

BOOK REVIEWS

Sibley's Birding Basics, by David Allen Sibley. 2002. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 154 pp. Paperback. \$15.95. ISBN 0-375-70966-5.

Every once in a while a book comes along and you think, "how is it that this wasn't done before?" *Sibley's Birding Basics* (hereafter *Basics*) is one such book. Its audience is really anyone who looks at birds in the field, beginner or expert—don't be fooled by the title. Beginners will find huge amounts of useful information to help them improve and refine their skills; experts will be reminded of their learning curves, have some things reinforced, and perhaps think, "wow, that's a really good way to think of such-and-such." Those of us who teach will be in a far better position to help others if we read this book—it cuts to the quick on a wide range of subjects in a clear, easy-going style. As well as good text, the book is liberally illustrated by thoughtful and well-executed sketches and paintings—each worth hundreds of words, if not a thousand each.

As the introduction to *Basics* states, this book is about interpreting what you see and hear in order to make better judgments—it is not a guide to the identification of any specific bird. Birdwatching can be practiced in many ways, from casual feeder watching to focused field ornithology. The common thread is an ability to see, to observe, and to interpret one's observations, whether it be to tell a male Northern Cardinal from a male Summer Tanager at the feeder or to distinguish the songs of Dusky and Hammond's flycatchers while recording data for a breeding-bird atlas. *Basics* comprises 16 short chapters that range from getting started watching birds to wing structure and molt. Chapters 1–5 cover introductory basics about being in the field and how to judge what one sees; chapters 6–15 cover important background topics, an understanding of which will strengthen any field observer's skills, and Chapter 16 is the obligatory note on ethics and conservation.

The first chapter emphasizes learning to see details, gaining experience, the importance of reading, and how to use your binoculars efficiently. One tip I might add to this last section is to learn roughly where the various focusing distances lie on the focus wheel and then to put the binoculars to your eyes *while you're looking at the bird*. That is, put the glass directly between you and the bird, then tweak the focus—don't take your eyes off the bird. Chapter 2 discusses field skills, including many things a lot of us take for granted, plus the importance of taking notes and sketching—things many of us don't do as much as we might. Chapter 3 runs through the challenges of bird identification, discussing sorting skills, the use of relative, proportional, and average differences among species, and how the mind can use (or misuse) partial clues. Chapter 4 covers misidentification: how and why it occurs, mainly because of misjudgment. Chapter 5 is a suitably brief discussion of identifying rare birds.

It is in chapters 6–15 that most readers of *Western Birds* may be most interested. Chapter 6 is a quick overview of taxonomy and emphasizes the importance of learning the genus of each bird—far more important for grouping similar species than trying to use common names. Chapter 7 points out the importance of behavioral clues in identification, and Chapter 8 is a very helpful overview of vocalizations, with tips on how to describe songs and calls in the field. Chapter 9, on understanding feathers, is the longest chapter and one that may take the greatest time for a beginner to assimilate. But the investment is well worth it, and anyone who absorbs most or all of this information will be far ahead of the pack when it comes to understanding what he or she sees in the field. Three sketches show passerine anatomy and eleven show nonpasserines ranging from the Great Blue Heron to the Rufous Hummingbird. As well as perusing these figures, remember to read the accompanying text. One point of potential disagreement in this chapter might be for tertials, which are treated as the three innermost secondaries, whose function is to cover and protect the other secondaries. Passerines generally do have three well-defined tertials, but how many tertials do gulls or some other nonpasserines have? Chapter 10 goes on to relate feather arrangements and color patterns, showing how the most complex patterns

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usually have a simple foundation. Chapter 11 covers the structure and mechanics of tails and wings, again with numerous illustrations. A brief discussion of bare parts (or soft parts) is the subject of chapter 12, although, for no clear reason, legs and feet are not mentioned. Chapter 13 is a well-written overview of molt, including a clear comparison between the Humphrey-Parkes system and the traditional life-year system. Chapter 14 discusses feather wear and its consequences for the appearance of a bird, and chapter 15 covers age-related variation.

And that's it. A real gem in the world of bird books. One suggestion for readers of *Basics*: don't sit down and try to read it all at one sitting: it will overwhelm you, even though it's basic information. Read a chapter or two at a time, and read some chapters more than once. Dip into it from time to time to refresh your memory, and recommend it to any birder who wants to improve his or her skills.

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