

**Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast**, by Joan Easton Lentz, with photos by Don DesJardin. 2006. University of California Press. 240 pages, 120 color illustrations, 51 line illustrations, 16 maps. Paperback \$19.95 (ISBN 0-520-24321-8). Hardback \$55.00.

The southern California coast is a deservedly renowned hotspot for birdwatchers, a place where birds of colder northern waters mingle with a fascinating mix of warm-water birds. In places along this coast the movements of migrating birds are nothing short of astounding. And the southern coast offers a number of important, though now much reduced, estuaries and coastal marshes that attract a scintillating variety of species that somehow manage to cope with the onslaught of development and pollution.

Although much could be written, and has been written, about the avifauna of this area, it is laudable that the University of California Press has published the first introductory guide to draw beginners and the general public into an appreciation of this region's birdlife. While there may not be much in this guide for an advanced birder, it is certainly an ideal text for "the hikers, naturalists, residents, and travelers" listed on the back-cover blurb. The writing is straightforward and jargon-free, with all relevant topics covered in just enough depth to be clear for the first-time student.

Arranged very simply, *Birds of the Southern California Coast* is divided into an Introduction, Species Accounts, and Birding Sites Along the Coast. Appendices provide seasonal bar graphs, a chart of shorebird sizes, and a brief introduction to gull identification. The book covers the area between the southern boundary of Monterey County (near Point Piedras Blancas) and the Mexican border and encompasses common coastal habitats as well as upland habitats on adjacent marine terraces. Accounts of 120 species include all of the most common and characteristic birds found in these habitats.

For its intended audience this book has few faults. It presents the region, its bird life, and basic birdwatching skills with a deft touch that is sure to please any newcomer. Clear, well-chosen photos by Don DesJardin provide a strong visual element to the species accounts, while the excellent maps and illustrations round out the overall appeal of this guide.

The introductory section on "How Coastal Birds Live" is particularly interesting in its detail. For instance, the statement that "Ornithologists speculate that feeding in different localities on the mudflats may lessen the competition for food sources in a uniform habitat," is followed by a fairly sophisticated description of the niches used by various species and the specific foods found in each niche. This level of information is insightful and informative in a way that both welcomes beginners yet provides facts that even experts find useful. Likewise, descriptions of migrating seabirds, shorebirds,

## BOOK REVIEWS

and waterfowl are so juicy that they will make readers itch for days in the field regardless of their level of expertise.

Overall, however, this book suffers from a fate common to many introductory guides: an overemphasis on “basic” rather than “introductory.” To wit, why must introductory guides diminish the intellectual rigor of their subjects rather than lead the newcomer into a growing appreciation of the topic with some degree of vigor?

Although the text in this book is well written and technically correct, it is often simplified to the point of blandness. For instance, the species account for the Gadwall simply calls it a “fairly common migrant,” when the text could have just as easily mentioned important information like arrival and departure dates, abundance, or habitats used—not to mention its recent explosive increase in the area as a breeding species. It’s not clear why such facts aren’t considered part of an introduction to the region’s bird life.

Other examples include statements like, “Between the headlands are beaches, where sand is deposited by waves.” Elsewhere, estuaries are described merely as places where “there is a constant ebb and flow of freshwater and saltwater” with few other details. Likewise, I found sentences like “Eared and Horned Grebes are separated in winter plumage by their cheek patches,” not terribly useful because readers are given no additional details.

When applied to the species accounts, this kind of language fills up a lot of unnecessary space with sentences such as those that begin the Canada Goose account and continue for one-third of a page: “In pastures in December or January, a loose flock of geese walks slowly among the stubble. As the geese feed, they bend their long necks to nibble at the waste grain.” Ultimately, this doesn’t leave much space for the kinds of fine points and facts that could make a beginner excited, or even knowledgeable, about a new subject. For example, the Barn Swallow account is notably more interesting when it talks about how the tail length of male Barn Swallows in Europe has increased by 10% in the past 20 years in an amazing show of rapid evolutionary change!

This emphasis on “basic” carries over into the selection of topics found in the introduction, where there are sections on “Birding Basics” and the kinds of binoculars and field guides to buy. Haven’t these topics been discussed countless times in other books, and why are they important in an introduction to the birds of the southern California coast? The space could have been better used truly introducing the habitats and lives of the region’s birds.

The concluding chapter “Birding Sites Along the Coast” is a stand-out section that will recommend this book to even the most accomplished birders. Excellent maps, clear directions, and plenty of local contact information make this chapter a valuable resource for finding the best birding sites along the southern California coast. This section will also make the book useful for out-of-town visitors who are trying to find those locations casually mentioned on rare bird reports and hotlines.

Finally, the appendices on shorebird sizes and gull identification are odd additions. It’s not exactly clear why a reader would want a table listing the relative sizes of the shorebirds mentioned in the book, or why the table wasn’t instead included with the section that introduced the shorebird species accounts. The gull identification appendix seems to want make the point simply that “True gull aficionados will wish to study gull plumage changes in depth. For beginners, however, the intricacies of gull identification can be overwhelming.” If essential to the book, the gull appendix at the very least would have benefited from a sequence of photographs introducing the ways that gull plumages change with age.

These quibbles aside, *Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast* is a solid, though in places overly simplified, book that would make a great gift for a beginning birder, newcomer to the area, or first-time visitor. And even advanced birders will find the section on southern California birding locations invaluable.

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