

BOOK REVIEW: *Eastern Birds: A Guide to Field Identification of North American Species*

by Brian Cassie

Eastern Birds: A Guide to Field Identification of North American Species written and illustrated by James Coe, Golden Press, New York, NY. 160 pages, 81 color plates, paperback \$12.50.

I suppose I have been asked hundreds of times to recommend the best book for beginning birdwatchers. Unhesitatingly, I have recommended Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, which illustrates all of the birds of eastern North America and has a straightforward text and very good maps. The continent-wide field guides, such as the National Geographic guide, are great, but they can be overwhelming for the casual or novice birdwatcher. When you started out, were you interested in subspecies of Merlins, Common Nighthawks, and White-crowned Sparrows, or were you merely delighted to discover that these birds actually existed and that you could find their pictures in your bird guide? If you go on three bird walks a year, and they are all in Mount Auburn Cemetery in May, do you really need a lineup of Aleutian vagrants in your field guide? Of course not. What beginners need is a field guide that can help them identify the birds they are actually going to run across when they are out there by themselves, not chasing down juvenile stints in Newburyport harbor but rather sorting through that little group of kinglets and nuthatches along the Charles River in Waltham.

Peterson's guide was never truly the answer for beginners, because it does include rarities, strays, and pelagic species more likely to confuse than enlighten the hordes of casual birdwatchers we have in the East. What they have needed is a well-illustrated, well-written compact field guide to the commoner eastern birds. I am delighted to have such a guide now at hand.

James Coe's *Eastern Birds* is a tour-de-force, a positively brilliant guide. In 160 pages the author/illustrator has presented 300 of the most familiar birds east of the Rocky Mountains. The book begins with an introduction to the guide itself and to the basics of birdwatching. Following this are ten pages of habitat plates, showing characteristic birds of saltwater bays and the ocean; ponds, lakes, and marshes; coastal beaches and salt marshes; roadsides; and backyards, as well as soaring birds, all depicted in typical habitats. This is a long overdue addition to field guides and should be incorporated into all guides for all animals and plants, whether for beginner or seasoned observers. Four pages of "confusing songbirds" plates precede the main section of the book, which comprises 128 pages, with color plates on the right-hand pages and text and maps on the left-hand facing pages.

The first measure of a field guide is its illustrations. James Coe has

developed into an extraordinarily fine illustrator, and the paintings in this guide are an inspiration. I especially like the use of natural backgrounds in the plates. This is another convention that is typically overlooked by field guide illustrators but which adds immeasurably to the enjoyment of the plates.

Coe's text opposite the main section of color plates includes brief introductions to bird groups (e.g., shorebirds, vireos, tanagers) and three-to eight-sentence paragraphs about the illustrated species, with pertinent information on identification, habitat, status, and vocalizations making up most of the commentary.

Maps are an important element of a successful field guide, with the ability to convey a good deal of critical information in a rather small space. The maps in *Eastern Birds* depict winter, summer, and permanent ranges, as well as migratory routes, in the familiar three-color layouts. Nonetheless if there is a shortcoming with this guide, it would have to be the maps. First, there are not enough of them. Where are the maps for the Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, Eastern Kingbird, Blue Jay, and American Crow? Second, there is a tendency to portray the winter ranges of many species a bit too far to the north, as in several ducks and blackbirds. Third, there are a few blatantly obvious errors on the maps, such as the winter range of the Northern Flicker and the unattributed map on the bottom of Page 100. Better attention to map details will make the next edition of this field guide all the more worthwhile.

When I visited India several years ago, I was a beginner on the Indian bird scene. Everything was new. Among the bird guides I had packed was a slim paperback entitled *Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent*, written and illustrated by Martin Woodcock. This was a great little guide that fit easily in my pocket and depicted characteristic birds in a variety of habitats. I carried it everywhere. I have often thought that the Woodcock guide could serve as a model for introductory guides in other areas of the world. I can now say the same for the Coe book. It is the same size as the Indian guide (half as thick as Peterson's) and the perfect introduction to the subject. When the time comes to recommend a guide for those starting out in the wild world of birdwatching, you can now do no better than this.

BRIAN CASSIE is an avid birder, an interest that has taken him far and wide throughout the world on his own and as a trip leader. He is currently president of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. Brian is also a butterfly enthusiast and is Coördinator of the Massachusetts Butterfly Atlas project, sponsored by the Massachusetts Audubon Society.