

# Book Reviews

*Two in the Bush.* 1982. By Rosemary Gaymer. Amethyst, Oakville. 104 pp. \$7.95 from author at Box 152, Oakville, Ont. L6J 4Z5.

This slim volume is a collection of essays on encounters between Gaymer and various denizens of nature in North America. The setting ranges through much of Canada, U.S.A. and the French islands of St. Pierre-et-Miquelon, but most are in Ontario. Subjects of the 2-7 page accounts range from crickets to chipmunks, with a predominance of birds.

*Two in the Bush* is not written as a book of facts or hot "birding" sites, but like most contributions of its genre contains numerous tidbits of biology (hummingbirds bathing by swinging aerially through a sprinkler) and identification tips (only waxwings have yellow terminal tail bands; ducks can be distinguished at great distances from grebes by their manner of diving). Although the author delights in such out-of-range sightings as a White-tailed Kite sailing over Mt. St. Helen's, her emphasis is on learning more about common species. In fact, she changes her life style at times to learn more, swimming daily for awhile with a family of loons or sandwiching the rest of the day between pre-dawn alarms and river-bank suppers to follow the daily movements of a Canada Goose brood.

Gaymer's enthusiastic writing

style is bound to kindle interest in any budding naturalist as she portrays vultures rising on thermals, unsuccessful attempts by a duckweed-draped turtle to climb on to a log, chipmunk-woodpecker altercations, and aerial chases of Mourning Cloak butterflies. Seasoned naturalists will alternate between reminders of familiar incidents and fascination at new behaviours of old friends. Gaymer avoids the over generalization of much nature writing partly by concentrating on specific incidents and partly by carefully qualifying her few general statements.

The only error I found in the book was the use of "particular" for particularly (p. 50), although there are inconsistencies in British vs. American spelling (behaviour p. 25; behavior p. 27). I found no errors of fact, but Gaymer's comment on the conspecificity of North American and European creepers is unfortunate in light of A.O.U. revisions about the same time the book was published. The photograph of the pan-handling nuthatch and pleasant sketches of E.B. "Bev" Sanders adequately complement the writing. My only complaint is the lack of an index, which is bound to frustrate me while I search for some tidbit

relevant to some future behavioural note that I wish to write. The title mystifies me, as most of the observations are by Gaymer alone, and the same title was used earlier in another book of the same genre by Gerald Durrell.

Evaluation of nature writing, like nature art, depends somewhat on taste. For me, the test is whether the author can transform me back to some of my own encounters. Gaymer passed my

test with glowing colours as she evoked memories of watching grebes with wet feet, hummingbirds singling me out as the food provider, and a beach that *had* to host Piping Plovers, through her descriptions of grebe behaviour, her personalized nuthatch and her own Piping Plover story. Naturalists who enjoy the writings of Hugh Halliday, Louise de Kiriline Lawrence or Bob Symons will cherish *Two in the Bush*.

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**Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification.** Second Edition, 1983. *Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Bruun, and Herbert S. Zim.* Illustrated by Arthur Singer. Golden Press: New York. 360 pp., \$9.95 paperbound.

When I was first introduced to birdwatching in the early 1970s, I was weaned almost entirely on the first edition of the *Golden Guide* (1966). Despite Roger Tory Peterson's reputation as the father of the modern field guide, his illustrations seemed too small, too simplistic, too lifeless. By contrast, Arthur Singer's renderings were exactly as the birds appeared in the field. The text was concise yet enlightening; the multi-coloured range maps so much more informative than the written description provided in *Peterson's*.

Seventeen years later, Golden Press has released "an expanded,

revised" second edition of its famous guide. Unlike its predecessor, this book is a major disappointment.

It has been "expanded" (more birds, more pages, more illustrations) and it has been "revised" (new text, new range maps, new names) but in my opinion it has not been "improved" in any way. There has been no attempt to keep abreast of recent advancements in field identification.

Few field guides live up to their billing and this one is certainly no exception. Several grandiose claims are made which bear closer scrutiny.

1. "Art revisions range from small

color improvements and helpful additional details . . . to entirely new plates and many more paintings of individual birds.”

Eleven new plates have been included in the second edition, illustrating vagrant shearwaters, godwits, curlews, Eurasian peeps, immature terns (2), parrots, vagrant thrushes, wagtails, Eurasian pipits, and vagrant finches. With the exception of the parrots, all the plates appear blurred and washed out.

