

BOOK REVIEWS

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A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America.—S. N. G. Howell and S. Webb. 1995. Oxford University Press, New York. xvi + 851 pp, 71 pl. \$35 (paper), \$75 (cloth). ISBN 0-19-854012-4 (paper); ISBN 0-19-854013-2 (cloth).

This book represents a tremendous advance in the small world of field guides for northern Middle America. Its magnitude (page length and 3.4 lbs shipping weight) was a surprise, as was the attempted scope of its treatment. It is meant to cover the approximately 1,070 species occurring in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, western Honduras and Nicaragua, and the Mosquitia region of eastern Honduras/northeastern Nicaragua. It does so with mixed results: the book is both a wonder and a disappointment. In its content, it simultaneously achieves both ends of the spectrum of quality.

This is the first thorough treatment of the birds of northern Middle America in decades. The amount of work required to create a book of this size and scope is tremendous, and the authors are to be commended on their unflinching dedication to bring us something new, useful, and well beyond anything heretofore existing for this region.

The distribution maps (given for all species) represent the most spectacular and ambitious component of the work: this is the first time that such maps have been created for most of the species included. The authors' extensive field experience in the region has clearly played a strong role in the development of these maps, but many other sources were used as well. While there are errors both large and small in these maps (and *Mosquitia* is not included), they nevertheless represent an important contribution deserving high praise. Note: no distinction is made between sighting and specimen records in these maps.

The primary purpose of the guide is to "facilitate field identification" (p. 69). Its size is a major strike against it in this regard, and the lack of an adequate table of contents is an ominous beginning; there is no breakdown whatsoever of the 677 pages in which the family and species accounts occur, making it difficult to find where family treatments begin (orders are ignored). There are 85 pages of introductory material—far more than necessary. Although I enjoyed the brief (five page) section on the history of ornithology in the region, the sections on climate and habitat, conservation, birding, taxonomy, and molt could all have been drastically shortened. A field guide is not the place to discuss the biological and phylogenetic species concepts, nor to review the Humphrey-Parkes molt terminology. Unlike most field guides, the concept of brevity was largely disregarded here, and I feel that with ruthless editing as much as 25–30% of this book

could have been cut with little detracting from its use in the field.

In the 71 plates there are more species and plumages depicted than in any other guide for the region, and in groups such as *Icterus* and *Accipitridae* this is a dramatic and welcome improvement. The plates serve their purpose, but vary in quality. Postures and proportions are often slightly askew. By my count, 751 species are depicted, many with multiple representations. In addition, there are many black-and-white sketches interspersed through the species accounts. As with most other guides to Neotropical birds, the long distance migrants depicted in guides to northern North America are not portrayed here. This is a real problem, for it requires the possession and transportation of two guides in the region.

The species accounts are ambitiously long and detailed, and, taken overall, are another of the high points of the book. The accounts are broken into sections on identification (including subcategories on description, voice, and habitat and habits), similar species, status and distribution (with subcategories status, abundance, and distribution), range, and notes. "Uneven treatment" is the operative phrase, however. Some accounts are enlightening; others are disappointing. The authors' extensive field experience with these species and their willingness to produce a book of this size provides us with an excellent benefit in the often lengthy descriptions of voice. It is very useful to have a field guide written by people with such extensive recent experience with the species treated.

The increased length of the species accounts over other guides is not always an improvement, however. Despite the longer accounts here, I find Peterson and Chalif (*A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*, 1973, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston) more useful in separating potentially problematic species such as *Empidonax flaviventris* and *E. flavescens*, and *Myiarchus tuberculifer* and *M. yucatanensis*. It is unclear why no useful measurement suggestions are given to separate *Empidonax* or *Myiarchus* species (where species limits are reasonably well understood), yet detailed measurements are included that highlight relatively minor differences in the bills of the *Aratinga holochlora* superspecies group (where species limits are poorly understood). Neglecting to include useful in-hand identification criteria (e.g., wing or primary lengths in *Empidonax*) is unfortunate, given that a substantial portion of users will be working with birds in the hand.

An inconsistent attempt was made to include subspecific information. This effort is largely beneficial; marked geographic variation is included in both plates and text. However, there are many polytypic species with more than one subspecies in the treated region

that are presented no differently than monotypic species; this is especially common among migrants. The authors also made an inconsistent attempt to describe nest location, nest construction, and eggs. Perhaps most noteworthy in this respect is the number of species for which nest and eggs are apparently undescribed, a condition often flagged in the text.

