

BIRDERS' BOOKSHELF

Identification Guide to North American Passerines

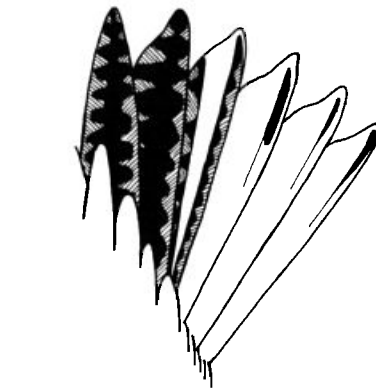
Peter Pyle, Steve N. G. Howell, Robert P. Yunick, and David F. DeSante. Slate Creek Press. 1987. 278 + x pp., 219 line drawings. Softbound. \$19.50 plus \$2.50 postage and handling (\$3.50 outside the U.S.); California residents add \$1.17 sales tax. Order from Slate Creek Press, P.O. Box 219E, Bolinas, CA 94924.

IN THE WORLD OF FIELD ORNITHOLOGY, it sometimes seems there is an inverse relationship between the size and flashiness of a book and its lasting significance. An expensive, colorful "coffee table book" may disappear without a ripple, while a small volume that is short on decoration but long on information may have a major impact.

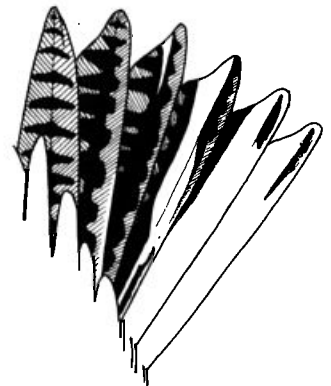
"One of the most important bird books of the decade. Every active birder could learn a lot by using it."

As an example, I might point out a book called *Guide to the Identification and Aging of Holarctic Waders* published in Britain about a decade ago. It contained a few photographs, but most of its simple illustrations were of single feathers, not whole birds. Designed for banders, it focussed on many characters that were not even visible in the field. And yet this slim volume revolutionized shorebird watching in North America. Much of what we know today about the timing of shorebird migration has been learned very recently as a result of *Holarctic Waders* and its emphasis on determining the ages of shorebirds.

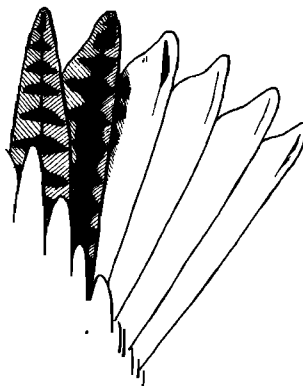
Do I digress? No. Many of the points I've just made about *Holarctic Waders* could apply equally well to this new work, *Identification Guide to North American Passerines*. Most of its illustrations are of single feathers, and the



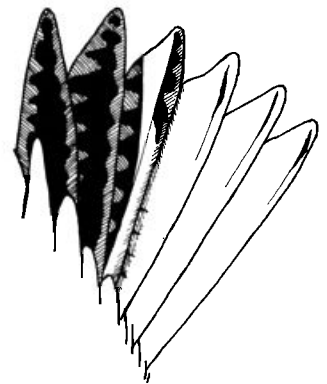
Western maximum white



Western minimum white



Eastern maximum white



Eastern minimum white

Figure 198. Tail patterns in Eastern vs. Western meadowlarks, to assist in identification. Illustration/Steve N.G. Howell from *Identification Guide to North American Passerines*.

text is telegraphic and utilitarian, designed as a reference for working bird-banders. Its decorative qualities are minimal. You will not find it on coffee tables—except on mine. In my opinion, this is one of the most important bird books of the decade. Every active birder could learn a lot by using it.

". . . every birder with a serious interest in field identification should have this book."

To elaborate on that, I should begin with a few words about what this book is *not*. If you buy it on the basis of the title, thinking it will give you the last word on fall Pine Warblers, you will be disappointed—unless you have that Pine Warbler in your hand—because

this book is written for banders, and makes no concessions to field birders. Material on how to identify birds to species is presented in minimal fashion, and most of the emphasis is on identifying birds to age and sex. Abbreviations from the banding world are legion (AHY, CP, BP, etc.). Measurements, pneumatization of the skull, and shapes of feather tips get a lot of attention. For many species there is no information that could possibly be used in the field—other than the implication that the species cannot be aged or sexed by sight. Observers will find this book difficult to read at first, and they will have to dig through it for those pieces of information that can be used in the field. But despite these seemingly negative comments, I'm excited about this book, and I urge every serious birder to get a copy and make the necessary effort to use it.