Many of the original plates have been retained from the first edition. For some inexplicable reason, however, others have been entirely repainted. While the content is unchanged, the quality has been compromised. Less attention is given to detail, a tendency that is most apparent in dark-mantled gulls (p. 142), western *Empidonax* flycatchers (p. 214) and fall warblers (pp. 294-5).

2. “Special emphasis is given to the different plumages of each species.”

Despite the inclusion of many species previously not pictured, the illustrations are replete with omissions and/or errors, e.g.

- The distinctive “Clark’s” race of the Western Grebe is not pictured.
- Unlike other members of the genus *Pluvialis*, Black-bellied Plovers possess a hind toe (hallux). This morphological characteristic now has been omitted in both editions. While admittedly an insignificant field mark, the new *National Geographic Society Guide* has seen fit to illustrate it correctly.
- With their complex sequence of season- and age-related plum-

ages, gulls are probably the most challenging of all birds to illustrate accurately. However, the gull plates in this guide are fraught with mistakes, e.g. the adult Thayer’s Gull pictured in flight on page 145. Anyone who identifies a Thayer’s Gull on the basis of this illustration has almost certainly seen either a Herring Gull or a *Larus* new to science. Although the bird pictured resembles a gull, it displays none of the marks which would even remotely suggest Thayer’s.

- As Paul Lehman pointed out in a recent issue of *Birding* (Vol. 15: 228-30), the head patterns depicted in the winter plumage of Royal and Elegant Terns (p. 155) have been reversed. This error has also survived both editions.
- Two of the most important field marks used to distinguish Lesser from Common Night-hawk in flight (p. 183), the shorter, outermost primary and the wider band of white in the tail, are neither indicated nor mentioned.
- No less than 18 different individuals representing seven species of woodpeckers are crowded onto page 199. The new Red-breasted Sapsucker is given particularly cursory treatment; less than two lines of text, a shared range map and a relabelled illustration showing only the upper half of the bird.
- The picture of Traill’s Flycatcher used in the 1966 edition has been relabelled as *both* Willow and Alder (p. 213). Rather than recognizing subtle, yet important morpho-

logical differences between the two, emphasis is given solely to differences in vocalizations.

- The new plate illustrating Asian pipits (p. 257) is flawed by the inclusion of a series of black and white tail patterns on the opposite page. Based on this illustration, the tails of Asian pipits appear virtually identical!
- 3. "The text has been extensively revised throughout to incorporate new knowledge."

In actual fact, there are few revisions, of which most involve minor changes such as the addition and/or deletion of several words. If you possess both editions, select several pages at random and compare them.

The Little Gull is still described as a "European straggler and rare breeder". This species is now clearly established in the east. It is ridiculous to suppose that the majority of Great Lakes sightings involve birds that originated overseas.

- 4. "Special features of this guide that have been retained include . . . . Sonagrams."

I have always ignored Sonagrams, perhaps because of a high school aversion to any form of "written" music. Nevertheless, in the introduction of this guide, one is assured that "with a little practice, Sonagrams are handy for field use." To illustrate this, a description of the musical components of an American Robin's song is given: "Middle C has a frequency of 0.262 kHz. The frequency doubles with each

succeeding octave: C' is 0.523, C'' is 1.046, C''' is 2.093, and C'''' (top note on the piano) is 4.186 khz." Sure sounds like a Robin to me!

- 5. "The latest English names of the American Birding Association (A.B.A. checklist, 2nd ed., 1982) are used in this guide."

Although the scientific names used conform to the most recent A.O.U. checklist, the taxonomic sequence has not been revised to reflect the current phylogenetic order of North American birds.

- 6. "As most subspecies cannot be told in the field, very few are included in this guide."

This is clearly a cop-out statement, intended to obscure the lack of recognizable races and subspecies portrayed. It is also a further indication that this edition has failed to acknowledge recent advancements in the field identification of subspecies.

- 7. "A rare bird . . . is usually only found by an experienced observer."

This is a patently absurd statement. Not only is it an insult to the many novice birders who have experienced the thrill of discovering and identifying a rarity, it again exemplifies the archaic attitudes of the authors.

- 8. "The authority."

In its day, the *Golden Guide* was arguably the best North American guide available. The release of a revised *Peterson's* and the recent emergence of the heir apparent, the NGS guide, have combined to topple the *Golden Guide* from its once lofty perch.

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