

Book Reviews

Birds of the Cottage Country. 1985. By William C. Mansell. McBain Publications, Kitchener. 208 pp., \$7.95 (paper).

As the author points out, the cottage country of central Ontario becomes the destination for tens of thousands of people every summer. Many of these people have a casual interest in birds but need a source of regional bird information to answer their questions. The author hopes that this book will be a reference for local birds that will "be a last recourse to those arguments around the dinner table", as well as an addendum to the four major field guides. The area encompassed by this book includes the Districts of Muskoka, Parry Sound and Haliburton, plus Algonquin Provincial Park. Unfortunately, the *Birds of the Cottage Country* does not meet either of these aims very well.

The book is made up of three sections. It begins with a brief five page introduction. Here, the purpose of the book is outlined, and an overview of the book's layout is given. Sadly missing from this introduction is any kind of map of the area in question. The final section is a useful chart of the 310 species known to occur in the region. Listed beside each species are spring arrival and departure dates and fall arrival and departure dates. The bulk of the book, nearly 200 pages, is comprised of the accounts of all 310 species and their respective families. The order of these families by and large follows the 6th edition of the AOU checklist

(1983). However, on some occasions, birds are placed in odd combinations (for example, the placing of Horned Lark in the chapter with mimids, pipits, waxwings and starlings). After each family name, there is a brief list of that family's member species arranged by abundance. A drawback with this system is that I looked in vain for definitions of the abundance ratings. For instance, what is the difference between "rather uncommon" and "uncommon"? This lack of definition causes some confusion, or perhaps I disagree with the ratings; I am not sure which. For instance, according to my records, Red-breasted Nuthatch is not "uncommon", nor is Northern Oriole "rather rare" in the cottage country. Following this attempt at abundance ratings, the family of birds covered in that chapter is briefly described. Then follows a species by species account. The species name is bold-faced and numbered; the number corresponds to the arrival/departure chart at the back of the book.

The most recurrent flaw in this book is the repeated use of misleading language which, to a novice birdwatcher, will give a most incorrect impression of certain birds. The description of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet call sounding "as if the bird was pulling nails from wood" will not aid a budding birdwatcher in

identifying this bird. In the general discussion of swallows, Mansell declares that "all swallows are colonial in nesting habits". This is definitely not the case for the Tree Swallow, and rarely for the Barn or Rough-winged Swallow. Sometimes, important facts about birds are left out entirely. I can think of few other birds that so readily remind me of a spruce bog as the Olive-sided Flycatcher. However, Mansell makes no mention of them around bogs. And I have yet to see a Brown Creeper on a cow tail!

A major problem with Mansell's perspective on the birds of this region stems from the personal approach that the author takes. Most of his sense of the species' regional status appears to come from the birds he has seen at his cottages on Rebecca and Pen Lakes. I am not convinced that these observations apply across the region. Mansell's descriptions of Northern Pintail and Gadwall imply that they are rare visitors from the prairies. However, both species have nested in Parry Sound and Muskoka Districts as part of a major eastward range expansion.

The narrowness of such a personal approach could have been avoided through the better use of existing literature and records. A look at the Ontario Nest Records Scheme or the results of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas would have revealed that contrary to what Mansell believes, Brown-headed Cowbirds have indeed parasitized many nests in cottage country.

Clearly, the most interesting sections of the book are the numerous anecdotes the author recounts. There are some delightful descriptions of approaching herons in canoes, watching young loons learning to fish and finding a Scarlet Tanager in October. If the *Birds of the Cottage Country* had stuck to such a personal note it would have been a much more interesting read.

This book attempts to straddle the line between personal recollections on the one hand and an annotated checklist on the other. The result is that it does neither very well. Therefore, this book cannot be recommended as a guide to the birds of cottage country, either for the seasoned bird enthusiast or the beginner.

Chris Harris, 4-4175 Carnarvon St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 2S3

***Watching Birds: An Introduction to Ornithology.* 1977. By Roger F. Pasquier. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston (published in Canada by Thomas Allen & Son Limited), 301 pp.; \$13.95 Paperback.**

Introductory texts on field ornithology that are both worthwhile and at the same time not overly technical are hard to find. Accordingly, it was with some apprehension that I approached Roger F. Pasquier's *Watching Birds: An Introduction to Ornithology.* Not

another birdwatching "how-to" book! Therefore, it was with pleasant surprise that I discovered a useful, informative and mostly accurate book.

Pasquier wrote this book with two audiences in mind. As a teacher of ecology, he wanted to

place abstract ecological principles in the observable, real world. And the world of birds provides ample opportunity for the illustration of ecological concepts. The other people for whom this book is aimed are birdwatchers. Many birdwatchers are keen to move beyond merely identifying birds to understanding their roles in the ecosystem. In brief, this book is both a primer on birdwatching and a primer on ecology.

Watching Birds is an intimidating 301 pages; the text, however, is set in easy to read print and is liberally sprinkled with attractive black-and-white illustrations, capably done by Margaret LaFarge. The text is divided into 15 bite-sized chapters, each dealing with an important aspect of the study of birds. Topics covered range from why people study birds and a basic introduction to birding, through physiology and behaviour, to the current state of the field. Also included is a foreword by the dean of birdwatching, Roger Tory Peterson, and appendices on further reading and some major ornithological and conservation organizations.

Each of the chapters can be read as a separate unit and provides a wealth of information. Underpinning each is a concern with ecological principles and an emphasis on the adaptive significance of physiological features and behaviour. Pasquier supports these larger themes with numerous specific, mostly North American, examples. These are of interest to both amateurs and professionals. While some of the information verges on the trivial (how many feathers does a

hummingbird have?), others strike to the heart of matters. Particularly interesting to this reviewer was the conservation dilemma posed by a pair of Spotted Owls. The timber value represented by the average territory of these birds is estimated at ten million dollars!

While mostly accurate, *Watching Birds* is marred by the occasional mistake, often caused by the author's tendency towards making absolute statements. Contrary to what is stated in the book, House Finches in eastern North America do compete with another species, albeit the much maligned House Sparrow (p. 229), Kirtland's Warbler does breed outside of Michigan (p. 238) and Yellow-breasted Chats will raise young Brown-headed Cowbirds (p. 187). Other inconsistencies are caused by the book's age; published in 1977 it is already somewhat out of date. For example, the superior National Geographic Society *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* is, obviously, not noted in the list of field guides. Furthermore, the taxonomy used has been superseded by revisions made by the AOU. More sadly, Pasquier's reference to 50 California Condors is no longer accurate, as only a handful remain. While these minor shortcomings are annoying, they do not effect the overall value of the book.

Watching Birds is a worthwhile addition to the bookshelves of anyone interested in birds and/or ecology. It is an ideal teaching tool, both for schools (senior secondary and junior college) and for independent study. In addition to answering many questions, Pasquier poses many many more; *Watching Birds* provides the inquiring mind

with dozens of questions yet to be answered. For birders, this book will allow them to better understand bird biology and the ecological roles played by birds.

Pasquier makes a powerful argument for conservation; hopefully this book will help to further this goal.

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OFO Announcements

Field Trips

23 May 1987, Saturday: TORONTO ISLAND. Spring migrants for beginner birders. Leader: Glenn Coady (416) 596-8109. Meet at 8:00 AM at Toronto Island Ferry Docks.

5-7 June 1987, Friday to Sunday: OFO ANNUAL SPRING MEETING—LONG POINT. Organizer: Jon McCracken (519) 428-0019. Orientation meeting on Friday, 5 June at 8:00 PM at the Group Campsite, Turkey Point Provincial Park (see last OFO Newsletter (No. 11) for more details).

4 July 1987, Saturday: BRUCE PENINSULA. Nesting Eastern Bluebirds, Brewer's Blackbirds, Sandhill Cranes. Leaders: Dave Fidler (519) 371-2919 and Tom Murray. Meet at Dave Fidler's house at 8:00 AM. From Owen Sound go west on Hwy. 21 to Jackson (8.0 km), north one concession (2.0 km), west 0.8 km, north 1.1 km (only house on left side of the road).

7-9 August 1987, Friday to Sunday: PEMBROKE SWALLOW ROOST. Details will appear in the next OFO Newsletter. For more information contact Chip Weseloh (416) 485-1464.

1 November 1987, Sunday: SARNIA JAEGERES. Leader: Dennis Rupert (519) 371-2919. Meet at 8:00 AM at the first stoplight at Point Edward parking lot behind the waterworks. If it is a good day (i.e., bad weather) Dennis will stay there most of the day. If it is a bad day (i.e., good weather) the trip will move on to Kettle Point and Ipperwash about 10:00 AM.

21 November 1987, Saturday: NIAGARA RIVER GULL OUTING. Leader: Glenn Coady (416) 596-8109. Meet at 8:00 AM at the parking lot at the mouth of the river, Niagara-on-the-Lake.

For the latest details regarding any of these events contact Margaret Bain, OFO Field Events Coordinator (416) 668-6452.