

BOOK REVIEW

A Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds, Donald W. Stokes. Little, Brown and Company; 1979; 336 pages; illustrated by the author and supplemented with 25 original illustrations by J. Fenwick Lansdowne; \$9.95.

As birders become more experienced and more expert at identifying birds, we tend to lose interest in the common species. We hardly make a mental note of them, keeping our eyes and ears alert for something "good." Since something "good" is not always around, we're often disappointed. We no longer marvel at the beauty of a Blue Jay, though we'd probably travel a hundred miles to see a Steller's Jay if one showed up. And while non-birders may gaze in wonder at the soaring flight of "sea gulls," our probable response to Herring Gulls is simply to dismiss them.

One way of overcoming this sense of boredom is to take beginners or non-birders on field trips with us. Their enthusiasm for ordinary birds is often refreshing and bird trips become more pleasurable. There is another way to combat this boredom, however, and that is by taking a second look at the individual and social activities of the birds we see.

A Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds, by Donald Stokes, is a fascinating introduction to bird behavior that will stimulate many birders to take that second look. In this book, Stokes has compiled a great deal of information, taken mostly from ornithological journals and from his own observational studies, and presented it in easy-to-read text organized into a format convenient to use in the field.

Following a general introduction and explanation of how to use the book, there are 25 chapters, each devoted to one of our common birds. Facing the first page of text in each chapter is a finely rendered full-page Lansdowne drawing of the bird. The text begins with a general behavioral introduction in which some of the more fascinating behaviors of the bird are highlighted. The remainder of the chapter consists of three standard parts: a "Behavior Calendar," a "Display Guide," and "Behavior Descriptions." The "Behavior Calendar" is a matrix that correlates seven general aspects of the bird's annual cycle - territory, courtship, nest-building, breeding, plumage (molts), seasonal movement, and social behavior - with the months of the year. The "Display Guide" is a catalog of the principal visual and auditory displays of the bird. Each display is named and described, often with an accompanying illustration in the margin. The "Behavior Descriptions" are divided into seven sections corresponding to the seven general aspects of the bird's annual cycle. Each section gives a detailed description of the bird's behavior

in that aspect of its annual cycle, with reference to the associated displays in the "Display Guide" and with explanations of the functions of these displays, if known. Of particular interest to the field ornithologist are the behavioral clues to nest location under "Nest-building" and the behavioral indications of sex under "Plumages."

The book should be valuable to birders in three interrelated ways. First, a general reading of the book gives one a fuller awareness of the activities of the 25 common birds described. It does this by confirming and cataloging behaviors that one has already noticed, while at the same time indicating the vast range of behaviors that one has not observed. For example, Stokes' descriptions of pigeon courtship helped me to differentiate and understand the variety of courting behaviors I myself have observed in these birds, and to learn of others, such as "billing," for which I will now look.

Second, Stokes' book is a field guide to behavior. Not only does he tell us what to look for, but we can compare our observations with his descriptions and thus come to a better understanding of what we have observed. Since many displays, such as the "grunt-whistle" of Mallards, occur very quickly, knowing what to look for and how to anticipate it will often be the deciding factor in whether we observe a particular display or not. Similarly, with the aid of Stokes' descriptions of how vocalizations change according to both the season and the behavior displayed, we will be more alert to changes in voice (especially those of us who don't have "good ears" and wouldn't necessarily notice such changes).

Third, by reading and using Stokes' book to understand the 25 common birds he discusses, we will begin to understand and better appreciate the activities of the birds we see. Even rarities will become more interesting for us. They will become more than "life" or "year" birds, and we will study them for their own behavioral qualities.

Since all of us have had different field experiences, information from this book will strike us differently. For me there were many surprises, some affirmation of behaviors I had observed, and some disappointment that certain behaviors were not mentioned. For example, I was surprised to learn that Chimney Swifts actually fly differently when courting, and that Tree Swallows often disappear from their breeding grounds for several days for no apparent reason. My own observations on the courtship displays of Common Flickers were confirmed in detail by Stokes' descriptions, but I was disappointed, given the detailed scope of the book, that neither the "swallow-like" mass flights of Starlings in the fall nor the "buzzing" of Red-winged Blackbirds in a marsh were mentioned. Of course, this is not really Stokes' fault, since as he states, very few detailed observations of our common birds have actually been made.

As more birders begin to observe behavior, not only will they find greater satisfaction from bird watching, but they will also tend to disturb birds less. After all, it's hard to observe the behavior of a bird if you flush it every other second! Finally, there is the chance that something unexpected may occur while you're watching bird behavior. One of my most exciting field experiences occurred this way. One day, while I was sitting on a log and intently observing a pair of chickadees as they excavated a nest, a woodchuck walked just beneath my feet!


Craig Jackson



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EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH

This year the Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will conduct coordinated weekends watches on the last two weekends in April: April 18-19 and April 25-26. Volunteers are needed for both inland and coastal sites on both weekends. If you are interested in participating or would like additional information, please contact:

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24 Pearson Road
Somerville, MA 02144 (617) 776-8566 (after 8 p.m.)