

THE WONDER OF BIRDS: THE RECORDINGS - A REVIEW

by Michael R. Greenwald, West Roxbury

As Leif Robinson mentioned in his article in the December 1983 issue of Bird Observer ("Some Thoughts about Field Guides - Old and New," BOEM 11: 312-314), the National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America is but one piece in a four-part set which includes the field guide, a "coffee-table" book entitled The Wonder of Birds from which the entire package takes its name, a migration map, and a set of recordings - four nine-inch Eva-Tone soundsheets which look like a cross between a normal phonograph record and a computer floppy-disc. Each side of the soundsheets contains approximately twelve minutes of bird vocalizations introduced by an announcement of the species and, if applicable, the geographical variant. Correlation with the pagination of the Field Guide to the Birds of North America is made on the jacket.

This is a departure from the format on the soundsheets of the National Geographic Society's earlier Song and Garden Birds of North America (1964). Those were six-inch Eva-Tones bound with a book backing. They had very few birds represented and were more fully narrated. There is also no attempt to represent every species occurring in North America. Roger Tory Peterson has already done that in A Field Guide to the Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America, Raleigh Records (Houghton-Mifflin Co.), 1959 (rev. 1971) and its western equivalent (1975). Indeed, on this entire set, only 179 species are represented. The editors have chosen rather to include those species whose vocalizations are most critical to identification, either because the birds look alike (as with Alder and Willow flycatchers or Couch's and Tropical kingbirds), are secretive and thus hard to see (as with rails, owls, and nightjars), or are so non-descript that even direct field observation does not mean that the bird can be easily identified (as is true of the Northern Beardless Tyrannulet). In the words of the editors, they have chosen vocalizations which are "not always the most beautiful sounds, nor the most often heard, but the sounds that are most helpful in finding and identifying elusive or confusing species." They have also included species such as Common Ringed-Plover, Greater Golden-Plover, and Temminck's Stint that are rarely found in North America and hence are not often included on other bird records.

The goal of the editors is not to provide the beginner with the most typical song of those birds that he or she is likely to encounter on a spring bird walk but to provide the more experienced observer with another dimension of identification. To this end, as they reduced the number of species represented, they increased the space devoted to each and, for many species, have given several different vocalizations. An entire band has been devoted to the three yellow-bellied kingbirds of the

Southwest: Cassin's, Couch's, and Tropical. There are three different vocalizations each for Virginia Rail, King Rail, and Sora (to the other extreme, however, I am not sure that it was necessary to have twenty-four seconds devoted to a Yellow Rail calling, "Click, click-click, click-click-click, click-click," etc.). Certain other areas are particularly strong. Many different tern vocalizations are given (although gulls are not included at all). Nine minutes have been devoted to night birds (owls and nightjars) and another nine to flycatchers: all of the genus Myiarchus and all of the genus Empidonax, except Buff-breasted Flycatcher, are represented. So, too, are all of the North American vireos save Yellow-throated and Black-whiskered vireos. However, there are songs of only five sparrows and six wood-warblers: three Oporornis (MacGillivray's is missing), the two water-thrushes, and for the ever-hopeful, Bachman's Warbler.

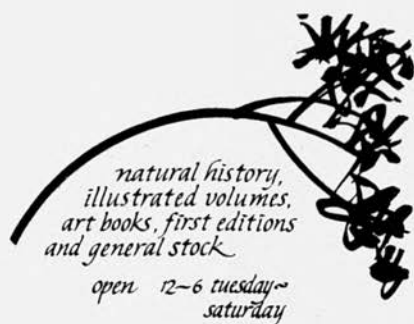
Nothing is perfect, however, and as Leif Robinson said in his review of the field guide, after some of the criticism of the fourth edition of Peterson, it is amazing that anyone would attempt a new one. For in spite of all of the strengths of this record-set, there are some detractions. Even if we were to acknowledge that wood-warblers, sparrows, and gulls are not necessary in a collection of this sort, there is some real unevenness in the selection of species for the records. On one hand, we are given Sanderling, Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Baird's Sandpiper, and Pectoral Sandpiper. Why is Western Sandpiper missing altogether? Both Blue-gray and Black-tailed gnatcatchers are given. Why not Black-capped? It is hardly more esoteric than Arctic Warbler. Since Red Crossbill is included, why are White-winged Crossbill and Pine Grosbeak omitted? The reasons for the selection of Wren and Mimid species are likewise unclear. Could it be that no one has ever recorded a LeConte's Thrasher? Comparisons are made between Downy and Hairy woodpeckers and Ladder-backed and Nuttall's woodpeckers. It would have been just as helpful to have a comparison between the Black-backed and Three-toed woodpeckers. The vocalizations of some of the species are themselves under-represented. The Northern Saw-whet Owl has many different notes; yet we are given only the "whetting" note which gives the bird its name. We are given three examples of the Scarlet Tanager's song, one of its "keep-back" call, but none of its early morning "burr."

