

Book Review

Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America (2008), by Ted Floyd. Collins (an imprint of HarperCollins), New York. 512 pages. 8 inches x 5-3/4 inches. Includes a DVD of 587 MP3s covering 138 species.

Reviewed by Mike Busam

7577 Whitehall Circle West
West Chester, Ohio 45069

Like Darwin's Finches, contemporary field guides for birds have radiated outward from a common source in order to survive, compete, and reproduce in the varied niches of the evolving birding marketplace (Think a book can't reproduce? Consider the original *Sibley Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2000) and its Eastern and Western splits). There are guides that target every level of serious birder, from beginner to expert; guides for people who wish merely to separate passerines from non-passerines; and guides for people whose interest in birds begins and ends with figuring out the "red ones, the brown ones, and the yellow ones" at their feeders. We are not talking only about books, either. There are field guides for hand-held computers, web-based field guides, and guides on DVDs and CDs—on any platform or medium in existence. Most birders today accept that any interest in birds, and by association, conservation, is to be commended. Although that may be true, not every field guide for birds is to be equally commended. A visit to your local bookstore or wild bird feed

store will likely produce some sad field guide encounters for serious birders. There are many field guides in the marketplace, but only a handful are actually useful to those of us who are deeply interested in birds, regardless of our experience or skill level.

We know the field guides we use and trust; we know their strengths and weaknesses. Most of us have a number of these guides on our shelves, in addition to any number of books specializing in select groups of birds: shorebirds, warblers, gulls, and the like. A recent addition to the list of general all-encompassing field guides is the *Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (hereafter abbreviated as *Smithsonian Guide*), by Ted Floyd. Floyd is the editor of *Birding* magazine and also a regular contributor and sometimes sparring partner on the Frontiers of Identification list-serve, a public forum in which one can find almost any aspect of bird identification being pondered or debated by serious birders.

The "nuts-and-bolts" of bird identification is featured on any page one might open in Floyd's *Smithsonian Guide*, but at the same time the dark cloud of conservational pessimism that often obscures the silver lining of watching, identifying, chasing, and simply enjoying birds is not ignored.

The guide begins with interesting and clearly written introductory material covering the natural history of birds, bird identification basics, and a general explanation of the layout of the book. The section on plumages and molt is worth reading, because each species account in the *Smithsonian Guide* includes bullet-point descriptions of molt strategy as well as seasonal, and age- and sex-related

plumage differences. Floyd describes four molt strategies used by the birds covered in the Guide (page 22): “Simple Basic Strategy (one plumage per year). Complex Basic Strategy (one adult plumage per year, plus a second plumage in the first year of life). Simple Alternate Strategy (two plumages per year). Complex Alternate Strategy (two adult plumages per year, plus a third plumage in the first year of life).”

Where applicable, Floyd also uses the terms “breeding” and “nonbreeding” and “juvenile” and “immature” in an effort to simplify discussions of different plumages. Additionally, there’s a sidebar in the introductory section on plumages and molt to explain the concept of annual molt and plumage cycles among gulls.

In the introduction, Floyd says (page 2) “The *Smithsonian Guide* has two special emphases that reflect emerging trends in the field identification of birds. The first is a focus on natural variation within and among species, and the second is a ‘holistic’ view of the bird as the sum of its behavioral, ecological, and morphological parts.” The species accounts in the *Smithsonian Guide* do deliver what Floyd promises in the introduction, but I think there is some allowable skepticism as to the notion of “holistic” identification techniques being somehow new to bird identification or the contemporary field guide. Our best field guides all present information that could be argued as being “holistic” in nature. The holistic approach is certainly not new to field guides. However, the design, layout, and presentation of information in the *Smithsonian Guide* are excellent and clear, and it is fair to say that the book achieves Floyd’s goals,

however one might define “holistic.”

The *Smithsonian Guide* covers all the birds regularly occurring within the ‘ABA Area,’ (defined by the American Birding Association). ABA Checklist Codes are used in each species account, as well as in the beginning of the brief introductions to different orders or families of birds covered in the text. For instance, the beginning of the Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers section notes that in the ABA area there are within this group (page 183): “50 species: 25 ABA Code 1, 9 Code 2, 7 Code 3, 4 Code 4, and 5 Code 5.” The ABA Codes range from 1 to 6 and designate the status of a species from 1 (occurring widely) to 6 (extinct or not found in the wild). The codes are useful shorthand for a beginning birder trying to figure out the relative status of a given species in his or her area. It remains an imperfect rating system, though, since a given species can occur widely in one area, yet be a hotline-worthy rarity in another. In Ohio, for example, would any knowledgeable birder consider a Loggerhead Shrike a Code 1 species? It is probably asking too much of a field guide to cover all the nuances of range and distribution, and the codes have to be interpreted cautiously. One hopes that in addition to their field guide, serious birders also consult knowledgeable people in their area. Not everything can be learned from a field guide—even a good one.