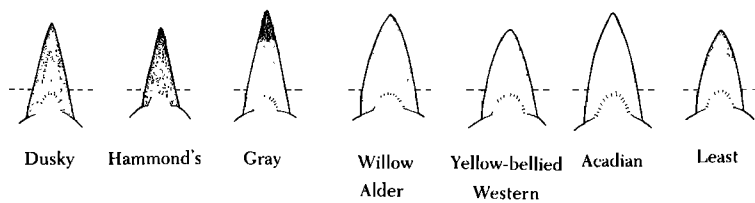


Figure 24. Relative sizes and shapes of the bills, and color patterns of the lower mandibles of *Empidonax* flycatchers.

Illustration/Steve N.G. Howell from *Identification Guide to North American Passerines*.

This is the first complete reference on aging and sexing criteria for North American passerines, and as such, it is a gold mine.

How important is it to know the age and/or sex of a bird in the field? That depends. Of course, there's nothing wrong with just enjoying birds without even knowing what species they are, but most active birders like to identify birds with as much precision as possible.

We already know that for many species, the different age and sex classes are not uniformly distributed. Females may tend to winter farther from the breeding range than males. Juveniles may migrate later in fall than adults. Inexperienced younger birds may be more likely to wander out of range. Obviously, we could make more progress

in studying these phenomena if we could identify the sex and age groups with confidence.

Unfortunately, a certain type of misunderstanding often comes into play here. Field guides have to deal with the extremes of variation shown by many species, so they may illustrate a drab fall bird and label it "immature male" (because they have to label it as something). A birder who encounters a similar bird may say, "It looks like this picture . . . must be an immature male." But it might not be. The bird guide doesn't tell you how much variation there is in each plumage, or whether immature males might be identical to adult females, or which characters are actually diagnostic. Birders who are commendably cautious about identi-

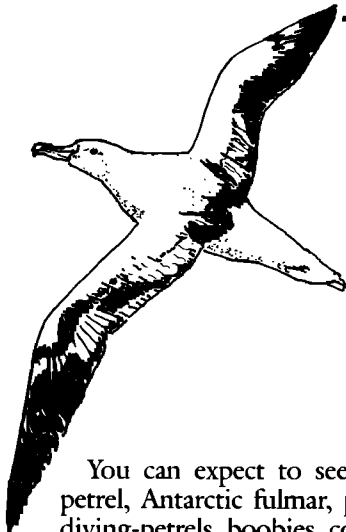
"A pioneering work like this one serves to point out what is unknown and uncertain, as well as what is known . . ."

fying birds to species may resort to careless guesswork in identifying them to sex or age.

There is no guesswork in *Identification Guide to North American Passerines*—just a lot of real work. First author Peter Pyle, inspired by the work of Lars Svensson on European passerines, set out to read everything published on the North American side of the subject (and a diverse and scattered body of literature it is, too). Pyle followed this up with countless hours in museums, and then checked many of the ideas against live birds at the Pt. Reyes Bird Observatory's banding station on fabled Southeast Farallon Island. Steve Howell got into the project as an illustrator, but became a major contributor of information as well. Bob Yunick and Dave DeSante, who have done exhaustive amounts of banding research, combed the text and illustrations to check for accuracy. If factual errors remain, they are likely to be minor ones.

Peter Pyle expects that errors will be found, however, and that new information will be discovered, so that his book will be out of date shortly. A pioneering work like this one serves to point out what is unknown or uncertain, as well as what is known, acting as a springboard to further research. Active banders and birders are urged to come up with corrections or additions, so that the next edition may be more thorough and accurate. This is a project that can benefit all of us. Something that I would like to see in the second edition would be more attention to characters that are visible in the field. The best way to bring this about would be for more field observers to get involved in the research and the dialogue on the subject.

I think it goes without saying that all serious banders will want this book. Dwelling on that theme would be like preaching to the converted. The ultimate point I want to make is that this reference is not just for banders—every birder with a serious interest in field identification should have this book. It could revolutionize our perceptions about the birds we see in the field.—K.K.



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The Sparrowhawk

Ian Newton. T & A D Poyser Ltd., Staffordshire, England. 1986. 396 pp., drawings by Keith Brockie. Hardbound \$35.00. Available from Buteo Books, P.O. Box 481, Vermillion, SD 57069 (add \$2.00 handling charge).

THIS BOOK WILL TAKE ITS PLACE among our best classics in natural history. It is scholarly, yet written in a style that will enlighten and entertain anyone interested in the lives of birds. The author is one of our most admired and respected ornithologists. His work is an excellent example of meticulous attention to detail and a gifted ability to synthesize the vast amounts of information collected by creative and rigorous field research. Dr. Newton's previously acclaimed work on the *Population Ecology of Raptors* (1979, T. & A D Poyser Ltd.) is a major ornithological contribution to the study of birds of prey. In this book he provides us with an in-depth look at the life of a specific raptor, the Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter ni-*

“ . . . reveals the fascinating life of an elusive predator . . . ”

sus). Like its North American relatives (Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, and Goshawk), this European accipiter is an especially secretive predator that primarily feeds on birds. The focus of the book is on the ecology of the species, and he describes in great detail its habitat, food, breeding, movements, and mortality. The content is comprehensive and almost all of what is written has been obtained from the author's 14-year study in southern Scotland. Individually marked birds were followed for several consecutive years using various techniques, including radio-tracking; some individuals were studied for their entire lives. Most of what is presented here has been previously published as separate scientific papers written by the author and his colleagues. This book reveals the fascinating life of an elusive predator, and offers insights and evidence

The SPARROWHAWK

IAN NEWTON



Illustration/Keith Brockie from *The Sparrowhawk*.

applicable to the biology of other birds of prey and, on many topics, to birds in general.

