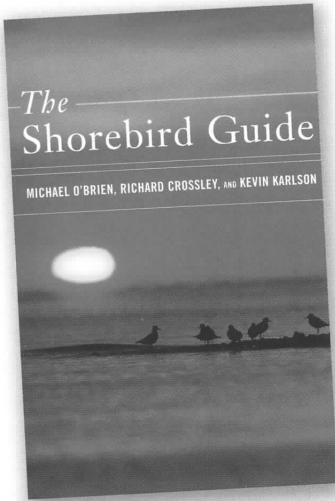


Book Review



The Shorebird Guide. 2006. By Michael O'Brien, Richard Crossley and Kevin Karlson. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York. Vinyl Flexicover, 491 pages, 870 colour photographs, 15.5 x 23.5 cm. \$33.95 Canadian. ISBN 13: 978-0-618-43294-3.

The Shorebird Guide follows closely the publication in 2005 of a photographic guide to the *Shorebirds of North America* by Dennis Paulson. I reviewed Paulson's guide a year ago in the August 2005 issue of *Ontario Birds*. There is a third recent shorebird guide (illustrated with paintings) titled *Shorebirds of North America, Europe, and Asia* published in 2005 by Princeton University Press. If you were to buy only one of these specialty books, I recommend

The Shorebird Guide which is reviewed here. Get all three books if you love shorebirds as I do.

The Shorebird Guide covers all North American shorebirds including vagrants. The *Introduction* gives an excellent overview of shorebird families, how to identify shorebirds, topography using three photos, molt, plumage and aging. The guide is divided into two large main sections, the *Species Photos* and the *Species Accounts*, which are discussed in the next two paragraphs.

The *Species Photos* section is the core of the guide. It is a tremendous visual resource. The high quality of the colour photographs is outstanding and many stunning full page images are included. It first treats 48 Domestic Species of regular occurrence in North America in considerable detail (e.g., 17 photos on 5 pages for Western Sandpiper), showing juvenile, winter and breeding plumages including birds in molt, mixed species flocks, in flight and close-up shots, behaviors and habitats. The photo captions bulge with identification tips. The month and location for most photos are given in the caption. Dates are extremely useful in understanding appearance, plumage and molt. There are small but accurate range maps in colour. The second part of the *Species Photos* section treats 46 Rarities and Regional Specialties. The number of photos per species is fewer. There are

no range maps in this part, but range is described in the *Species Accounts*. Canadian content in the *Species Photos* section is represented by only two photographs: a juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper in flight on page 172 by Brandon Holden of Ontario and a juvenile presumed hybrid White-rumped x Buff-breasted Sandpiper on page 314 by Bruce Mactavish of Newfoundland.

The *Species Accounts* (text) is the second main section. The accounts contain an exceptional amount of detailed and valuable information on the Status, Taxonomy (a better heading would be Sub-species), Behavior, Migration, Molt and Vocalizations. The heading Behavior is misleading because under it is considerable information normally not considered behavior, such as habitat.

Instead of identifying shorebirds primarily by plumage field marks, this guide focuses on their **General Impression of Size and Shape** or GISS, which is an old military term for recognizing aircraft. The acronym changed to JIZZ used by birders. Identifying birds by jizz is also known as the holistic or gestalt method. Two examples of jizz identifications are: a yellowlegs dashing around chasing small fish is almost certainly a Greater; and a dowitcher that looks like it “swallowed a grapefruit” is a Long-billed. The guide is full of such examples. As birders gain experience, they incorporate more jizz into their identifications. I support the jizz method because most of

my identifications use jizz. I caution identifying birds by jizz only. Particularly when documenting rarities, be certain to note diagnostic plumage characters and eliminate all similar species if you expect your reports to be accepted.

The guide has a number of “special features” making it challenging and fun to use, such as the following. There are 45 quiz questions in the captions of the *Species Photos* with answers in the Appendix. There are 27 full page shorebird photos with answers in the Appendix. There are photo pages of hybrid and aberrant shorebirds. There is a photo page comparing juvenile stints. There is a quiz of 27 shorebird silhouettes on the inside back cover and facing page, with the page number answer under each silhouette.

Here are some additional comments and discussion. The two subspecies of Solitary Sandpiper, eastern nominate *solitaria* and western *cinnamomea*, may be separate species. DNA barcode analysis suggests they were isolated several million years ago (*fide* Paul Hebert). Fresh juveniles of the two subspecies are easily told apart in the field. In eastern *solitaria* the upperparts are dotted with buffy white spots (which soon fade whitish) whereas *cinnamomea* has much brighter cinnamon spots. With this in mind, the guide only has a good photo of a juvenile *solitaria* whereas the juvenile *cinnamomea* is a small inset photo making it hard to see the difference.

This guide realistically states that the Eskimo Curlew is “presumed extinct”. It would be interesting to know the year of the last juvenile Eskimo Curlew specimen. A few years ago I inquired about the ages (adult or juvenile) of the last two Eskimo Curlew specimens. Both were taken in late summer, and if they were juveniles it would indicate breeding in the years they were collected. The second last specimen was taken at Battle Harbour, Labrador, on 29 August 1932. It is in the Canadian Museum of Nature, and is an adult. The last ever specimen was shot in the Barbados, West Indies, on 4 September 1963. It is in The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, and is an adult too. Accepted sightings in Texas dating from 1945 to the 1960s never recorded more than two birds. The last photograph of an Eskimo Curlew (reproduced on page 268) was taken in March 1962 in Texas. I have often wondered if the bird in the 1962 Texas photo and the 1963 Barbados specimen are the same individual given that there were perhaps only three very old Eskimo Curlews still alive in 1963. There are no secret breeding grounds in Canada. Searches were done for many years in Mackenzie District (Northwest Territories) in summer and in Labrador for fall migrants. None were sighted. Since there have been no confirmed records in over 45 years, the Eskimo Curlew is extinct.

The *Glossary* consists of three pages. Some specialized terms used in the guide such as intergrade are not defined. The North American term “peep” and the European term “stint” are said to be analogous (similar but not synonymous) without explaining the difference. Peep was defined in Peterson’s classic 1947 edition under Least Sandpiper: “Collectively we call the small sparrow-sized Sandpipers ‘Peep’ (Least, Semipalmated, Western, Baird’s, and White-rump)”. The first three are stints, but not the slightly larger White-rumped and Baird’s Sandpipers. All stints are peeps, but not all peeps are stints.

The *Bibliography* is weak because it lists mainly books whose primary content is not shorebirds. Much of the scientific literature on shorebirds is not in the bibliography, such as Pitelka’s classic 1950 monograph on dowitchers. Also missing are significant shorebird articles in ABA’s *Birding* magazine and other major journals. Considering the many general bird books listed, I cannot understand the omission of *The Birds of Canada* by W. Earl Godfrey (1986).

The Shorebird Guide has no equal. Study its splendid photos, and read the detailed captions and species accounts. Do the quizzes and memorize the silhouettes. The guide contains a huge amount of information not found in other shorebird books. It is highly recommended.

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