

BOOK REVIEWS

Raptors of Western North America, by Brian K. Wheeler. 2003. Princeton University Press. 544 pp. Hardback. ISBN 0-691-11599-0.

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Even in the brave new world of in-depth family monographs, Brian Wheeler's two volumes tread where few have wandered before. North America has long lacked a guide comparable to Dick Forsman's brilliant *The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East*, and Wheeler is the first to attempt to remedy this situation. The result is monumental, staggering in its scope, and, quite frankly, a mixed bag. If nothing else these books break new ground in the world of raptor identification: there are a lot of ideas that go beyond what has been suggested before, many of which need to be tested in the field, some that may become standard in the future, others that will fall by the wayside. In two books with such detail there is a tremendous amount of material to review. And while there are many errors, omissions, or nit-picky details to quibble over, it must be said that this is a highly commendable, deeply personal, and intensely scholarly effort on Wheeler's part—all North American birders and raptor specialists have much to learn from these books.

The layout of these two books is extremely helpful. The introduction, of 30-plus pages, pulls together extensive glossaries of raptor morphology and descriptions of molting patterns and plumage characteristics. Even more fascinating are two introductory chapters that describe types of flying and perching displays, along with photographs of each display. The bulk of the books comprises exhaustive species accounts (33 species in the western guide, 26 species in the eastern) complete with a blizzard of dazzling close-up photographs and the most detailed range maps ever compiled for North American raptors. These accounts cover, in overwhelming detail, descriptions of age, molt, subspecies, color morphs, size, species traits, traits of every conceivable age class, abnormal plumages, habitat, habits, feeding, voice, status and distribution (with subsections on summer, winter, movements, and extralimital occurrences), nesting, conservation, similar species, and other names. If you lose track of the bird at hand in this long listing you're not alone, but there's a wealth of great information here.

Having said all this, I have to ask a question on many people's minds: why two books? Only one species (the Snail Kite) makes it into the eastern guide but not the Western, and huge portions of the text and nearly all the photographs are identical. In fact, it's a tremendous limitation to not have western and eastern range maps side by side, not to mention the sections on status and distribution. It's likely the publisher wanted to generate extra book sales or felt that there was too much material for a single book, but if you look closely you will see excessive repetition that should have been cut in editing. For example, a lengthy treatment of the effects of pesticides is repeated virtually verbatim in the accounts of the Bald Eagle, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, and possibly other species, rather than being presented once and referenced elsewhere.

Verbiage is definitely a problem in these books. Forsman's book on European raptors elegantly and simply leads readers through each species' distinctive age and sex classes with helpful phrases like "juveniles are easily told by their..." "in flight, upwings show a diagnostic...", and "adult females can be separated from males by their..." Wheeler, in contrast, approaches each age and sex class with an exhaustive description while scarcely noting those features that distinguish a juvenile from an adult or a male from a female. The descriptions are accurate to the nth degree, but the reader probably merely wants to know what key feature(s) to look for. For example, Wheeler describes the "subadult" Bald Eagle for five pages and takes five pages to

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describe 27 morphs of the juvenile Red-tailed Hawk. It's a lot of work to pick through this for the information you need.

This problem is particularly acute in the photo captions, where readers can legitimately expect to find the pithiest features highlighted in some hierarchical manner. Instead, each caption merely lists the bird's obvious features, and there is no attempt to rank unique diagnostic features. Thus arise situations like the photos of adult male and female Ferruginous Hawks side by side, both with lengthy (7- and 8-line) descriptive captions. The reader is reduced to scanning the captions line by line while holding a finger or ruler on each line to mark his place, hoping to find a feature that separates the sexes. This frustrating exercise is further necessitated because the massively detailed species account doesn't appear to mention sexual differences even once. Much better would be captions that simply read "adult males are recognized by their characteristic..." etc.

Mention is made above of the category "subadult" used in these books. This is perhaps the most controversial and difficult-to-defend aspect of Wheeler's treatments of plumage sequence. Although Wheeler claims to use the Humphrey-Parkes system of naming plumages, he goes on (p. 23) to say that the term "subadult" is used "synonymously with 'basic' plumage and/or age." But the imprecise term "subadult" was never used in the Humphrey-Parkes system, and its use was also discouraged by William Clark in the September 2003 issue of *Wingspan*, the newsletter of the Raptor Research Foundation. Furthermore, Wheeler's use of "late-stage juvenile" versus "early-stage juvenile" (terms not defined anywhere I found) is ambiguous. In some cases the plumage may be unmolted (western guide plate 19 of the Turkey Vulture), in others a molt is involved (western guide plate 525 of the American Kestrel)—in which case the bird is *not* a juvenile by the Humphrey-Parkes system. Raptor molt is relatively straightforward, but these books lead one to believe otherwise.

The photos deserve special mention because they are the heart and soul of these books. In one word, superb! Never before has there been such a montage of stellar, close-up raptor photos compiled in a single source: Red-tailed Hawks alone are covered in 82 photos depicting more color morphs than you imagined possible. It's tempting to rave about this coverage, but it's equally sober to question how often do we see raptors in such detail? The books would be better suited to field identification if they also included images of distant raptors overhead—as we often see them in the field. And there are curious omissions in the photos: why no adult male Merlin in flight, for instance, why no dorsal view of a juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk in flight (a very common view at raptor-migration sites)?

Beyond these broad comments, there are countless places for smaller critiques. There are range maps that cut off important geographic regions; for example, the Mississippi Kite map omits California and the 25 or so records at the western edge of this species' wanderings. The status and distribution sections are detailed, but they are unreferenced and so have little if any scientific value; for example, what data were used to map the remarkably detailed breeding ranges shown in Mexico for the Goshawk, Golden Eagle, and Zone-tailed Hawk? There are anomalies in the introductory glossaries (why is BLM defined but not USFS? why is thornbush defined? why define geographic features like "fall line" but not the Great Basin?). Why is the Zone-tailed Hawk not listed as a similar species in the account of the Turkey Vulture?!

Despite some drawbacks, these are still marvelous books that present a range of detail never before attempted in a book on North American raptors. Even top-notch raptor biologists will find many nuggets in the maps, images, and descriptions. Where there are problems, Wheeler merely sets the stage for future study and inquiry, challenging all of us to follow or modify his ideas with our own feedback.

David Lukas