

ABOUT BOOKS

A Task of No Small Difficulty: A Critical History of the North American Field Guide

Mark Lynch

“To investigate, with any tolerable degree of success, the more retired and distant parts of the animal economy, is a task of no small difficulty.” Thomas Bewick in his Preface to Volume 1 of *A History of British Birds* (1797).

Introduction

Field guides are the bibles of birding. They are the sacred texts by which we first learn to identify birds, check our calls in the field, and challenge others. Many of us become attached to the field guide we used when we started birding. Even if we no longer pack that specific book with us when we go out into the field, we remember that book fondly and often save and preserve our original beat-up and well-worn copy.

We now live in a time of a plethora of choices when it comes to field guides. Increasingly, the field guide form has tended to become ever more specific and narrow in the number of species treated. There is so much detailed identification and behavioral material on many species of birds available that a single book cannot possibly contain all the important information on all the birds of any reasonably sized geographical area except perhaps Antarctica. Books like *The Facts on File Guide to North Atlantic Shorebirds* by Richard Chandler, *Warblers* by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett and the seemingly endless series of identification guides have challenged the notion of the usefulness of the single volume all-of-the-species field guide. In the last half-century, there have been many attempts to rethink the format of the all-inclusive field guide. Is it still possible to come up with a new approach to this very old concept? To answer that question, we should also ask: who uses field guides now? Under what circumstances do we consult a guide? Most importantly: what makes a good field guide?

Judging Field Guides

The dream of a single book containing all the information you need to know about one subject is a very old one. When speaking about field guides, we should also mention the importance of portability. Certainly, I can find most of the information I want on any bird in any one of a number of large, thick tomes or multiple volume series that sit in my library. Those are not field guides. Field guides are used to identify birds in the field, and these books need to be concise to cut down on size and weight. Field guides should be able to be brought out of doors to the places where we actually see the birds.

When I look at a field guide, I judge its usefulness in five categories.

Illustrations. The worth of a field guide starts with the illustrations. If you have ever been birding in another country with only a poorly illustrated field guide to go by, you know how important good artwork is in identifying birds. We are visual learners, and although sound is important, birding is very often a visually based avocation. A field guide's illustrations need to show the bird's essential field marks and colors clearly and prominently. The shape, proportions, and posture of the living bird should be captured by the artist as well, since these are often useful clues to identification. If a species has several plumages, all of those likely to be encountered in the field should be shown. Field guide illustrations can be drawn, painted, or photographed. They need not be fine art as in fully realized oil paintings, but the pictures should be lifelike. Lars Jonsson is one of the few field guide illustrators and writers who has managed to bring a fine art technique to the field guide form.

Written Content. A field guide's text by necessity has to be brief and to the point. The guide cannot be overly chatty because birders want to know the important information as soon as possible. Birders in the field do not want to wade through an author's anecdotes, colorful and entertaining though they may be. A book we may find amusing to read in an armchair is rarely the book that is also a useful field guide. Yet too much detailed description of plumage can be confusing and mind-numbing. Birders need only those field marks that separate one species from all similar species. But there can be more. Every author's subjective experience birding in the field over the decades means that they may have some personal observations on behavior or plumage that may be helpful in identification beyond what is found in most guides. These personal touches also allow us to look into the mind of the author. So a good field guide can include more than a dry list of plumage details and can contain a bit of personality too. Field guides nowadays also need to be up to date on all species splits and lumps. A really good field guide will also illustrate recognizable subspecies that may in the future be declared species. Birders are a persnickety and nitpicking group of book buyers. If a guide seems out of date, it is doomed. All of this means that editing a field guide is one of the most painful and time-consuming chores in their creation.

Organization. This point has been the downfall of several newer guides looking for an alternative to the taxonomic listing of species. Often, a birder needs to use a field guide in a hurry, so the information needs to be organized in a manner that makes it easy to find what you are looking for. A few authors and publishers in the last few decades have opted for grouping birds in their field guides by color or by habitat preference. This organizing idea has never worked because birds are rarely one color, males and females of the same species are often different colors, and many bird species are often found in a variety of habitats. A good field guide today is organized generally around current accepted taxonomic order. This has become an increasingly difficult task since the science of taxonomy itself is going through an upheaval, and some dramatic changes in taxonomy are being hotly debated. Finally, the ideal field guide should have all the information on a species on one page. The illustration is usually opposite the text for that species and, if possible, the range maps.

