

BOOK REVIEWS

Palacios, E., and Rodríguez, C. 2005. Nesting seabirds of the Gulf of California's offshore islands: Diversity, ecology and conservation, in *Biodiversity, Ecosystems, and Conservation in Northern Mexico*, (J.-L. E. Cartron, G. Ceballos, and R. S. Felger (eds.)), pp. 452–470. Oxford Univ. Press, New York.

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Bird Voices of Northern California: An Audio Guide to Bird Identification, by Ron LeValley and David Fix. 2007. Mad River Biologists, Arcata, California (ordering information at www.madrivernbio.com). Double CD set, \$27.95.

Bird sounds are an important component of field identification, and these days numerous compilations of recordings are available, usually for families of birds or for geographic regions. This pair of CDs (hereafter *Bird Voices*) includes the voices and other sounds of 190 species found in northern California, ranging from the Marbled Murrelet to the House Sparrow, from the Sandhill Crane to the Wrentit. The region covered is not defined but appears to be truly northern California (north of Sonoma county), rather than including central California. The species covered are listed on a simple insert (adorned with some nice color photos), which notes that the recordings were made primarily by LeValley, with help from the California Department of Fish and Game, Sean McAllister, Mark Higley, and Seth Bunnell. The insert also informs us that most recordings were made in Humboldt, Trinity, and Siskiyou counties, and that Fix wrote and spoke the accompanying narration.

Bird Voices is essentially a greatly expanded version of a tape cassette produced some years ago by the same team, which was a tool aimed to help field biologists recognize bird vocalizations for censusing purposes (hence the long samples of species such as the Marbled Murrelet and Spotted Owl). The emphasis on real-life sounds means that some recordings are deemed of “marginal quality” by the authors, but these are included because they aid in identification. The species are “arranged following the American Ornithologists' Union checklist” (version not specified), starting with geese, although the California Towhee is misplaced between the Lazuli Bunting and Red-winged Blackbird. Also, the names Aleutian Cackling Goose, Red-shafted Flicker, and Audubon's Warbler are used, rather than Cackling Goose, Northern Flicker, and Yellow-rumped Warbler, but no scientific names are provided. As well as giving scientific names, the insert could have benefited from giving the date (even just month) and location of the recordings (at least those made outside of the three main counties). Other than a skimpy insert, my main gripe is “I want more,” and I hope the authors expand upon this invaluable compilation and produce another version before too many years pass.

The typical format on bird CDs, of a neutered voice announcing, say, “number 98, the Warbling Vireo,” can stifle one's ability to learn sounds. LeValley and Fix eschew this format so that the sounds come first, followed by the narration and species' identity (set your CD player to “shuffle” and see if you can identify every sound before you are told!). At least on my CD player, the narration sounded a little distorted if listened to at the volume at which the bird sounds were best heard, and I found it distracting to have constantly to increase and decrease volume.

The selection of species is somewhat eclectic. Surprising omissions include the American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon (but the Prairie Falcon is included), Allen's Hummingbird, and Say's Phoebe, and the range of calls given for the Acorn Woodpecker is rather limited. Perhaps inevitably, the emphasis is on songs rather than calls, and an expanded version could include many commonly heard calls that can be confusing in the field, as well as the song of Black-capped Chickadee. In particular, more calls of swallows, vireos, and sparrows (such as the White-crowned and Golden-crowned) would be nice. On the other hand, it is great that there are numerous examples of species with variable songs, such as the Nashville, Wilson's, Black-throated Gray,

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and Hermit warblers, and the Fox Sparrow. In this last species, it may be confusing that the songs are of “Thick-billed” Fox Sparrows whereas the calls are of “Sooty” Fox Sparrows; although the narration discusses the differences in calls it does not explicitly state which call is included.

Context is often important in the identification of birds sounds, and the narration to *Bird Voices* is a gold mine of tips on other sounds not included, seasonal occurrence, habitat, abundance, and behavior, such as how one may hear an adult and accompanying juvenile Caspian Tern calling back and forth as they fly over at night, or the comments about Hammond’s, Gray, and Dusky flycatchers. This is hard-won, priceless information for which there never seems to be enough room in a conventional field guide.

Those familiar with wordsmith David Fix will not be disappointed by the narration, although some may find it a little “northern California” in style—but then it is a CD of the birds of northern California! We are told, for example, that the “steamy, dreamy whistles” of the Pigeon Guillemot suggest a “wet waxwing,” that Killdeers “seem haunted by chronic anxiety,” and that a singing male Anna’s Hummingbird sounds like “a cricket in the bug shop for a tune-up.” For commonly heard sounds absent from the recordings, Fix sometimes tries to imitate them; this works better for some species (e.g., the Virginia Rail) than others (e.g., the juvenile Caspian Tern), but when you know a sound these imitations can be helpful reminders. A few slips inevitably crept into the writing, such as under the Yellow-billed Magpie, where we are told this is the only species endemic to California (the Island Scrub-Jay may not have been split when the text was written) and that the Black-billed Magpie is now known as the American Magpie. Also, at least in central California, the Eared Grebe and accipiters are not silent in the non-breeding season.

The specter of misidentified calls haunts any collection of sounds, and *Bird Voices* may be free from this plague. However, the putative Barn Owl sounds disconcertingly like a begging juvenile Great Horned Owl, despite the narration that “the toneless scraping hiss of a Barn Owl is unlike any other night sound commonly heard,” and the comment under the Great Horned Owl that a begging juvenile (no recording included) “can be a very puzzling sound for the uninitiated to identify.” At the very least, the listener should have been made aware of this very real pitfall. See (well, hear) what you think.

One might ask, how does *Bird Voices* compare to *Bird Songs of California*, by Geoffrey Keller, a set of three CDs covering 231 species and produced by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology? *Bird Voices* includes 40 species not on the Cornell CDs, mainly waterbirds such as geese and shorebirds; the only passerines not represented on the Cornell CDs are the American Redstart, White-throated Sparrow, and House Sparrow. The Cornell recordings are generally clearer (some so good that they can sound “unnatural”), and the recordings and narration (coming first, “as usual”) are balanced in volume. While a very few sounds on *Bird Voices* seem a little unnatural, such as the calls of the Red-shouldered Hawk and Ring-billed Gull, most ring true of a real-life field experience. The Cornell insert provides some identification tips that can be read as one listens to the recordings, but these do not reach the level of Fix’s perceptive narration on *Bird Voices*. The Cornell compilation is a useful reference for the state as a whole, but *Bird Voices* offers additional recordings and a fresh perspective, and is still worth owning if you have the Cornell CDs.

In conclusion, *Bird Voices of Northern California* is an excellent learning tool that should be obligatory listening for any field biologist censusing birds in northern California (as well as in adjacent southern Oregon and central California). It should also benefit any birder in the region who wishes to improve his or her field skills.

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