

BOOK REVIEWS

Moments of Discovery: Natural History Narratives from Mexico and Central America, edited by Kevin Winker. 2010. University Press of Florida. 401 + xiii pp. Clothbound, \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-8130-3417-1.

Moments of Discovery is a compilation of 20 autobiographic chapters by biologists who traveled in Middle America, mainly for ornithological field work, from the 1930s to the 1990s. The authors include big names in ornithology of this region: Miguel Álvarez del Toro (the only Mexican author), Robert F. Andrle, John M. Bates, Lula C. Coffey, Walter W. Dalquest, Robert W. Dickerman, Stephen W. Eaton, Ernest P. Edwards, John T. Emlen, Jr., Paul D. Haemig, Joyce Heck, Joe T. Marshall, Jr., Paul S. Martin, Don Owen-Lewis, A. Townsend Peterson, John H. Rappole, Charles G. Sibley, Walter A. Thurber, Dwain W. Warner, and Kevin Winker. This collection is intended to preserve a record of events that have gone mostly unrecorded in print. The majority of the travels described took place in Tamaulipas and Veracruz, with most others in central Mexico, Chiapas, and Central America; relatively few pages deal with field work in Baja California and Sonora. The black-and-white photographs included in some chapters are interesting. The map of Middle American states and countries inserted between the preface and chapter 1 should have been larger and should have indicated the location of places mentioned in each of the chapters; as it stands I do not think it is at all useful.

I enjoyed reading this book for several reasons: because of the historical importance of many of these events in Middle American ornithology, because sometimes they document ecosystems now long gone, because sometimes the biological observations brought back pleasant memories or nicely described idiosyncrasies of Mexican culture, and because the descriptive styles of some chapters are works of art in themselves and the anecdotes are humorous and fun to read. I have a greater respect for some of these authors and a greater knowledge of their contributions to the study of Middle American natural history after reading these autobiographies.

However, almost every chapter, the author's own included, contains errors. In the preface Kevin Winker admits "Each chapter is given mostly as the author wrote it. My editorial hand has generally been light." I think this decision was unfortunate because it compromises the accuracy of the information. (I can provide a list of these errors in case Dr. Winker is interested in publishing a second, revised edition.)

Álvarez del Toro's beautifully written chapter recounting his first trip to El Triunfo is an English translation of an account he published in his 1990 autobiography *¡Así Era Chiapas!: 42 Años de Andanzas por Montañas, Selvas y Caminos en el Estado*, published by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The translation is very good, except that both mentions of goldfinches at El Triunfo refer to the Brown-backed Solitaire (*Myadestes occidentalis*)—in Mexico *jilguero* refers to the Brown-backed Solitaire but in Spain to the European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*). There are a couple of typos, and the date of the trip is lacking.

Dickerman's chapter has a surprising typo, with the name of a subspecies of the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus arthuralleni*) that he named himself misspelled (p. 91)! In most of the other chapters, by far the majority of errors are misspellings of Spanish names or words, extremely disappointing for a book on Latin America. This is one more of many books with total disregard for getting Spanish words and names right. It is beyond me why the authors and editor would not have the courtesy or try harder to be culturally and editorially accurate.

Another source of error is scientific inaccuracy. There was an attempt to provide the current (in 2010) English and scientific names of species the first time they are mentioned in each chapter. This worthy goal was usually, but not always, achieved.

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Examples of this problem plagued Eaton's chapter: both the Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) and Great-tailed Grackle (*Q. mexicanus*) are mentioned in Guatemala; there is a potentially confusing section mentioning both Passerini's (*Ramphocelus passerinii*) and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers when, to be precise, the author was writing about Cherrie's Tanager (*R. costaricensis*); "a large, spotted rodent" is named "an agouti (*Dasyprocta*)," when if it had a spotted coat it must have been a paca (*Agouti*); an "Elaenia" mentioned in the highland forest of "Sierra Colorado," (actually Cerro Colorado, Hidalgo) is clearly an error (the Greenish Elaenia, *Myiopagis viridicata*, is possible there, though); and both the Cactus Wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*) and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch (*Arremon brunneinucha*) are mentioned near Hutzilac, Morelos, when it is actually related species that occur there.

