

THE IDENTIFICATION GUIDE SERIES: AN OVERVIEW (PART TWO)

by Mark Lynch

This is the second article in a series of three in which I review the books generally referred to as the "Identification Guides." In the first article I gave an overview and history of the series as well as a review of the first three releases in the series on seabirds, shorebirds, and waterfowl. In this article I review later releases in the series given in the order of their publication, many of which are not well known to the average birder in North America. In the third installment I will review the Pica Press series of "Identification Guides."

Swallows and Martins: An Identification Guide and Handbook by Angela Turner, illustrated by Chris Rose. 1989. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. *Swallows and Martins* seems like an odd choice for the next volume in the Helm Identification Guide Series. As a group, swallows do not present the identification challenges that pelagics or shorebirds do. Indeed, there are only seventy-four species of swallows in the world. With the publishing of this book, I believe the Helm Identification Guide Series more clearly defined its goals—namely, to not just produce world level field guides, but to create a series of monographs of birds that have rarely been dealt with completely. Although the identification details in both the plates and text are still top notch, each book in the series from this title on contains more written information on behavior, taxonomy, and others.

Because U.S. birders do not consider swallows as glamorous as, for example, raptors, many birders are not familiar with this book. This is a shame because this is one of the most thorough and beautiful books in the entire series. From the cover art through the plates, the illustrations are elegant, detailed, and alive. Because there are so few species to be dealt with, the plates are uncrowded, with lots of bits of background included. Maybe it is the natural "jizz" of swallows, but many of the birds pictured seem ready to flit off the page.

The written part of *Swallows and Martins* is likewise superb. The introductory chapters on morphology, plumage, classification, and behavior are longer and more informative than in other books in the series. Species writeups are more detailed and subheadings include the following: field characters, habitat, distribution and population, migration, foraging and food, social organization, sociosexual behavior, breeding, description, measurements, and races. To give you an idea of the completeness of the text, four densely printed pages are devoted to just the Tree Swallow.

Although *Swallows and Martins* will never be commonly used as an identification guide, it is an important reference work that contains much

information on even familiar species that will be new to the reader. Travelers to Africa, Asia, South America, and Australia will of course find it an important source for pretrip research. Mostly, this is a book that by its well-written text and sheer beauty of its plates makes us look again at a group of birds that we often ignore.

Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, and Rollers by C. Hilary Fry and Kathy Fry, illustrated by Alan Harris. 1992. Princeton University Press. Of all the books in the Helm Identification Guide Series, this title is probably of the least interest and use to birders who have not traveled outside North America. There are only three species of kingfishers in North America, and only one is widespread. Needless to say, there are no bee-eaters or rollers in the ABA area. The 123 species covered by this book are portrayed in forty color plates. The illustrations are excellent, almost as good as the plates in *Swallows and Martins*. Of all the books in the series up to this point, the species shown in *Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, and Rollers* are certainly the most exotic looking, with their colorful plumage and unique jizz. There is a high degree of island endemism in the kingfishers, especially in the southeast Asian and South Pacific areas. This makes *Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, and Rollers* a pleasure for "armchair" birders who like to dream of exotic birds in faraway places.

The choice of only dealing with kingfishers, bee-eaters, and rollers as the subject for this book is a bit strange. The order, Coraciiformes, also contains the todies, motmots, ground rollers, and the monotypic family of the cuckoo-roller. Coraciiformes is divided into two suborders of Alcedini and Corachii. Families were included and excluded from this book from both of the suborders. The species excluded do not number that many (eighteen), and I wish they had been included for completeness sake.

The format of the book follows that of previous titles, although the introductory chapters are more detailed. These include a concise but thorough explanation of the characters and relationships of the Coraciiformes, and good general notes on food, foraging and nesting, and social and breeding behavior. As can be imagined, birds this unique in plumage and distribution do not require the detailed plumage accounts of other groups of birds with many easily confused species. The written information is excellent, although sometimes spare, and includes full accounts of many poorly known and underdescribed species. Particularly well done is the complete illustrating and description of the huge Mangrove Kingfisher complex.

There is no doubt that *Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, and Rollers* is an important contribution to ornithological literature but will be of very limited interest to the birder who does not stray from North America. This book also contains many wonderful illustrations of some of the most interesting, elegant, and beautiful birds of the world.

Crows and Jays: A Guide to the Crows, Jay, and Magpies of the World by Steve Madge, illustrated by Hilary Burn. 1994. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Madge and Burn are the same team that wrote *Waterfowl*. This slim volume is an interesting addition to the series. The forty color plates illustrate the 120 species for consideration. The artwork is very good but lacks the drama and beauty of *Swallows and Martins* and even *Kingfishers, Bee-Eaters, and Rollers*. The plates are well designed and are not overcrowded. Actually, Hilary Burn does a good job with an unenviable task—illustrating the world's crows.

