

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rare Birds of California**, by Robert A. Hamilton, Michael A. Patten, and Richard A. Erickson (editors). 2007. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, CA (order from Allen Press by e-mail at [orders@allenpress.com](mailto:orders@allenpress.com) or by phone at 800-627-0326. 504 pp., numerous photos, sketches, and 71 color plates. Hardback, \$54.00 for WFO members, \$59.95 for nonmembers. ISBN 978-0-9790585-0-9.

With the appearance of *Rare Birds of California*, edited by Robert A. Hamilton, Michael A. Patten, and Richard A. Erickson, the historic record of the pursuit of rare birds for fun and for science in the Golden State is presented. And it has been served up large. The book is a distillation of the work of the California Bird Records Committee over its first 37 years. All records submitted to the committee, as well as other reports and evidence, are here compiled in a single annotated listing. As well as a distillation, the book is a celebration, filled with photographs and documentary artwork attesting to the talents and zeal of California birders.

*Rare Birds of California* is dedicated to Guy McCaskie, who has fostered the growth of the state's birding fraternity during the past half-century. Given his long-time involvement with the California Bird Records Committee, it is appropriate that McCaskie also offers the foreword, in which a brief explanation and history of the committee is laid forth at the outset.

The introductory section describes the book's organizing principles, purpose, and operation. Table A is a history of when and where committee meetings took place, along with attendees at each; Table B details the membership of the committee through time. This material is followed by the California bird list of 634 species accepted as of 25 June 2007, which takes up 15 pages as Table C. Accounts for all species reviewed at any time by the committee are referenced by page number within the list. This is followed by the supplemental list of six species of uncertain natural occurrence. Table D lists 15 naturalized bird species not reviewed by the committee. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 9 of these are psittacids, but it may come as a surprise to some to find that only one such bird, the Red-crowned Parrot, is currently accepted on the main state list.

Of singular interest is Table E, "Annual Additions of Native Species to the Main List, 1900–2006." Harris's Sparrow, first reported in 1900, is at the beginning of this roster of 228 species. I found this historic record intriguing, my eye lingering on species or groups of species whose sudden detection in California hints at shifts in the when, where, and how of the field effort. One might intuit that the majority of the earlier additions by year are, like Harris's Sparrow, species now known to occur regularly in California and, for the most part, this is so.

Yet, the early potential for glamorous vagrants decades before the advent of modern birding in California is revealed by the state's first Louisiana Waterthrush (in 1908, with the next not until 1985 and only 13 since then), Varied Bunting (1914; only 3 total records), Streak-backed Oriole (1931; only 7 total records), and Jack Snipe (one shot by a snipe hunter in 1938 was followed by the only other record—with evidence obtained the same way—in 1990). A conspicuous run of five years, 1940–1944, with no additions to the California bird list suggests that no one lifted binoculars during the Second World War. Poetically, 1957—the year Guy McCaskie moved from Great Britain to California—was the most recent year in which no species was added.

The list of yearly additions during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s is busy with California firsts, including ten in 1969. As the state list has grown, so too has the pool of likely new possibilities diminished; the number of such species added per year can be seen to have decreased over the past 20 or so years. The discussion here closes with a wishful look at potential additions yet to come, ranging from species resident nearly to the California border in Arizona (the grudging Canyon Towhee) to "birds without maps": Siberian mindbenders yet to be detected in the state, such as the Bean Goose and Temminck's Stint.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Of special appeal in *Rare Birds of California* are three insightful and well-constructed essays. The first, "Trends in the California Bird List: Jehl (1980) Revisited," examines changes in the relative contributions of geographic source regions from which have come the set of California rarities. Most telling is the degree to which Asiatic and Arctic species have come to supplant eastern North American and Mexican/southwestern birds as new additions over the decades.

Next is "Birding in California 1960–2007," an overview that paints a picture of a birding fraternity growing in size, skill, and collective consciousness. It will succeed in imparting to the uninitiated reader what birding California has meant, both for those who have done it and for those pursuing birds elsewhere, who may stand to gain from applying California learning. An increased understanding of the identification, seasonality, dynamics, and intrastate distribution of California's birds in this era is referenced to seminal publications made during this time, many of which contribute perceptions and original understanding arising directly from the California birding experience.

