

BOOK REVIEW: *The Macmillan Field Guide
to Bird Identification*

by Robert Hilton

Note from Alden Clayton, *Bird Observer* Department Head, Book Reviews. The lead article in the February 1993 issue of *Birding* is "Building a Birder's Library," by Richard E. Webster. Citing 223 titles organized in twenty-two categories, Webster offers an extraordinarily comprehensive survey of books relevant to birds and birding. His final category is headlined as, "The Best Bird Book Buys." Two books are selected "that especially fit all my conceptions of 'quality' in combination with 'value'." One of these is *The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification*. The other is W.E. Godfrey's *The Birds of Canada*. Webster has this to say about the Macmillan guide.

This is my nomination for the standard for future bird books. As a bibliophile who has recommended tomes for pages and pages of this article, I still think that there is something about good small books that make them the best. Although a British guide, it offers much to a North American birder and a great deal to any lover of bird books. What does this book have? Just artistically exquisite illustrations of complex plumages accompanied by a birder's text. This is the book against which I will measure all others when it comes to a "satisfaction index."

The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification, by Alan Harris, Laurel Tucker, and Keith Vinicombe. 1989 (revised 1990). London, England: Macmillan Press. [iv+] 224 pages (94 contain color). \$29.95.

This little book is a British equivalent to Kenn Kaufman's *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*, with each of the seventy-one chapters illustrated in color. It discusses regularly occurring British and Irish species that pose problems for the "average bird watcher"; only confusing plumages are illustrated and considered. Rarities are included when they are frequently confused with a common bird. The book is the same size as and put out by the British publisher of what we know as *The Facts on File Guide to North Atlantic Shorebirds*.

As with *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*, the individual chapters, written by Keith Vinicombe, are arranged in a manner suitable for the species under discussion. The general format is that of an identification "mini-paper." Unlike the Kaufman guide, there is a profusion of color illustrations, provided by Alan Harris and the late Laurel Tucker. For a week after I obtained my own copy, I spent every evening at home merely admiring these paintings. Tucker's portraits are more impressionistic and more lively than Harris': one of her Wood

Sandpipers looks set to walk off the page. Charming vignettes pepper her plates; I particularly like the flock of grey geese stretching across the tops of two pages, containing individuals of each species feeding, walking, or standing. Harris' paintings have a preciseness to them, with most larger, patterned feathers individually delineated. Hand lettering on plates give name, plumage, and often key identification information.

About thirty-five chapters deal with two or more American species, making them useful in North America, with another sixteen containing at least one regular North American species. Any chapter discussing a North American species is valuable for the illustrations alone. The chapters with the most utility for North Americans discuss loons, grebes, dabbling ducks (including female and juvenile Garganey), large plovers, skuas and jaegers, gulls, terns, alcids, and Long-eared and Short-eared owls.

As an example, take a chapter of particular interest to me: the one that discusses three medium-sized terns, Common, Arctic, and Roseate terns. Common and Arctic terns are treated together with many features compared and contrasted between the two species: adult summer and winter, juvenile, and first summer plumages are covered, with subheadings highlighting parts of the body necessary to identify a specific plumage. The Roseate Tern, with somewhat less detailed treatment, is compared in adult and juvenile plumages. The illustrations show all three species in a variety of plumages, both in flight and sitting, and include paintings of three heads and two underwings to demonstrate important features. These species are also discussed and compared with Sandwich, Gull-billed, and the three marsh terns in other tern chapters.

Plates throughout the book, some containing more than thirteen individuals each, show a wide variety of plumages. Many times, two birds are drawn in the same plumage and pose to illustrate individual variation. Aberrant plumages of a few species are shown: for example, a first winter Little Gull with all dark wings. Several nice paintings portray molting shorebirds, among them an adult Spotted Redshank and molting juveniles of both Wilson's and Grey (our Red) phalaropes. Their proportions are more accurately portrayed than in *The National Geographic Society Field Guide to North American Birds*.

The introductory material contains a section on shortcuts in identification, in which Vinicombe discusses the importance of aging and sexing birds and elaborates well the basics of rare bird study: know the common birds, keep an open mind, learn calls, and write descriptions. Both inside covers contain useful (and identical) material depicting bird plumage terminology. There is a two-page bibliography of widely available books and articles (the latter mostly from *British Birds* magazine), which contain more detailed useful information.

Comparisons to *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding* are perhaps inevitable. The Macmillan guide contains many more illustrations, all of which are in color. Many of these portray the entire range of tricky plumages of two or more

species side by side, whereas Kaufman usually depicts one plumage or view per page or chapter. Species that are discussed in both books receive approximately the same amount of coverage, albeit from their different perspectives. Kaufman's book has a more thorough introductory discussion on how to identify a bird.

I find this book valuable because of the wealth of plumages it portrays for both American and European species (many of the latter potential vagrants to this country), including many not commonly represented in general field guides. For instance, females of each British species of dabbling duck (Cinnamon Teal included, as an escape) are illustrated; all species except Blue-winged Teal have either the juvenile or eclipse male plumage pictures as well, and for most species both plumages are shown. The gull plates show each species in winter plumage from first winter to maturity, as well as juvenile and first summer dress, for both flying and sitting or swimming birds. Sometimes more than one individual is portrayed in each plumage and pose combination; Scandinavian Herring and hybrid Herring x Glaucous gulls are also depicted, in addition to the normal British form.

I recommend this book for many reasons. If you plan on traveling to England, by all means buy a copy. Rare bird searchers will want to own it as well, because it is useful in researching the identification of accidental species. Less peripatetic birders who enjoy well-done books about other avifaunas may also want to obtain a copy: the artwork alone is an inducement for purchase.

ROBERT HILTON has been an avid birder for more than twenty years, and now takes this book with him on most outings. He lived for two years in Italy and has also birded in England, Belgium, and other European countries. He is planning on returning as soon as he can.

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