

Ridgway's Ornithology of the Fortieth Parallel [1877] Revisited: Updated with Contemporary Place Names and Species Nomenclature, edited and published by Clarence D. Basso. 2004. 76 pages; front and back cover illustrations. Spiral bound. Available from Clarence D. Basso, 2545 Carville Drive, Reno, NV 89512.

Early Twentieth Century Ornithology in Malheur County Oregon, edited by Noah K. Strycker. 2003. Oregon Field Ornithologists, Special Publication No. 18. 210 pages; black-and-white photographs and line drawings throughout. Paperback. ISBN 1-877693-34-0. Available from Oregon Field Ornithologists, P. O. Box 10373, Eugene, OR 97440.

In this "golden age of field guides," as Eric Salzman has termed it, there is a temptation to focus all of one's bibliographic interest on contemporary books. In just the first half of the first decade of the 21st century, we have seen the publication of several major "general" field guides, several dozen excellent "specialty guides" to specific taxa, and scores of bird-finding and other regional guides. Meanwhile, the technical ornithological literature continues to proliferate. The report in last week's *Science* is a bit stale, last year's *Auk* is old news, and *The Sibley Guide* is starting to show its cracks. This caricature pursued just a little further, the twentieth century might be looked back upon as quaint and irrelevant, and the nineteenth as positively fossilized.

Enter the subject matter for this review. The stated goal of both volumes reviewed here is to make accessible to the modern reader the unpublished or long-out-of-print field notes of ornithologists working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, as it turns out, both books concern themselves with ornithological activities in the northern Great Basin. Thus similar goals, similar avifaunas. Similarly successful? Not at all. I'll look briefly at the less successful undertaking and then examine in greater detail the merits of its more successful counterpart.

At first glance, *Ridgway's Ornithology of the Fortieth Parallel Revisited*, edited by Clarence D. Basso, would seem to be the more compelling volume. After all, Ridgway was so significant a figure—especially from the vantage point of western field ornithologists—that his name remains etched in the consciousness of the modern birder. And there is an undeniable mystique about this particular work: it was Ridgway's debut, the work of a brilliant teenager and tag-along on the fabled U.S. Geological Survey Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel.

Basso's "revisiting" of Ridgway's notes has as its subtitle "Updated with Contemporary Place Names and Species Nomenclature." In fact, the "species nomenclature" is a mess. One can probably figure out what is meant by "Royal Tern, *Sterna caspia*"—indicated without comment on three occasions (pp. 35, 52, 69). But what of "Solitary Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*" (p. 13) and "Cassin's Vireo, *Vireo plumbeus*" (p. 53)? Or "Common Teal, *Anas cyanoptera*" (p. 46) and "Green-winged Teal, *Anas crecca*" (p. 56)? What is the "California Valley Jay, *Cyanocitta californicus*" (p. 9)? And what possibly could have been intended by "Wandering Tattler, *Heteroscelus incanus*," said to be "rather common" in Utah (p. 59)?

The presentation of this volume is so sloppy and unreliable as to render it virtually useless. And that's a pity, because much of what Ridgway recorded in the Great Basin could be of considerable relevance to the modern ornithologist. We read in these pages of Black Rails and Black Swifts, of Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Sage-Grouse, of White-winged Crossbills and Yellow-billed Cuckoos – all of which are absent from or seriously declining in the Great Basin of the 21st century. It would be fascinating to compare Ridgway's notes with the current crop of survey data coming out of Nevada and Utah. But the present volume is sadly inappropriate for this endeavor.

My other gripes include the following: (1) the book is organized, as it were, alphabetically by species name. Thus, for example, within the Buena Vista Canyon account (pp. 10–13), "Water Pipit" follows "Solitary Vireo," which follows "Scrub Jay," which

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follows "Rufous-sided Towhee," which follows "Ridgway's Sparrow," whatever that is; (2) there are no acknowledgments, there is no analysis, and there is no context; but (3) there are hundreds of mysterious numerical asides (viz., unexplained three-digit numbers that follow many of the species accounts) and hundreds more typos.

By contrast, *Early Twentieth Century Ornithology in Malheur County, Oregon*, edited (extensively but not high-handedly) by Noah K. Strycker, is wonderful. The bulk of this special publication of Oregon Field Ornithologists is a previously unpublished 1915 manuscript of Edward A. Preble, who conducted extensive fieldwork in Malheur County. Shorter excerpts (reprinted) from the works of Malheur County biologists Morton E. Peck and H. E. Anthony provide additional perspective on turn-of-the-20th-century ornithology in southeastern Oregon. And brief explanatory chapters by Strycker provide essential modern context.

Here is the short list of the many virtues of Strycker's edited volume: (1) the rationale and methods for the book are clearly laid out; (2) the editorializing, although copious, is unobtrusive and always clearly indicated; (3) notes on population change are commendably brief and informative; (4) apparent errors are identified and corrected; and (5) the copy-editing is nearly flawless.

Its weaknesses? Well, the copy editing is nearly flawless, not flawless. The back-end materials (species lists, references, etc.) seem to have been approached perfunctorily. And the layout and design are Spartan—probably a reflection of the shoestring budget typically available to regional ornithological studies such as this one. (Note, though, that spartan design is preferable to the grotesque over-design employed with tragic results in too many modern bird and nature publications.) But these are quibbles, and this is a fine book.

Early Twentieth Century Ornithology in Malheur County, Oregon is genuinely useful. The avifauna of the northern Great Basin is dynamic and potentially unstable, and Strycker's volume helps us to make sense out of the ornithological complexity of the region. Consider the following five species: Greater Sage-Grouse, Northern Bobwhite, Eastern Kingbird, Veery, and American Goldfinch. They're a pretty diverse bunch, but all five species represent management and conservation challenges of one sort or another for biologists working on the ground in the Great Basin in the 21st century. And all five are treated in such a way here—directly through the reproduction of Preble's field notebook and indirectly through Strycker's commentary—as to have consequences for the decision-making of modern managers.

At some level, though, we are dealing here with rather arcane subject matter. Should this book be read more widely? Does it hold any interest for researchers working outside southeastern Oregon in particular, or the Great Basin in general? I believe so. First, it is a fine model for future endeavors in the same genre. Obviously, any work of the "historical ornithology" of a local region will have its own particular and peculiar style; but *Early Twentieth Century Ornithology in Malheur County, Oregon* sets a fine standard at a rather general level. Second, in this era of ornithological instant gratification (rare bird alerts by Internet, tour guides who find lifers for you, and DNA analysis of records that committees can't resolve quickly enough), there is something cathartic, something civilized, about spending an unhurried weekend afternoon with long-dead ornithologists who were just as smart and just as inquisitive as we are.

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