

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of North America**, by Bill Thompson III. 2012. Houghton Mifflin, New York. 368 pp., ~450 color photographs, 300 line drawings. Paperback, \$15.95. ISBN 978-0-547-44021-7.

The latest addition to the Peterson Field Guides series, *The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of North America* is written especially for children 8–12 years old. In many ways it is a simplified field guide, aiming to ease kids into birding without overwhelming them. The real success of this book, however, is in Thompson's light-hearted writing style, which kids will find fun, engaging, and full of tidbits of information. The value of this book is not as much to help aspiring young birders become great at bird identification but to ignite a spark of interest in birds and bird watching.

The original version of this book was published in 2008 and limited in scope to eastern North America. For this version, 100 species from western North America were simply added to give it a broader geographic range. I wonder why the publisher chose to create a guide to all of North America rather than creating a new regional guide for western North America. However, given that this is meant as a first field guide for kids, the important birds to cover are those most likely to be seen in backyards, towns, and local parks. Considering this book covers only 300 species, this is achieved remarkably well.

*The Young Birder's Guide* is dense with information, with a full page for each species (with the exception of a handful of similar, closely related species that share a page) arranged in taxonomic order. This layout, combined with the lack of a "quick index" page pointing to the major groups of birds, will likely make it difficult for the user to find and identify an unknown bird. Still, each page is attractive and fun to read. Every species account includes one or two photographs, which are generally well chosen. An exception is the photograph for the female Costa's Hummingbird (p. 178), which shows a female Anna's Hummingbird. Line drawings by Julie Zickefoose and Michael DiGiorgio are beautiful, fun to look at, and often informative. The best parts of the species accounts are the "Wow!" inserts, containing some random tidbit of information about each species. Some of them are just for laughs; for example, the insert for the Cinnamon Teal (p. 61) informs the reader that the spice does not, in fact, come from ground-up ducks. Most, however, are informative and fascinating. The range maps used are the standard Peterson maps, which are fundamentally flawed in that they do not show range during migration.

Most young readers, like most adult field-guide users, will skip right to the species accounts and begin flipping through the pages. One hopes, however, that the young birder whose interest has been sparked by the species accounts will eventually turn to the 38 pages of introductory material. These sections are filled with great tips on getting started, how to look at a bird, how to use binoculars, how to get involved, etc. The back content is useful as well, including a resources page, a very nice glossary, and an index.

In order to field-test this guide with its intended audience, I lent it to a small sample of kids. The group of 5- to 7-year-olds, not surprisingly, flipped through looking at the pictures and happily pointed out the birds they knew. I also handed it to a group around 11–13 years old, none of whom had shown the least interest in nature, and they used it in a surprising way. They hardly seemed to notice the photograph but flipped through, reading the captions for the line drawings and the little "Wow!" blurbs. I could see a new world opened to those kids, and they were excited to learn about something completely different. One girl spent about 20 minutes going through the book page by page, enthralled, and remaining oblivious when her friends moved on to other topics of conversation.

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This, then, is the strength of this book. Thompson's fun writing style, great pictures, and interesting facts are all perfectly tailored to get kids interested in birds. This is a book for kids who have never thought to look at birds and kids who are just getting started in birding. Once the beginner gets a little more advanced, and starts to wonder why he or she can't identify all the birds in the neighborhood by using this book, then it's time to move on to another field guide. By then, it will have accomplished exactly what it aimed to do: create a new birder.

Lauren Harter

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