

BOOK REVIEW

The Birdwatcher's Companion: An Encyclopedic Handbook of North American Birdlife. Christopher Leahy. Illustrated by Gordon Morrison. 1982. Hill and Wang, New York. 877 pages. Publication date: November 29, 1982.

Here is a book where you can find nearly everything you want to know about birds, birdwatching, and birders in one compact, delightfully written, and aptly titled volume that is truly a portable "handbook," and every person concerned with birds, at any level of expertise, will want to own it and to have the book available on the most convenient shelf.

"The inspiration for the Companion is rooted in two desires," Leahy explains in his introduction.

. . . One is the practical wish to own a single reference book that I could hold in one hand but that would tell me, for example: whether birds have a well-developed sense of taste; what "agonistic" means; what color a Dipper's eggs are; what "pomarine" means; how to pronounce "parula"; who Bendire was; how many species of woodpeckers there are in the world; what kind of bird a "hagdon" is; what special birds I might hope to see in the Pribilof Islands; how to measure a bird; when to visit the Florida Keys in order to be sure of finding a Black-whiskered Vireo; whether or not I should subscribe to The Condor; how to cook a scoter...and other such information, from the critical to the trivial. The other worthy ideal involves my desire for readable, non-technical (yet pithy and accurate) accounts of the basic elements of birdlife - accounts that can be read for pleasure as well as information . . . or simply for the fun of discovering some of the more bizarre peripheries of the bird world.

The author's mission has been admirably accomplished! Leahy has managed to collect, to organize, and to present a wealth of fascinating information in lively prose that is erudite, literate, witty, and, for this reviewer, readable to the point of addiction. The book reveals a truly creative mind at work.

Roger Pasquier points out in the very laudatory preface that the "Companion is useful to readers of every level." In addition to all that one expects to find in such a book (accounts of bird families and species, bird anatomy and physiology, avian ethology and evolution, etc.), there is much that is unexpected and this enhances and expands its general appeal. The backyard birdwatcher will be drawn to these topics: Birdhouse, Care of Distressed Birds, Food/Feeding, Conservation, Man-made Threats, Photography, Smoke/Fire, and Song. For the novice and the casual birder, the entries on Optical Equipment, Etiquette, Big Day, Checklist,

Christmas Count, Collecting, and Rare Bird Alert should be very enlightening. And what Hard Core birder will be able to resist that entry as well as those on Birdmanship, Good Call/Bad Call, Nouns of Assemblage, and Verification of Records? The entry headings are printed in good strong CAPS that leap provocatively to the eye so that leafing through the pages, I readily forgot what I had started to look up. A few headings that led me to wandering were Comfort Movements, Bird Skin (preparation described), Drunkenness, Edibility, Autolycism, Leucism, Moon Watching, Human Culture and Imagination (-Birds In), Play, Hinckley Ohio, Imping, Jizz, Madera Canyon, Topotype, and Zugunruhe.

The section, "How to Use This Book," provides a fine summary of the Companion's organization, contents, and features and includes several substantial lists of subject headings to enable the user to find material that might otherwise be overlooked in an alphabetical format. The list of unusual headings and the list of broad subjects that are presented as longer essays seemed especially helpful. The essays that I read all proved to be comprehensive, comprehensible, not excessively long, and well marked with conspicuous subheadings. Thus the author leads the reader easily to the information desired without cramming the book with redundant entries. The cross-referencing is well done and is fruitful without being tedious. No space is wasted in this book.

The last section of the book contains three valuable appendices and a very extensive bibliography usefully arranged by subject. Appendix I lists the common and scientific names of all regularly occurring North American birds arranged in phylogenetic sequence, annotated to distinguish visitors from breeders and to compare the numbers of families, genera, and species in North America with the numbers worldwide. Appendix II is a tabular list of vagrant species that shows where they are native, where they have visited this continent, and the basis of the record. Appendix III provides a temporal guide to bird finding by migration, by locality ("hot spots"), and by species (specialties).

The volume is beautifully illustrated by Gordon Morrison whose work in Newcomb's Wildflower Guide has been widely praised. Ninety-one species are depicted in six color plates and twenty-five black and white figures. The plates are a combination of line art and subtle coloration that creates an accurate, clean appearing, and aesthetically satisfying representation, and the artist's work has been well preserved in the printing process. The book jacket, an extra plate in which fourteen bird species (and one insect) are positioned on a silhouette of North America, is a lesson in visual instruction - how good art enhances learning. All of the art work has been meticulously planned to illustrate specific entries (e.g., Display, Ecological Niches, Mobbing, Types of Nests) as well as accurately portraying bird species. Only the closest cooperation between author and artist could have

produced such a felicitous, even synergistic, result.

Chris Leahy, a staff biologist of Massachusetts Audubon Society for which he has led birding tours throughout the world (most recently to Siberia and Mongolia), is described by John Henry Dick in Other Edens (Devin-Adair, 1979) as "one of the sharpest birders I have ever met. His experienced eyes and keen hearing could pick up a motionless trogon, a skulking wren in the darkest recesses of the forest, or quickly identify the shrill squeak of a hummingbird." Despite extensive touring, he remains an enthusiastic resident of the North Shore where he "wasted his youth watching birds, collecting dragonflies, and otherwise gratifying his senses" (Sanctuary, January 1982). He is also an expert photographer and, as this book amply attests, an accomplished writer.

If you have already invested in Terres' The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds, my advice to you is to leave that volume displayed on the coffee table and put Birdwatcher's Companion in the car or on the nightstand. Read and enjoy!

Dorothy R. Arvidson

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS COLORING BOOK by Roger Tory Peterson, Peter Alden, and John Sill depicting 262 North American species is a delightful volume, chockfull of bird silhouettes that make one's fingers yearn for colored pencils. Because the bird outlines are reasonably sized and carefully arranged, 320 drawings are included in just 64 pages. All of the species have been printed in color on the four and a half pages of cover space (the back cover folds out) by reducing artist John Sill's beautifully drawn birds to miniatures. Congratulations to the authors and to Houghton Mifflin, the publisher, for devising such a handsome, yet inexpensive, educational book. Peter Alden's clearly written text contains condensed information about bird families and bird identification and about color, habits, and habitat that fixes the birds in mind and, combined with the coloring activity, provides a useful learning technique to sharpen the awareness of birdwatchers of any age. What better way to remember the chestnut patch on the shoulder of the Dickcissel than to put it there yourself as you scan a few words about its field marks, habitat, song, and distribution? AND, this book is not solely for children! Recently I saw it in use in a Nantucket cottage where three respected birders whose combined years of experience amount to well over a century were happily filling in the outlines with 48 rainbow-hued pencils. Let us hope that the well qualified authors will produce additional volumes to cover other parts of the world. Coloring books have a widespread appeal that must extend to Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro as well as Boston or St. Louis and could very well serve the cause of conservation by offering young people anywhere a pleasant and easy way to learn about the natural world.

D.R.A.