Finally, an upbeat essay encourages readers to document and report records in an appropriate and useful manner, and to overcome "rejection dejection." This material is recommended reading for anyone, anywhere, who wants to write better reports of rare birds. The lesson is administered in a properly un-vireo-like fashion, without scolding or any arching of the supercilium.

A section explaining the necessarily space-constrained format of the species accounts allows users of this work to understand fully the account headings and table of records. The reader who has read this section will better understand why it is, say, that only three records of the Broad-winged Hawk and six of the Northern Parula appear in the book, and why the Rusty Blackbird was placed back on the review list after three decades during which no reports were requested.

To be sure, it is the species accounts treating the collective exaltation of California rarities that make up the bulk of *Rare Birds of California*. This section takes up 401 pages, two-thirds of the book (including appendices, etc.). The reader may begin at the front, with the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (31 accepted records) and read straight through to Common Redpoll (73)—or skip and browse, taking in the summary of the Gyrfalcon (10), Common Greenshank (1), Groove-billed Ani (11), Sedge Wren (7), Gray Catbird (108), and Worm-eating Warbler (97).

Because each rarity has its own unique history in the annals of California birding, the accounts in *Rare Birds of California* are far from uniform. Yet the varying approach or tack called for by a given species' idiosyncrasies further stamps each rarity as its own nation of beings. Pushing beyond the overarching generalities of a theory of vagrancy, the editors have capably explicated each species' particulars: the possibility of escaped captive waterfowl is examined; incursive movements of boobies and southern waders are dutifully treated; emerging knowledge of identification attends the overview of exotic tubenoses. Differences or shifts in the historical distribution of records within and across the state are constantly noted. Intransigent dilemmas faced by the committee in its handling of some species, or species groups—the deep-water petrels, Harris's Hawk, White/Black-backed Wagtail, and Painted Bunting come readily to mind—are tersely recounted.

Accompanying many accounts are easily perceived maps indicating where in California and its offshore waters each species has occurred, with bubbles of varying sizes for various numbers of records per site. Occurrence by season or across the span of years is often plotted in histograms.

Accepted records do not stand by themselves in this listing. Submitted reports which were not accepted because the identification was not established or because the natural origin of the occurrence was questioned are also listed and, where appropriate, discussed. That many sightings have been accepted after having been initially voted down or, conversely, were ultimately rejected after a previous acceptance,

## BOOK REVIEWS

indicates the value of including these ancillary reports to better represent the entire historic data base.

Those who have read the periodic reports of the California Bird Records Committee in *Western Birds* will recall that those reports have included significant material dealing with identification. It is worth noting that the present work, while in a sense a compendium of those efforts, by and large does not reiterate such information as primary formulae, rectrix shape, and interior covert patterns. Most often, identification is discussed when it simply bears mentioning that identification issues have played a critical role in the committee's decisions. That said, there is still a quite a collection of information offered about the importance of molt schedules, plumage state, the commonness of various songbirds in northwestern Mexican pet shops, etc. Nearly all of this is referenced, and much of it may prove useful to birders.

A section on hypothetical species addresses reports for which the identification is not established (50 species), natural occurrence is questionable (14), or establishment of an introduced population is questionable (2).

More than 21 pages of fine print are required to list the 1293 literature sources cited. Following the bibliography, eight appendices totaling 83 pages round out the book. These include the committee's bylaws, a list of its 31 numbered reports, its abbreviations for counties in California, abbreviations for the 40 institutions holding cited specimens, and an alphabetical master list of the 1883 contributors whose efforts laid the foundation for this volume. There is a 20-page gazetteer for records reviewed through 31 December 2003, giving the number of accepted records for each of hundreds of locations, along with their latitude and longitude; there are maps of political boundaries, roads, physical relief, bathymetry, nearest-point-of-land contours, and geographic distribution of accepted records. Several maps at increasing scales culminate—why not?—with a global perspective.

Appendix H discusses noteworthy records during the three years 2004–2006 and touches on other notable records involving reports of 89 species already treated. The book closes with a subject index.

As elsewhere in the pursuit of science, the methods employed in descriptive and quantitative ornithology are unconcerned with beauty, the most subjective and untestable of concepts. Rightly so, it is a theme seldom discussed in the text of this book. Rather, evidence of that beauty is manifested in the pages of *Rare Birds of California* in an array of photographs, color plates, and documentary artwork. These representations have been given abundant space in the book, allowing one to appreciate their accuracy and sensitivity more fully. The selected art portrays more than birds; it illustrates the broad spectrum of approaches spanned by birders who have committed their observations to pencil, pen-and-ink, watercolor, pastel, and related media. The bird portraiture seems scarcely subordinated to the main goal of representing a strictly historical picture. The result is a fusion of science, art, and well-edited writing. Stated at the outset, the editors' shared vision "to bring together something more compelling and vital than a dry collection of records and analyses" has been attained.

A diverse collection of personalities has held court in California birding. Proponents of various schools of thought attending rare-bird theory have, at various times, held sway. That this book is, after all, a record of the committee's decisions spurs the question of how much politics may have affected the outcome of any of various submitted reports that proved contentious. This I will leave unexamined. Nor do I find it appropriate here to call into question any of the decisions the committee has made, deferred, retracted, or revised.

Upon beginning reading *Rare Birds of California*, I set out a notepad for tracking mistakes. I never found anything with which to begin the list. Assuming that some error or another may well have slipped through undetected among the thousands of listed records, I looked for obvious factual errors or contradictions in the main text, and didn't find any. Surely, somewhere, there must be a simple error of fact, something

## BOOK REVIEWS

overlooked, some misrepresentation—but I can't report that I discovered any. The text was proofread to the degree that I discovered no caption goofs and, indeed, no typos—do the authors know where a few are yet hidden? Sentences with no apparent reason to exist failed to come to my notice. I will relate that I encountered the words “beloved,” “fugacious,” and “metaphysically” once each.

The endpapers together comprise two maps of California, split north and south, each conforming to the two long-established regions by which are packaged the quarterly summaries in *North American Birds*. Counties are named with their 2- or 3-letter codes. White numerals, easily discerned against neat black boxes, draw one's eye to 273 numbered locations from which reports reviewed by the committee have come. By benefit of two inset maps magnifying heavily birded coastal southern California, that portion has been marked with 140 such sites, while northern California hosts 133. Sizable swaths of California unmarked by symbols betray regions that are sparsely populated, lightly birded, not strategic places to look for rarities—or, just as likely, all three. The endpapers in my copy were firmly glued and are evenly framed against the inside tuck of the covers. The book seems well bound and sturdy.

The looks, plan, and layout of *Rare Birds of California* work well. While the sheer glut of historic information cannot avoid appearing ponderous, that density by itself will not discourage reading. Throughout the book, it is apparent that a balance between tedium and liveliness has been met. The editors have welcomed the reader, enlivening a great deal of rare bird data with erudite analyses, questions, footnotes, and supporting references.

Dull bird books are promptly relegated to vertically aligned storage. It is safe to say that *Rare Birds of California* likely will lay on an exposed horizontal surface within easy reach for some days after the reader acquires it.

I thank Steve Mlodinow and Alan Contreras for their helpful suggestions.

David Fix

**Gulls of the Americas**, by Steve N. G. Howell and Jon Dunn. 2007. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 516 pp., 1160 color photographs. Hardcover \$35.00 (ISBN-10: 0618726411).

This book constitutes a superb reference guide for the identification and plumages of the 36 gulls that occur in the western hemisphere (22 breeding in North America, 10 in South America, 4 visitors), and it surely constitutes the best comparative and comprehensive reference book on gull plumages published to this date. The authors' profuse use and adequate selection of photos provide the reader with rich comparative visual material.

The book is divided into five main sections: How to use this book, Introduction, Plates, Species Accounts, and Glossary. The section “How to use this book” explains how the information is organized and the way maps should be interpreted. In this section, however, the authors already warn the reader that “citations are provided only for some specific distributional information and for specific statements and information that we consider not to be general knowledge.” It is hard to assess what they consider “general knowledge” in relation to gulls, and the reader is left to wonder where much of the information included in the book is coming from. Furthermore, they later go on to state that “most gulls are relatively little studied. Recent observations have brought into question some time-honored beliefs about gull molts and plumage.”

It is easy to imagine that the “little studied” statement applies to all aspects of gull biology. Also, most of our “general knowledge” about gulls is based on the species that tend to associate with people and behave commensally when around people, as around fishing operations or in marine animal parks. When not associated with people many of these gulls behave very differently, and this needs to be acknowledged.

The introduction definitely should not be skipped, as is commonly done, for it is rich in information concerning taxonomy, field-identification methods, variation in the