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# Books

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**A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America.** Steve N. G. Howell and Sophie Webb. 1995. Oxford University Press, New York. 1008 pp. including 71 color plates, \$75 (hard cover), \$39.95 (paper).

This monumental work, weighing 4 pounds in a 6-¼ x 9-¼ inch format, brings together the massive amount of data gathered about the avifauna of northern Middle America in the last quarter century. Covering Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and northern Nicaragua, this guide is apparently intended to meet the range of Ridgely and Gwynn (1989), enabling birders to cover all of Middle America with two books.

This book fully describes approximately 1070 species. Identification details include voice, color morphs, identifiable races, similar species, abundance, habitat, range with map, as well as nest and egg data. The color plates and line drawings illustrate 750 species. The other 320 species are accidentals, species whose ranges just cross the US/Mexican border and birds the authors apparently judge familiar to all North American birders. An additional 50 Honduran species are described less fully in Appendix E without illustrations. As with most New World guides, you will need to supplement the illustrations, particularly for water birds and warblers.

The guide follows AOU Checklist order, but Howell has split some species, based in part on his own field experience. These taxonomic changes may be the most controversial part of this book, partly because of Howell's handling of them. Howell does not always identify the points at which he departs from the AOU Checklist, although he leads the reader to believe in the introduction that he does. The split of Whip-poor-will into "Northern" and "Mexican" is an example. The authors' complicated system of brackets, parentheses, and asterisks is not an intuitive or "user friendly" way of dealing with changes in nomenclature and taxonomy.

Howell's approach to taxonomy may be judged a middle-of-the-road one in a few years. While some people feel that authors should wait for AOU

revisions before publishing suggested changes in taxonomic status, this approach can render a guide instantly out of date. Some splits in the book are currently being approved by the AOU. Taxonomy in North and Middle America is in such a state of ferment that any approach has its critics.

The bibliography attests to the volume of literature consulted. Howell does not accept literature uncritically, as indicated by his published comments. The guide seems to be consistent with current knowledge. For instance, although Wilbur (1987) lists only one report for Mountain Plover in Baja California, Howell and Webb show an extensive wintering area in northwest Baja. Mountain Plover have been reported here recently from habitats probably not birded in the past. The guide includes the extensive data gathered by the authors in the field since the early 1980s.

The plates and facing page notes do a fine job of covering the species illustrated, providing a "guide within a guide." Most birders, accustomed to North American "facing page" guides, will use the plates for identification, referring to the more extensive text only when necessary.

Plates can make or break a field guide. Because of severe space limitations, Webb has not had the opportunity to place birds against backgrounds, as in some recent foreign guides. The plates are filled with birds. The brightly colored images glow with the hues of live birds. In addition to males, many female, juvenal, and identifiable form plumages have been included, adding to the usefulness of the guide. For instance, the Quetzal and trogon plate has 18 plumages of nine species, as well as 16 additional tail pattern views.

Inevitably, the plates will be compared with those of Peterson and Chalif (1973), which some consider the high point of Peterson's career. Peterson's work is very attractive. But, to save space, it includes many partial and overlapping images. Most of Webb's images are full and not overlapped, making these plates definitely more useful. Twelve plates cover raptors extensively with both perched and flight views. Most water birds are not illustrated.

Again, unless your knowledge of this group is extensive, you will probably want to supplement with a North American field guide.

The rest of the plates illustrate the wealth of avian diversity in this region, so relatively close to the U.S. border—a cornucopia of small owls, parrots of all sizes, and a rainbow of tanagers, to mention only a few groups. Unfortunately, this region is not exempt from the rapid loss of natural habitat occurring throughout the Western Hemisphere, so the future of some species is in doubt. The authors include a list of recently extinct species, a grim reminder of things to come.

The importance of illustrations is shown by an example on the plate of mimids. Text description of the *palmeri* group of Curve-billed Thrasher includes “2 narrow whitish wingbars,” while Webb’s plate gives a more realistic picture of faint wingbars, less distinct than in the *curvirostre* group. The text describes a freshly molted adult, whereas most birds seen in the field have more worn and faded feathers, making features like wingbars less distinct. A picture is clearer than words. Describing the more boldly marked *curvirostre* group first followed by the duller *palmeri* group might have been clearer.

Of 18 species of mimids described in the text, ten are shown on plate 52, two on plate 69 (island endemics) and six are omitted from plates. The most unfortunate omission, in my opinion, is Bendire’s Thrasher, but other members of the family have major winter ranges in Mexico and will surely be encountered by visitors to the region.

Some of the shortcomings of this guide are apparently dictated by economics. More illustrations, particularly of “southwestern US specialties,” unfamiliar to many North Americans, would be very useful. A listing, facing each plate, of related species described in the text but not illustrated would aid birders using the plates as their primary guide.

Howell bravely enters the treacherous arena of transcribing bird vocalizations to syllables. He is no more successful than any other field guide author thus tempted. It is simply not possible to reduce the vocalizations of some 1070 species and forms to

distinguishable combinations of the limited numbers of letters and syllables available. It is useful to include descriptive phrases relating to vocalizations such as accelerating tempo, rising or falling pitch, and sweet or harsh. Howell does this sometimes but not consistently.

Howell’s vocal descriptions do not emphasize the useful distinctions or points of possible confusion sufficiently to be most helpful to birdwatchers. Howell has noted some instances where a bird he judges less well known is similar to a bird he judges better known, but many confusing pairs are not mentioned. He also compares non-mimid vocalizations to mimids: Cactus and Rock wrens, for example, “suggest a mockingbird.” This is not very helpful.

The guide opens with 102 pages of introductory material, including obligatory reading, such as abbreviations and symbols and a very helpful presentation of the varied biogeographic regions of northern Middle America. Placing some of the less essential text from the introductory pages, including the history of ornithology in Mexico, the background essay on taxonomy, and the glossary, into appendices would highlight the important material and make it less daunting to readers.

The book deserved a more thorough editing than it received. None of us write so well that careful editing will not make the text crisper and easier to read. The guide is not written badly, but heavier editing to remove meaningless phrases such as “Ages alike or different” or to reduce the number of “etc.” would have improved the text.

The guide would also have benefitted from the full integration of the 50 Honduran species described in Appendix E into the main text. This appears to have been a last-minute addition to the book. Plates 70 and 71, “Central American species,” may have been a previous expansion; however, these species are described in the main text.

Users will include banders handling Neotropical migrants, researchers interested in a species whose range extends south of the U.S.-Mexican border, birders along this border hunting for strays from the south, and of course anyone interested in

birding in northern Middle America during a period of relative stability.

"A Guide to The Birds of Mexico" provides a gold mine of information about the avifauna of the region. The plates and facing page notes almost suffice on their own as a field guide to the birds they illustrate. Although the text and the introduction could have been made much easier to use, the book is by far the best resource on the avifauna of this region. I hope the publisher will consider a CD-ROM version with the addition of vocalizations and more illustrations.

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