

BOOK REVIEWS

Important Bird Areas of Nevada by D. E. McIvor. 2005. Lahontan Audubon Society. 160 pages, numerous color photographs and maps. Softback. \$19.95. ISBN: 0970343825.

Nevadans have long claimed that there is more to their state than a bunch of sagebrush and dirt. And Nevada birders are the same, emphasizing riparian zones filled with warblers and buntings, desert lakes covered with pelicans and grebes, wetlands loaded with avocets and stilts, and montane forests with their woodpeckers, tanagers, and grosbeaks. But, as Ray Nelson's cover painting for *Important Bird Areas of Nevada* suggests, what is really important is perhaps all those areas in between—the gray-brown land filled with gray-brown birds: the Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Greater Sage-Grouse, Burrowing Owl, Sage Sparrow, and Sage Thrasher stare out from the cover like a bunch of mobsters on the Las Vegas strip and are deadly serious about the message they intend to send.

This book summarizes the results to date of the Nevada Important Bird Area (IBA) Program, guided from its inception until recently by the book's author, Don McIvor. The IBA concept originated with BirdLife International and has spread globally as a mechanism for highlighting areas that should receive the attention of conservationists. The basic idea is that objective criteria are used systematically to identify a set of high-priority sites where conservation efforts can be focused. All over the world this approach has proven effective in getting the attention of governments, conservation organizations, and the public.

McIvor's book begins with a description of the IBA system, both generally and as it was applied in Nevada. The introduction also provides a helpful summary of the challenges facing protectors of the state's birds, with water use quite rightly highlighted as the first item on the list. There's no way around the fact that Nevada is a desert, and everything that happens in the state—whether it involves birds or people—revolves around water. In contrast, from my perspective the concerns raised about the evils of urbanization (Nevada is the most urbanized state in the union; that is, the one with the greatest portion of its population in urban areas) seem somewhat misplaced. Clearly, development is a major concern, but ultimately it is the number of people that is the problem, not the degree to which they are concentrated into urban areas. Indeed, urbanization actually minimizes many effects of human populations, both by reducing the total area of land devoted exclusively to human use and by making the use of water, energy, and other resources more efficient. In other words, if you are going to develop, it is better (for wildlife) to cram people into urban areas than to spread them out across the landscape. Overall, though, the book's list of concerns hits all the right points.

Most readers will turn straight to the site descriptions, and there are probably two classes of people for whom these accounts will be of interest. First, the intended audience of conservation practitioners, who will find nice succinct descriptions of what these sites are and why they are considered important. Second, birders, who will turn to these accounts as a way to learn of new places to visit in a large state with a limited birding literature.

With my conservation biologist's hat on, I found myself delighted that so much had been consolidated into such a small book but simultaneously wanting so much more. My biggest gripe is the numbers. Each account comes with a table summarizing the abundance of high-priority species and explaining the criteria used to identify the site as an IBA. In some cases, I found the numbers a bit hard to believe, undoubtedly just showing my ignorance, but to satisfy my curiosity I would have really liked more information on how the numbers were derived. In other cases, I was left wondering whether the stated numbers were really enough to warrant highlighting a particular site. Is a density of one to four pairs of Sage Sparrows per square kilometer really enough to qualify a site as an IBA? Maybe, but I'd sure like to see the justification.

BOOK REVIEWS

And if one site with this density gets designated, I'd like to be sure that there aren't dozens (or hundreds, for this particular example) of other sites with similar densities that got left out.

When the birder in me took over, my response was "Wow! I lived in Nevada for six years. How can there be all these great places that I've never heard of?" In part the answer is that I was an apathetic, narrow-minded graduate student and didn't take the time to explore. But it is also a sign of how far Nevada birding has come in the past ten years, thanks to those who did put in the effort. This book is not, and clearly is not intended to be, a bird-finding guide. But in a big state with a depauperate birding literature, it will help get birders to new places, and give them a sense of where to go once they get there and what they might find. If people follow up, and also stop at other likely spots along the way, the growth in knowledge will continue to accelerate.

Overall, those criticisms that I have relate more to the IBA program as a whole than to the specifics of the Nevada enterprise. Identifying sites via nominations, rather than an objective assessment of all possible places, will inevitably bias the selection toward areas that are already well known, sometimes for reasons other than their conservation importance (e.g., their proximity to a city with lots of birders, or their propensity to act as a migrant trap). Equally, we need better ways of identifying the top sites for sparsely distributed species. How do we decide what makes a location especially important for a species like the Sage Sparrow? Densities well above average and good reproduction must be part of the equation, but this information is incredibly hard to come by. The underlying cause of all these problems is simply that we lack the broad-scale inventory data needed to do things better. And this is a universal problem, one that we have even in my current home state of Connecticut, which compared to Nevada is puny and crawling with birders.

Don McIvor is clearly not responsible for these problems, and I don't know that I have solutions. Anyone who has worked closely on IBAs has grappled with the same issues and come to peace with them in his or her own way. Nonetheless, these concerns bear repeating because they are often sidelined simply on the grounds that they are hard to solve. *Important Bird Areas of Nevada* has gone a long way toward advancing bird conservation in the state of Nevada, and both McIvor and Lahontan Audubon deserve enormous credit. Theirs is just the first step, though. Those mobster-wannabes on the book's cover are gone from the land where the Strip now lies. If they and their flashier cousins are to survive, many more steps will have to follow.

Chris Elphick