Edwards's chapter well describes the Tawny-collared Nightjar (*Antrostomus* [in 2010 *Caprimulgus*] *salvini*) but does so under the names "Buff-collared Nightjar (*Caprimulgus ridgwayi*)." An endnote to Martin's chapter mentions collecting an Eastern Towhee in Tamaulipas, but this refers to specimen Denver Museum of Natural History 48875, a Spotted Towhee. Sibley's chapter mentions collecting a pair of Aplomado Falcons (*Falco femoralis*) near Rancho Guirocoba, Sonora; this would be shocking if correct. I looked it up through www.ornisnet.org: the falcon that Sibley collected near Rancho Guirocoba is a Bat Falcon (*F. rufigularis*) (which makes more biogeographic sense). Sibley's chapter also seems to treat *maculatus* and *erythrophthalmus* as interchangeable names for the Spotted Towhee, which they are not (but nevertheless the summary of Sibley's findings on *Pipilo* systematics in Mexico is absolutely fascinating).

In sum, this book provides fun and absorbing reading for those interested in the historical, cultural, and biological aspects of Middle American travels by earlier naturalists, though it would have benefitted greatly from a heavier editorial hand.

Héctor Gómez de Silva

The Travails of Two Woodpeckers: Ivory-Bills & Imperials, by Noel F. R. Snyder, David E. Brown, and Kevin B. Clark. 2009. University of New Mexico Press. xiv + 170 pp., 27 color photographs, 21 halftones, 2 maps, 2 tables, 1 chart. Clothbound, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-8263-4664-3.

The Travails of Two Woodpeckers examines the historical perspectives and the apparent ultimate extermination of two of the most iconic bird species in North America. The authors thoughtfully weave an intriguing story for each of the species' demise, replete with historical accounts, natural-history accounts, along with conservation theory and endangered-species management. The book has been broken up into three main chapters, the first focusing on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), the second on the Imperial Woodpecker (*C. imperialis*), and the third addressing conservation issues, past and present.

In the account of the demise of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, we are taken through the history of the species' discovery and description, the description of its preferred habitat, and some of its population dynamics and life history. By the time the alarm bell for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker sounded, because of a significant population decline in the early the 20th century, only limited information existed on crucial life-history requirements. One of the most respected naturalists of the era was James Tanner, who believed that habitat loss was the most compelling reason for the Ivory-bill's decline in the U.S. Tanner believed that the Ivory-bill was a specialist in foraging, requiring huge tracts of virgin bottomland forest to find sufficient food. The authors believe that this assertion by Tanner started the perceived misbelief that sustained logging

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of primary forest was the primary cause for the decline of the species. The authors of *The Travails of Two Woodpeckers* make a compelling alternative argument, that the true driver of the of the species' ultimate demise was instead unrelenting depredation in the form of collecting for museums, subsistence hunting, curiosity hunting, and shooting through ignorance. They believe that the most crucial negative effect of timbering on the woodpecker may not have been to deplete its food supply but to facilitate an increase in shooting: lumber roads improved access to forests and led to substantially increased numbers of people in the forests. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Cuba (possibly a distinct species?) faced a similar threat, although that population managed to persist into the late 20th century.