Size. Size does matter, although it is a subjective matter. Field guides do not simply need to fit in the pants pocket, they need to be easy to carry in the car or backpack. A large, bulky book is just not that easy to read out of doors. Furthermore, large books are often very expensive books. You should feel it's all right to get your field guide wet or dirty. For me, *The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic* by Mark Beaman and Steve Madge (7 x 9.5 x 2) and *A Guide to the Birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives* by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp (7 x 9.75 x 2.5) are *not* field guides. Although both are superlative volumes concerned with details of plumage, behavior, and distribution, they are just too damn big, heavy, and expensive to be considered real field guides. That said, when push comes to shove, you could use either book in the field. I have already brought the Beaman and Madge out while having my class look for the Garganey on Plum Island, although it was difficult to work with.

Range Maps. These are of limited importance but are useful for beginning birders to always consult when they think they have seen a Gila Woodpecker in the city of Worcester (true story). Maps should be clear, easy to read, and distinguish winter from breeding ranges. This is very difficult because of the constraint on space on the page. The best range maps I have seen in a field guide were in the later versions of the Peterson series. These were large, easy to read, and in the back of the book so as to not take space away from the text and illustrations. I am surprised other authors have not opted for that choice.

Finally, it is always important to keep in mind when judging a book that the purpose of a field guide is to help identify birds seen in the out of doors. Period. That is the guide's *raison d'être*, and any other information or idea is secondary.

A Bit of History

Many people think that Roger Tory Peterson invented the concept of the field guide. Actually, small portable books on birds existed well before *A Field Guide to the Birds* was published in 1934. A case can be made to consider Thomas Bewick's two-volume *History of British Birds* to be the archaeopteryx of the field guide. Bewick was England's foremost wood engraver, and his books were published in 1797 (Vol.1 Landbirds) and 1804 (Vol. 2 Waterbirds). These small books (my 1826 printing measures only 5.5 x 3.25 x 1.62) were meant as books for the general public, and more than any other book of their time, they opened up the world of birds and nature to a lay reader. Each species is wonderfully illustrated with a detailed black and white woodcut done by Bewick at the head of each species account. Amazingly, any serious birder today can still identify most of the species of birds from these prints. In the introductory chapters there is a completely illustrated topography of a bird just as one finds in any modern field guide. At the end of each species description are found some of Bewick's wonderful tale-pieces, small fully realized illustrated scenes of country life. Each species section contains full plumage descriptions often of both male and female. There follows details of habits and migration, a subject that fascinated Bewick. In his introduction to Volume 1, Bewick talks about the joy of field identification and the importance of field marks: "To the practical ornithologist

there arises a considerable gratification in being able to ascertain the distinguishing characters of birds as they appear at a distance, whether at rest, or during flight; for not only every genus has something peculiar to itself, but each species has its own appropriate marks, by which a judicious observer may discriminate with certainty" (p. xxxii).

Probably these small and relatively inexpensive books were not often carried into the field, but you can certainly imagine them being packed in a saddle, rucksack, or picnic hamper.

Closer to home, the popular *Bird Guide: Land Birds East of the Rockies* by Chester Reed was published in 1906. This is a small softbound and inexpensively published book and was certainly meant to be carried out of doors. At 5.5 x 3.25 x .5 it can fit into a shirt pocket. This portability was even used as a way to boost sales: "As many will not wish to soil their book, we would suggest that they have a leather covered copy for the library and a cloth one for pocket use" (p. 14).

The format is one species per page with a single sometimes fair, sometimes poor and inexpensive color illustration. The text is skimpy on the plumage details, but does contain information on size, nesting, and range. At the end of the book there is a field key for identification of eastern landbirds by "conspicuous markings," starting with color. The same format of Chester Reed's books and even the same size were used again in *The Blue Book of Birds* and *The Green Book of Birds* by Frank Ashbrook (illustrated by Paul Moller), published in 1931.

When Houghton Mifflin published Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds (Including All Species Found in Eastern North America)* in 1934 the phrase "a bird book on a new plan" was used. It is interesting to look at this first version of what was to become the classic field guide today. The illustrations at first glance look spare even for the time period. Most are reproduced in black, white, and gray, although the wood warblers are in color. Many species are shown in simplified profile views. Groups like the smaller shorebirds are particularly poor. One need only to look at Bewick's woodcuts from more than a century earlier to see what is possible in a black and white format. On some pages, as in the warblers, the illustrations are so tiny as to be insectlike. Peterson's idea was to reduce the illustrations to only the essential field marks thus creating an almost abstract bird. There are no range maps, although the ranges of each species are fully described in the species accounts. The text is very good. Some of Peterson's subjective descriptions are really wonderful to read even if they may have you shaking your head: "A common characteristic of the Connecticut Warbler is to flush from low vegetation and fly to some perch half-way up a nearby tree, where Thrush-like it watches its disturber with wide dreamy eyes" (p. 127).

