

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Shorebirds of North America: the Photographic Guide**, by Dennis Paulson. 2005. Princeton University Press. 384 pages, 534 color photos. Paperback, \$29.95 (ISBN 0-691-12107-9); hardback, \$65.00 (ISBN 0-691-10274-0).

Some shorebirds are the epitome of wilderness—from Arctic tundra to the remote tidal flats of Tierra del Fuego—others, like the Killdeer, may be familiar in urban neighborhoods. All are wild and beautiful creatures, and their spectacular flocking, impressive migrations, and frequent identification challenges are among the reasons that shorebirds are popular with many birders and field ornithologists. This book (hereafter *Shorebirds*) will be welcomed by enthusiasts, but does it hold much for more general readers?

Be aware that this is truly a photographic guide with fairly minimal text, no range maps (omitted “because all current field guides have largely accurate maps”), and an average of 5–6 photos (range 1–16) per species. The attractive layout is similar to that of other books in this series (which originated with Academic Press and was inherited by Princeton), such as hummingbirds and sparrows. The scope is North America in its biogeographic sense, so the Caribbean and Middle America are included (and with them three “extra” species unrecorded in the myopic political entity we often consider as North America); in all, 94 shorebird species are treated.

A 19-page introduction discusses the subject and this book’s approach to it, with short sections on anatomy, plumage variation, molt, identification, behavior, vocalizations, distribution, and conservation, plus explanations of the species accounts, photos, and photo captions. The introductory material is well worth reading, although molt is reportedly arrested during migration, rather than suspended, or interrupted (arrested molt is stopped, not to be continued); “eyering” and “orbital ring” are considered synonymous despite the frequent distinction in other works that the former is feathered, the latter bare skin. Measurements given for overall length, bill, and tarsus are simply average values; the failure to provide ranges of values is surprising and detracts from the book’s usefulness for identification. The final sentence to the introduction is a plea with which I concur—that photographers label their photos with locality and date. Despite this, photos without date and location were used, as for a juvenile White-rumped Sandpiper, hardly a plumage for which photos with data seem unattainable.

The species texts (only 1–2 pages each) address size (weight, length, bill, and tarsus), plumages (a synopsis of age- and sex-related differences, not including immature plumages past juvenal), identification (criteria for distinguishing similar species), flight (description of salient flight characters), voice (brief description), behavior, habitat, and range (a very general statement). Paulson’s writing style is very readable, almost casually and disarmingly distilling a wealth of personal observation and tidbits from someone who has clearly held a long-term passion for shorebirds. The pithy identification discussions and photo captions are particularly good, although sometimes lacking in features one might expect to see mentioned, such as differences in auricular pattern and overall structure between the Pectoral and Sharp-tailed sandpipers.

The photos are generally of good to excellent quality, and well reproduced, but a few images are almost too small to be of use, at least without a magnifying glass, such as photo 74.11, of Rock Sandpipers and other species in flight. A great feature is the inclusion for most species of photos of flying birds; unfortunately, a Long-toed Stint in flight (with its long toe projection beyond the tail tip) was not among photos that could be found. The photos’ coverage of variation by age and season is fairly good, with single photos included only for unmistakable species such as the two woodcocks and Double-striped Thick-knee (although this last is unlikely to be the subspecies recorded in North America). For better or worse, the photos are biased toward rarities: witness five photos of the Far-eastern Curlew and only four of the Long-billed Curlew, or

## BOOK REVIEWS

three of Wilson's Snipe and four of the Common Snipe. There are only three of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, with none of birds in flight.

A notable feature is the use of museum specimens for direct comparisons of upperwing and underwing patterns in some species, such as the for sand-plovers and Spotted vs. Common sandpipers. This valuable approach could have been taken further—there are no such photos for phalarope upperwings, and series of specimens showing variation in the underparts of breeding-plumaged tattlers would have been instructive. I found no photos obviously misidentified with respect to species or age, although I wondered how photo 37.4 was identified to subspecies, given the author's doubt that subspecies of the Willet can be distinguished reliably. And photo 57.3 of a Black Turnstone may not be of a bird in full juvenal plumage, especially given the late date.

Unusually, more thought than work seems to have gone into this book, although much of both have been lifted from Paulson's classic *Shorebirds of the Pacific Northwest*, which treated 78 of the same species in more detail. The format, much of the information, and most photos, are good to excellent, but fact-checking and copy-editing were indifferent or poor. Typos are not rare (e.g., the Little Curlew and Upland Sandpiper are both 27 cm long, yet one is 11", the other 10.5"), and syntax is occasionally comical (e.g., "Dark eyes, dark-tipped bill, and whitish legs characteristic of plumage;" photo 22.2 caption). Text and photos do not always agree—the supposedly diagnostic unmarked breast of Temminck's Stint is not a feature of breeding plumage, as the photos show. Errors in the range statements further suggest that information-gathering was hurried; for example, the Spotted Sandpiper breeds south to southern (not northern) California, as reported (a point acknowledged even in the AOU Checklist), and the Southern Lapwing is reported north only to Costa Rica (cf. Martin, J. P. 1997. The first Southern Lapwing *Vanellus chilensis* in Mexico. *Cotinga* 8:52–53). Furthermore, the Southern Lapwing's taxonomy is not addressed, and the photo from Calafate is of the southern subspecies group that may represent a species distinct from the northern populations that occur in Middle America (cf. Fjeldsa, J., and Krabbe, N. 1990. *Birds of the High Andes*, pp. 159-161. Zool. Mus., Univ. of Copenhagen).

The audience of this book is unclear to me. Some parts seem aimed at relative beginners, others are relatively advanced (although presented in a very accessible style). Beginners are better off with conventional guides such as the Sibley Guide, which is not packed with extraneous rarities and has an excellent and well laid-out treatment of shorebirds. Rarity hunters and chasers may find themselves drooling over photos of species they are unlikely to see—especially if they stay inside reading! Experienced birders and those familiar with Paulson's earlier work will surely enjoy the "refresher course" that reading *Shorebirds* provides, but many will probably be disappointed by the text's brevity and failure to treat such things as molt strategies, migration timings, and commonly encountered ranges of variation in vocalizations (e.g., calls of golden plovers and peeps). I number myself among the last category and view *Shorebirds* as ostensibly a commercial venture and a missed opportunity for a great book—which a little more work could have produced. It's still a good book, but of the sort I'd be happy to receive as a present rather than buy for myself.

Steve N. G. Howell