

# ABOUT BOOKS

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## Three Contenders

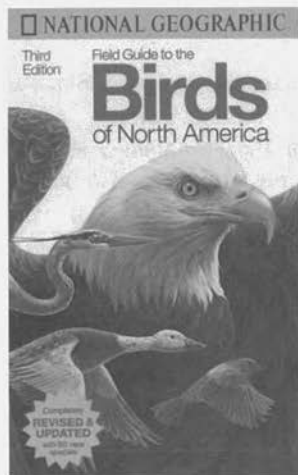
Mark Lynch

*Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (third edition), written and published by the National Geographic Society. 1999. 480 pages.

*Birds of North America*. Kenn Kaufman. 2000. Houghton Mifflin. 384 pages.

*The Sibley Guide to Birds*. David Allen Sibley. 2000. Alfred A. Knopf. 544 pages.

Last year saw the publication of the third edition of the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* by the National Geographic Society. This was the first field guide in the last two decades that genuinely gave the Peterson "Eastern" a run for its money. It rapidly became very popular with birders soon after it was published in 1983. This is amazing because originally you could not buy this book in any bookstore but had to order it directly from the National Geographic Society. Long-time birders may also remember that for the price of the guide you also received a coffee table book (*The Wonder of Birds*), a wall poster, and a series of good recordings of bird calls on strange floppy records. The guide remains large (5 x 8 x 1.25), meaning you really cannot fit it in your pocket, and making it inconvenient to carry. Shortly after this guide caught on, there was a small cottage industry that produced special pouches that you could attach to your belt just to carry this guide. This guide was written and illustrated by a large staff, often a formula for disaster. So why does this guide remain so popular?



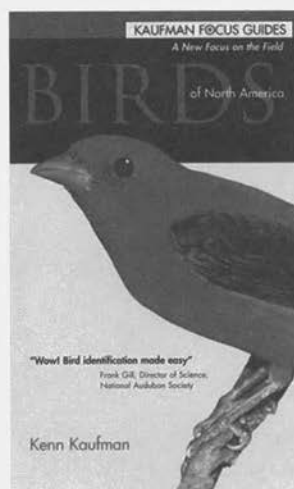
The short answer is that the "National Geo" is a good guide. It is concise, contains most of the birds of North America, and it is organized well, generally along taxonomic lines. It has always tried to stay current and was the first guide that illustrated many of the recognizable subspecies that would later become full species. It is also a very focused guide, its goal only to help the person in the field identify a bird. So there are no long essays on ecology or behavior, just to-the-point descriptions of plumages and similar species. Because of this, it hangs together as a guide despite having been created by a large staff. This is a guide for the serious birder but also good for the beginner.

The illustrations, opposite the text, are clean and well laid out. Because a staff painted these birds, especially in the earlier versions of the guide, some sections were better than others. In the first printing for example, the illustrations of the loons were decidedly off. In

this third edition, many of the plates have been reworked, reorganized, or completely redone. Eighty new species have been added, which I think speaks volumes about the current state of taxonomy and the popularity of birding. Many of the plates look darker and richer in color. I have heard birders comment on the colors being off on some plates, but by and large, the illustrations remain useful and very good. As can be expected with any field guide, some of the plates may seem crowded, but I find none to be confusing, and most look very well organized. An example can be found in the plate on the larger *Pluvialis* plovers (p. 153), which shows them one under the other in the same plumages with a row of the birds in flight above. Even the colors on the range maps have been changed to make them easier to read.

The *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* is a success story in a very difficult field and remains one of the guides you most often see people using while birding.

Kenn Kaufman has really attempted something different in his *Birds of North America*. To begin with, Kaufman wanted to write a guide predominantly for beginners or people with a casual interest in birds, because they are the audience that most uses field guides. He also decided to keep the guide small (4.5 x 7.5 x .75 ) so that it would be easy to carry on field trips. The book is organized somewhat on taxonomic lines, although he does group ocean and waterbirds like ducks, cormorants, and gulls at the beginning. His species descriptions are to the point but still contain a very personal and evocative tone. About the Great Egret, Kaufman writes: "This elegant wader is our most widespread white egret, often seen standing like a statue along the edges of lakes and marshes" (p. 146).



Throughout this guide are wonderful short introductory essays on the various bird groups that help get the beginner off on the right foot. There is also reassuring advice from a master when needed:

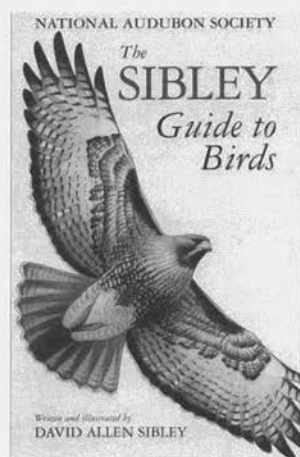
"Don't be discouraged if you can't name all the shorebirds right away. It may take many field trips to learn them all, but even without knowing their names you can enjoy the grace and energy of these subtle birds" (p. 157).

