

REVIEWS

Florida Field Naturalist 30(2):60-61, 2002

Hummingbirds of North America.—Steve N. G. Howell. 2002. Hummingbirds of North America. The Photographic Guide. Academic Press Natural World, San Diego, California. 219 pages. \$29.95. ISBN 0-12-356955-9.—There are over 300 species of hummingbirds, all confined to the Americas. Twenty-four of them have been found in the United States (14 breed regularly) and are described in detail in this beautifully produced little book. The author, Steve N. G. Howell, has had extensive experience with these and other birds and is recognized for his writing on field identification problems (e.g., as in Howell, S. N. G. and S. Webb, 1995, *A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America*. Oxford Univ. Press. Oxford.). The goal of this new book is “to provide identification criteria that, given good views of a bird, should allow you to identify the majority of individuals.” I applaud the author’s attitude that “responsible field identification always includes the ability to ‘let birds get away’ as unidentified.” Hummingbirds, especially, cannot all be identified in the field. Some species are very similar in appearance and their diagnostic characters difficult to see in a free-flying bird (or even when the bird is held in the hand). Views of hummingbirds are often fleeting glimpses of a flying bird and rarely does one have the opportunity to study or photograph it adequately. Accounts include all verified Florida species, plus the Cuban Emerald. Accounts are not provided for the Antillean Crested and Rufous-tailed hummingbirds.

This book will enable identification of many hummingbirds that would remain questionable if one depended upon previous field guides, including the new volumes by Kaufman and Sibley. But the greatest benefits from this book will come only after intensive study of its contents before tackling birds in the field. A 34-page introductory section provides a clear review of hummingbird characteristics and is essential reading for effective use of the book. It is concisely written and well illustrated. A brief “box” introduces each genus. Each species account includes an identification summary and sections on taxonomy, status and distribution, range, structure, similar species, voice and sounds, habitat, behavior, molt, description of each sex and age, hybrids, and references. Sections on sounds and behavior are not illustrated, but they are adequate as an aid in distinguishing species. Molt sequence and its timing are particularly useful in identifying hummingbirds and Howell has done a good job in using them as tools. Each species account is illustrated with 4 to 12 photographs; a few paintings by Sophie Webb are used where photographs were not available (as for the Bee Hummingbird). How effective are these photographs? In general, they are excellent, but in a number the accompanying text emphasizes features that I was unable to see, perhaps because of the loss of resolution in printing. Photograph 18.9 of an immature male Anna’s Hummingbird is used to point out advanced primary molt, but this will require study and imagination; this is but one of a number of illustrations that don’t quite provide the details cited in the accompanying caption. Some captions are misleading, e.g., in Pic.17.7 it indicates the bird is an immature Black-chinned, based in part on a “relatively long tail.” The immature male Black-chinned Hummingbirds that we banded in Arizona had shorter tails than either immature or adult females. But if the reader studies all photographs carefully, the exercise will serve to emphasize the important criteria and lead to an increased awareness of these features on birds in the field. Occasionally there is a disclaimer, such as “apparent white is reflected light” as in the amount of white in the tips of the rectrices (Pic. 12.1, 12.2, 12.5). This points out the hazards and difficulties associated with the interpretation of photographs used to document critical records.

Howell prepares the birder to automatically look at certain useful field characters, e.g., “. . . is the tail long, short, forked, cleft, notched, squared, graduated, double-rounded?” He defines all of these terms and others, but the time to become acquainted

with them is not when the hummingbird is pausing briefly as it forages in flowering *Cordia seetina* (Geiger trees). Many of the characters are relative ones: is the outer wing tip narrow and tapered (as in a Ruby-throat) or is it broad and blunt (as in a Black-chinned)? Is the tail weakly or strongly graduated? Is there a relatively short tail projection beyond the primaries? Good photographs or excellent views in the field are essential for the interpretation of many of these characters. Rufous and Allen's are the two species most likely to pose identification problems; Howell admonishes the birder to begin by determining the age and sex of the bird in question. But he does not clearly describe how to do this; the information is there but one must dig it out and organize it. As I read through this book, I often wished that it provided a table of all characters and compared them among species. The book will even help you identify adult males when the lighting results in an all black gorget.

There are a few points in this book that disturb me. Hummingbirds have grooved tongues, not tubular ones as stated on page 1. Bill length is given for each species, but the method to obtain it is not explained; most species are described as having a bill of medium length, including both Allen's (bill 17-21 mm) and Green-breasted Mango (bill 24-30 mm). Howell does not always follow scientific names in the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (which he misspells as "Checklist"). He advocates the use of "Sheartail" for the Bahama Woodstar and Lucifer Hummingbird, with good arguments. The book was well edited and the few typos are not misleading (except that on page 28, line 3, the reference should be 19, not 17). Howell introduces the term "splodges" to American birders; I had to go to the Oxford English Dictionary to establish that such a word exists. It is more or less synonymous with "splotches." It was not easy to locate the Figures scattered through the book, but the "Pics" (photographs) were keyed to species accounts and readily found.

Who needs this book? It will be essential to anyone who wishes to identify as many individual hummingbirds in the field as possible. It will be essential to those who attempt to identify species from photographs. It will be very helpful to those who wish to raise their hummingbird identification skills to a level above that possible using the new Sibley guide. Certainly all institutional libraries should acquire it. I wish that I had this book years ago, when I felt that I could identify every hummingbird that I saw in the southwestern US; it would have saved me from many mistakes. Only when I started banding as a tool for studying hummingbirds did I learn that identification of hand-held birds could be challenging and free-flying birds impossible. I rapidly learned to say "I don't know," even of birds a few inches away at feeders. This book will be a welcome resource for many who enjoy the challenge of hummingbird identification. **Stephen M. Russell**, Dept. of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Arizona, Tucson (current mailing address: 2850 N. Camino de Oeste, Tucson, AZ 85745).