

BOOK REVIEWS

Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors in Flight, by Jerry Liguori. 2005. Princeton University Press. 132 pages, 339 color photos, 7 b/w photo plates, 2 maps. Paperback \$19.95 (ISBN 0-691-11825-6); hardback, \$55.00 (ISBN 0-691-11824-8).

Hawks are among the most spectacular birds in North America, and there have been several raptor-identification books published in recent years—so why another? In 1988, *Hawks in Flight*, by Pete Dunne, David Sibley, and Clay Sutton, broke new ground in North America by taking raptor identification beyond Peterson's field-mark system. Identifying raptors in flight is as much art as science, and it is difficult at best to convey what exactly it is that experienced hawk watchers use to name birds at long range, and at those real-life angles birds assume. *Hawks in Flight* still stands as a landmark, with numerous superb line drawings and a good number of (poorly reproduced) black-and-white photos showing hawks "as they really are." *Hawks from Every Angle* also attempts to distill decades of hard-won knowledge into a field-friendly format. It is perhaps inevitable to liken Liguori's work to a succinct, more standardized version of *Hawks in Flight*, with the benefit of color photos, but these differences are attributes and will help make *Hawks from Every Angle* the new bible for hawk watchers.

One of the book's great strengths is its brevity. Unlike Brian Wheeler's two-volume tome (reviewed in *Western Birds* 34:252-253, 2003), which treats field marks in impenetrable detail, *Hawks from Every Angle* cuts to the chase. The 13-page introduction introduces the subject: the in-flight identification of the "22 raptor species... that most commonly occur at migration sites throughout the United States and Canada" (the Turkey and Black vultures are included in this total, even though they are not raptors). A brief glossary with three labeled figures of anatomy, discussions of light conditions, molt, aberrant plumages, hawk migration, and migration sites (with two maps), is followed by three tables that show, for 20 species, the spring and fall timetables of migration and North American daily and seasonal high counts (including Veracruz, Mexico). Then come the identification texts, grouped in five sections and nicely laid out: accipiters; the Northern Harrier; buteos; falcons; and, last, the two vultures, Osprey, and eagles. A short bibliography (18 of the 28 titles listed are by Liguori) and index complete the book, which I read in just a couple of hours—two of the most informative hours I've spent in a long time.

Largely standardized from group to group, the text sections all start with an overview of identification characters and migration behavior and timing. Then come a synthesis of plumage features (grouped either by age or morph, depending on which is most likely to be distinguishable under field conditions), sometimes a discussion of similar species and identification pitfalls, and then a section on flight style, including comparisons of shapes as viewed soaring, head-on, overhead, and wing-on/going away (wing-on being the side view of a bird at eye-level). Well-chosen adjectives make the flight-style descriptions particularly useful. Boldface type is used to highlight pearls of wisdom and suggest caution, as in the bolded text (p. 28): "The tail tip of all accipiters appears squared off when headed away; however, the tail of Sharp-shinned Hawks looks especially shortened." Unfortunately, the comparatively short tail of the Sharp-shinned Hawk is not shown by the photos, which highlights a problem with this kind of book: codifying one's intuition is difficult enough, but finding photos to portray such subtleties is almost impossible. Identifying distant hawks involves constant re-evaluation as a bird turns or approaches, but this dynamism simply cannot be conveyed by photos.

Still, each section has well-chosen color photos of identifiable age and sex classes (mainly in overhead soaring poses) with pithy captions that highlight pointers for

BOOK REVIEWS

species, age, or sex. These color photos were chosen to show plumage features, but they are also instructive for shape, especially when composite photos compare similar species (e.g., the excellent photo for CH Pitfall 03, page 24, showing a juvenile Cooper's Hawk and Northern Goshawk). Both dorsal and ventral surfaces are shown, usually with the sexes or ages in roughly comparable poses—in itself a remarkable achievement and a labor of time and love. At the end of each section are composite black-and-white photo plates, with similar species shown the same size (the sky is notably lacking in rulers) in soaring, head-on, gliding, wing-on, and going-away poses. Annotated pointers draw one's attention to important distinguishing features, such as tail and wing shapes. The two pages of accipiter plates alone, with 24 individual photos comparing the three species, are worth the price of the book.

What shines through are the author's extensive experience and his strong desire to share as much of his knowledge as possible. For example, more than once I've mistaken a Double-crested Cormorant for a Peregrine Falcon (when they're flying head-on), perhaps as often as I've confused the Peregrine and Prairie falcons. Liguori compares the flight manner of the Peregrine to that of cormorants, which makes me feel better—it's a real-life problem. Surprisingly, though, no mention is made of the pitfalls of pigeons, or even of martins, which can be confused with falcons. Sometimes, depending on light or distance, you just can't identify a raptor to species, or age, or sex, and Liguori acknowledges these limitations to hawk watching. He doesn't insist that every hawk can be identified, which is refreshing—and sobering, coming from an expert.

Obviously I like this book, but does it have drawbacks; could it be improved? Well, for such a short book the editing is particularly poor. Copy editors with birding knowledge are rare, and few birders are expert at conveying information clearly. On p. 102, "a pale grayish white head," beyond lacking a hyphen, seems rather odd phrasing—what does a dark grayish-white head look like? I remain bewildered by the definition of "primary projection" in the glossary. After reading the book I thought I had it figured out, but in talking to a colleague familiar with raptors I learned he was equally sure it meant something quite different. We both left the conversation completely uncertain what the term means in *Hawks from Every Angle*. Sentences such as "Intergrades that inherit traits of both parents are extremely difficult to specifically categorize" (p. 53, in reference to offspring of mixed races or morphs of the Red-tailed Hawk) is a bizarre sentence that even a neophyte copy-editor should have flagged. Birds have been endowed with gender (misused for sex on p. 28), and terms such as "broad" and "stocky" could have been defined; for example, on p. 83, the Broad-winged Hawk going away has stocky wings, whereas the Red-tailed Hawk has broad wings. And so on.

But my two main gripes are photo dates and molt, which are linked. I find it incredible that something as simple as the date (even the month) is omitted from a book that purportedly deals with the subtleties of identification. For example, many of the Swainson's Hawk photos show molting birds—but when were the photos taken? As in other raptor identification guides, it is sadly evident that the huge interest in hawk-watching is in inverse proportion to correct use of age terminology, knowledge of molt, and its application by hawk-watchers to age and species determination. Oh, and the California subspecies of the Red-shouldered Hawk is barely treated, indicating an eastern (or, at least, not western) bias.

So, the second edition could be copy-edited and include dates in the photo captions. But despite these gripes I loved this book. It's short but sweet and rich, like so many views of hawks and falcons. As the book's introduction states, *Hawks from Every Angle* is designed to help birders of all skill levels identify raptors in flight. It succeeds admirably in this goal, and Liguori is to be commended for writing this fine book.

Steve N. G. Howell