

BOOK REVIEWS

Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part 2 by Peter Pyle, with S. N. G. Howell, Siobhan Ruck, and David F. DeSante. 2008. Slate Creek Press. 836 pages, illustrated. Paperback, \$62.38, ISBN 9780961894047. Order online from www.slatecreekpress.com/order_us.htm.

Prior to writing this review, I asked a number of active banders whether they would be willing to review Part 2 of Peter Pyle's vast ornithological fact-swamp. Each of them scuttled rapidly away muttering about being asked to review the Bible. A technical review of Part 2 from a bander's perspective is neither appropriate nor feasible for *Western Birds*. Most of our readers are more interested in what aspects of the book are likely to be of use to them in the field, rather than for examining birds in the hand.

The Pyle guides are sometimes treated as though they are conceptually unique and have no ancestry. In fact, they are part of a long natural progression in American ornithology and have a few ancestors worth mentioning. If we think of Pyle guides as equivalent to the compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, we should look back to the full-length predecessors. The most important of these are the 11-volume *Birds of North and Middle America* by Robert Ridgway and Herbert Friedmann (1901–1950) and the two-volume fifth edition of *Key to North American Birds* by Elliott Coues (1903).

However, there are precursors in the "compact" realm as well, the best of which might be Thomas S. Roberts' *Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States*, which first appeared as part of his two-volume *Birds of Minnesota* and was issued in 1932 (with reprints through at least 1974) as a single volume on its own. Portable books serving a similar field-reference function in the early 20th century include such standards as Frank M. Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* and Florence M. Bailey's *Handbook of Birds of the Western United States*, both of which went through several revisions.

It is important to note what the Pyle guides really are: compact, portable encyclopedias. A good encyclopedia provides a condensed version of complex information in a form understandable to a nonspecialist and refers interested people to additional sources. If we take this definition as our basic standard for the Pyle guides, they succeed admirably as compact, portable, and condensed. Owing to their profound suffusion with banding terminology and a debilitating load of abbreviations they are only partly successful as understandable to nonspecialists; in short, they require study. They are superb as a source of further information on identification, being in effect the best bibliography for North American identification issues.

People who study birds of the American West for fun or in a professional setting deal with exceptional complexity and subtlety on a regular basis. Anyone who gets beyond his back-yard feeder comes face-to-bill with things that don't appear in basic field guides almost immediately. In midsummer there will be juvenile sparrows not far beyond the back fence. At the lake will be collections of overlapping terns and clumps of gulls whose so-called plumage would seem evidence of some epic natural disaster were it not for the fact that *all* of them look that way, with subtle differences. At the park will be waterfowl that seem to have dipped themselves in something to leach all of their field marks to a ghastly brown mush. The *Empidonax* sitting on the mailbox speaks for itself.

Yet all of these birds have something in common. They have details, especially structural details, that allow almost all of them to be identified by a patient observer. I must emphasize the words "patient" and "observer," for it is for such people that the Pyle guides are intended. The Pyle guides are field *references*, not field guides. If you try to use them in the hand while the bird is still flitting 20 yards away, you are already in deep trouble. They don't work that way.

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Pyle rewards the observer who does what the best observers have always done: obtain as many details as possible in the field. This can be done by note-taking, photography, or surreptitiously grabbing the odd feather that spirals down when the bird flies across a river for good.

When you have in hand all possible details about a bird you see, part 1 (1997) or part 2 is what you may need, particularly if you are observing juvenile terns or other difficult groups of birds. The gull section, to which Steve Howell made significant contributions, is in effect a pocket version of much useful information from *Gulls of the Americas* (S. N. G. Howell and J. Dunn, 2007, reviewed in *Western Birds* 39:47–50) and might almost be copied and kept in the glove compartment for convenient access. It is certainly one of the sections that will be most often used by nonbanders. The terns and alcids are an underappreciated identification challenge, and their treatment in part 2 is among the best and most easily usable in any guide.

A few things could be better. Part 2 is very similar to part 1, in one respect too similar: the publisher would have done users of both a kindness by making part 2 bunting blue or goldfinch yellow instead of gold-on-black, identical to Part 1. As in part 1, the references, a section of the book to which many users refer quite often, are printed in a typeface that ought to be a felony, brutally small and painful to read.

Part 2 has a fair number of typos, e.g., mislabeling the drawing of an Eared Grebe face as Horned Grebe, as well as misspellings. Given the mass of text, some such errors are inevitable. I surmise that any of these that have a bearing on part 2's utility will be corrected on the publisher's web site in the same way as such errors in part 1 were handled.

Part 2 has considerable line art, which is a mixed bag, ranging from excellent (molt limits, loons, egret feet, Soras, gulls, terns, puffin faces) to rather dubious (most sandpipers, large tern heads). The unevenness in the art is too bad, partly because the drawings will get heavy use from nonbanders and partly because some users will not be sure which drawings are exact and which are not. In some cases (e.g., Dunlin/Curlew Sandpiper) heads are too large for bills, while in others (e.g., other peep heads and bills) the reverse is true: bills are attached to micro-heads. This mish-mash is distracting and confusing. My own banding experience was mostly with peeps, and this kind of drawing is not sufficient.