The genius of Peterson's first guide lay in its organization and format. First, it follows taxonomic order and contains all species in one volume. Bird species were put on plates that were often, but not always, opposite the appropriate text. By showing similar species on the same plate, the birder could compare and contrast birds. In the text, Peterson points out similar species and what key field marks separate them. Lastly, by being economic in text and illustrations, the guide is small and fits into the

back pocket. As later versions of the guide were published through the decades, Peterson's artwork vastly improved, and color was used throughout. The text was eventually placed squarely opposite the appropriate pictures, and maps were added at the rear of the guide. It is clear that Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds* grew apace with the growth in popularity and maturation of birding.

After Peterson: A Critical Review

North American field guides since the first publication of Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds* have been a story of rapid growth and experimentation, often with mixed results. Birders tend to be rabid book buyers, and many of you probably own copies of most of the books I will now mention.

The guides written by Richard H. Pough and illustrated by Don Eckelberry improved immensely on Peterson's first guide. In the *Audubon Land Bird Guide*, originally published in 1946, Eckelberry's color illustrations are a wonder. The birds are very lifelike, and usually several plumages are shown. Birds are depicted in a variety of active attitudes. Several species are shown on a page, although all the plates are in the center of the book. Pough's text is wonderfully written. Full plumage descriptions are given, of course, but there are also rich and personal observations of the birds. There are even some interesting history tidbits as when writing about the Mourning Warbler, Pough notes: "Wilson, its discoverer, saw only one, Audubon very few, and Nuttall was never sure he saw it" (p. 185).

These books were true field guides and were small and compact. They are still useful to look at today. Other titles in the series were a western guide and a waterbird guide.

Birds: A Guide to the Most Familiar American Birds by Herbert S. Zim, Ira N. Gabrielson, and illustrated by James Gordon Irving was published in 1949. This Golden Nature Guide was aimed at younger readers and had no pretense at inclusiveness, focusing only on common birds. The format was mostly one species per page, but several species of warblers and sparrows were shown on a single page. The artwork consists of superb fully realized paintings of birds in their habitats. The text contains mostly plumage descriptions with notes on song and calls. A good range map is included for every species. This guide's small size (4.25 x 6.25 x .5) and inexpensive price meant that it could be brought into the field. For many of us, this was our first bird guide. The extensive Golden Nature Guide series, with titles like Mammals, Butterflies, and Weather among many others, offered solid scientific knowledge in an attractive field guide format and encouraged many youngsters to get out into the field and see things for themselves.

Golden Press later attempted a fully realized bird field guide for adults when in 1966 they published *Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification* by Chandler Robbins, Bertel Bruun, and Herbert Zim, with illustrations by Arthur Singer. This trim and inexpensive volume is a marvel of economy. Species are in taxonomic order; the text and range maps are opposite the generally very good illustrations. Also included are sonograms for most species, although I doubt that many birders make use

of these. Information was succinct and up to date at the time of its first printing, and focused mostly on the critical field marks. Species like hawks and gulls are shown at rest and in flight. A unique and useful two-page section shows just female ducks in flight. Most of the birds of North America are shown in a book that would still fit in your pocket. This book is still in print.

In 1994 Golden Books published the trim *Eastern Birds: A Guide to the Identification of North American Species* written and illustrated by James Coe. This attractive guide focuses only on the more common birds. By way of an example, although Common Loon is given the full treatment, Red-Throated Loon is shown in only a small basic plumage illustration and is treated in the text under the listing for Common Loon. The plates are generally very good, lifelike and delightfully colorful, although certain groups like the *Empidonax* flycatchers are weak. Birds are shown in their habitats in fully realized paintings so not many species are illustrated per page. Gulls, ducks, and hawks are all shown in flight. For the most part female and male plumages are shown, and a limited number of nonadult-plumaged gulls are also depicted. A special section on confusing songbirds is at the back of the book where similarly colored or patterned birds are shown on the same page. The concise text and very clear range maps are opposite the plates. Names of some species, like Solitary Vireo, are now out of date, and this guide, although still in print, has not been revised. Plumage details are basic. This is a perfect first guide for beginning birders.