The taxonomy of *Crows and Jays* generally follows the then new work of Sibley, Ahlquist, and Monroe. The species for consideration were formerly included in the family Corvidae and are now relegated to the tribe Corvini within the subfamily Corvinae of the family Corvidae. Other tribes in this subfamily include the Paradisaeni (birds of paradise); Artamini (butcherbirds, currawongs, and woodswallows), and Oriolini (Old World orioles, minivets, and cuckoo shrikes).

The format of *Crows and Jays* remains true to the format of the series by starting with some short introductory chapters including conservation, relationships, and origins. This section is less informative than in the last two books in the series, which I found disappointing.

The species accounts are excellent and thorough. The Banggai Crow from a small island in the Sulawesi and previously known from only two specimens is fully described here for the first time. It is not known whether this bird still exists. Of more local interest, I found the discussion on the problems of the taxonomy and identification of American Crows to be very enlightening. It is interesting that the Northwestern Crow is labeled "one of North America's most controversial bird species" (and I thought it was the Cox's Sandpiper).

Crows and Jays is a fine addition to the Identification Guide Series. Although many birders will find it not as critical to own as *Shorebirds* or *Seabirds*, it does contain much information of interest to birders of the Americas.

Finches and Sparrows: An Identification Guide by Peter Clement, illustrated by Alan Harris and John Davis. 1993. Princeton University Press. This book focuses on the bird families Fringillidae, Estrildidae, and Passeridae. It does not cover what we in North America call "sparrows." A whopping 290 species are illustrated in 73 color plates, including four full plates of Australian finches and nineteen plates for just the "African finches." Although the plates are somewhat crowded, they are well laid out, and the artwork is of the usual high standard of the series.

The introductory chapters are minimal but do include a full page map of mountain ranges and principal lakes of the eastern Palearctic, where a number of the more interesting and little known species treated in this book are found. The species accounts are very complete. The written section ranks as one of the best

and most detailed in the series. Particularly outstanding are the accounts and illustrations of little known species such as the snow finches or real rarities such as the Sao Tome Grosbeak.

Of course, all the species we in North America refer to as finches are included in this book. Clement still lists four species of crossbills: White-winged or Two-barred (*Loxia leucoptera*), Red or Common (*L. curvirostra*), Scottish (*L. scotia*), and Parrot (*L. pytyopsittacus*). He admits that the latter three may be a cline of forms. There is an excellent discussion of the problems of separating these three "un-barred" species of crossbill in the field. The Hoary Redpoll maintains its species level status, but the problems of separating this species in the field from pale forms of Common Redpoll are very completely presented. As of the writing of *Finches and Sparrows*, the rosy finch complex had not been resplit, and so *Leucostiete tephrocotis*, *L. atrata*, and *L. australis* are treated as recognizable subspecies, but Clement mentions that some authors treat them as three separate species.

I admit to a real interest in the family Passeridae (House Sparrow and relatives). The information in this volume on this often overlooked family is very complete, although it owes a lot to the research of J. Denis Summers-Smith. His *The Sparrows* (1988) still remains the single best source of information on this group. (Summers-Smith also wrote an amusing accounting of his travels while researching the Passeridae called *In Search of Sparrows*, which makes a good winter's night read.) When I read species accounts, I am always looking for tidbits of information that I did not previously know. In *Finches and Sparrows*, it is stated that one of the largest concentrations of House Sparrows was in London in August 1949, when 19,000 came to a single roost. But this is dwarfed by the report from Egypt in 1931 when 100,000 were reported in a single roost. And you thought there were a lot at your feeder.

Finches and Sparrows is an important reference book for any birder traveling to Asia, Africa, or Australia, although it is too heavy to consider carrying along. To a lesser extent, birders in North America will find its accounts of local species interesting and enlightening.

Warblers of the Americas: An Identification Guide by Jon Curson, illustrated by David Quinn and David Beadle. 1994. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. With this title I believe the series regained a lot of its North American audience, for obvious reasons. Indeed, this is the most geographically limited volume in the Helm Identification Guide Series. All of the 116 species of the subfamily Parulinae are illustrated in thirty-six color plates. Curson does not omit the Olive Warbler, but he does admit to its uniqueness and mentions Sibley and Monroe's moving this species to its own subfamily, Peucedraminae, within the Fringillidae family.

