

BOOK REVIEW

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Birds of Baja California. Sanford R. Wilbur. 1987. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. ix + 253 pp., 1 black and white plate, 12 black and white photographs. Price: \$40.00 hardcover.

Baja California, Mexico, is the world's second longest peninsula—over 1200 kilometers long and bounded on the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Sea of Cortez. Numerous islands dot both coasts, and generally the climate and vegetation types are arid. For the most part, the avifauna is similar to that of the Mediterranean, desert, and montane areas to the north in southern California. Because of the peninsula's isolation, perhaps the most striking feature of the bird life of Baja California is its general lack of differentiation at the species level from that of the nearby mainland.

Any isolated landmass, however, attracts the curious. For the peninsula, ornithological investigation began in earnest in 1858 with John Xantus' arrival at Cabo San Lucas and continued at a steady pace until the mid 1920s. By this time many parts of Baja California had been carefully explored, and all information to date was critically reviewed and presented in Joseph Grinnell's benchmark 1928 work *A Distributional Summation of the Ornithology of Lower California* (Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool. 32:1-300). So thorough and complete was Grinnell's effort that it is still the starting point (and in many cases also the last word) in any study of bird distribution in the region. For the next four decades bird study proceeded slowly, until 1973 when the completion of the transpeninsular highway provided easier access to the interior and the Sea of Cortez and the emergence of the whale-watching industry allowed many observers to visit the islands and large lagoons of the west coast by boat. Since then there has been an upsurge of interest and a steady increase in the amount of information being gathered on bird status and distribution in Baja California.

Birds of Baja California has resulted from this amassing of recent data. The book begins with a brief overview of the peninsula's cultural and geographic setting, describing its various faunal districts and life zones. No new information is presented here, but it is helpful for those unfamiliar with the region. I was pleased to see a section devoted to conservation efforts and needs, but I wished there had been greater depth of discussion on the status of the more sensitive species and ecosystems. This is important in light of the increasing pressure brought by the rapid expansion of Mexico's human population and the resulting national and international demands on the region's marine and terrestrial resources.

The major portion of the book is an annotated list detailing the known status and distribution of the approximately 400 species of birds occurring in the Mexican states of Baja California Norte and Baja California Sur, in adjacent waters, and on nearby islands (including some records from Isla Guadalupe to the west but not including the Revillagigedo Islands to the south). Each account includes a Mexican bird name, derived from Birkenstein and Tomlinson, but unfortunately the complete citation of this important and useful reference (*Native Names of Mexican Birds*, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Publication 139, 1981) was omitted. Each species account also includes a list of the subspecies (if any) known from Baja California. These lists seem to have been copied directly from the 1957 A.O.U. Check-list, as they give no evidence of research on subspecies since then, for example, Short and Crossin's discrediting of the supposed northern Baja California race of Acorn Woodpecker, *Melanerpes formicivorus* "martirensis." Wilbur cites their paper in several other instances but evidently ignored in it the new information on subspecies. Especially because many Baja California races differ strikingly from mainland forms (e. g., in the Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Cactus Wren, and Yellow-eyed Junco) it is a shame that subspecies are treated so superficially. After the annotated list we

are given a hypothetical list, a "selected" bibliography, a list of place names with corresponding map references, and a check-list of common names.

Ornithologists who work in Baja California and are familiar with Grinnell's work will wonder what this book provides that Grinnell did not. Although as many as 61 more species have been recorded since 1928, most have already been reported elsewhere in the literature. Only 21 species new to the region (by my count) are reported in print for the first time here, and apparently only one of these observations (Bronzed Cowbird) is the author's. These records are not identified as such in the book; Wilbur also gives no indication of whether he realized that many of his records constitute remarkable range extensions. For the most part, Wilbur's book is a re-presentation of published information from Grinnell and others, embellished with sight records from the field notes of the author and a number of other observers who were contacted and submitted their data. Unfortunately, the search for knowledgeable observers was not as thorough as it could have been.