There are 25 chapters, four appendices, a bibliography, 63 tables, 24 black-and-white photographs, and 90 figures consisting of graphs and distribution maps. Each chapter ends with a clear

We thank the following book reviewers for their careful reading and comments. The initials at the end of each review correspond to these names: Kenn Kaufman; Daniel Klem, Jr.

and concise summary, and the final chapter, entitled Conclusions, is an overall summary emphasizing the salient points of the entire work. The text is supplemented throughout by the drawings of Keith Brockie. These accurate and instructive illustrations blend appropriately with the text, and can also be enjoyed and admired as magnificent art in their own right.

The presentation is well organized, with individual chapters providing: a historical perspective, descriptions of the study areas and methods, a detailed treatment of general species characteristics, nesting habitat, nest spacing and breeding, density, home range move-

ments, population trends, hunting and feeding behavior, food, effects on its prey, and breeding season. There are five chapters on the breeding cycle: early stages, eggs and incubation, growth of young, parental care, and post-fledging period. The remaining chapters describe seasonal trends in breeding success, nest failures, age and breeding, molt, dispersal, territory and mate fidelity, migration, mortality, and the effects of pesticides. The appendices further explain or provide greater detail on nest finding, human persecution, procedures for analyzing nest spacing, and causes and diagnosis of nest failure. The relationship between topics necessitated some overlap, but each chapter is well-defined and the subject and conclusions are logically presented and so well written that what repetition occurs is reinforcing, enhancing, and in no way detracts from the text.

The book is filled with intriguing facts and interpretations of fascinating theoretical questions that continue to interest contemporary ornithology. A few of my own biased selections are: (1) Sparrowhawk hunting techniques depend on the terrain and prey, but concealment is most important for a successful capture, (2) at times, these tenacious predators persist in chasing their prey into thick vegetation and even into buildings where they are killed colliding with windows and other obstacles, (3) both sexes can carry prey as heavy as themselves, (4) throughout the breeding season, the hawks captured fledglings with ease and preyed on different species as



Juvenile male Sparrowhawk

each produced young that left the nest, and (5) the oldest Sparrowhawk lived almost 11 years, but few lived longer than seven and most died much earlier.

Insights to more theoretical questions were also revealing. Both genetic and environmental conditions had an influence on post-fledging dispersal, but the environment during early life seemed to be more important in explaining individual movements. Size differences between male and female (sexual dimorphism) are interpreted as an outcome of a clear division of breeding roles. During the breeding season the male is the principal food provider, and this role favors small size and minimal

body reserves. Alternatively, the female stores food for breeding and this role favors large size and maximum body reserves. The female remains almost completely inactive while incubating and caring for young while the male provides both female and young with food. For females and young, the most important resource was an established male able to provide enough food for survival. We are told that here is a species where reproductive success is directly dependent on the male in contrast to accepted theory for many other animals in which males are assumed to invest less in reproduction than do females. On yet another important factor influencing populations of species, mortality was found to be compensatory. This means that if many sparrowhawks died from one cause, then fewer died from another, and overall losses tended to remain the same from year to year. Considering all influences and all evidence, Sparrowhawk population sizes were most dependent on food availability.

There are surprisingly few omissions and errors in printing. A "were" instead of a "we" appears at the bottom of page 58. The citation Newton *et al.* 1977 is printed in the text on page 58 and in Table 8 on page 361, but it is not in the bibliography (most likely it is: Newton *et al.* 1977. Spacing of Sparrowhawk nesting territories. *J. Anim. Ecol.* 46: 425-441). The citation Harvey *et al.* 1976 appears in the text on page 264, but it too is not in the bibliography. And in the text on page 229 and 231 reference is made to Bomholt 1983, but the bibliography only lists Bomholt 1981. Some may consider the placement of all tables at the end of the book to be inconvenient. One attractive feature of the table legends is that the author often provides a qualifying or interpretive statement of the data.

Like others before him, Dr. Newton teaches us the value of a long-term in-depth study of a single species, particularly for population biology, and reveals the majesty of species-specific evolution. Just as commendable, books of this type serve as a model for inquiring investigators, especially beginning students, interested in discovering the secrets of an individual species. This book will have great appeal for raptor enthusiasts everywhere. It will be of equal interest and captivate anyone interested in reading about birds. —D.K. Jr.



All illustrations on this page by Keith Brockie from The Sparrowhawk.