In 1977 the National Audubon Society and Knopf published the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: Eastern Region* by John Bull and John Farrand, Jr. Photographs are used to illustrate the text, two per page. The photographs are gathered at the front of the book, with the written accounts at the back. The grouping of the photographs follows several plans based on morphology and color, not taxonomy. In the first section there are gull-like and duck-like birds with female ducks in a section separate from the drakes. For perching birds, the grouping by shape and color leads to some interesting juxtapositions as when the woodland thrushes are followed by Ovenbird, the waterthrushes, and then the waxwings. The Indigo Bunting is directly opposite the Mountain Bluebird. Because birds are separated by color, the female Scarlet Tanager is on a completely different page than the male.

The photographs are generally good, but critical field marks are not always shown. The reason is that the photographs in this guide take up a lot of space. No matter how close you crop it, the rectangular format of the photo means that you can only put a very few photos on a page. Also, any single photograph cannot show all the important field marks because the bird usually needs to be viewed from several angles to make those field marks visible. A great shot of the head will not show the underwing pattern. Color is also very variable in any photo depending on time of day, vegetation, shadows, photo processing, and so forth.

The organization of this guide is all very confusing, and I suspect not very helpful to the beginner birder. Basic taxonomy is not a bad thing to learn, and treating beginning birders like children who can learn only by shape and color is not a good choice for organizing a field guide. I have taught many beginning classes in birding

and have seen students struggle in the field with this book to the point where I have had to ban it from classes. Sadly, the written text is very good and contains all the basic identification information as well as interesting historical and behavioral notes. My personal feeling about this guide is that it was a major misstep in field guide organization. This guide is still available.

As if by way of an apology for this last mistake, the National Audubon Society and Knopf then published *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* in 1983. This three-volume series was edited by John Farrand, Jr. Taxonomic order is followed, and the text is opposite the photograph illustrations. When no photograph is available, serviceable but generally uninspired drawings are used. For the most part, there are three photographs per page, and there is a small section next to each photograph that points out the key field marks. Overall, the photography is good, although a few photos are not in crisp focus. Birds like gulls and terns are shown perched and in flight, and male and female plumages are also usually shown. The text is good to excellent and includes a nice introductory section on the bird's behavior, a complete description of plumage, voice, a discussion of separating the species from similar species, and a description of the range of the species with a map. Overall, these are good books but because of their size, three hefty volumes, some may question whether these are true field guides. I believe they are, and have used them in the field.

For some reason known only to the publishing gods, John Farrand, Jr. and McGraw-Hill then published *An Audubon Handbook* series of three volumes in 1988, one on *Eastern Birds*, one on *Western Birds*, and one called *How to Identify Birds*. This time the format is one species per page, illustrated with photographs again, sometimes several of the same species. Often several plumages are shown. The text is good, with fairly complete plumage descriptions and range maps. The critical problem is the organization of the text. Birds are grouped according to similarities like habitat, look-alikes, and related species. A flight section of ducks and raptors is at the beginning of the book, shown even before the rest of the photographs begin. The organization of the species is very confusing. The waterthrushes and Ovenbird are again found between the woodland thrushes and the mimids. The Connecticut Warbler is opposite the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher. This just does not work. The volume on *How to Identify Birds*, although well written, is a colossal waste of space. For example, a two-page color photograph of a boat being followed by gulls is used to illustrate open ocean habitat. Most of the information in this volume is more succinctly given in the introductory chapters of many field guides. When I bought these books (I try to buy all field guides), each volume had an annoying paper wrapper around it that when removed revealed a gray rubbery plastic cover that is certainly waterproof if unpleasant to touch. Another misstep.

An earnest attempt to do something different with the field guide format came in 1996 with the publishing of the *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* in two volumes: an *Eastern Region* and *Western Region*. The format is one species to a page using photographs as illustrations generally following taxonomic order. Most hawks are shown in flight, although ducks are not. Rarer species like Tufted Duck and Rufous-Necked Stint are not shown. The photographs are of varying quality and do not

always show critical field marks. For some species only one photograph is used as in the Golden-Crowned Kinglet (female) or the Connecticut Warbler (male). These are clearly books for the beginner or casual observer, and of little use to the experienced birder. The text is good, but plumage descriptions are spare, which detracts from these books' use as field guides. What the Stokes have included is more information on the status of each bird gleaned from Christmas bird counts, breeding bird surveys, and conservation reports. Is the bird decreasing? Is the species endangered? All in all, an interesting effort, but not totally successful as a field guide because not enough attention is paid to the actual identification of a species.

