

## ABOUT BOOKS

### The Artist's Eye and the Birder's Passion

Mark Lynch

*Sibley's Birding Basics*. David Allen Sibley. 2002. Alfred A Knopf: New York.

British writer and philosopher Alain de Botton, in his recent book, *The Art of Travel*, writes about the desire to possess beauty. He recounts how nineteenth-century British artist, critic, and writer John Ruskin believed that not just artists, but everyone, should draw and paint when abroad to better capture and remember the beauty of a scene. "If drawing had value even when practiced by those with no talent, it was, Ruskin believed, because it could teach us to see – that is, to notice rather than merely look" (p. 217). de Botton follows Ruskin's advice and spends an afternoon trying to draw his bedroom window and only by doing so does he realize the rich complexity of what he had visually taken for granted. "Drawing brutally shows us our previous blindness to the true appearance of things" (p. 222).

This is one of the central themes of this wonderful and deceptively slim book by David Sibley. Birders often identify but rarely really see. There is little doubt that one style of birding encourages quick identifications and then an immediate move on to the next new bird. Such lack of attention to the subtleties of color, light, stance, proportions, and dynamics of feathers can lead to misidentifications or even an inability to identify a bird right in front of you. To improve your field skills, you really do need to slow down and spend time learning how to see. "Active study, asking questions while observing, is important. Anything that promotes detailed study – such as sketching or taking notes – is also very helpful" (Sibley, p.5).

The title *Birding Basics* may sound like this is a book about buying your first pair of binoculars and choosing a field guide. Make no mistake about it, *Birding Basics* is not just a beginner's guide to getting into field identification. There is something in this book to make even the most seasoned twitcher stop to reconsider. To begin with, Sibley discusses how to think about the relative value of field marks given in guides. In chapters on "Differences," he breaks down field marks into sorting skills based on such categories as relative, proportional, and average differences and discusses the challenges and pitfalls of using each kind of field mark. In other words, not all field marks are created equal; some are more useful than others in certain circumstances.

As an artist and art teacher, I thoroughly enjoyed Sibley's discussions on how light and background color and even position of the bird in relationship to the light can change the apparent look of the bird. Included in these sections are wonderful gems of paintings to illustrate these points. Particularly dramatic are two paintings of



a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in diffuse and bright sunlight that don't even appear to be of the same bird. The differences in mere silhouettes of White-crowned and White-throated sparrows in various positions again shows Sibley's skill at field drawing and capturing the essence of what is critical and unique about the actual appearance of a living bird. Another illustration of the changing positions of a Herring Gull's head handily shows how apparent bill size can change based on what the bird is doing. Some field marks are not fixed signs, but are more like fluid clues whose usefulness can change depending on what the bird and the environment around the bird are doing. From the start, Sibley emphasizes this point when he writes: "In the field, however, identification rarely is 100% certain" (p. 3).

Most of the last third of the book is an in-depth analysis of feathers. After all, when we look at birds, most of what we are looking at is feathers. There are chapters on types of feathers and feather groups, how feather arrangements produce the color patterns we see as field marks, wing patterns, feather wear, and the molt cycle. Sibley includes a clear comparison of the two systems of terminology used to describe a bird's plumage. These are the "Life Year system," which includes terms like "first year" and "juvenile" and the "Humphrey-Parkes (H-P) system," which includes terms like "alternate plumage" and "prebasic molt." I am sure some birders have been confused by these two different sets of terms, and Sibley does a good job explaining the differences. "The H-P system describes molt, while the Life Year system describes the birds' appearance. There is value in both systems, and field observers (who deal in appearances) should continue using the Life Year terms for most purposes. The H-P terms should be invoked only when molt is specifically addressed" (p. 128).

*Sibley's Birding Basics* works best when the text is backed up by the author's thoughtful and well-executed artwork. The feather groups of various passerines and nonpasserines are shown over eight pages. These clear illustrations, using washes and minimal color, are much easier to interpret and understand than almost all other similar illustrations and photos in other field guides. Five pages show the differences between H-P terms and Life Year terms for species like Snow Bunting and Sharp-shinned Hawk. A comparison of the feather patterns of a Song Sparrow with feathers sleeked down and ruffled is a gem of concise visual information. To describe in words what happens to the sparrow's feathers in these two positions would take many pages of boring detail that ultimately would be confusing to read. But in less than two-thirds of a page, Sibley's paintings make all the changes in appearance clear. This book is a monument to the instructional power of well-done illustrations.

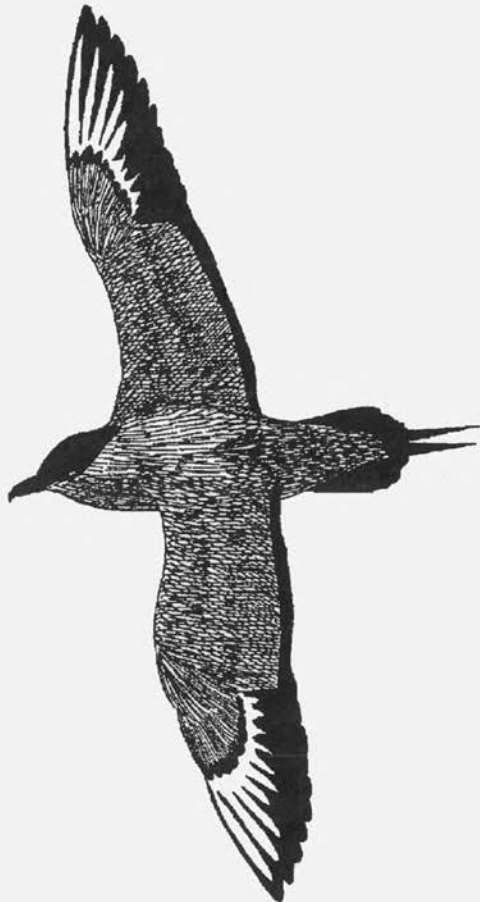
Some sections of the book are less successful. The chapter on "Voice," while good, breaks little new ground. Because the elements of sound are not great subjects for illustrations, this chapter also lacks the power of the other sections that fully utilize Sibley's considerable artistic talents. The chapters on "Identifying Rare Birds" and "Ethics and Conservation" are bizarrely short at a mere two pages each, and seem like afterthoughts. I am sure Sibley has more to say and possibly to show on these important subjects, and hopefully both chapters can be expanded in future editions.

There is little doubt that David Sibley has once again challenged our expectations for how a bird book is structured and illustrated. Reading *Sibley's Birding Basics* and savoring the concise and wonderful illustrations, you cannot but have greater expectations of what future field guides can show and tell us. Ultimately, this book encourages us to look more deeply and closely when we are in the field. If we can accomplish that, then as de Botton describes it: "We come closer to the Ruskerian goal of consciously understanding what we have loved" (p. 231, *The Art of Travel*). 🦅

**Literature cited:**

de Botton, A. 2002. *The Art of Travel*. Pantheon Books: New York.

*Mark Lynch is a teacher and ecological monitor for Broad Meadow Brook, a Massachusetts Audubon Society property. Currently, he is conducting bird surveys on the Blackstone National Corridor. Mark is also a docent at the Worcester Art Museum and hosts an interview show on the arts and sciences on WICN (90.5FM).*



PARASITIC JAEGER, GEORGE C. WEST