BIRDERS' BOOKSHELF

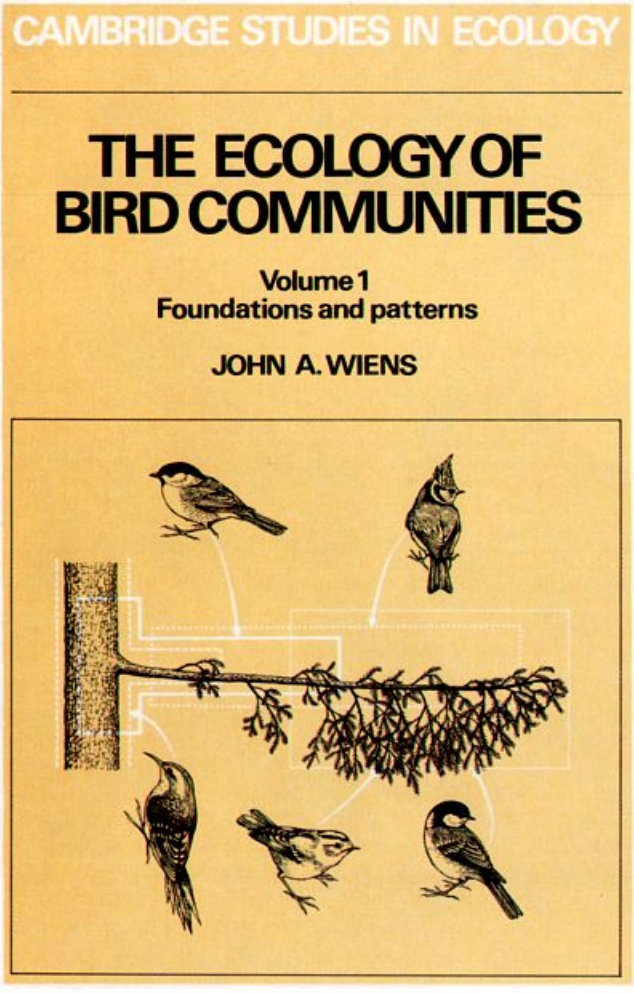
The Ecology of Bird Communities.
John A. Wiens. 1989. Volume 1: Foundations and Patterns. 539 + xiv pp. Volume 2: Processes and Variations. 316 + xii pp. Cambridge University Press.

When I was just an unscientific bird-chaser, I used to wonder why John Wiens, an ornithologist with fine field skills, should have chosen a specialty that sounded as obscure as "community ecology." But if I still harbored any such naive doubts, they would have been answered by the time I finished reading *The Ecology of Bird Communities.* As Wiens knew all along, community ecology is a rich subject that touches on many things having to do with the lives of birds.

Indeed, field observers may be surprised to see how many aspects of community ecology are directly relevant to things we notice in the field—things like bird distribution and abundance, the number of species we find in a given area, and so on. But things that we've taken for granted become a lot more interesting in this two-volume work after Wiens opens them up for a second look. Yes, there are more species in the tropics than in polar regions, but do we really know why? Yes, small islands tend to have fewer species than large islands, but do we understand the reasons? How important, really, is competition among species? Yes, bird communities are likely to be limited by the available resources, but do we know which resources are critical?

Many of the questions raised are controversial. Wiens naturally has his own opinions (he has been a leading researcher in the field since the 1960s), but he lays out both sides of every controversy. Thus presented, community ecology comes across as a lively and exciting discipline.

And it is presented here in all its dimensions. John Wiens paints the big picture of avian community ecology, starting with the philosophy of the basic approach to the science, tracing the history and the current thought, finishing with projections and suggestions for the future. Rarely has an entire scientific discipline been laid out so thoroughly. Anyone who appreciates good science might read these volumes just for the pleasure of seeing something done so well.



On the other hand, birders without scientific training, leafing through this work, will notice immediately that there are lots of graphs, tables, and equations. Fact of life: That's the way science is done these days. There is actually a lot *less* math here than in most publications on ecology, because Wiens is more interested in real concepts than in the dry mathematical models to which they might be reduced. His writing is exceptionally clear. I tried reading some sections with "one eye closed," so to speak, and concluded that a reader could skip every bit of the math and still understand virtually everything.

Perhaps the single thing I appreciated most about these volumes is the value that the author places on field research. As he points out repeatedly, no amount of theorizing can take the place of getting out in the field and seeing what's actually going on. The American Ornithologists' Union, honoring Wiens with the 1991 Elliott Coues Award, noted his ability to balance theoretical concepts against the careful fieldwork on which such theorizing should be based. Birders who read *The Ecology of Bird Communities* will note the same thing. Unlike those theoreticians who seem to regard facts as unnecessary, John Wiens really does know birds in the field.

In short, this is a *tour de force*, a brilliant overview of the ongoing study of bird communities. Written with great clarity, brimming with ideas and questions and controversies, chock-full of examples from the real world, it is a work that I recommend highly to anyone with a serious interest in birds.

—Kenn Kaufman