Also missing are the geographical notations given on the Peterson recordings. Research has shown that for many species, only the basic structure of the song is inborn; the remainder is learned. This allows for a high degree of geographic and individual variation. Knowing these geographical variations can be very useful in the field. The recording of the White-eyed Vireo, for example, is identical to those that I have heard throughout the Florida Everglades but have rarely heard either here in New England or in the Ohio Valley.

The greatest detraction of all, however, is the Eva-Tone soundsheets themselves. To be sure, the recording quality is superb, often far better than the same species on the Peterson records. But I am concerned that the soundsheets are not very durable. My sheets from Song and Garden Birds of North America have not held up well. I have played the new ones perhaps half-a-dozen times and already one of them has developed a "popping" noise in the bass caused by a ripple on the surface.

When writing a review, it is always easier to write about the detractions and gloss over the strong points. In this instance, the latter far outweigh the former. This set is a very useful field tool and should be a welcome addition to anyone's record library. Alas, this forces me to mention but one more detraction - the records are only available as part of the entire set, which, depending on where and when one buys it, costs either \$29.95 or \$34.95.

MICHAEL GREENWALD began birding by ear in New Hampshire's White Mountains in the early 1970s. Because he did not own binoculars, it was nearly three years before he realized that birds could be seen as well as heard. While living in Ohio, he met his first birder and discovered that other people had known this for a long time. He has served as a backpacking and canoe trip leader in Maine and New Hampshire for over ten years and is currently a naturalist-in-residence in the hut system of the Appalachian Mountain Club. In his spare time, he works on his doctoral dissertation on New Testament and Christian Origins and is the rabbi of Melrose.



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BOOK REVIEW

The Wonder of Birds. Robert M. Poole, ed. 1983. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C., 280 pages. Available as part of a set that includes the N.G.S. Field Guide to the Birds of North America (reviewed by L. Robinson, BOEM 11: 312), four Eva-Tone soundsheets of bird song (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), and a poster-sized migration map, \$35.

This "coffee-table"-type book, is the centerpiece of this set, and its goal is appreciation - appreciation both of the beauty of birds and of the struggle of their day-to-day existence over the course of a year.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each by a different naturalist-author. The first chapter is an introduction by Louis J. Halle who lays out the aesthetic tone of the entire book, wistfully lamenting the public indifference to the lyricism of the sound and of the movement of birds. Noting that the goal of this volume is one of appreciation, he defends such a goal by stating that ". . . in the observation of birds, identification is not enough (for) our kind will not conserve what it does not appreciate" (p. 15). The second chapter by Roger F. Pasquier is also introductory but features a different perspective. He presents the reader with some brief notes on the history of ornithology, avian palaeontology, avian anatomy, and ecological niches. The next four chapters trace the lives of birds through the seasons. The chapter on spring, by Paul A. Johnsgard, discusses courtship and mating rituals and the territorial and nesting habits of various species. In his vivid descriptions of the migration and mating ritual of the Sandhill Cranes, one senses Johnsgard's own experiences on the midwestern prairies. The next chapter by Anne LaBastille continues the life-cycle with stories of the trials and tribulations of raising young. The autumnal chapter by Frank Graham, Jr. concentrates on the fall migration, and the chapter by Franklin Russell traces the struggles of survival through a winter for the twenty billion birds present in the United States and Canada at summer's end. We are left with the stark reality that of the eight billion migrants who travel beyond the southern borders of our country, "one of three . . . will die before spring" (p. 192). By the end of these chapters, one almost begins to see the world through a bird's eye. We are abruptly yanked back to our own humanity, however, with George Laycock's concluding chapter on human impact, a discussion ranging from the introduction of species to the destruction and alteration of habitat with the concomitant destruction of species and human attempts to save them. A final useful feature is a four-page guide at the end of the book, "Bird Watching by State and Province."

The text flows evenly, is well-written, is informative, and is well-indexed. But the real artistry of this volume is in

the photographs. There are 198 of them, and all of them are magnificent. My favorite is that of a Wood Duck duckling that has just been coaxed out of the nest by its mother and frozen in midair by the photographer-magician. For those who might be familiar with other works by the National Geographic Society, the photos in this work are not in sections apart from the text but are interspersed within it. This might be a distraction for some, but it does help to maintain the correlation between photographs and text. Not all of these photographs are new. Many have been previously released in the monthly issues of National Geographic Magazine. But it is of no matter. In this book they have been put together in a spectacular photographic essay.

In the introductory chapter, Louis J. Halle tells us that "for the real thing . . . we have to go out into the field. The basic service that this book performs is to equip us beforehand with the knowledge we need for the appreciation of what we see" (p. 15). True. But in so saying, he sells the book short. For those who appreciate objets d'art, this book is itself a thing of beauty.

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