

BOOK REVIEWS

Introduction to California Birdlife, by Jules Evens and Ian Tait. 2005. University of California Press. xi + 382 pages, 150 color photographs, 4 line illustrations, 7 maps. Softback, \$16.95. ISBN 0-520-24254-8.

With more than 600 species of birds and the richest diversity of habitats found in any state, California is a paradise for birds and birdwatchers. This same complexity, however, has posed a daunting, even overwhelming, challenge for writers. Despite the seminal works of Dawson and of Grinnell and Miller, and a more recent contribution by Small, the nature of California birdlife remains largely unaddressed in a present-day context. *Introduction to California Birdlife*, by author and biologist Jules Evens and photographer Ian Tait, is the most recent effort in this distinguished lineage. Part of the *California Natural History Guide Series* published by the University of California Press, this book has the unique distinction of being an introduction to the state's birdlife rather than an exhaustive treatment. While this approach limits the book's usefulness as a reference tool, it makes it an ideal textbook for beginning birdwatchers, newcomers to California, and bird classes.

Arranged very simply, the book consists of eight chapters that start with an overview of California birdlife and then move through the state's seven biogeographic regions. By and large, the delineations of these regions are well considered and intuitive: ocean, shoreline, coast ranges, Central Valley and delta, mountains and foothills, Great Basin, and deserts. Within chapters, topics of special interest as well as subregions are described. In a mere 300 pages the reader is taken on a whirlwind tour of California and comes away richer for the experience. In addition, the book is expertly illustrated by a series of 150 marvelous photographs by Ian Tait, whose work must be commended for its ability to capture the spirit and personality of its subjects.

This book covers a vast area and provides innumerable facts and numbers about California birds. It is rich with examples and stories that could be described as "snapshots" of California's birdlife. Some readers may find these useful as learning or teaching tools, especially because so many are included in this slim volume.

Introduction to California Birdlife has some weaknesses, however, that limit its potential. In particular, it has a hurried and scattershot feel that sometimes makes for a less-than-pleasant read. For example, to make its points, the book often relies on lists within the text. On a random sample page from the introduction, there is a list of seven counties in one paragraph, a list of 18 unique topographic features in the next, a list of seven birding hotspots in the next paragraph, a list of 15 familiar birds in the next, a list of eight birds with limited distributions in the next, etc. Then, page after page reads like this sample from page 196: "American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), and Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) perch on fence posts and wires and forage over open fields; Red-shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*) and Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) stay close to riparian corridors. In winter, Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) and Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*) are as likely in the foothills as anywhere, except perhaps the Coast Ranges. In the less peopled regions, where open pasture is extensive enough for jackrabbits, Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) still range. Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is common, but seldom seen; the lower foothills may be a last stronghold outside the Imperial Valley for Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), but even here it is getting exceedingly scarce." After a while the reader's mind can be excused from going numb with these bombardments of facts. If nothing else, omission of the distracting scientific names would have helped, since these appear in a complete checklist of California birds after the main chapters.

The real shame is that when applied at the chapter level, this scattershot approach begins to dilute the book's effectiveness. For example, the lead chapter on "Seabirds and the Marine Environment" (easily the strongest chapter) moves gracefully between subsections on California's marine environment, taxonomic groups, biogeography of seabirds, seabird communities, seabird nesting sites, seabird habitats at sea, seabird

BOOK REVIEWS

behavior and ecology, and conservation. But the concluding chapter, “The Desert’s Birds,” wanders off into subsections on the physical environment, Mojave Desert, mountains of the deserts, Colorado Desert, Salton Sea and Imperial Valley, and Colorado River Valley, with no subsections on biogeography, bird communities, or behavior and ecology. There’s a lot of great information here but it’s presented in such a jumbled barrage that readers may not remember much of what they read, and it’s nearly impossible to compare chapters (i.e., regions) and answer parallel questions.

The structure of the desert chapter further highlights the book’s greatest weakness—its over-reliance on a regional breakdown. In fact, so much text is devoted to regional (and subregional) descriptions and coverage that many other factors affecting California birds are overlooked or given short shrift. The fifth sentence in the introduction states that “California lies at an intersection of atmospheric and oceanic currents and, therefore, at the crossroads of migratory bird routes of the Western Hemisphere.” Yet these concepts are scarcely explored. Little or no mention is made of how California’s unique Mediterranean climate or the barrier of the Sierra Nevada affects California birdlife, for example. This would have been especially appropriate in the section on “Endemics and Near Endemics,” as a way of explaining why certain birds favor California. Another example would be the section on “Accidentals,” which lists eight favorite birding hotspots but doesn’t mention causes of vagrancy in birds or theories about why so many end up in California. The book could have been much improved by streamlining the nearly 100 pages of back matter (a species checklist, glossary, bibliography, and two indexes, which combined make up 25% of the book!) and using those pages to explore the subject matter in greater depth.

A final weakness of this book is that it does not look back, or forward. It would have been helpful to discuss in the introduction the strengths, weaknesses, and coverage of other books that survey birds and birdlife of the state. Dawson, Grinnell and Miller, and Hoffmann are quoted regularly but never given any context, and no history of California ornithology or birdwatching is offered. The introduction covers critical habitat components, endemics, accidentals, and expatriates but does not mention trends or future directions, despite the state’s burgeoning human population and its tremendous impact on native habitats.

Despite these qualms, there is nowhere else so much information about California birdlife is crammed into such a small package and, for this reason alone, *Introduction to California Birdlife* is deservedly bound to become the definitive new textbook on California’s birds. There is a lot that even a seasoned birder could learn from this book. But the daunting challenge of writing the first definitive book on California birds still lies unanswered—are there any writers or publishers out there willing to tackle this magnificent task?

David Lukas