

BOOK REVIEWS

Better Birding: Tips, Tools & Concepts for the Field, by George L. Armistead and Brian L. Sullivan. 2016. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 318 pages, 850 color photos, 4 maps. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-12966-2.

Better Birding is an unusual book. Not quite a manual of tips for birders, not quite a photographic field guide, and not an in-depth guide to a single group of birds, this book falls somewhere in the intersection of these three styles. Its main goal is to foster better birding by instructing birders in learning the ins and outs of identification of select groups of birds, so that they can apply the practice of knowing a group intimately more broadly. This is accomplished by providing information not only on field marks but also on behavior, habitat, taxonomy, and other facets of identification that are not often covered in depth in other identification guides. At its heart, this is a guide to really getting to know the birds.

The introduction is brief, only 17 pages. Here, the authors clearly outline their goals, discuss what it takes to become a better birder, and detail the aspects of birds' lives that are included in the group accounts, such as molt, taxonomy, vocalizations, and distribution. Other useful topics covered briefly here include how to be prepared for finding rarities, why and how to use www.eBird.org, and whether to broadcast recordings. A deeper introduction to these topics would have been welcome, but as it is, the introduction is more than sufficient to prepare the reader for the following chapters; anyone wishing to learn more on these topics would be wise to turn to other sources, such as some of the ten references listed at the end of the introduction.

The bulk of *Better Birding* covers 24 groups of North American birds, chosen to span a diversity of taxonomic groups and identification issues and to present a wide variety of approaches to identification. The taxonomic level covered in each group varies from a few sister species (e.g., monochromatic "mallards"), a genus (e.g., *Brachyramphus* murrelets), and a few closely related or similar genera (e.g., *Troglodytes* and *Cistothorus* wrens) to an entire family (e.g., the loons). The level of difficulty varies as well, from relatively easy (e.g., white herons) to advanced (e.g., swifts of the genus *Chaetura*). The organization of the group accounts is unconventional and, in my opinion, not very useful: various accounts are grouped mostly by habitat preferences or habits. The most useful grouping is of the accounts of the curlews and godwits into "large shorebirds." Reading the book, I didn't gain anything from accipiters and American rosefinches being grouped into "birds of forest and edge." As I flip through, finding what I'm looking for can be difficult.

The details within each chapter vary with the group and the best techniques for identification. These are laid out in an introduction to the group, followed by "Hints and Considerations," identification, then detailed descriptions of each species. The second page of each chapter contains a bold "Focus on" heading, which lists the most important factors to key in on for identification within each group. These may be as diverse as head pattern, bill color, vocalizations, range, habitat, primary extension, structure, etc., depending on the particular group. Sometimes range maps, "Taxonomic Notes," and/or "Natural History Notes" are added to provide additional information. Just a few of the useful and often unique bits of information presented in various chapters include a photo of a flock of Pacific Loons, noting that flock size is a useful identification clue (p. 35), rules of thumb for picking out a hybrid of the Mallard and a related monochromatic species from either parental species (p. 59), and photos of typical views of *Brachyramphus* murrelets swimming or flying away. The treatment of the Atlantic gadfly petrels both covers taxonomy (p. 140) and presents side-by-side comparisons of these with confusion species, showing the Trindade Petrel with the Sooty Shearwater and Long-tailed Jaeger, for example (pp. 144–145). Useful too

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are photos of the habitats of the marsh sparrows (p. 184), a discussion of mimicry in *Haemorhous* finches (p. 211), and a series of photos showing differences in primary emargination by age and sex in the Couch's and Tropical kingbirds (p. 256). Each chapter ends with a brief list of references, which include mainly primary literature (journal articles) but also relevant books and web pages. These provide a great opportunity for the interested birder to delve more deeply into the lives of each group of birds.

Photographs, most of high quality, are used liberally throughout, often to illustrate variation within a species, make comparisons between species, show how the progression of molt affects appearance, or provide a variety of examples of variation in shape in flight. Most photographs are presented in a grid on the page with appropriate captions underneath, but several plates consist of a Richard Crossley-style composite image in which numerous photos are edited into one plate, allowing for better comparisons. My favorite use of this style is with comparisons of the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks (pp. 204–205). These two plates, one for adults and one for juveniles, show a total of 15 pairs of photos, each pair representing one Sharp-shinned and one Cooper's Hawk in a similar plumage and pose, resulting in very useful comparisons.