The Imperial Woodpecker of the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico was the largest woodpecker in the world. It was recorded less than 40 miles south of the U.S. border in Chihuahua near the Mesa de Guacamayas, south and east of the Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona. The first specimens were collected by a contract hunter in the Sierra Bolaños in the state of Jalisco, and were shown to the ornithological world at the Zoological Society of London in 1832. They were the size of ravens, nearly two feet in length! Unlike the Ivory-bill, it was noted early on that the Imperial was hunted regularly by indigenous peoples as well as by the Mexicans at the time. Carl Lumholtz wrote (p. 71), "The giant woodpecker is seen in the more remote parts, but it is on the point of being exterminated, because the Tarahumares consider his one or two young such a delicacy that they do not hesitate to cut down even large trees to get at their nests. The Mexicans shoot them because their plumage is thought to be beneficial to health. It is held close to the ears and the head in order to impart its supposed magnetism and keep out the maleficent effects of the wind. In the pairing season these birds keep up a chattering noise, which to my ears was far from disagreeable, but very irritating to a Mexican whom I employed. He used to shoot the birds because they annoyed him." Indeed, a local nickname of the bird was "un gran pedazo de carne" (a great piece of meat). Although habitat destruction in the form of intensive logging certainly degraded the Imperial Woodpecker's preferred habitat, Snyder, Brown, and Clark present a convincing argument that human depredation was actually the driving force behind the species' decline.

While visiting Tutuaca in southern Chihuahua on a WFO-organized field trip in 2003 (a site also visited by the authors in preparation for this book), I was able to listen to an elder Mexican in the remote *ejido* telling of his childhood and the Imperial Woodpecker. From my field notes on that trip, "Don Bernardino stated that at the age of 15 (he was born in 1947), it was not uncommon for him and his father to see between 1 and 3 Imperial Woodpeckers (*Campophilus imperialis*) in one day while on their way out to the main highway which links Hermosillo and Chihuahua City (Hwy. 16) while getting provisions for their house. That places the dates at around 1962 when Bernardino saw the birds. He mentioned that the early populations of the Thick-billed Parrots were larger, and that the individual flocks were much more extensive than they are now, with groups of 50–60 seen commonly during the day. He (Bernardino) has huge concerns that their numbers may continue to decrease in much the same way that the population of Imperial Woodpeckers did.... He now only sees small flocks of parrots daily, and he does not want this bird to disappear as the 'Carpintero imperial' did. It is sobering and humbling to speak with a man who has seen a species of bird go extinct in his backyard while 'on his watch.'"

The last section of the book presents an overview of the demise of the two woodpeckers, with valuable insights on conservation biology and lessons learned during their research for the book. The most intriguing idea the authors present is the warning that sometimes explanations for declines of endangered species become widely accepted before alternative explanations are examined and the original hypothesis is fully tested. Snyder certainly has a great deal of experience with this tenet, and he and

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his co-authors made it clear that the consequences of misidentification of causes of declines and lack of identification of limiting factors can mislead conservation efforts and waste initiative and money.

Overall I was impressed with this book, with both the historical accounts of the species and the analyses of their declines, as well as with the conservation biology presented throughout. I recommend this book for those interested in learning more about these two charismatic species, as well as those who have an interest in biological investigation and conservation biology. It's a good read, and one which will give WFO members close to northern Mexico a reason to dream about what could have been.

Dave Krueper

Wing your way to...

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 9-12 OCTOBER 2014

The 39th annual conference of the Western Field Ornithologists will be held in San Diego, California, 9-12 October 2014, at the Marriott Courtyard hotel at Liberty Station, less than 1 mile from the San Diego airport and Fisherman's Landing, from which our pelagic trips will depart.

We are still in the early stages of planning for this meeting, but expect a wide diversity of presentations, workshops, social events, and full-day and half-day field trips, both terrestrial and pelagic.

The conference will include a symposium on **avifaunal change in western North America** to be published subsequently as a volume of WFO's monograph series *Studies of Western Birds*. We welcome and solicit contributions to this symposium and peer-reviewed publication. To inquire about participating, please contact Dave Shuford at dshuford@pointblue.org or Bob Gill at rgill@usgs.gov.

Please watch www.westernfieldornithologists.org/conference.php for details as they become available. But plan now to join us next year in San Diego!