Some really useful drawings include the underwings of snipes. Their utility may not be immediately apparent to nonbanders, but note that Oregon has recently recorded two Jack Snipes, on the basis of birds shot by hunters. Excellent photographs are available, and one of the specimens has been preserved. If a Common Snipe from Asia has to be distinguished from Wilson's Snipe, Pyle part 2 is ready.

The dedication and sheer brute doggedness required to produce a book like this reaches the far limits of what can be expected of anyone, and the fact that we who work with and enjoy birds have the privilege of living in the era of Peter Pyle and seeing these guides come into use is something that we must never take for granted.

Alan Contreras

Field Guide to Owls of California and the West, by Hans Peeters. 2007. California Natural History Guide No. 93, University of California Press. 326 pages, profusely illustrated with photos and art. \$50.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-520-25280-6

This fat little guide is one of the finest works of natural history that I have read in years. I can say "read," not merely referred to (or worse: utilized), because it is not only as fact-laden as most utilizers might want, it is written almost as a work of literature and can be read for pleasure. Before all of you hard-science types creep off to digest the molt limits in Peter Pyle's new guide rather than risk the shoal waters of "read-

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able” bird books, note that Peeters’ new owl guide is exceptionally well-referenced (the citation list takes 24 pages) and can serve as a resource as well as a read.

The best natural-history writing typically includes three features. It is based on accurately recorded personal observation over time, it demonstrates familiarity with the literature related to the subject, and it shows good writing ability. Many books manage two out of three; *Field Guide to Owls* showcases all three at an exceptionally high level. The tradition of bird books that serve as serious references as well as works of art represented the norm, or at least a fairly common, respected format in the 19th and early 20th century, falling somewhat out of fashion as ornithology became more the province of professionals and technicians. We have some good examples, however, in the works of Margaret Morse Nice, Kevin Zimmer, John Janovy, Ralph Hoffmann, Ted Floyd, Ned Brinkley, and others.

Field Guide to Owls is divided about evenly between an extensive section on owls as a biological category, with examples of what they are like and what they do, and well-illustrated species accounts. My personal need is for a book that is a bit heavier on species accounts and lighter on the generic information, yet the latter is so well written and illustrated and contains so much of real interest (plenty of “I didn’t know that”) that I could hardly recommend that such material be cut. It is, in short, as good a balance as we are likely to see. Although much of the content is natural history in the biological sense, there are many interesting and humorous asides, for example, the Great Horned Owl trained for falconry that turned out, when hunting in the wild, to have a strong preference for Western Toads.

The illustrations are top-level, almost without exception, and there are hundreds of them. The owl photos are as good as any I know. The author’s full-page paintings of owls in this guide are unsurpassed and rarely equaled in any book I have seen. They easily stand comparison to those of Fiertes, Sutton, Tunnicliffe, Liljefors, or McQueen. There are also many small, intricate, pristine illuminations (the word “illustrations” hardly does them justice) of such things as talons, feathers, pellets, and disappearing mice. This is the work of a master, based on a lifetime of study and practice.

The art is quite varied in subject, and the photos are not without humor: one shows a supposedly fledged Northern Pygmy-Owl dangling upside down by one foot, having found flight something of a challenge. A plate showing size comparisons of all the owls lined up next to each other is a simple idea that I found surprisingly useful. We almost never get to see owls, unlike many other kinds of birds, near each other or even one species right after another.

The only sour note in this book is the distribution maps, which range from adequate to bad. They are made rather casually, unlike everything else in the book, and should not be considered accurate, at least for the Pacific Northwest, the region with which I am most familiar. This is an unfortunate aspect, but in fact good maps are very time-consuming (and therefore expensive) to produce, and most bird books have at least some that are pretty dubious. I know from my own experience working on three books featuring maps that issues of both accurate content and technical presentation are very significant. Making accurate maps is a massive undertaking, and in the case of these owl species, maps are not of much importance.

For some species, such as the Long-eared Owl, a map is very hard to produce no matter how much energy is spent on it. The data are simply too limited, contradictory, or murky, plagued by the question of level of scale, and spatial distribution is an issue only locally. For others, such as the Northern Saw-Whet or Snowy, a static representation such as a map displays what is *least* interesting about the species’ spatial characteristics; the most interesting aspects are the movements. These movements, to the extent that they are known, are adequately presented in the text. I would have liked to have seen more information on the migratory movements of species for which significant data are available, for example, the exceptional flights of Saw-whets banded at Boise Ridge, Idaho, in some years.

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The book's title says "California and the West" but that means simply that a lot of the examples, including a fair chunk of the habitat-use data, relate substantially to California situations. However, I found the information, except the maps, to be quite accurate or easily convertible to what I know or want to know about owls in my region. I suspect that the same would be true for other parts of the West.

In terms of detail and technical information, this book is a notch below such definitive portable family studies as *Warblers* (Dunn and Garrett, 1997) or shoulder-straining references like *Pipits and Wagtails* (Alstrom and Mild, 2003). It is what it says it is, a natural-history guide, not a technical reference. It shows, however, just how superb a true natural-history guide can be as both science and art, and establishes a standard to which other writers might profitably aspire. It is a standard that few will ever reach.

Alan Contreras

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Address inquiries to: contact@westernfieldornithologists.org



Short-eared Owl

Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig