

chord, and weighed only 1565g with his burden; the branch itself was just over 415g. I have recorded other captive herons eating more than that weight at a sitting, as well as swallowing fish over 300mm long.

I suspect that the heron may have been fishing in murky water and quickly swallowed what he mistook for a large dark fish. As it probably caused no distress, he did not regurgitate it.

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Book Reviews

Editor's Note: The recent publication of J. Murray Speirs' *Birds of Ontario* marked the first detailed account of the province's avifauna in 100 years. Given that this long-awaited work has generated widespread interest among Ontario birders, a decision was made to include two reviews. Although this represents a departure from the norm, it was felt to be warranted due to the sheer magnitude of the two-volume work and the somewhat differing viewpoints expressed by the two reviewers. A version of Bruce Di Labio's review originally appeared in *Trail and Landscape* Vol. 20, No. 4 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club.

Birds of Ontario. 1985. By Dr. J. Murray Speirs. Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc., Toronto. Vol. I, 538 pp., \$49.95; Vol. II, 986 pp., \$24.95.

When first presented with the opportunity to review *Birds of Ontario*, the challenge was met with enthusiasm. However, as I began my research, the magnitude of the endeavour was almost intimidating. The overwhelming size of the books (538 pages in Volume I and 986 pages in Volume II) presented some problems.

The concept of the books is certainly intriguing. Long overdue, this compilation of Ontario's avifaunal data should be accepted eagerly by birders and researchers.

However, Dr. Speirs might have received deserved uniform acclaim had he published the two volumes separately, for, in fact, he has produced two books so radically different that it is difficult to accept them as Volumes I and II of the same publication.

Not since McIlwraith wrote his *Birds of Ontario* in 1886 has anyone attempted to document in one publication the status and history of Ontario's birds. Fifty years, tens of thousands of notations, thousands of hours of field work and hundreds of cited observers

have been melded to produce these two volumes.

As it is my impression that each volume is designed for a different market and audience, I will deal with each separately in this review.

Volume I, intended primarily as a coffee table book on birds, is full of colourful and generally attractive photographs of most of Ontario's birds. It is difficult to find fault with the format of the book as it is so very simple. Photographs of birds appear opposite a brief description and anecdotal comment on the species. Species follow the new taxonomic order of the A.O.U. Checklist (6th Edition) and are generally in conformance with the official Ontario checklist as of the end of 1984. The additions of "unofficial" species for Ontario are discussed in the review of Volume II.

However, even cursory examination of the book will reveal serious flaws. Dr. Speirs has relied far too heavily on a small nucleus of photographers to provide pictures of the birds. This leads to several photos that are sub-standard or totally unacceptable for a publication of this nature. Problems with lighting, focussing and sometimes even identification arise as a result. Why Dr. Speirs did not contract other photographers remains a mystery. Many fine pictures of some of the bothersome species do exist, or could easily have been commissioned.

One cannot overlook errors in fairness to the readers. The photos of the Baird's Sandpiper and the Hairy Woodpecker appear to be Pectoral Sandpiper and Downy

Woodpecker, respectively. While the picture on page 326 is unquestionably that of a Bank Swallow colony, where are the birds themselves? Finally, the Black Vulture must belong to the Australian subspecies for it surely is flying upside down.

Fully 100 species are not illustrated at all. One wonders why greater effort was not expended to obtain these missing photos of sometimes very common species. Further, even if good photographs were not available, why leave large blank sections in the book where they would have appeared. This leads to a starkness and distracting appearance that detracts from the quality of the product.

The birder unfamiliar with Ontario might reasonably assume that one quarter of all the best birding spots lie within 50 km of Toronto since the map on the inside front cover shows eight of the listed 36 birding spots within this zone. However, many significant areas such as Sarnia, the St. Clair marshes and Presqu'île, to name a few, are not even mentioned.

In summary, for the serious bird student or birder, the book offers little useful information, beyond the obvious advantage of possessing another photographic reference to be used for species evaluations. One must admit that although some species are poorly represented, most of the photographs are concise and clear and occasionally spectacular. For the armchair birder, many reminiscences will be evoked as one thumbs through the pages. For them, at least, the aesthetic value

of the book far outweighs the negative aspects.

Volume II presents information on significant records, seasonal patterns, breeding dates and anecdotal comment on all of Ontario's bird species. Dr. Speirs is to be commended for the incredible effort that must have been expended over many years to collect the data that were collated and organized to build the body of the book.

As with any document of its kind, certain flaws show up once an attempt has been made to use the book. Dr. Speirs states that the purpose of the book is "to give a picture of each of the birds that have been known to occur in Ontario up to the end of 1984, where they have been found, when they have occurred at each season . . ." Well, generally speaking, he has met his goal! Consideration must, however, be given to the use of the book in this context.

Researchers must be concerned that the author has ignored several significant records and sources of information and included several species not currently accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee. In the former case, although the vast majority of records do appear, additional research would be required to produce a definitive statement in a published report on the occurrence of any species in Ontario. Simply stated, the book cannot be assumed to be complete in this regard, even within the temporal limits stated. While no attempt will be made to outline all of the records ignored, as that list would surely be flawed, comment is

necessary regarding added species.

Seventeen species are listed in the book that, based on the data presented, are not included on the "official" Ontario list. While the observers of these birds undoubtedly believed that they saw the species in question, the origin of the bird, the validity of the sighting and the lack of or flawed documentary evidence have all contributed to their exclusion from the Ontario checklist.

The following species are assumed escapees: Scarlet Ibis, Bean Goose, Barnacle Goose, Prairie Falcon and Mountain Chickadee. The Magnificent Frigatebird involved a secondhand report with incomplete details. The Baird's Sparrow, Western Wood-pewee, Wilson's Plover, Swainson's Warbler, Great Skua and Roseate Tern were reported with inadequate details. The geographic origin of the Snowy Plover is questionable and the Brewer's Sparrow was judged to be a hybrid by the National Museum of Canada. The Carolina Parakeet cited was based on sketchy details and the Atlantic Puffin specimen is unlocatable. Since the time of writing, one record of the Atlantic Puffin and the Swainson's Warbler have been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee, and archeological evidence of Carolina Parakeet has been discovered. Additional reports of Long-billed Curlew, Roseate Tern and Baird's Sparrow are presently being reviewed by the OBRC.

While Dr. Speirs obviously evaluated each species for inclusion, one wonders why other known or presumed escapees such

as the American Flamingo, Blue Tit and Monk Parakeet were not included for the sake of completeness. As he has seen fit to include some obvious escapees in the text, why not list them all? If it was Dr. Speirs' intention to list all species recorded in Ontario, perhaps an addendum listing these species would have been more useful. At any rate, the qualifiers for each of the questionable species are variable. Some are listed as hypothetical or given other designations in the text, but not always. How is the reader to know which species are considered valid and which are under suspicion? While I personally agree with some of Dr. Speirs' conclusions, I feel that we must rely on the decisions of the Ontario Bird Records Committee to preserve continuity. All species not on the "official" list or still under review should have been so designated.

The other major flaw in the book is in the omission of many records because local or regional publications were not consulted. Many of these books exist and would have contributed significantly to the completeness of the book. As a result, the 1981 Spotted

Redshank record from Lakefield and the 1981 Northern Fulmars at Netitishi were ignored completely, in addition to many others.

Finally, a brief explanation of the Christmas Bird Count and Breeding Bird Survey maps would be advantageous. For example, what does "+" mean? This symbol appears on several of the maps.

Had Dr. Speirs concluded each species account with a brief summary of its status in Ontario, geographically and seasonally, many of the inconsistencies would have been alleviated.

All this aside, the book provides a good summary for almost all species with accounts that are generally accurate and complete. This exhaustive treatise represents a useful, and most importantly, interesting summary of our birds. One other reviewer has stated that "Birds of Ontario (Vol. II) is a reference book, not bedtime reading, and yet in the latter capacity I find it somewhat compulsive". So too will be your experience, I'm sure. Dr. Speirs is to be congratulated for his work in the production of this long overdue book, one that is highly recommended for any birder's library.

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Birds of Ontario. 1985. By Dr. J. Murray Speirs. Natural Heritage/
Natural History Inc., Toronto. Vol. I, 538 pp., \$49.95; Vol. II, 986 pp., \$24.95.

The publication of a provincial bird book is always an impatiently awaited event within birding circles. Prepublication announce-

ments of *Birds of Ontario*, which included laudatory remarks by Roger Tory Peterson, heightened the anticipation. The book, when it

finally arrived, proved to be a disappointment.

The work is in two volumes. Both are attractively and durably bound, and outwardly would make a handsome addition to any bookshelf. But wait. Before you pay the \$49.95 for Volume I and \$24.95 for Volume II a closer look at their contents is in order.

Volume I, after a very short introduction and a long list of acknowledgements, contains a species by species listing of all (?) the birds recorded in Ontario. On the right-hand page is the bird's scientific name, a short note on its distribution, and an equally short section describing the physical characteristics of the bird. Usually, there are two species per page. On the left-hand facing page there appears a photograph of the species with the English common name. The taxonomy and species order follow the most recent AOU checklist (6th edition, 1983). The 538 page volume ends with an index of the common names only.

At 986 pages, Volume II is nearly twice as thick but contains no photographs, which probably explains its lower price. In this volume, each species is again listed in AOU order. Both common and scientific names head each account. The text usually begins with some comments on the species' distribution, range, and habitat, followed by an equally brief summary of the main identification features. The heart of the text is a listing of selected records of each species by season. Some accounts end with banding returns. Measurements and references complete each section.

At the end of the text is a Literature Cited section, and the volume ends with two indices, one of common names and the other scientific names.

Based on the above description, one might imagine that the two volumes are an important contribution to the knowledge of bird life in Ontario. Other reviewers have found the book praiseworthy and to be recommended to both novice and expert. Their remarks seem unsupportable when the book is examined in detail.

Let's begin with Volume I. The primary justification for this volume seems to be as a vehicle for the photographs. There is always a problem with photographs, specifically with the variation in quality. Some of the photographs in this book are very good, others border on unrecognizable. The Purple Sandpiper (p. 184) looks like it was taken in evening twilight during a blizzard. Is that really a Lincoln's Sparrow (p. 492) or a Tennessee Warbler (p. 406)? Identifying them from the photographs would be tricky. There are no birds at all in the Bank Swallow photograph. The picture of the Glaucous Gull (p. 214) is really a photograph of a number of gulls in what appears to be a flooded field. The Glaucous Gull is, according to the caption, "The white gull standing, with Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls". Of the four or more white gulls in the photograph (two standing, two sitting), one must take the author's word that they are (all?) Glaucous Gulls. The picture was taken too far away to be sure. A better picture of

Glaucous Gulls is on page 212 over the Iceland Gull caption. The two white-winged gulls (one adult, one immature) in that picture are both Glaucous Gulls.

Species that are not illustrated have a blank space where their photograph would be. A quick count revealed that nearly 25% of the species were lacking a picture. This, along with some short species accounts on the facing page, leaves a lot of expensive, empty white paper. The most notable example of wasted space is the Carolina Parakeet account (pp. 244-245). This extinct species is given only six lines of text, which leaves the two pages devoted to it almost completely blank. Included in the group of birds with no photograph are Purple Martin, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Gray Partridge, all of which should have been easy to obtain. A province-wide solicitation of photographs would surely have turned up many of the missing species and undoubtedly would have provided better pictures than some that were included.

In what was apparently a lapse in proof reading, the picture labelled as a Hairy Woodpecker (p. 290) is clearly that of a Downy. The mislabelled Glaucous Gull has already been mentioned. In a very blurred photograph on page 180, the bird called a Baird's Sandpiper is really a Pectoral Sandpiper. On page 492, an overexposed photograph labelled Swamp Sparrow is really a Palm Warbler! Such errors should have been caught by a reviewer prior to publication.

Most of the significant

information appears in Volume II. It repeats almost word-for-word the text of Volume I and adds some details on the seasonal distributions of each species. The information on seasonal occurrence is mostly taken from the author's personal records, records from acquaintances, and published records, mainly from *American Birds*.

The choice of records is selective and inconsistent. It is difficult to see the value in long lists of sightings when no pattern is illustrated or no point is made. What is the significance in stating a summer record of a nest of a Red-winged Blackbird with four eggs at Black Rapids near Ottawa on 4 June 1921 and neglecting a spring record of a Spotted Redshank at Lakefield sewage lagoon near Peterborough on 7 May 1981, only the second record for Ontario? Was it simply missed? This seems unlikely, particularly since the *American Birds* issue in which the Spotted Redshank record was published, and even highlighted, is given as a reference in the Literature Cited section of Volume II.

There are many examples of overlooked records. The author does not cite any winter records of Purple Gallinule. One was found in Ottawa on 29 December 1973, and the record was published in *American Birds*. The specimen is now in the National Museum of Natural Sciences collection. Speirs cites that issue of *American Birds* as a reference elsewhere. An eider collected in Ottawa was identified as a Common Eider by G.R. White, and the record was

published in *The Auk* in 1890. In 1923, Hoyes Lloyd corrected the identification to King Eider. (The mounted specimen is still in the Carleton University collection.) The author has called it a Common Eider despite the correction in a publication that he cites in his own book. These are but a few examples of the numerous errors and omissions to be found.

Issue must also be taken with a couple of "species" that the author has included or excluded from his list. He discusses the Herring x Great Black-backed Gull hybrid in some detail. No mention is made of the Herring x Glaucous Gull hybrid, of which there are several museum specimens and which may be the more common hybrid in Ontario. The Brewer's Sparrow is listed on the basis of a single record in late March 1980. Photographs of the bird (which was released alive) were later examined by Dr. W.E. Godfrey of the National Museum of Canada, who determined that it was definitely not a Brewer's Sparrow and most probably was a Chipping x Clay-colored Sparrow hybrid. This conclusion, published by R. Poulin and B. Di Labio (*Birdfinding in Canada* 9:10-12, 1982) was overlooked by Speirs.

Several things are notable by their absence. The Literature Cited section contains no mention of *The Birds of Presqu'île* by R.D. McRae, or either edition of *The Birds of*

Prince Edward County by R.T. Sprague (and R.D. Weir). Both books contain a wealth of information apparently not used by the author. The National Museum of Natural Sciences specimens mentioned were only those records that were available in the published literature.

The point of detailing only some of the mistakes is to warn readers that the book should not be considered as a standard reference text for Ontario birds. It is really a personal compilation by the author and is by no means a definitive and comprehensive study of bird distribution and status in Ontario.

An attempt to write a book on the bird life of Ontario would be an extremely difficult task given the size of the province, the variety of habitats, and the patchy distribution of birders. A definitive text would require the help and cooperation of many hundreds of active and knowledgeable amateur birders along with the involvement of numerous professional ornithologists in and outside of Ontario. Such a book has still to be attempted.