Since no supporting documentation is presented, the reader is expected to accept Wilbur's critical review of the validity of many of these sight records. To a certain extent this limits the usefulness of this book, for even though observers' names and initials are given, chasing down addresses and obtaining details of specific sight records could be a time-consuming and frustrating process. The long-term scientific value of this work could have been greatly enhanced by having the supporting data on file and available at an appropriate institution. My suspicions regarding the overall credibility of the data were aroused when the first species account I looked at (Black-vented Shearwater) contained an error: the species is reported as breeding on Isla Cedros on the basis of a literature citation and the observations of one of the contributors. Upon further investigation I found that the paper in question made no mention of breeding, and when I contacted the individual whose observations were cited he informed me that he had reported only seeing the species "near" the island. Another mistake is in the account of Lucy's Warbler. Jehl may have seen the species at the San Benito Islands, but not in 1960, which was years before he started his work in the region. Beyond such *prima facie* errors, some of the reported sightings are so outlandish that they cast a shadow over the other, possibly valid, records. Xantus' Hummingbirds are most certainly not "common" at San Telmo, over 400 kilometers north of their normal range. Bendire's Thrashers are occasional vagrants to coastal southern Alta California, so a record or two from Baja California should not be too surprising. But "irregularly seen" between San Felipe and Puertecitos and six on Isla Cedros strain credibility, especially because Wilbur conveys no inkling that either he or the observers knew the species was unrecorded in Baja California. One could devise a continuum of believability of Wilbur's records, passing from these reports through such things as Water Pipits in the Sierra San Pedro Martir on 3 August to plausible range extensions such as Brown Creepers in those same mountains (that species had not been reported previously south of the Laguna Mountains of San Diego County). By indiscriminately mixing the wheat and the chaff Wilbur has obscured, not elucidated, the distribution of many Baja California birds.

I am also disappointed by a lack of consistency in the manner in which previously published records are cited. In some cases (e.g., Red-tailed Tropicbird and Mountain Bluebird) Wilbur cites Grinnell, even though his bibliography contains the original references to the specific records in question. Other records (e.g., Cinnamon Teal and Northern Mockingbird on Isla Guadalupe) he reports on the basis of personal communications when additional pertinent data can be found in the published accounts. I also wonder why the record of Eastern Kingbird rejected by Grinnell was accepted by Wilbur without explanation or comment.

Those who are interested in bird distribution at specific locales in Baja California (especially islands) will find their work increased by the need to cross-reference this book to the older literature. Again, some previously published records are included and some are excluded, perhaps according to the significance attached to them by this author. Also, the lack of specific details in some accounts presents difficulties. For example, Pomarine Jaegers are reported from Islas Todos Santos, San Martin, Cedros, and San Benito. Were they actually seen on the islands, or nearby? If nearby, how close to the islands?

In all fairness, it must be kept in mind that one can rarely be as thorough as one would like to be. But this raises the question of the purpose of this book and its intended audience. *Birds of Baja California* has been given the price and trappings of a major new treatise when it seems at best to be an "interim" work, a summary of established information combined with a useful but unremarkable number of new records. The fact that it is published by the University of California Press suggests it is an academic endeavor. If this were the case, I would have expected more information from specimen collections, particularly from the extensive post-Grinnell Baja California collections at the San Diego Natural History Museum. Apparently, Wilbur never visited this museum, even though it contains one of the largest collections of Baja California birds. I tend to agree with the seventeen co-authors of a 1981 commentary in the *Auk* (Ornithology as Science, Vol. 98:636-637) that records in regional summaries published by scientific organizations should be supported with documentation. I am also surprised at the apparent lack of involvement, contribution, and review by Mexican ornithologists. Several prominent Mexican researchers have been working in the region for nearly a decade, and until very recently they were not even aware that this publication is available!

If this work was never intended to be a rigorous and thorough scientific document, I would have expected more information of interest to the layman, such as guides to better birdwatching locations, seasonal distribution bar graphs, and additional information on the identification and life history of the few endemic species. It would also not be necessary to include so many specific references and credits for each account. The list of place names is helpful but the map is poor, so the traveler would be well advised to take along a copy of the detailed gazetteer in Grinnell's book as well as one of the commercially available maps (e. g., the excellent Baja Topographic Atlas Directory published by Topography International, Inc.).

This brings me to my final complaint about this work: the price. I fail to see the justification for the cost of the book. There are no color plates or photographs. It is nicely bound and printed on good quality paper, but that alone is not worth \$40.00. Certainly it is well beyond what most Mexican students can afford, and more than I would expect the general public to pay. It would be far less expensive to photocopy the entire work. If this book had to be published, an inexpensive paperback version would have been preferable.

Despite its many weaknesses, this publication has several benefits. Since copies of Grinnell's work are so hard to come by, this present book, with all its flaws, is the only concise reference to the bird-life of Baja California available to the general public. There are quite a few specific new reports which are of great interest, even though many of these must be considered hypotheses for testing rather than scientific fact. The post-Grinnell literature citations are very useful. The most compelling reasons for coming out with this work at this time are to establish a benchmark against which future changes can be compared, and to publicize the need for conservation efforts in Baja California and the Sea of Cortez. I would have preferred to see a more rigorously reviewed and briefer paper presenting only new data, or a book as detailed, reliable, and useful as Grinnell's.