

BOOK REVIEWS

Small Mountain Owls, by Scott Rashid. 2009. Schiffer Publishing, Ltd. 176 pages, over 160 color photos and drawings. Hardback, \$39.99. ISBN 0-7643-3282-1.

Small Mountain Owls is a small coffee-table book that details the life histories of the Northern Pygmy Owl, Flammulated Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Boreal Owl in the western United States, primarily in Rocky Mountain National Park. The book's text is divided into four parts, with well-ordered accounts for each of the four species that address identification, anatomy, coloration, vocalizations of adults and fledglings, distribution and range, territory size, hunting habits, diet, nesting, courtship behavior, interactions between adults and nestlings, longevity, mortality, and more.

The reader may legitimately ask the question as did I: does the world really need another book about owls? A quick scan of some major book outlets reveals at least three dozen titles about owls currently on the market. And many of us who consider ourselves owl watchers already own at least a few of the major works, such as *The Owls of North America*, *Guide to Owl Watching in North America*, *North American Owls: Biology and Natural History*, or *Owls of the World*.

But among these many other books *Small Mountain Owls* holds its own. This unique and rather refreshing book includes a plethora of engaging first-hand observations of the four small owls gleaned from the author's 20 years of experience studying them in Colorado. And the author did not merely observe these owls from afar but gained valuable insights about them during his years of banding and rehabilitating them.

One might also consider buying the book solely for the exquisite art work and incredible photos of the four small owls. Most of the images were artfully produced by the author himself. Even better, these delightful drawings, watercolors, and photos helpfully illustrate the owls' various ages, behaviors, and postures mentioned in the text.

Almost inevitably, books of this nature have at least a few weaknesses, and *Small Mountain Owls* is no exception. First of all, a few of the range maps seem inaccurate. For example, the breeding range of the Northern Pygmy-Owl is not shown to include the mountains of central Idaho or central Oregon, where it nests according to *The Birds of North America Online*. In addition, the maps for the Northern Pygmy-Owl and Flammulated Owl both indicate breeding in the Columbia Basin, an expansive arid region of south-central Washington and north-central Oregon that generally does not support trees, let alone these forest owls.

Additionally, *Small Mountain Owls* seems a bit too provincial in places; the accounts do not encompass the species' entire geographic range. Examples of this are found on page 25: "Northern Pygmy Owls are found from approximately 6,000 to 12,000 feet above sea level," and on page 120: "Pygmy-Owls...often vocalize on an exposed limb, sometimes as high as 60 feet from the ground." In the Pacific Northwest they are common below 2000 feet and can be found locally to sea level in coastal forests. We often see them perched atop conifers that easily exceed 100 feet in height. The discussion of Christmas bird counts on page 73 leads with the apparently unresearched statement, "Christmas bird counts have been an anticipated winter activity for bird enthusiasts since 1900 in the East and 1960 in the West." That assertion is clearly in error: both Pueblo, Colorado, and Pacific Grove, California, inaugurated their counts in 1900. That said, these errors are minor distractions and do not detract from the book's ability to inform and delight.

Who might benefit by owning this book? Those planning a trip to see these four owl species, especially in Colorado, should find the book valuable because it offers a great deal of information on habitat and phenology that is useful for finding the owls. If you have trouble distinguishing the similar Northern Saw-whet and Boreal

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Owls, *Small Mountain Owls* offers many pictorial comparisons of these two species, including several images of the two perched side by side. Readers with an interest in the biology of these owls should want this book's studiously detailed account of these owls' lives.

Finally, I recommend this book for anyone who appreciates the incomparable beauty of these small, delightful owls. The sharp, close-up photos and pleasing artwork will justify a place it on any owl lover's coffee table or bookshelf.

Dave Trochlell

Breeding Bird Atlas of Santa Clara County, California, by William G. Bousman. 2007. Santa Clara Audubon Society, Cupertino, CA. 547 pages, over 180 black and white illustrations of birds, 177 species maps, 81 figures. Paperback. \$15.00. Order with www.scvas.org/pdf/book_order_form.pdf. ISBN 978-0-9796038-0-8.