In contrast to the thorough treatment of the visual aspects of identification through abundant photographs, *Better Birding* gives audio identification less attention. This is mentioned in the introduction, where the authors urge birders to learn by listening in the field, and recommend some online resources. In the group accounts, voice is briefly described for each species whenever relevant, and sometimes compared directly to confusion species, especially when voice is of paramount importance for identification, as for the Couch's and Tropical kingbirds or Pacific and Winter wrens. For a few groups such as the screech-owls and curlews, reference numbers are given to Macaulay Library recordings. Accounts of most groups, however, lack these references to recordings, so a tremendous resource for learning aural identification is underutilized. No sonograms are depicted, though they could have been useful to illustrate vocal differences in groups such as the *Haemorhous* finches and the longspurs.

The style of *Better Birding* may bring to mind references such as Kaufman's *Field Guide to Advanced Birding* [2011, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York; reviewed in *Western Birds* 42(3)] or another new book in this genre, *The Peterson Reference Guide to Birding by Impression*. *Better Birding* is similar in many ways to the latter title (see book review in this issue). *Advanced Birding* shares goals similar to those of *Better Birding*: providing a wide-angle view of identification to instruct birders in how to look at birds to understand the big picture, rather than focusing on a few key field marks. The methods used to accomplish these goals differ in important ways, though both are effective in their own way. *Better Birding* focuses more on a rich array of photographs and side-by-side comparisons, whereas *Advanced Birding* excels in the detailed information provided in the text. This is especially evident where the two books overlap, particularly with the loons and the accipiters. Ultimately, overlap between the two is minimal, and both are worthwhile investments.

Despite a few faults, *Better Birding* has wide appeal, from the beginner who has begun learning bird identification but wants to know how the expert tour leader makes identifications so effortlessly, to the expert who wants to delve deeper into the identification and variation within the groups this book covers. The strength of *Better Birding* lies in its detailed discussion of the groups covered, useful tips for identification, numerous photographs used well to illustrate variation and comparisons, and specific guidelines for the factors on which birders should focus faced with a tough identification in one of these groups. I would like to see this treatment applied more widely to other challenging groups (more seabirds, *Myiarchus* flycatchers, gnatcatchers, *Catharus* thrushes, thrashers, and *Passerina* buntings, for example), but this book does not aim to be a complete advanced identification guide. Rather, it is more of an introduction to how to go about learning bird identification, and the kinds of factors one may have to consider for various groups. The core philosophy of *Better Birding*

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can be summarized in a Japanese proverb quoted in the introduction: “Don’t study something. Get used to it.”

Lauren B. Harter

Birding by Impression: A Different Approach to Knowing and Identifying Birds, by Kevin T. Karlson and Dale Rosselet. 2015. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston. 286 pages, over 200 color photographs. Hardback, \$30.00. ISBN 978-0-547-19578-0.

For bird observers keen to sharpen their identification skills, there is an ever-expanding selection of literature to aid in self-study. One of the newest is this reference guide. The title immediately piqued my interest. To bird by “impression,” one does not focus on obscure field marks, e.g., the apical spot on the 9th primary. In this respect, the book is quite different from the requisite field guide or advanced identification book. The most intriguing aspect of the title is *Knowing and Identifying Birds*. “Knowing” a bird indicates a depth of understanding beyond mere identification. What the authors have attempted here is to put this level of understanding into words and photographs.

In its first 19 pages, the introduction to *Birding by Impression* (BBI) walks us through the key principles for understanding the “reference” chapters to follow. It forms a solid foundation upon which the rest of the book is built. It explains the main points *Birding by Impression* uses to describe each species or guild of species, on the basis of “unchanging characteristics”: size, body shape/structure, and behavior. This is the way many of us recognize a good friend from half a block away, or the way that many birders recognize familiar species at a glance. “Supplemental characteristics” such as plumage patterns and general coloration, habitat use, and vocalizations are considered next. These help to distinguish species that are superficially similar in shape or structure. Finally, “non-BBI details” round out each description, where additional notes are helpful in the identification process—for example, finer feather details to examine, when general patterns and coloration are not enough.

The remaining 36 chapters cover almost every family of birds in the U.S. and Canada, though, oddly, the book never explicitly states its geographic scope. Coverage of the taxa is good, with the great majority of species regularly occurring in the U.S. and Canada being treated by photos, written description, or both. About halfway through reviewing the book, I began to wonder why the book seemed so highly visual with just 200 photographs, as claimed by the book jacket and introduction. In reality, the book sells itself short—by my rough count, there are about 700 images in this book, some of those featuring multiple species within a single image! The authors also manage to avoid an east-coast bias, something I notice too often in a variety of bird books. Western birdwatchers and field ornithologists will find a great deal applicable to our region.

