

# On Building a Balanced Library for the Ontario Birder

by  
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Jim Heslop's inquiry concerning the essential books required to amass a balanced library for the Ontario birder (*Ontario Birds* Vol. 2 No.2) has prompted the following reply from a confirmed ornitho-bibliophile.

A number of Ontario's top field birders were canvassed and asked to provide a list of their personal choices, giving reasons why these particular books warranted inclusion. The results of this survey have been tabulated and are summarized below.

It is important to recognize that each birder will have specific literary needs, dependent in large part upon his/her level of expertise, place of residence and propensity for travelling throughout the province in search of birds. Some birders possess a specific interest in a particular aspect of avian behaviour such as nesting. Others may limit their activity to a given time of the year or a small geographic area.

Given this wide range of pursuits, I have attempted to design a library which is intended to satisfy the needs of the *average* Ontario birder. I have assumed

that this hypothetical individual has between five and ten years of birding experience, resides in southern Ontario, and is primarily interested in the essential aspects of "birding" (i.e., identification, distribution, life history, etc.) rather than mere "listing".

The books mentioned below have been grouped on the basis of their particular function into the following categories: field guides, distribution guides, birdfinding guides, general references and journals.

## Field Guides

The first essential, of course, is a field guide. Those polled seemed to be fairly evenly split between the latest edition of Peterson's Eastern guide and a relative newcomer, the National Geographic Society (NGS) guide. Most felt that both guides were a must, a sentiment which I would echo. Each complements the other; Peterson is an excellent starting point for the beginner, while the NGS guide caters more to those who strive for the state of the art in field identification.

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### Distribution Guides

The recent release of J. Murray Speirs' two-volume *Birds of Ontario* marks the first comprehensive treatment of the province's avifauna since T. W. McIlwraith's 1886 book of the same title. Since this ambitious work will be the subject of a full review in a future issue of *Ontario Birds*, I will not discuss its virtues and shortcomings here. Volume I, however, is no more than a photographic compendium of Ontario's birds and, at \$49.95, is grossly overpriced. Volume II, devoted to a species by species discussion of winter and breeding distributions, migration dates and extralimital records, is by far the more informative of the two and a relative bargain at only half the price.

Two other essential distribution references are the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario* (James *et al.* 1976) and *Breeding Birds of Ontario. Nidology and Distribution. Volume 1: Non-passerines* (Peck and James 1983). Although the former is now somewhat out of date, it is very inexpensive and provides a quick reference to a great deal of succinctly summarized data. *Breeding Birds of Ontario. Nidology and Distribution Volume 2: Passerines* is currently in press and due for release sometime in 1986. Together this set will provide a wealth of information on the nesting ecology of Ontario's birds. The inclusion of historical breeding distributions will allow comparisons with results of the forthcoming Atlas of the breeding birds of Ontario.

For those wishing to obtain a wider, Canadian perspective on bird distribution, there is only one recommended source, W. Earl Godfrey's classic *The Birds of Canada* (1966). Although still available in many bookstores, anyone without a copy might be better advised to hold off purchasing one until the long awaited revision appears. After innumerable production delays the second edition is now expected to be published in the spring of 1986.

The library of any serious Ontario birder should also contain the book(s) which cover the birds of his/her area of the province. There are many such regional/local avifaunas available; unfortunately it is impossible to list them all here. Some of the better ones, however, are *Birds of the Oshawa—Lake Scugog Region* (Tozer and Richards 1974), *History of the Birds of Kingston, Ontario* (Quilliam 1973), *A Cottager's Guide to the Birds of Muskoka and Parry Sound* (Mills 1981) and *Birds of the Niagara Frontier Region* (Beardslee and Mitchell 1965).

### Birdfinding Guides

There are two birdfinding guides currently on the market which are pertinent to Ontario birders. Goodwin's *A Bird-Finding Guide to Ontario* (1982) is indispensable to anyone visiting an unfamiliar part of the province. Although it contains a good summary of Ontario hotspots, Finlay's *A Bird-Finding Guide to Canada* (1984) should appeal to birders with somewhat broader horizons.

### Identification Guides

In keeping with the trend toward more specialization in field ornithology, a number of identification guides dealing with a particular family of birds have recently appeared on the market. Respondents to the survey were virtually unanimous in their endorsement of *Gulls: A Guide to Identification* (Grant 1982). This superb book contains dozens of excellent black-and-white photographs and is an essential reference for anyone wishing to unravel the complex sequence of age and season-related plumages peculiar to gulls. An equally confusing group, waders, is dealt with in a similar fashion by the *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders* (Prater *et al.* 1977). This is also an invaluable reference, despite the fact that it treats a number of Eurasian species which have never occurred in Ontario (let alone eastern North America). Much of the critical numerical information contained in this book (measurements of wing chords, tarsi, etc.,) are intended more for the benefit of the bander, rather than for the field birder.

Although it bills itself as a field guide, the three-volume *Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* (Farrand 1983) is, by virtue of its size alone, most useful as a photographic reference. The text also contains many helpful identification hints not found elsewhere.