Particularly infuriating, and truly a faux pas when one's purpose is to facilitate the transfer of information, is the authors' penchant for calling birds whatever they feel like calling them. No standards appear to have been followed for English, Spanish, or scientific names. It may be excusable (or not, given that the book is published in the United States) to use "Grey" for "Gray" throughout. However, departures from known standards are rampant. For example, in looking up any of the tropical robins occurring in the region, one finds that the authors have decided to call them all thrushes instead. Changing widely accepted common names (e.g., Eastern Pewee, rather than Eastern Wood-Pewee, Clay-colored Thrush for Clay-colored Robin) is foolish and inexcusable. Looking up terms such as Wood-Pewee and *Limnothlypis* in the indices rubs the reader's nose in this nonsense; we are directed to look up the terms under the authors' usually unique views of what they should be.

The purpose of a field guide is to deliver information in a condensed and efficient manner. In this respect this guide is a failure; a field guide is not the place to change common names and instigate generic revisions, particularly when no justification is given for these changes and no recent research reports are available for support. Generic changes occur throughout; some examples are the merging of genera (e.g., *Casmerodius* into *Egretta*, *Chen* into *Anser*, *Rissa* and *Xema* into *Larus*, *Ciccaba* into *Strix*, *Doricha* into *Calothorax*, *Atthis* into *Selasphorus*, *Calypte* into *Archilochus*, *Ridgwayia* into *Zoothera*, *Limnothlypis* into *Helmitheros*, *Euthlypis* into *Basileuterus*, *Xenospiza* into *Ammodramus*, and *Passerculus* into *Ammodramus*). Other examples of generic changes include resurrection of the hummingbird genera *Pygornis* and *Basilinna*, and retention of the woodpecker genus *Centurus*. Many of these treatments should provoke discussion, but none is given here. No doubt some of these are taxonomic revisions that will be made, but some represent regression to earlier conditions and others are simply bad guesses. All are carried through to the index—a major error.

If this was not a guide, the many changes might be dismissed as the idiosyncratic views they represent. Here, however, they are a major hindrance to the intended user group. Few of the authors' suggestions for name changes are likely to be quickly adopted by taxonomists. On p. 73 the authors state that suboscines (a traditional suborder of Passeriformes, called Clamatores historically, and Oligomyodi or Tyranni now) include everything from pigeons to flycatchers (nine orders and part of a tenth)! Such profound ignorance of avian taxonomy provides critics sufficient evidence to dismiss the majority of the other taxonomic views proffered.

There are five appendices; the two most important are the tabular species lists of birds of Pacific and Atlantic islands. These appendices represent important synthetic information with a substantial addition of current information from the authors' extensive recent travels. The bibliography is impressive, including many items that only true aficionados of Middle American ornithology would have found. Unfortunately, some important works were missed, and apparently not all of the literature cited was read, or there would have been fewer errors in the text (e.g., wintering range of *Limnothlypis*, breeding range of *Sturnus vulgaris*).

Unfortunately, there are two indexes—English and scientific names—making the book needlessly difficult to use. When will publishers realize that in the language of science all the terms can be arranged alphabetically? There is certainly no excuse for multiple indices in any ornithological work. Why, too, does the detestable entry "(see. . .)" occur in indexes, when it would take less space and be more helpful to simply give the page number? Indexes do not exist to look something up twice, yet these are both riddled with this miserable style, the more maddening because so many names have been changed.

Sadly, despite its size, one still needs to carry more than one guide in northern Middle America. After working in the field with many Mexican students over the years, and using all previously available guides, my personal choices remain the National Geographic (*Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 1983, National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.) and Peterson and Chalif (1973, *loc. cit.*) guides for the field in Mexico, although this new guide will be an important reference to consult at the end of each day. It is an invaluable addition to the office shelf.

Many of the most irritating faults with this guide would have been removed if it had been carefully reviewed prior to publication by other ornithologists working in Middle America. There is nothing in the introduction or acknowledgments to suggest that this was done. A warning to other authors and publishers: do not neglect this important step. In this case, what could have been a great book leaves this reader hoping that a leaner, more standardized second edition is planned.

The world according to Howell and Webb is a very detailed, intriguing, information-rich compendium of everything they could get away with including. As a field guide, it would have benefitted immensely from a more focused, standardized approach. It nevertheless adds a great deal to the ornithological literature of northern Middle America, and, through repeatedly drawing attention to the many unknowns, should foster much interest in the distribution, natural history, and systematics of Middle American birds. Notwithstanding the number of errors, uneven treatment, and unfortunate style, this is a major contribution to neotropical ornithology.—KEVIN WINKER, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.