The illustrations are among the better in the series. The plates are uncrowded and usually show a good variety of plumages of each species.

Although the pictures of familiar North American species may not seem to break too much new ground, they are still a big improvement over the illustrations in all the popular field guides. Where this book really stands out is in the plates and accounts of Central and South American species and the Caribbean endemics. I found the plates of the *Myioborus*, *Basileuterus*, and *Geothlypis* species particularly good and useful. To bring home this point, compare plates 8 and 9 from *The Birds of South America Volume 1: The Oscine Passerines* by Robert Ridgely and Guy Tudor with the comparable plates in *The Warblers of the Americas*. The latter book's illustrations are larger, more lively, more fully realized, better colored, and show you more plumages. As for the Caribbean endemics, this was the first time I had seen decent illustrations of many of them. I even like the choice of using the Golden-winged Warbler for the cover.

The text is well written, yet concise. The book is one of the trimmest in the series, making it attractive to bring out into the field.

The American wood warblers are the favorites of many birders. The *Warblers of the Americas* belongs on the shelf of anyone who has spent an enjoyable May morning observing a wave of these feathered jewels.

Tits, Nuthatches, and Treecreepers by Simon Harrap, illustrated by David Quinn. 1996. Christopher Helm/A & C Black, London. Published in the United States by Princeton University Press. I have to admit that this volume took me by surprise. This was not one of the titles that I was eagerly awaiting. After all, just how many chickadees are there anyway? Well, *Tits, Nuthatches, and Treecreepers* ends up being one of the best volumes in the series, rivaling *Swallows and Martins* in the quality of the plates and text.

This book covers the Paridae (true tits), the Remizidae (the penduline tits), and the Aegithalidae (the long-tailed tits), which totals seventy-eight species. Also included are the twenty-four species of nuthatches and the eight species of treecreepers. The thirty-six plates by David Quinn are nothing short of superb. The colors are well reproduced, the plates often include some bits of background, and the birds (especially the nuthatches) are shown in a variety of poses. Some of the artwork, particularly the nuthatches, is of such quality as to take on the look of good photographs. A few of the plates may seem a bit crowded with too many look-alike species (e.g., Plate 9 of the treecreepers). In these cases the birds are shown in similar poses to enable the reader to better differentiate the subtle plumage characteristics. Numerous black-and-white drawings are found throughout the text, including amazingly detailed closeups of the upper wing patterns of the treecreepers.

The text more than matches the high quality of the plates. The species accounts are a neat synthesis of much of the current knowledge of these species. The writing is clear and concise, but includes an amazing amount of information. For instance, you may think there is not much you could learn

about the ubiquitous Black-capped Chickadee. In the eleven pages of dense text dedicated to this species, you are sure to find out an amazing variety of facts that you did not know about this common backyard species. First, there is a complete summary of the fascinating and unique dominance hierarchies of winter chickadee flocks, a must-read for anyone interested in the social life of birds. Even the "chick-a-dee" call is revealed to be exceedingly complex with an unlimited number of variations: "...Chick-a-dee can be used to convey much information and is the only known system of combinatorial animal communication, apart from human language" (page 267). The writing about Black-capped Chickadee geographical variation and hybrids is likewise thorough, although the average birder may find those sections heavy going.

We also learn that because the Red-breasted Nuthatch is one of the few nuthatches to undertake regular migrations, it is the only nuthatch to have crossed the Atlantic. This occurred on October 13, 1989, when two birders found a Red-breasted Nuthatch at Holkham Means, Norfolk, in Great Britain (see *British Birds*, volume 88, number 3, March 1995, for details).

The introductory section provides a good discussion of the trends of splitting and lumping and clarifies (as best as is possible) the concepts of superspecies, subspecies, and clines. Generally, Harrap uses the classification of Sibley and Monroe, although "purely for convenience." This chapter may be a bit technical for some birders but is further proof of the current dynamic (some may say confused) state of taxonomy and its importance to birders. After all, the concept of a "species" is the hook on which birding hangs its hat.

Tits, Nuthatches, and Treecreepers, although clearly the standard reference on these species, may not be that useful as an in-the-field guide. Certainly, no areas of the world have enough species of tits and nuthatches to require you to bring this book along. However, this book is essential for any pretrip research, whether you are off to the Petite Kabylie for the Algerian Nuthatch or simply traveling down the Delmarva Peninsula for your first Carolina Chickadee.

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MARK LYNCH is a teacher at the Broad Meadow Brook Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary and host of a weekly show on the arts and sciences on WICN radio in Worcester. He is a frequent contributor to *Bird Observer*.

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