Book Reviews

Birds at Your Feeder: A Guide to Feeding Habits, Behavior, Distribution, and Abundance. 1999. By *Erica H. Dunn and Diane L. Tessaglia-Hymes.* W.W. Norton & Company, New York. Hardcover, 418 pages. $42.00. (ISBN 0-393-04737-7)

This book presents detailed information on the feeding habits of North American birds derived through Project FeederWatch (an ongoing cooperative survey since 1987, which now has over 10,000 volunteer feeder watchers annually). Project FeederWatch is administered in the United States by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and in Canada by Bird Studies Canada, and promoted by the National Audubon Society and the Canadian Nature Federation. The book describes "which species frequent feeders in different parts of North America, how often these species visit feeders, and what they prefer to eat".

The FeederWatch findings are presented in accounts for over 90 species that are "most widespread at North American bird feeders". Each species account includes graphs depicting the number of birds at feeders and the percentage of feeders visited (by month), and maps showing distribution and abundance at feeders. Every account also features a very attractive line drawing by Peter Burke of the species discussed.

An extremely interesting and informative component of each species account involves a summary of "winter ecology, aimed at increasing your appreciation and understanding of bird behavior that you may witness in your backyard". Key references from which this information was drawn are listed at the end of this section for each species account, and total over 600 books and articles in the Literature Cited. These references facilitate further reading on topics of special interest. For many birders, this fascinating information will be the most valuable part of the book.

I detected relatively few errors in these accounts, although perhaps inevitably when so much material was summarized from a vast array of published sources, some incorrect information did get included. For instance, Gray Jay territories are stated to be 25 to 50 acres in size, when actually they have been found to be much larger, ranging from an average of 100 acres (41 hectares) in Yukon to an average of 365 acres (146 hectares) in Algonquin Park, Ontario (see Strickland and Ouellet 1993 in *The Birds of North America* series). Similarly, the average Gray Jay life span after reaching adulthood is not "two to three years". This long-lived species can reach 10 to 15

years of age, and the average expectation of further life of a territory-holding adult is five to six years (Dan Strickland, pers. comm.).

I found this book to be a very interesting read, that will continue to be used as a reference. The species accounts are well written in an understandable style which avoids scientific jargon. It would make a great gift for anyone who feeds birds and especially for Project FeederWatch participants. The price is a little steep, but this book is available from Bird Studies Canada for a 30% discounted price of $29.95 (plus $5.00 shipping and handling); call Anne Marie Ridout toll-free at 1-888-448-2473 to order.

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Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds. 1999. By *Scott Weidensaul.* North Point Press, New York. Softcover, 420 pages. $24.95. (ISBN 0-86547-591-1)

In a sense, this book is a compilation of many different "stories" about the lives of migratory birds, and the difficulties facing them in our hemisphere. The longer you have been birding, the more of these stories you will have heard, but until now you would not have been able to find them all detailed in one place.

The approach is interesting. Instead of just rehashing old news from a distance, Scott Weidensaul's starting point is a visit to the place where something is happening. He has literally "been there" – from Izembek NWR in Alaska to the pampas of Argentina, the waters off Monterey to those adjoining Nova Scotia, Bombay Hook NWR in Delaware to Ontario's Long Point, with banding stations on the Gulf shores of Alabama and Texas and other equally interesting places thrown in.

He sets the stage by recounting a trip to the extreme western part of Alaska that almost touches Russia. Brief snapshots describe how Wandering Tattlers leave there and head for Australia while Hudsonian Godwits go to Argentina, and how Arctic Warblers fly to Asia but Blackpoll Warblers go to Brazil.

There are good descriptions of how birds know where they are, whether by celestial navigation or sensing the earth's magnetic field or hearing the distant low frequency sounds of crashing surf – or all of the above. These are balanced by discussion of how we humans know where the birds are, be it from banding returns, birding at a hot spot, watching the moon through a telescope at night or, the latest tool, by weather radar via the Internet.

Migration is mostly about eating. If there is enough food in the breeding grounds, and if the weather

allows the birds to get at it, they have no reason to migrate. If the supply is cut off or drops significantly, some species always return to the same non-breeding season locations, which can be thousands of miles away. Other species will travel only as far south (or north, depending on where they are in the hemisphere) as necessary to find sustenance.

Some of the migrations are incredible. We have all heard how the Arctic Tern flies from the Arctic to the tip of South America, but did you know about the Greater Shearwater? This pelagic species nests on and near the Tristan Da Cunha islands in the very middle of the far South Atlantic. When the food supply dwindles, they go looking for more, following the ocean currents which deliver fish and plankton in different places at different times of the year. First they fly west, then north up the east coast of South America, past the Caribbean and USA, to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. After a period of Canadian hospitality, it's east across the North Atlantic to Europe, south to the coast of Africa, then west again, back across the South Atlantic to the islands in time to breed once more. In all, a voyage of 13,000 miles, sometimes more!