The book is written to appeal to a broad range of bird observers. Many advanced birders, however, are likely to employ the *Birding by Impression* approach already. Yet, those who tend to primarily focus on plumage details will find a lot of useful insight into identification by gestalt here. Although this book finally put a name to something I have been practicing for some time, reading *Birding by Impression* also helped me find new words to *describe* how we identify birds at a glance. This is invaluable when one is trying to teach others how to truly *look* at birds, rather than simply rattling off field marks that add up to a species name.

Birding by Impression is not explicitly presented as an “advanced” identification guide but will serve as one. It does not shy away from immature gulls or female hummingbirds. I was surprised, though, to find that it took on the question of the Eastern and Western wood-pewees, a subject that many experts avoid completely. Yet I felt some chapters were lacking. I fully recognize the difficulty in parsing a family as diverse

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as the Emberizidae, but the sparrows in general could have been better treated. I believe I truly “know” the sparrows in my region, and I’m able to identify them at a glance primarily by shape and structural differences, the key points emphasized so well in other chapters. The main differences between genera of sparrows are restricted to chart format here; the value of expanded photographic support would have been inestimable. In many cases throughout the book this sort of “quick comparison chart” is very useful (see hummingbirds), but serves as only a “CliffsNotes” version of sparrow identification.

For the most part, however, the choice of images and photographic editing is admirable, allowing for good comparison of similar species. A prime example of this is the wrens, where important structural differences are emphasized with well-cropped photos of six species in amazingly similar poses on very similar backgrounds. This allows the reader to focus easily on what the authors have discussed in the text, as the eye is naturally drawn to the most important features. Throughout the book, “quiz” photos make excellent use of this layout. The critical thinking process involved in pondering these quizzes (answers in the Appendix) is sure to be beneficial in assimilating *Birding by Impression* techniques.

The only unhelpful facet of the book is its use of measurements. I get squeamish when birds are discussed as if they’re perched on an imaginary ruler. I have yet to meet anyone who can accurately judge the difference between 12 ½ and 11 inches under field conditions, the stated difference in length between the Northern and Gilded flickers. Even folks who have memorized bird lengths from field guides use relative comparisons to judge the size of a bird in the field, a solid *Birding by Impression* technique, rather than estimating a bird’s actual span from stem to stern. Listing weight would have been a superior tool, as used in *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, giving the reader a feel for a bird’s “magnitude.”

This issue is mitigated, however, by the designation of reference species. A superb example is in the tyrant flycatchers. When describing the sizes of various flycatchers, the authors do not specify lengths in inches but, importantly, offer common birds for comparison (Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Robin, etc). They also make a point that I espouse on field trips: although some flycatchers may measure longer in a specimen drawer, they are often more comparable to, and more easily confused with, some of the smaller species because of their more slender shape.

Such an undertaking is virtually guaranteed to incur a few minor errors and omissions along the way. For example, the Green Violet-ear is not a regular vagrant to southeastern Arizona (p. 152)—not even one record exists for that state. Body shape descriptions are switched in the chart comparing the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher and Great Kiskadee (p. 176). Fortunately, typos and errors such as these appear to be few. Omissions are more difficult to judge, as the aim of this book is not necessarily to compare every single bird likely to occur in North America. Still, I was struck that there was no comparison of the Zone-tailed Hawk with the Turkey Vulture! Birders are far more likely to overlook a Zone-tailed Hawk by dismissing it as a Turkey Vulture than they are to confuse a California Condor with a Turkey Vulture—a less confusing BBI topic that is addressed.

Overall, however, this work is packed with useful information that will help many birders make sense of confusingly similar species. It does, in fact, present an approach that will seem quite different to folks who have learned their birds by thumbing through a field guide to determine which bird most closely matches their observations. A broad range of birdwatchers somewhere between “novice” and “expert” will reap the greatest benefit from this work. Though the book is written such that beginning birders need not feel intimidated—it largely avoids technical jargon—I doubt it will find much audience among folks who are still sorting out sparrows from finches. If you are ready to take your identification skills to the next level, however, regardless of your current proficiency, this book could prove a real asset.

John Yerger