### General References

Although now somewhat dated, the 26-volume set of Life Histories

of North American Birds (1919–1968) by Bent (and collaborators) is unsurpassed in terms of the wealth of information it contains. Written in an engaging, often anecdotal style, these books are a refreshing change from the dry, overly factual style which typifies much of today's scientific writing. Anyone wishing to make an extremely worthwhile investment (and it is expensive!) is advised to do so without delay; apparently some of the popular Dover reprint editions are now out of print.

Another worthwhile but somewhat less costly investment is the one-volume *Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (Terres 1980). Although this book does not approach the Bent series in terms of overall comprehensiveness, the information it does contain is much more current.

Palmer's *Handbook of North American Birds* series, once considered the heir apparent to Bent's Life Histories, appears doomed to publishing oblivion. Since its inception in 1962, only three volumes of this monumental work have been released, encompassing loons through ducks. At this rate, none of us are likely to witness its completion during our lifetime. We can only hope that a new series of life histories, planned for release by the American Ornithologists' Union, will not suffer the same fate.

For those fortunate enough to have won a lottery, acquiring *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* by Cramp and Simmons is a must. Four volumes of this definitive

work have been published to date, and cover all the non-passerines. Fortunately, these are the species which are of greatest relevance to the Ontario birder, since many occur as vagrants on our side of the Atlantic. At approximately £60 per volume however, they are beyond the reach of all but the very serious (or the very wealthy).

### Journals

Given the phenomenal amount of ornithological information currently in print, it is virtually impossible to keep abreast of recent developments without subscribing to a pertinent bird journal (or two).

*American Birds*, published five times a year by the National Audubon Society, is requisite reading for anyone interested in North American bird distribution. The journal *Birding*, despite its unabashed emphasis on "listing", nevertheless often contains excellent articles on the identification of notoriously difficult species. The American Birding Association produces six issues of this journal annually. Needless to say, any library which does not contain all the issues of *Ontario Birds* is woefully incomplete.

What then are the essential references? The 15 listed below best reflect the opinions of those polled, in fulfilling the basic literary needs of the average Ontario birder. These are, in no particular order:

1. Peterson, R.T. 1980. *A Field Guide to the Birds*. Houghton-Mifflin. 384 pp.

2. Scott, S.L. (Ed.) 1983. *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Kingsport Press. 464 pp.
3. Speirs, J.M. 1985. *The Birds of Ontario*. Volume 2. 986 pp.
4. Peck, G.K. and R.D. James. 1983. *Breeding Birds of Ontario. Nidology and Distribution. Volume 1: Nonpasserines*. Royal Ontario Museum. 321 pp.
5. Peck, G.K. and R.D. James. In press. *Breeding Birds of Ontario. Nidology and Distribution. Volume 2: Passerines*. Royal Ontario Museum.
6. *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*. In prep. Federation of Ontario Naturalists.
7. Goodwin, C. 1982. *A Bird-Finding Guide to Ontario*. University of Toronto Press. 248 pp.
8. Tozer, R.G. and J.M. Richards. 1974. *Birds of Oshawa-Lake Scugog Region*. Alger Press. 384 pp.
9. Bent, A.C. and collaborators. 1919-1968. *Life Histories of North American Birds*. 26 Volumes. Dover Reprint Editions.
10. Godfrey, W.E. 1966. *The Birds of Canada*. National Museums of Canada. 428 pp. (Second edition due for publication in early 1986.)
11. James, R.D., R.L. MacLaren and J.C. Barlow. 1976. *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario*. Royal Ontario Museum. 78 pp.

12. Terres, J.K. 1980. *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. Alfred A. Knopf. 1109 pp.
13. Grant, P.J. 1982. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. T & AD Poyser. 280 pp.
14. *American Birds*. Journal of the National Audubon Society, New York. Five issues/year.
15. *Ontario Birds*. Journal of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, Burlington. Three issues/year.

The final word on all of this comes from Jim Richards, who wisely cautions that,

“... by having the above, you will find that you are so damn busy reading that you won't have time to go birding much anyway, and after paying for the books and your annual magazine subscriptions, you won't be able to afford to go anywhere even if you had the time.”

Happy Reading!

## Notes

### Sexing Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila caerulea*)

I found the note by Ted Cheskey (*Ontario Birds* 3:68-69) on winter records of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher very interesting, but I'm afraid I must question his unqualified sexing of the one he saw as a female.

Spring adult Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are sexually dichromatic, as shown in virtually all bird books, the males having a narrow black line extending from the forehead to the sides of the crown. Only *one* of the current field guides (Terrill, in Farrand 1983) bothers to mention “immatures” at all, and here the wording is ambiguous; the head pattern of the spring adult male is correctly described, and then the text states “Females and immatures are similar but less bluish above”

(Vol. 1, p. 38). It is stated explicitly that females lack the black head marking, although this is probably implicit in the sentence attributing this mark to adult males, and of course the lack of the mark is obvious in the accompanying photograph of a female. What is *not* stated or even necessarily implied in the above-quoted sentence is that “immature” males (i.e., in first basic plumage) *also* lack the black line. This mark is not acquired until about February, in a limited first prealternate molt.

There appears to be some controversy in the literature as to whether fall adult males retain the black head markings after their complete prebasic molt. Dwight