

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Small Gulls of North America**, with Jon Dunn. 1999. The Advanced Birding Video Series. Peregrine Video Productions. 177 minutes viewing time. VHS stereo. \$34.95 plus \$6.50 shipping and handling.

Birders have long appreciated the value of a guide or manual that is comprehensive in its discussion of identification and its portrayal of intraspecific plumage variability. The first two offerings of the Advanced Birding Video Series clearly illustrate the advantage of video over print media in achieving these goals, particularly with taxa as variable as gulls. Those impressed with the high quality of *The Large Gulls of North America* will not be disappointed in this follow-up volume covering North America's smaller gull species. In short, *The Small Gulls of North America* has even more of what made volume 1 so useful.

This video provides 177 minutes viewing time covering 14 small and medium-sized gull species. After a brief overview of gull topography, it discusses each species in considerable detail. The duration of this discussion averages about 12.3 minutes per species, with a range of 9.25 for the discussion of the Ross's Gull to an amazing 30.7 for the Mew Gull. Thus the species accounts are significantly longer than those in *The Large Gulls*, which average about 8.7 minutes per species. For each species the general breeding range, wintering range, and patterns of dispersal and migration are described, followed by comprehensive discussions of temporal and spatial occurrence that include a great deal of detail on vagrancy. Information on natural history, habitat associations, and behavior is sprinkled here and there, though this video clearly focuses on identification and intraspecific variability rather than ecology. After brief overview of the general size and shape of each species, the plumages are described in detail, starting with the adult and followed by juvenile, first basic, and subsequent plumages leading to the adult. Video, or at least stills, of nearly all plumages is depicted, and the date and location are indicated for many images.

The narrative is clearly and concisely written, and Dunn's soft narration is easily understood. Occasional references to Dunn's own experience (e.g., the degree of variation in a given plumage or character) not only personalize the video but also give the viewer confidence in the well-researched, up-to-date information presented.

The advantage of video over print media in dealing with tough identification issues lies in its ability to illustrate minute details of plumage and morphology, to show "real-life" shape, behavior, and flight style under different conditions and from a variety of angles, and to depict a wide range of variability within species. This video uses stop-action and slow-motion video, split screens, composite images, and descriptive text and captions even more liberally than in the first volume, where these features were used so effectively. Where differences in the calls of similar species are useful in identification, they are usually played back to back.

Discussion of tough identification issues, such as the separation of the two kittiwakes or of adult Laughing vs. second-alternate Franklin's gulls, is thorough and well supported by appropriate images. One of the strongest points of this video, however, is the attention to detail on intraspecific variability. The inability of most field guides to cover variability within species, owing to space constraints, has always been a source of frustration for me, and I've often wondered whether aberrant individuals or extreme variants of one species may be mistaken for another. Before viewing this video, I made a mental list of unusual features I had seen (e.g., first-year Ring-billed Gulls with nearly all-dark rectrices, a first-year Bonaparte's Gull with extensive dark markings on the upperwing so it resembled a Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gulls with red-based bills) to test how thoroughly variation was described. This video at least mentioned, and usually provided images of, nearly all of the examples I had personally seen. Most of the species treated in this video do not have well-differentiated subspecies, but the detailed account of Mew Gull's racial variation is unparalleled.

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For an undertaking this immense and complex, I found surprisingly few points to quibble about. Most of my criticisms concern cases in which the images shown are either at odds with, or are not explained by, the narration or text. For example, narration concerning the extent of black in the wingtips of adult Mew and Ring-billed Gulls accompanies a photo caption stating “white in wingtip,” while comparison of “adult and 1st-winter” Black-legged Kittiwakes accompanies photos captioned “adult” and “1st-alternate.” On the images of the Kamchatka (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) and Common (*L. c. canus*) Mew Gulls presented, I was unable to discern a clear difference in primary pattern, even though the narration stated that the “white wedge that separates the gray bases from the black distal portions of the central primaries” in the Kamchatka is supposedly lacking in the Common. Images of a leucistic Heermann’s Gull were not labeled as such and were shown during narration concerning the species’ breeding range, while an adult Ring-billed Gull with a dark eye was labeled as such but was not discussed at all in the narration. I applaud the number of images, and the amount of discussion, of unusual variation in this video, but showing such images without explanation may result in confusion for some viewers. In a few cases, attempts to illustrate a narrative point failed visually because the image did not clearly show the character in question. For example, one of the two composite images comparing the relative sizes of the white primary tips of adult Mew and Ring-billed Gulls failed to show the difference described. The addition of date and location to some cuts is very welcome, but I suggest these data be mandatory for all cuts and photos, not simply some. Similar criticisms were pointed out in a review of *The Large Gulls* (*Western Birds* 29:480–481), and future installments in this series might address these points more fully.

I was curious as to why two species, the Gray (*L. modestus*) and Band-tailed (*L. belcheri*) gulls, were not even mentioned in the video. Because both are so rare on this continent, and because some may question the origin of the individuals that have occurred in North America, I can understand why neither had its own species account. Both pose potential identification problems, however (with the Heermann’s and Black-tailed Gull, respectively), and some mention of these potential identification issues should have been made.

Because of the length of the video and the incredible amount of information it contains, even the most experienced “larophile” will have to sift through *The Small Gulls* a little at a time, over and over again. However, this video is not merely a “gull encyclopedia,” a reference to be opened only when one has a question concerning a certain plumage or character. Beginning birders will benefit from watching (albeit in small bites) the species accounts, both to gain an appreciation for variability within species and to begin building the knowledge necessary to distinguish them. Producer John Vanderpoel and the writers of both of these gull identification volumes are to be commended for producing that rarest of bird identification materials: something that appeals to the most avid fanatic while bringing the identification of these extremely tricky birds within the grasp of beginning birders. Anyone even remotely interested in gull identification should own both of these videos.

Stephen C. Rottenborn

**Owls: A Guide to Owls of the World**, by Claus König, Friedhelm Weick, and Jan-Hendrik Becking. 1999. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT. 320 pp., 64 color plates. Hardback \$50.00. ISBN 0-300-07920-6.

This latest in the Yale/Pica series (hereafter *Owls*) treats 212 species of owls: 18 of Tytonidae (barn owls) and 194 of Strigidae (typical owls). These figures compare with 16 and 189 species recognized by Bruce (1999) and Marks et al. (1999), respectively, in volume five of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (hereafter *HBW5*); these discrepancies reflect taxonomic differences of opinion. The introduction to *Owls*