

BOOK REVIEW: *Lives of North American Birds*

By Mark Lynch

Lives of North American Birds, by Kenn Kaufman. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co. (Peterson Natural History Companions). 1996. 675 pages, extensively illustrated.

Kenn Kaufman is birding's answer to Martha Stewart (and I mean that in a pre-*Just Desserts* sense, i.e., "a good thing"). He can be found everywhere: in magazines, in books and field guides, on videos and even on CD-ROMs. In *Lives of North American Birds*, his thorough knowledge of North American birds is combined with an affable and chatty writing style, typical of all of Kaufman's work. In this book Kaufman attempts the daunting task of summarizing the life histories of all the birds of North America. This is intended as a supplement to the field guides which can offer only the briefest of descriptions of a species' natural history. This also means the *Lives of North American Birds* has no detailed identification information.

There is a short introduction to each family that contains general information on feeding, nesting and displays. Separate species accounts follow, most with a single color photograph, range map, and details of that species' habitat, feeding strategies, behavior, nest, young, migration, and conservation status. Rare vagrants and strays to North America, such as the Lapwing, are summarized usually in a few sentences without the photo or map.

This book began as the CD-ROM *The Peterson Multimedia Guides: North American Birds*. This may explain why the range maps have obviously lost some of the detail when shrunk down to the small size used in the book. Kaufman also fully admits that the photos in the book "are not intended to help you recognize the birds you see" (p. xxii). Some of the photos have apparently also suffered from the change of format and are too small to clearly see much detail. An extreme example of this is the photo of the Black-capped Petrel (p. 18) which in the book is reduced to a black blob on a dark ocean. The majority of photographs are of good quality.

The text of the CD-ROM has been revised and expanded for this book. Kaufman cites that his largest source of information was that mammoth work-in-progress, the *Birds of North America* series edited by Frank Gill. So far, almost 200 thorough species accounts in this expensive series have been published, about one-third of the projected total, and Kaufman had access to all these accounts for this book. This makes *Lives of North American Birds* a boon to the average birder who does not have access to the wealth of information one assumes to be in the *Birds of North America*. I found myself wishing, however, that *Lives of North American Birds* had not been published until after all the species accounts of *Birds of North America* were written, so that all the new

information on those other 400 species could have been utilized in Kaufman's book. Other works consulted often by Kaufman for this book include *The Handbook of the Birds of the World* (another series in progress), *The Birder's Handbook*, and *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. Kaufman puts his own observations in this book, too.

In the introduction, Kaufman talks about how different authors quote the same old source for the average height of the nest hole of the Golden-fronted Woodpecker: "6 to 25 feet up":

In this book I give a slightly different figure (usually lower than 20 feet) only on the basis of several nests I have seen in Texas, but this is certainly not definitive, and I would welcome better information. With all the bird observers on this continent today, we should be able to do better than simply quoting a source published over a century ago. (p. xxv)

I certainly sympathize with the author's desire to get birders to do more than "tick" the next species. I did question, however, publishing a personal observation in a book of this sort if it is based on a limited number of observations. In fairness to the authors of the other books, Kaufman also does his own share of quoting of historical sources (see below).

Two sources that I have extensively used to answer questions about birds' lives previous to the publishing of *Lives of North American Birds*, have been *The Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (by John K. Terres. I will refer to the book as the *Encyclopedia*) and *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds* (by Paul Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye. I will refer to this book as the *Handbook*). I was eager to see how much new ground *Lives of North American Birds* broke in comparison with these other still available volumes. The *Encyclopedia* has been around since 1980 and is large in scope and size, containing entries not just for species, but most words and names associated with ornithology. It is illustrated with color photographs and black-and-white drawings. The *Handbook*, a much more compact and inexpensive publication, came out in 1988. This book is closer in format to *Lives*, but has no photographs or range maps. Throughout the species accounts of the *Handbook* are interesting essays on aspects of ornithology.

To check out exactly how much new information *The Lives of North American Birds* contained that was not found in these other two widely owned books, I chose three species at random common to Massachusetts and looked them up first in Kaufman's book. I then underlined the bits of information that I found interesting and unique. I then looked up the same species in the *Handbook* and the *Encyclopedia* to see how much of what I had underlined was already found in these previously published volumes. In all three cases, the information that I had underlined was found in the other two books.

