

Book Reviews

Feeding Wild Birds in Winter. 1981 (seventh printing 1989). By Clive Dobson. Firefly Books, Willowdale, Ontario. 128 pp. \$9.95.

Every winter more and more people decide to take up bird-feeding as a hobby, but many of them have little idea of how to properly embark upon this venture. By providing chapters on avian feeder visitors, food, feeders and other topics, *Feeding Wild Birds in Winter* attempts to arm prospective and beginning feeder-operators with the basics needed to start a feeding program.

But for a brief introductory chapter, the book starts with the second chapter entitled "The Winter Birds", which aims to provide descriptions and information about winter feeder visitors.

The chapter begins with what is essentially a table of contents showing the layout of the chapter. The layout is unorthodox, to say the least. Rather than using taxonomic order, the author groups birds alphabetically by groups. The groups themselves are a hodge-podge of orders (waterfowl), families (creepers, jays and crows) and subfamilies (blackbirds, grouse). Since the groups used are visually distinct and have some taxonomic basis, this alphabetical ordering of taxa would be acceptable (ignoring that some birds are placed in the wrong groups; e.g. sparrows are placed in the Finch family), given that the book is aimed at beginners, if at least this system were applied uniformly. Unfortunately, it is not, and a few birds are not even placed in one of the taxa where one would expect

them. The Rock Dove, for example, is not found in the pigeons and doves section, but in a separate section called "city birds", along with House Sparrow, Starling and Herring Gull (??).

Confusing to the beginner is the mixture of current, slightly old (e.g. Common Flicker) and simply archaic bird names (e.g. Common Cowbird). Given that the book's seventh printing was in 1989, such nomenclatural errors are very sloppy.

The choice of species included in the book is also puzzling. I've already mentioned the Herring Gull, but some of the other dubious or rare feeder visitors the book contains include Pileated Woodpecker, Red and White-winged Crossbills and Ruffed Grouse. The inclusion of such species would be understandable if the book were striving for completeness, but at the same time it completely ignores common feeder visitors such as the Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow.

A further glance through chapter 2 reveals, unfortunately, more shortcomings. Many of the right hand side text pages have only a few sentences of text, the rest being blank. And this limited text is littered with judgmental anthropomorphisms, inaccuracies, and juvenile assertions. The Evening Grosbeak, for example, is described as "messy and greedy". The female House Finch is described as differing from the Purple Finch

only by being "generally lighter in colour" (no mention of the eyeline). And of the House Sparrow we learn that "at certain times of the year they migrate along with masses of people to the many farms and exhibitions where rows of concession stands offer a variety of found foods".

While the right hand pages have the species write-ups, most of the left hand pages of the second chapter are taken up with full-page, rather unspectacular black-and-white drawings. I found them mediocre for the most part, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Labelling, however, is not. Two glaring errors are the drawing labelled White-breasted Nuthatch which shows a Red-breasted Nuthatch, and the drawing labelled Pileated Woodpecker which actually shows an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, flying through northern coniferous forest!

Chapter 3 is a marked improvement over chapter 2. It deals with food, listing a variety of common and not-so-common foods and what species eat them. To the uninitiated bird feeder, this is a real help. However, even here the value of the information presented is lessened by mistakes and inaccuracies. For example, corn is listed as the favourite food of Hairy Woodpeckers, and of the Red-breasted Grosbeak, whatever that is. (Probably Rose-breasted Grosbeak is meant, but what is that bird doing in a book about *winter* bird-feeding?) And while exotic foods like coconut, apricots and peas are included, the book makes no mention at all of niger, the seed of choice in attracting Pine Siskins and American Goldfinches (the book lists the favourite seed of the goldfinch as

millet).

Finally, chapters 4, 5 and 6 concern themselves with feeders, creating a natural habitat, and problems and solutions of bird-feeding, respectively. All three of these chapters cement the reader's hunch from chapter 2 that the author really didn't have enough material to write a book but went ahead anyway, for more than half of the pages in these chapters are either virtually blank or are taken up with huge-scale drawings. Some of these drawings (such as different feeder designs) are necessary but easily could have been reduced in size, while others are rather useless, such as the entire page showing different styles of fencing (?), with its opposing page entirely blank but for the caption.

Chapter 4 concerns itself with different types of feeders, which is useful for the neophyte feeder of birds. "Creating a Natural Habitat" similarly underlines important points that may not be apparent to the novice, such as the importance of conifers for cover, berry-bearing trees, etc. (although I found the author's endorsement of numerous non-native plant species for the purposes of achieving a "natural" situation to be disconcerting).

Finally, chapter 6 is a very brief treatment of problems (such as squirrels) at feeders and their solutions. The solutions described to prevent feeder raids by squirrels are useful and effective, but some of the other advice offered is bad. For example, the author implies one should feel for a pulse to check if a bird that has hit a window is still alive; this only risks further hurting or even killing the bird. Even worse, the author says that, in times of bad

weather, food should be scattered "after the storm has subsided," when in fact just before and during the storm is when birds need the food most.

My overall impression of this book is mixed. While it achieves its aim of introducing new feeder

operators to the basics of bird-feeding (food, feeders, habitat), it does so with many errors and omissions. In view of these errors and an overall shallow treatment, I would hesitate to recommend the book - you are probably better off to spend the ten bucks on bird seed.

Mark Kubisz, 104 Hadrian Drive, Rexdale, Ontario M9W 1V4

The Bird Biographies of W.H. Hudson. 1988. Forwarded by *Jonathan Maslow*. Capra Press, Santa Barbara, CA, USA. (Canadian distributors: Raincoast Books, Vancouver, B.C.) 208 pp. \$14.50 paper.