This book joins an expanding shelf of breeding bird atlases published for California. It follows the geographic format of focusing on a single county established with the publication of the standard-setting *Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas* (W. D. Shuford, 1993, Bushitt Books, Bolinas, CA). Although the Santa Clara book was published in 2007, it is based on field work from 1987 to 1993, although it is updated with information on additional species breeding from 1994 to 2006. What I first noticed about this book was its size—a whopping 547 pages—which at least partly explains why the book took so long to get completed after the field work was finished. So when I read the first line of the introduction stating that the purpose of the book was to “to determine the birds that breed within a geographic area,” I was surprised. It greatly surpasses this simple stated purpose and provides a rich understanding of the breeding avifauna (and more) of Santa Clara County.

I enjoyed reading the first hundred pages of introduction, divided into six chapters, which serve to inform the reader of many aspects of the county as well as to describe the atlas project. The first chapter discusses the county's general geography, climate (including historical rainfall patterns), and parklands. Chapter 2 describes the tectonic history of this county that straddles the San Andreas Fault. I am not sure how it relates directly to breeding birds in the 20th century, but it was an interesting read. Chapter 3 provides descriptions and maps of habitats and vegetation communities. Chapter 4 delves into the history of the county's human habitation and landscape changes. By page 70 we reach the first inkling that this book is about bird distribution with Chapter 5, which outlines the atlas project—its organization and methods. Chapter 6 is a nine-page summary of the project's results.

Chapter 7 is the heart of the book, with a brief introduction to guide the reader in interpreting the species accounts, followed by a single-page glossary, then 177 species accounts. Each account is illustrated by one of 20 artists, and, as can be expected, the illustration styles vary with each artist. Thankfully, the species accounts are all organized consistently with text on one page. The facing page contains a map illustrating the breeding or possible breeding locations, a graph estimating local population trends on the bases of Christmas Bird Counts and Palo Alto summer bird counts, and a graph showing seasonal or phenological information on breeding.

The text of the species accounts consists of four to six paragraphs, the first briefly summarizing the species' global, California, and Santa Clara County distribution and relative abundance. The following paragraphs provide details relevant to Santa Clara County, with information on historical distribution, population trends, results of the atlas field work, breeding phenology, and important comments on habitat preferences and data gaps. There is a lot of information here. Although the bulk of the species accounts was written by William Bousman, additional contributors include local ornithologists Stephen Rottenborn, Michael Rogers, Michael Mammoser, and others.

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Twenty-four pages of references at the end of the book attest to the large number of sources used to compile background information in the species accounts and other chapters. I noticed that some literature cited is secondary, but this is to be expected in such a large undertaking, and ample primary literature is cited too.

There are nine appendices, the first listing the project's contributors. Next come a 17-page history of local ornithology, a summary of historical population and distributional changes of 187 species, breeding-season dates for a few species, the range of estimates of population sizes for 159 species documented during the atlas period, the list of common and scientific names of plants and animals mentioned in the book, local place names no longer in use, accounts of species breeding historically, accounts of exotic species not established, and notes on two additional species found breeding in 2006.

I did not read every species account, but the many that I did read were consistently well written, and the information in each rang true. I was particularly fond of the constant attempts to pull in information from neighboring counties and states in order to provide a context with which local situation could be interpreted. I was also pleased that the authors did not attempt to discuss general natural history readily available in other sources but kept their focus on local, relevant information. There is very little, if any, "fluff" in these accounts.

As someone not completely familiar with the county, I found the maps a bit difficult to read. For background they show only waterways, so the standard references evident on a road map are absent from the atlas maps—no roads, cities, or towns. But with a bit of practice this obstacle is easily overcome. The display of Christmas Bird Count data varies by species, with some graphs showing birds/party-hour and others showing just the total count of birds. How this information fits into the purpose of the book is not clear; it would have been more relevant if the book had addressed distribution in the nonbreeding season as did the San Diego County Bird Atlas (P. Unitt, 2004, Proc. San Diego Soc. Nat. Hist. 39). To me, this book suffers from an identity crisis, as it is much more than a standard breeding bird atlas but not enough to qualify as a standard reference to the local avifauna or to the local natural/human history. However, it is a monumental work of which the authors and editor as well as the many other contributors should be proud. It was worth the wait.

If you have a collection of bird atlases for California, add the *Breeding Bird Atlas of Santa Clara County, California*. Birders and wildlife biologists who reside in or work in Santa Clara and neighboring counties should read and use this book extensively. Everyone with a thirst for distributional information on California birds should be satisfied with this book, and I recommend it wholeheartedly.

John Sterling