

BOOK REVIEWS

National Geographic Society Complete Birds of North America, edited by Jonathan Alderfer. 2005. National Geographic Society. 664 pages, 150 color photos, numerous color illustrations, maps. Hardback, \$35 (ISBN 0-7922-4175-4).

Another book on North American birds, I hear you ask. Do we really need this, and how is it complete? The unfortunate marketing-oriented title immediately dates the book—at least two species recorded from California in fall 2005 (Hornby's Storm-Petrel and Parkinson's Petrel) are missing from this *Complete Birds of North America* (hereafter CBNA), which is intended as a handbook-style companion to the National Geographic Society's (NGS) *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. It's a great idea, going beyond the field guides with more information on the identification of all birds recorded in North America: a book to be consulted when the conventional field guides just don't give you enough information. The experience of numerous field observers was drawn upon to write the text, which was reviewed and edited by Jonathan Alderfer, with help from Jon Dunn. Most of the illustrations are recycled from the NGS *Field Guide*, but numerous new paintings are also included, and 150 color photos are scattered through the text.

My review may be controversial in more than one respect. I was involved in writing some of the text, so isn't there a conventional taboo against my reviewing the book? But what is convention?

"Perfect for novices or veterans [but not both?], the *National Geographic Complete Birds of North America* is a definitive, must-have resource for every birder" proclaims the jacket blurb. And much of the information is accessible to novices, for example, the introduction, which is a superb (but too short, at a mere four pages) attempt to cover the basics for all levels. And then the book is packed with information, and attractively laid out—so what are the down sides? Well, sadly, the CBNA manifests the same slapdash approach applied to the NGS field guides, with the result that the different styles of numerous artists assail the eyes of the user. Contrast this heterogeneity with the uniform user-friendly appearance of the *Sibley Guide to Birds of North America*. For example, anyone hoping to identify a female Costa's Hummingbird will be challenged by the substandard illustrations recycled in CBNA. The short tail of Costa's is one its best marks, but these misleading pictures show the tail longer than the wings. And compare the wing/tail proportions of the perched immature male and female Rufous Hummingbirds; they're almost criminal. And the "subadult" Long-tailed Jaeger is a composite with the underwings of an adult and the tail projections of a juvenile. I recommend relying on the text more than on the illustrations, which vary from excellent (some) through good to fair (most) to downright awful (some). I'm sure the editors know which pictures need to be repainted, but this hasn't been done—yet. Not caring enough to redress such glaring problems shouts out that NGS thinks little or nothing of the reader—inaction speaks louder than words. Yes, it would have taken time and money to get some pictures repainted, but the book would be so much better for it.

The text has its own problems. The book had a preordained page plan, so that the contents of each page-spread were estimated at the start, then writers had to work with word counts that fitted the text into the white space around each illustration. It doesn't take long to realize that species with a single illustration, such as the Green Jay, are often unmistakable and you don't need to say much (but there's a lot of white space to use up). Conversely, some species with multiple illustrations, such as the Long-tailed Jaeger, need more writing but don't have the space for it. Hence the information content from species to species is uneven. Some accounts are notably terse, while others have been padded with filler, and both extremes read poorly. A logical approach to such a handbook would have been to give the writers guidelines on content (which was done), standardize the content by editing (which was not really done), see how many pages it came to, and then work on the page-spreads from there.

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Beyond the simple differences in word counts, the content for different species accounts often reflects the interests or expertise of different authors, such as molts and plumages versus status and distribution. For example, the accounts of the ibises of the genus *Plegadis* (pp. 123–124) give no indication of how to distinguish first winter/first summer birds from adults (or from juveniles!)—certainly something a curious observer might wish to know and more useful for field identification (the book’s purported focus) than information on population status (interesting but tangential). The second-summer Black-crowned Night-Heron is described but the second-summer Yellow-crowned is not. The schedule of wing molt is not mentioned for any swallow, though it is useful for identification in North America. The differences in the flight styles of the Common and Antillean Nighthawks are not described. Anyone hoping to identify the ages of nightjars has no hope; for example, see the Whip-poor-will account. The juvenile Poorwill is said to be similar to something, but to what is unclear. The fallacious dogma of wood-pewee mandible color is repeated uncritically (the Western averages darker but often has an all-pale mandible). And so on. But exact dates are given for the rarest vagrants—is such detail really in tune with the book’s goal? Did the Greater Sandplover really arrive in California on 29 January, and the Masked Tityra in Texas on 17 February?

As for copy-editing or proof-checking, apparently there wasn’t time to do this properly. Pick almost any page and you’ll find slips, and often a syntax-defying sentence. Under the Whooping Crane the first and last sentences of the identification section are the same (p. 174). The Mallard is called the “Mallard Duck” (p. 19). Some gulls are “4-cycle” species, others “4-year” species (synonyms, but standardized use of one term or the other would prevent confusion). The illustrations of the Greenish and Caribbean Elaenias are switched (p. 380). The text for the Sage Sparrow (p. 575) says the “white supraloral does not extend beyond eye” (but then it wouldn’t be a “supraloral”), yet the white brow does extend at least weakly past the eye in both the painting and photo of subspecies *nevadensis*, which is perhaps what was meant but erroneously misstated). And so on.

Other statements are more subjective, such as the description of the call of the Western Tanager (p. 558) as “very different” from that of the Summer but “indistinguishable” from that of the Flame-colored (whose call is considered “virtually indistinguishable” from that of the Western), yet differences in calls of western and eastern Summer Tanagers are not discussed, and I find all these calls quite similar. Do these comparisons really help the average birder, let alone the novice?

Many photos are stunning and well used, but others were poorly chosen, such as those portraying the Royal and Elegant Terns, which make these species look too similar. Could a photo of the two species together be that difficult to find? “Sorry, no time to look.” And the photo labeled as an Indigo Bunting (p. 605) appears to be of a juvenile Lazuli.

Books crammed with this much information are predisposed to such errors, but more time given to production and editing could have greatly decreased the sloppiness that marks the book throughout. If NGS really cared about the user, it would have allowed more time for the book to be planned and executed. Yes, it might say, but this is a first edition, and we plan to print updates and improve as we go—and we’ll make more money each time we do that. Great, and tell this to the thousands of trees that died for this edition. This “Microsoft approach” to bird-book publishing by NGS is being criticized elsewhere, as with a review in Finland of the 4th edition of the NGS *Field Guide to Birds of North America* (*Alula* 11:92, 2005). Why not “do it right” the first time?

Of course, if the world were perfect we human beings wouldn’t be here. So what if this book, like the NGS field guides, was pushed out under unreasonable deadlines? It’s all about marketing. After all, if thousands of people can be shown a few seconds’

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blurry video of a Pileated Woodpecker and be convinced that it's an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, then the sky's the limit. Image rules over content. Publishing is just one microcosm of humanity—why should it be different from the others?

We can end by asking “Who benefits from CBNA?” NGS or the consumer? There really is a lot of good information in the book—just don't be surprised by the slapdash production, which typifies the NGS “work ethic.” So should you buy this book or wait a few years for an (inevitable?) second edition that has (a few) better plates? Well, that's up to you.

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