This little book contains a selection of 49 of William Henry Hudson's bird studies published in 1920 in *Birds of La Plata*, long since out of print and as rare as Eskimo Curlews. They make a delightful read, for Hudson was a careful observer and an accomplished writer.

The foreward contains a brief account of Hudson's life concentrating on his work as a naturalist. He was born in Argentina in 1841 and spent his boyhood and young manhood on his parents' frontier estancia near the Rio de La Plata. This is the northern border of the "pampa humida", at that time a vast flat expanse of tall grass interspersed with innumerable marshes extending about 700 km southward to the Rio Colorado and not yet tamed by intensive cattle raising and agriculture. From the age of 5, when he was given a pony, he roamed the area to his heart's content, but it was not until he was 15 and read White's *Natural History of Selbourne* during recovery from a

near-fatal illness that he began making copious notes of his observations, extending his travels as far south as the Rio Negro in northern Patagonia.

For many years he collected specimens for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and the London Zoological Society, but the payments he received were very small. He also wrote many notes for the latter on the wildlife of the region, especially birds, and became well known in London ornithological circles. His income was never sufficient to cover expenses on his journeys but he had always been able to return home when money ran out. After his father died in 1868 Henry carried on his work for 6 more years but finally his lack of income, a feeling of isolation (he never met anyone with similar interests), and hopes that his London contacts might lead to congenial and better paid employment caused him to go to England. He sailed in 1874, never to return, a severe loss to South

American ornithology. His hopes for employment were never realized and he lived in near-penury for most of the next 15 years. It was not until 1889 that *Argentine Ornithology* was published, based primarily on his notes and specimens but authored by a professional ornithologist. Hudson's contributions were acknowledged in the introduction. It was not until 1892, however, when "The Naturalist in La Plata" was published that he gained widespread recognition and an income that made life easier. He continued to write, both novels and non-fiction (e.g. *British Birds* in 1895; *Birds in London* in 1898), and espouse the environmental cause and the interdependence of man and nature. In 1920 he turned his attention once again to Argentine birds, revising and republishing his notes as "Birds of La Plata". He died 2 years later.

The pieces in this selection vary in length from 1-page to a 14-page study in which he describes how he was able to sort out the very different nesting habits of the 2 species of cowbird native to the La Plata region. I enjoyed this immensely but I think my favourite was his discussion of the behaviour of the Chimango or Common Carrion Hawk. This crow-sized relative of the Crested Caracara looks most like a harrier in shape and flight but no longer subsists principally by hunting. Instead it had adapted to fill the niche left by the lack of corvids in Argentina and has developed the great catholicity of eating habits that this implies. Hudson seems to have observed most of them. This species can be found throughout the country but is commonest across the pampas to the Andean foothills where I spent most of 1981. My notes include a comment

that they would appear each morning from somewhere to the west, up to 200 at a time, circling lazily overhead as they drifted towards a nearby dump and the countryside beyond. Each evening I would see them returning and I assumed that they roost together just as their North American counterparts do when not nesting.

In addition to his visual observations Hudson also had an excellent ear and some of the most entertaining passages describe songs and calls, often with notes on the actions that accompany them. I particularly liked his descriptions of the duets of the mated pairs of Ovenbirds or Rufous Horneros and the ungainly-looking Southern Screamers.

I spent only a few days on "la pampa humida" but had the good fortune to have a tour of 2 estancias about 200 km southeast of Hudson's boyhood home. I can report that while the vegetation has undoubtedly changed for the worse his more pessimistic predictions about species disappearances have proved untrue although many are greatly reduced in numbers. My list of 75 species for the day included Greater Rhea, Southern Screamer, Jacana, Monk Parakeet and both Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans. It also included 4 "Norteamericanos" down for our winter - Lesser Golden Plover and Baird's, White-rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers.

The purpose of publishing this selection is not stated explicitly in the foreword nor is it clear who did the choosing. In addition to the text there are well-done black and white sketches of some of the species discussed. These are much superior

to any to be found in either of the field guides I have but again their source is not given - presumably they were also taken from "Birds of La Plata". Somewhere I seem to have read that once a Linnaean name has been assigned to a species it is more or less inviolate, but this is certainly not the case for South American birds. In fact of the 49 species treated here only 8 have retained both their English and Latin names. The names used in the original have been retained in the main text but an "Afterword" is included written by Judith Young in which she has updated the names. She used *A Guide to the Birds of South America* (1970) by R.M. de Schauensee (spelt Shawnses here) and has generally done a good job but in 8 cases has missed completely, naming birds that do not even occur in Argentina. The most glaring error is identifying Hudson's "Green Parakeet" (*Bolborhynchus monachus*) as the Sierra Parakeet (*B. aymara*) when the description of the bird, its habits and its abundance clearly indicate that it is the Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*).

For anyone interested in the history of birding and in evocative writing of bird behaviour and song, this inexpensive book will be a welcome addition to their library. For those who do buy it here is a list of the correct identities of the 8 species mentioned above. The names are taken from Tito Narosky's *Aves Argentinas*, a misleading title that should be "Aves de la Provincia Buenos Aires" since that is its scope. It includes English translations and species names.

4. Blue-and-White Swallow (*Notiochelida cyanoleuca*)
7. Saffron Finch (*Sycalis flaveola*)
10. Lesser Red-breasted Meadowlark (*Sturnella defillipi*)
22. Monk Parakeet
31. Stripe-backed Bittern (*Ixobrychus involucris*)
33. Southern Screamer (*Chauna torquata*)
35. Brazilian Duck (*Amazonetta brasiliensis*)
36. Yellow-billed Pintail (*Anas georgica*)

Bill Walker, 52 Laurier (Box 28), Deep River, Ontario K0J 1K0