Each order or family treated in the book begins with a one-page introduction covering general information on taxonomy, habitats, general physical characteristics, migration strategies, and conservation threats, followed by a line listing the ABA Codes for the group. One to

three species are covered per page, and more space is given to species with multiple well-marked plumages, regional variations, clearly marked subspecies, etc. Opening the book at random to the Western Kingbird account (page 297), we find one page with five photographs, each with captions explaining plumage points (“holistically” one assumes): one of an adult; one of an immature; two flight images, and one of a juvenile. The bird’s common and scientific names and its status as an ABA Code 1 bird are listed at the top of the page. In a clearly marked spot in the center left of the page is a line listing the average length, wingspan, and weight of Western Kingbird, followed by three bullet points covering plumage and molt, each on its own line. There are, we read (page 297): “two adult molts per year; complex alternate strategy / weak differences between juvenile and fall adult / feather wear significantly affects appearance of tail.” Below the bullet points are four sentences that describe preferred habitat (with brief comparison to typical habitat of Eastern Kingbird), behavior, and timing of migration. This block of text is followed by descriptions of its song and calls, which are compared to those of Eastern Kingbird. If there were sound files for Western Kingbird on the DVD that accompanies the text, there would be a blue speaker icon next to the song and calls descriptions.

Tucked in next to the descriptive text is a range map, roughly an inch square, showing winter, breeding, migratory routes, and areas in which the Western Kingbird is considered rare. There is no overlap in the breeding and wintering ranges in North America for Western Kingbird, but if there were, that would appear

on the map, too. Most of the range maps in the *Smithsonian Guide* show all of “North America,” or the United States, Canada, and northern Mexico. Mexico is not in the ABA Area, but the maps do cover the ranges of the birds as they occur in northern Mexico. The maps were prepared by Paul Lehman, and they are clear and seem accurate, insofar as the Ohio ranges of the species are treated. Given the size of the maps—an inch square on average—they are by necessity rather “broad-brush” in nature, which is why any Ohio birder ought to have Peterjohn’s (2001) *Birds of Ohio* or one of the good checklists or regional books dedicated to the birds of our state.

We are, for better and worse, in the technology age. Thus, the *Smithsonian Guide* is not just a printed book, but a vessel to carry cutting-edge technology to savvy birders. Tucked into the back cover of the book is a DVD containing 587 MP3 sound files of different vocalizations for 138 North American birds. Simple math reveals that there are a lot more than 138 species of North American birds. The benefit of the *Smithsonian Guide* DVD is not the breadth of coverage, but the depth of coverage. There are species one would like to hear that are not on the DVD, but the variety of songs, calls, and other sounds provides good examples of the variety of sounds that birds make from species to species as well as the variation within a species (this may be that “holistic” approach showing through, again.) I am a technology crab and have not yet been inspired to carry an MP3 player and speakers into the field to lure local birds, as some birders and photographers do. I do, however, have an MP3 player, and it was fairly easy to get the files onto

my off-brand machine. People with nicer MP3 players will find that a tiny picture of the appropriate bird will appear on their screen when they play its calls or songs. The sound files lack human voice-over, which is either a positive or a negative point, depending on how the files are used in the field or anywhere else one might listen to them. A booklet accompanying the DVD contains brief descriptions of each cut on the disk, plus information on where the songs were recorded if such information is pertinent. Birders with newer CD players in their homes or cars might even be able to play the MP3s on those machines, directly from the DVD, but do not count on that. If you are unsure whether your CD system can play MP3s, it probably cannot! Of course, if one lacks an MP3 player, the recordings can be played on most computers with DVD drives. If you lack a computer, the DVD would make a nice coaster or signaling device on a sunny day at Killdeer Plains.

Ted Floyd's *Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America* is a good addition to the higher quality guild of general field guides for North America. The book could be especially appealing to a new birder who, though seriously interested in birds, lacks the experience and knowledge of more learned birders. The introductory material covers much ground that serious birders need to know and points the reader in the right direction should he or she wish to learn more. There are 15 short essays scattered throughout the species accounts on various topics, ranging from vagrants to nocturnal migration to brood parasitism. The species coverage is detailed and concise, the photos are good, and the range maps

are clearly marked. The DVD is a nice complement to the book and offers a gateway into the study and appreciation of bird songs and calls. The *Smithsonian Guide* would make a great starter book for the serious beginner. It will not supplant either the *National Geographic Field Guide* (Dunn and Alderfer 2006) or *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2000) as guides of choice for more experienced birders, but it is still a solid resource for someone looking for an (or yet another) all-purpose North American field guide.

Literature Cited

- Dunn, J. L. and J. Alderfer (Eds.). 2006. National Geographic field guide to the birds of North America. 5th edition. National Geographic, Washington, D. C.
- Peterjohn, B. G. 2001. The birds of Ohio. The Wooster Book Company, Wooster.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. The Sibley guide to birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.