Another attempt to try something new was *All the Birds of North America*, an American Bird Conservancy Field Guide conceived and designed by Jack L. Griggs. Expectations were high for this book particularly when you read the number and caliber of people involved in the project. There are thirteen illustrators; many are some of the finest in the field. The eleven consultants included luminaries like Pete Dunne and Kenn Kaufman. As soon as I read the phrase, "ALL the birds of North America," I knew I would be in for a disappointment. My first thought was: "This small (4.12 x 8.5 x 1) guide is going to tell me everything I need to know about ALL the birds of North America? Talk about throwing the gauntlet down to the hypercritical audience of hard-core birders! Smack in the middle of the cover was another phrase that further raised my apprehensions: "A revolutionary system based on feeding behaviors and field-recognizable features." I was not reassured by the claim at the bottom of the cover that this guide was "for both beginning and advanced birders." On the back cover was emblazoned: "A surer, faster, easier way to identify birds." Talk about overselling yourself! I have never seen such hype on a field guide before. This book was daring critics not to like it.

This guide starts abruptly with eight pages of extinct birds. The illustrations were created digitally, and there are complete descriptions of how and why these species became extinct. Interesting? Sure, but does this belong in a field guide? The actual introduction for some unfathomable reason is in the *middle* of the book. Here are informative essays on flight and feathers, bird song, conservation, habitat, and the explanation for that revolutionary organizing scheme. This plan consists of grouping species according to some morphological characteristic, behavioral trait, or habitat used. So we have a section on pelagic birds which consists of tubenoses, *some* of the alcids, jaegers, two species of phalaropes, and the Black-Legged Kittiwake. For some reason the four pages on the jaegers and skuas are found in the middle of the pages of the tubenoses. Other sections include such catchy titles as Goose-sized swimmers, Flycatching bills (which includes the shrikes), Warbler-size, straight bills, and Cardinal-size, sparrow bills. The last chapter of the guide is titled Arctic Birds and is a trash bin of species that have shown up in Alaska or are native to the north. Here we find such diverse species as ptarmigans, Horned Puffin, Slaty-Backed Gull, and Mugimaki Flycatcher. The illustrations of the birds in this last section are poor, and the descriptions equally spare. For Red-Necked Stint the entire entry beyond the Latin name and measurements consists of: "Scarce migrant in Bering Sea area, rare breeder in coastal AK. Variably rusty face, upper breast; may be pale" (p. 170).

Let me just put this plainly: *that* is of *no* use to me as a birder, advanced or otherwise.

For the most part, the illustrations (other than in the last section) are very good. Several species are shown per page grouped in fully realized habitat paintings. These illustrations take up more than half the page and the written descriptions are below. The plumage details are good but break no new ground and are on the terse side. The reason of course is that the illustrations and essays take up a lot of space. Each chapter includes a rather good introductory essay by some specialist in the field.

The problem with this guide is one of expectations versus the finished product. You want to like this guide. After all, it is sponsored by the American Bird Conservancy, has many prominent birders involved in its creation, and has a strong environmental message. But the organization of the birds throughout the guide reminds me of some long-discarded taxonomy in the time of Bewick. I obviously believe the authors' and illustrators' hearts were in the right place. However, this guide more than any other before it reinforced my feelings that a good field guide has to stay focused on identification of birds and has to be simply organized. Furthermore, this field guide does not seem to hang together as a whole and reads more like a diverse compendium of essays on different groups of birds. This is because it was written and illustrated by a committee. This book is, unfortunately, of interest to beginning birders only.

New field guides are an important but risky publishing venture. They are expensive to produce, and the competition from the few older, well established, and commonly used guides is tough. In other popular avocations like skiing or running no one wants to be seen using substandard gear or look like a beginner. Similarly, in birding, I suspect that novices pretty quickly recognize what the good guides are and buy those. Who wants to be seen thumbing through a book in public that most people around you think is a joke? For the authors trying to come up with a new approach to field guides, it is akin to looking for the Northwest Passage, an arduous undertaking and the chances for failure are great. Just as many aspiring writers dream of writing that great American novel, there are those birders who will always attempt to design and illustrate the next important field guide. 🐦

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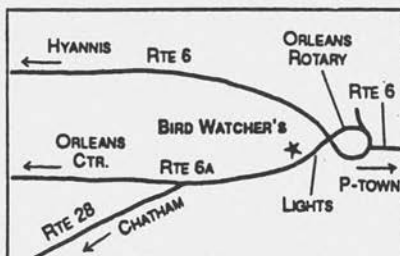
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