The plates are something different. Kaufman has used photographs, but has completely trimmed them from their backgrounds and has digitally enhanced and altered them to various extents to more clearly show off colors and field marks. This is very much a field guide for the new millennium. The effect takes a little getting used to, because at first glance the birds may appear mounted. The more that I looked at this guide, though, the more I realized that the scheme works. This is the way birds often appear to us *in situ*. Kaufman has also added small dots and lines that clearly point out the cogent field marks. Some of the colors may seem a bit off, but by and large, this is a successful experiment. Because Kaufman has not used the entire

rectangular photo, he can fit more species to a page, allowing this field guide to remain trim. The illustrations are opposite the text, and good, small range maps are included.

Kenn Kaufman has created a fine new field guide for the novice. In his written sections, his personal touches harken back to the earlier field guides of Peterson and Pough, but his illustrations make the most of the latest technology. It's a nice combination. I do not know how to phrase this any other way, but this is a beginner's guide I am not embarrassed to be seen with.

David Allen Sibley has created what will be *the* most talked about birding book of this year. His mammoth *The Sibley Guide to Birds* will make us rethink the future




design and uses of a field guide. For starters, this is a large book: 6.5 x 9.75 x 1.25. It dwarfs the National Geo guide. The pages are organized so that one or two species with text appear per page. The look of every page is spacious and easy on the eyes, even though the number of illustrations can conservatively be called generous. This is because it has been laid out by a visual artist, not just a birder who also does illustrations. The aesthetic look of every page was a concern for David Sibley. Sometimes this generous use of space borders on the profligate, as when he gives an entire huge page to just the Pileated Woodpecker. The Sibley Guide devotes 39 pages to gulls and terns compared with 28 pages in the latest National Geo. A whopping 35 pages are used to show warblers in the Sibley Guide compared with 26

pages in the National Geo guide. The illustrations, all gouaches, are excellent, clear and concise, and well laid out. Nearly all species are shown in flight. Sibley's admiration for artists like Lars Jonsson shows in the richness of his colors and the "jizz" of his birds. I have never seen this quality of illustration in a North American guide before.

The text lives up to the promise of the illustrations. Having the text on the same page as the paintings is brilliant. Although this idea has been used before in guides with photographs and in the Bird Conservancy Guide, here it is used much more effectively. The writing is clear, concise, and covers all the identification bases with up-to-date information on separating similar species. Many more subspecies are shown than in previous guides, although the full scientific names of subspecies is not given. This book is so up to the minute that Gunnison Sage Grouse is given the full treatment. Throughout the text there are short sections on behavioral clues to identification containing much information that will be new to most birders. There is a lot to read and learn here.

Some may argue that because of this book's large size, it cannot be considered a true field guide. This is a good point, and I admit I am not entirely comfortable calling this book a field guide. But the reality is that many birders will already be carrying a copy of this book in the car by the time this review is published, and even

occasionally packing it in backpacks. I groan in anticipation of the latter, but this is just too useful a book to leave at home.

This guide was six years in execution, but many, many years before that in preparation. In my radio interview with David Sibley, he talked about wanting to produce a state-of-the art guide to the birds that the experienced and novice birder would find useful, a book to grow with no matter what your skills. Mission accomplished. 

*Mark Lynch is the Book Review Editor of Bird Observer and a teacher and field trip leader for Massachusetts Audubon at Broad Meadow Brook. He is also a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum. The February issue of Bird Observer will contain an informative and entertaining overview of the history of the field guide genre.*

## A Million Raptors

From Charles Duncan (cduncan@tnc.org) of the Wings of the Americas program of The Nature Conservancy:

Benson Venegas, executive director of ANAI in Costa Rica, has just reported that the hawkwatchers in Talamanca (Jenfer McNicoll & Pablo Porras-Peñaranda) have counted their one-millionth migrating raptor this season!

In the long history of hawkwatching worldwide, there are only two hawk counts that have ever achieved this level. (These are the famous sites at the Veracruz, Mexico [River of Raptors] and at Eilat, Israel.)

This location is in the SE corner of Costa Rica, near the Panama border on the Caribbean coast. Its geographic makeup is similar to that of the now-famous Cardel region of Veracruz — a narrow coastal plain and nearby mountains which squeeze migrating raptors into a tight corridor.

The Talamanca team's accomplishment is all the more stunning for several reasons: this is the first year of counts at Talamanca, they have a tiny and overworked staff, and the season isn't even over yet. Their effort and success are truly Herculean.

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Jennifer, Pablo, and their volunteers can be reached at <anaital@sol.racsa.co.cr> or <anaicr@sol.racsa.co.cr>.