From the account of the Whip-poor-will:

Lives: "The song may seem to go on endlessly; a patient listener once counted 1,088 *whip-poor-wills*, given rapidly without a break." (p. 328)

Encyclopedia: "The record number of consecutive calls was 1,088 reported by John Burroughs; almost equal number counted by Cleaves (1945) who rendered the call *purple-RIB, purple-RIB*" (p. 635)

From the account of the Tufted Titmouse:

Lives: "Birds may pluck hair from live woodchuck, dog, or other animal, even from humans. . . . Pair may remain together all year. . . . Male feeds female often from the courtship stage until after the eggs hatch. Breeding pairs may have a 'helper,' one of their offspring from the previous year." (pp. 438-439)

Handbook: "Long-term pair bond. Young of previous brood occ help at nest. Male feeds female from courtship through early hatching." (p. 422)

Encyclopedia: ". . . will pluck hairs from live woodchucks, squirrels, opossums, and from human beings seated quietly near nest site." (p. 928)

From the account of Chestnut-sided Warbler:

Lives: ". . . this warbler is often common, hopping about in the saplings with its tail cocked up at a jaunty angle. It is apparently much more common today than it was historically: John James Audubon, roaming eastern North America in the early 1800s, saw this bird only once. The cutting of forests evidently has created more brushy habitat for Chestnut-sided Warbler, even as it has made other birds less common." (p. 523)

Handbook: "When foraging, hops rapidly between branches, usu with tail cocked exposing bright white undertail coverts. . . . Very rare in Audubon's time, then became abundant as modification of landscape produced successional habitats suitable for breeding." (p. 516)

Encyclopedia: "Audubon saw it only once-later, as woodlands of e. and middle U.S. cut off and chestnut-sided's favorite second-growth woodlands multiplied, it increased until one of the commonest warblers. . . . is sprightly active in cut over woods, thickets and bushes along country roads; male, tail high, wings drooping, chases insects or rises to top of bush to sing territorial song." (p. 969)

From this albeit small sample, it seems clear that at least some of the material in the *Lives of North American Birds* can be found in previously published books. What Kaufman has done is to synthesize previous accounts

with whatever new research was available and write about it in a style that is frankly more enjoyable to read. All three books do contain information not found in the others, while both the *Handbook* and the *Encyclopedia* have much more extensive bibliographies than the *Lives*. As an aside, I would like to mention that the family accounts in the *Handbook of the Birds Of The World* contain much more information about the lives of birds (albeit at the family level) that I found new and interesting, and had not read before, perhaps because of its European perspective.

Does the *Lives of North American Birds* answer those everyday questions that the average birder would want to know? An interesting case in point: as I was writing this review, I was monitoring migrants at the Barre Falls Dam area, when I observed a male Scarlet Tanager apparently "anting" in the road in front of me. This was the first time I had observed anting in the United States and was curious to read more about it and to find out if tanagers have been recorded anting. This was a perfect time, I thought, to use the *Lives of North American Birds*! However, I could find no reference to anting, or mention of anting under Scarlet Tanager in the *Lives*. In the *Handbook*, I did find a good general essay about anting, while in the *Encyclopedia* there was an extensive entry under anting that specifically mentioned Scarlet Tanagers as one of the species that has been observed performing this arcane behavior.

The lesson is that no one book can answer all our questions about the complex and varied lives of birds. There is also much that is just not known yet. That said, the *Lives of North American Birds* is a wonderful addition to your birding library, more aesthetically pleasing than the *Birder's Handbook*, more concise and narrowly focused than *The Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. But what really makes *Lives* special is Kaufman's enthusiastic and knowledgeable writing.

Books cited in this review:

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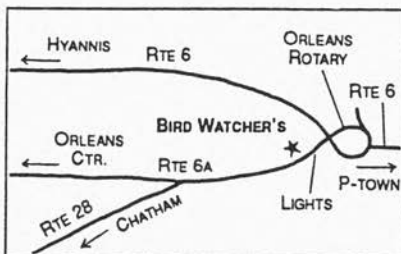
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