A visit to a Jamaican remnant forest provides a focus for discussion of how deforestation of tropical forests affects residents first, but also migrants. In Jamaica, the small numbers of the remaining indigenous species are found mostly in what little "old growth" forest is left, while many migrants are found in the "new" vegetation. In the tropics, some migrants such as the American Redstart can adapt to a winter habitat quite different from what it prefers in summer. Other species, the Wood Thrush being a good example, do not seem to be able to adapt to a winter habitat very different from what they prefer in summer. If Wood Thrushes lose the tropical forests, we lose them. Period.

In recent years, ads in birding journals have urged birders to buy shade-grown coffee. In 1970, an outbreak of coffee leaf rust, a fungal blight, occurred in Brazil. This led to wholesale replacement of shade tolerant plants with a new variety which grows well in the sun. Naturally, this meant cutting down the shade trees. The newcomer requires pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizer – all of which were previously supplied by the large amount of residue from the shade trees. Where shaded coffee plantations still exist, surveys show that birds, migrants especially, are abundant. On the other hand, recent studies indicate that while the coffee growers are getting up to 30% more coffee, the new habitat is supporting as little as 10% of the numbers and species, resident and migrant, as it did before.

As Canadians, we all know of the problem of the Canada Geese. There are too darn many of them,

right? Not quite. The real story is that the James Bay and eastern Quebec populations of Canada Geese have diminished by as much as 50 to 75% because too many of them are "stopping over" permanently in the south instead of migrating north in summer. On the other hand, we have the Snow Goose, a species whose numbers have climbed from just 3 to 4 thousand in the 1920s to 3 to 4 million today. These guys are going north, but there are so many of them that they are quickly wrecking all the habitat on the coasts of Hudson and James Bays, causing difficulties for themselves as well as for the many shorebirds which also use the same territory in summer.

On the positive side, we learn about what happened to the Swainson's Hawk, an insect-eating western North American buteo. In the early 1990s, biologists noticed that the numbers returning to their summer areas in the United States and Canada were dropping. It was thought that they wintered in Argentina, but this was unconfirmed. Two birds were fitted with satellite transmitters. One quickly stopped transmitting, but the other was eventually traced to an area west of Buenos Aires. Investigation there led to rumours and then confirmation that thousands of hawks were being killed by an insecticide used to control serious grasshopper infestations. For once, government, business, farmers and conservationists worked together quickly and effectively. The particular pesticide was taken off the market, other methods are being used, and farmers are being taught that the Swainson's Hawk is actually an ally in the fight against grasshoppers. While the problem in Argentina is not completely solved, things are going in the right direction. Sadly, the chemical, long banned in North America and now in Argentina, is still being manufactured and sold in other third world countries.

Another problem highlighted is that human activity is endangering large concentrations of some species in very small areas. On the Delaware Bay shore of New Jersey, horseshoe crabs, which delight the majority of the world's Red Knots by laying millions and millions of eggs, are being over-harvested for use as bait by fishermen. At the other end of the size scale, the famous millions of Sandhill Cranes which stop to feed at the South Platte River in Nebraska are facing development pressures which could greatly reduce their habitat. There is also the "What if?" factor. The Copper River Delta in Alaska, a primary spring food resource for millions of shorebirds, is not far from the shipping lanes the Exxon Valdez travelled before it dropped its load of oil. Closer to home, possibly 95% of the world's population of Semipalmated Sandpipers stops off to feed in the Bay of Fundy every summer. What if.....?

Many other topics are covered in *Living on the Wind*, among them the plight of grassland birds suffering from lack of grass in the mid-western states and provinces and, in the same area, the plowing under of prairie potholes, ancient geological features which have long served as the incubator for millions of puddle ducks. Problems caused by towers, stacks and lighted buildings bring a nice mention of Toronto's own Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP). The story of the wonderful sight of millions of raptors going over Veracruz, Mexico is also told.

Is this book a hand wringer, full of "Woe is us." (or "Woe is them.")? No. There are simple statements of the situations with, in my opinion, reasonable conclusions drawn. Not all the news is bad, but a great deal of it is not good. The message is that we still have a chance to help save some of this, but we had better hurry.

The nine maps are quite helpful. Each chapter has its own set of notes and bibliography, 24 pages in all, and there is also an 18-page index. I found out how useful the index is when I needed to check items for this review.

In a nutshell, *Living on the Wind* is a great read, and an even better reference book.

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