

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Sibley Guide to Birds**, by David Allen Sibley. 2000. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 544 pp. Paperback. \$35.00. ISBN 0-679-45122-6.

"There is order in the universe, and birds are no exception." Welcome to the Sibley guide (p. 10) and the sixth-order tantric chakra, related to the act of seeing, both physically and intuitively. This long-awaited work provides an American answer to the increasingly detailed volumes covering other continents, particularly Europe. Whatever quibbling follows, let me emphasize that no student of birds is too green or jaded to benefit greatly from the art and observations in this guide.

Sibley treats approximately 744 native and vagrant species plus 66 introduced and domestic species. The third edition of the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (NG3) treats about 60 additional vagrants and species of far offshore waters, so most serious birders will want both guides. I would have preferred more complete coverage, particularly of species that pose identification pitfalls (e.g., the Red-tailed Tropicbird, which likely occurs regularly in North American waters), but the Sibley guide's omission of ultra-rare species can be viewed as a progressive step toward a less ego-driven world—one where birders more clearly recognize that our most profound contributions to field ornithology and conservation are made through such communitarian undertakings as breeding-bird atlases, Christmas Bird Counts, and purposeful bird-banding. Such projects require sound grounding in the local avifauna rather than esoteric knowledge of Siberian specialties.

Acknowledging an increasingly chaotic state of affairs around the species level, and that most subspecies cannot be identified reliably in the field, Sibley opted to portray intraspecific variability by a system of "natural ecological regions" in place of subspecific designations. Thus, Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*) becomes the "west taiga" form, while the partially migratory Puget Sound (*Z. l. pugetensis*) and sedentary Nuttall's (*Z. l. nuttalli*) races constitute the "Pacific" group. Motivated readers are directed to admirably detailed subspecies accounts posted at [www.sibleyart.com](http://www.sibleyart.com). This approach may be as valid as any, given the deep split between practitioners of the phylogenetic and biological species concepts, but I perceive no compelling reason why currently recognized subspecies names were not correlated to Sibley's alternative system in the guide—what is gained by banishing this basic information to a web page that many readers will never visit?

Fourteen pages of introductory material warrant a close read, as they outline Sibley's approach to the subject material and provide unusually insightful information on bird topography, hybrids, aberrant plumages, molt, and other topics central to birding and ornithology. Species accounts stretch vertically, and each is headed by at least two in-flight illustrations, with flight silhouettes for selected species. Each family or major group begins with a summary page or spread describing the group's characteristics and showing small images of each species, arranged by genera. Not only will newer birders find their match quicker, but I expect that those who start by learning the genera, rather than each species independently, will cultivate a deeper knowledge of birds and their identification. This is one subtle, but important, way in which the Sibley guide has the potential to advance American birding.

The benefits of the book's distinctive layout (e.g., visual appeal and ease of comparison between plates) are not without costs. Most importantly, the rigid columnar format limits the possibility of image sizes being modified to show greater detail where warranted, or to otherwise use space judiciously. Readers will find scattered inconsistencies of scale, such as those between the Least and American bitterns and the Bonaparte's and Black-headed gulls, and note that sexual dimorphism is lacking in the genus *Accipiter*. Groups that could have benefited from larger image sizes include the tropicbirds, boobies, several hawks and gulls, and the *Oporornis* and *Wilsonia* warblers.

Birders have long expected field guides to feature in-flight depictions of seabirds, ducks, hawks, and gulls, but I was somewhat skeptical about the value of extending this

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convention to every species. As it turns out, these flight shots significantly improve Sibley's presentation by showing important wing and tail details and helping to convey each species' unique character. Considering the author's reputation for identifying birds by sounds as seemingly anonymous as a flight note, I was pleased to find the voice descriptions unusually detailed and helpful. The occasional eastern bias creeps through, however, such as the comparison of the Orange-crowned Warbler's call note to that of a Field Sparrow—western readers can substitute here the Black-chinned Sparrow (or a simple "tsit"). Special sections focused on topics such as the identification of swans, scaup, peeps, *Spizella* sparrows, and meadowlarks are stimulating and informative, often discussing plumages, structural features, and even behaviors that open both the eyes and the mind. Reminders that some birds may not be identifiable appear with welcome regularity.

Above all, Sibley is a formidable and attentive field ornithologist, and his distinctive artwork melds the birder's eye for proportion, posture, and feather patterns with the artist's gift for breathing depth and life into two dimensions. He employs annotated pointers to draw attention to key identifying features more quickly and effectively than text ever could. Particularly impressive plates include the shorebirds, hummingbirds (despite some tail-pattern miscues that could have benefited from a check of museum specimens), *Empidonax* flycatchers, chickadees through creepers, pipits and wag-tails, tanagers, sparrows, and icterids. Larophiles will appreciate 26 nicely executed Herring Gull images, but Sibley's semi-impressionistic style fails to capture fine details characteristic of certain other medium-sized and large gulls, such as Thayer's, and stark the white backgrounds detract from all of the gull and tern plates. The warblers are generally excellent—exceptionally dull Pine Warblers were a piece of cake for me on a recent Maryland trip—although western Orange-crowned Warblers appear too coarsely streaked and lack their distinctive pale marginal coverts. Apparent printing irregularities in my copy include overly intense rufous tones (on the Brown Thrasher, for example) and washed-out greens on the vireos. When will publishers care enough to reproduce colors faithfully? All things considered, however, Sibley's artwork outshines that available elsewhere, and no other guide approaches the range of plumage variation depicted here.

Range maps constitute the book's only true disappointment. Among numerous errors evident in southern California and adjacent areas, the Yellow-rumped Warbler, Summer Tanager, and Green-tailed Towhee are shown breeding along the southern California coast, the coastal range of the Chestnut-backed Chickadee stops around San Francisco Bay (this species occurs south to Santa Barbara County), the west coast is mistakenly shown as a "main migration route" for the American Golden-Plover, Baja California Sur lacks its wintering Clay-colored Sparrows, and many seabirds strictly pelagic in this region are shown ranging along our immediate coast. Additionally, the use of green dots to illustrate broad patterns of rare occurrence is problematic, at least in California. For example, the Painted and American redstarts are depicted similarly in southern California although the latter species is about a hundred times more common than the former, and the exceptionally scarce Cape May Warbler is granted considerably more California dots than most regularly occurring eastern vagrants. For now, the maps in NG3 are far more readable and reliable—another good reason not to relegate "old faithful" to the shelf just yet.

An accomplished guide can facilitate the student's journey toward the rarified echelon of wisdom and consciousness represented by the seventh, or crown, chakra. Most birders alive today were assisted along their paths by Roger Tory Peterson's remarkable combination of observational, writing, and artistic talents, and it is gratifying to see David Sibley emerge from Peterson's long shadow to lead a new generation of seekers toward birding's next level.

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