

BOOK REVIEWS

The volume is lavishly illustrated. Photographs depict Townsend's actual type specimens of the many new species he collected during his time in the West. There are illustrations of plants, animals, and personalities Townsend encountered. The Mearnses' own photographs depict locations and habitats that Townsend experienced. Maps detail both the route his expedition followed and the locations where various species were collected or sighted. Drawings and paintings by Audubon are of the western species Townsend found.

The appendices are a valuable resource for understanding Townsend's contribution to natural science. They trace such topics as the dispersal of Townsend's natural history collection through North America and Europe, by means of flow charts, and list his new species; his catalogue of bird specimens, including those from Tahiti, Chile, and the Hawaiian Islands, where he was one of the earliest collectors. There are 18 appendices in all, as well as an extensive bibliography of both unpublished and published sources.

The *Narrative* is again abridged, for the Mearnses have edited out some of the ethnographic material, but they have added excerpts, most concerning zoology, from Townsend's journal and personal letters to his family to supplement the text. Inserted collections within the text discuss particular topics of history and zoology. The Oregon State University Press edition (1999) remains the only unabridged reprint of Townsend's 1839 original, but this new volume adds so much material of historical, biographical, and zoological interest that students of western history and the progress of natural history in the United States will find it invaluable, a book to savor, a book worthy of that remarkable young man who visited the "Oregon country" in the 1830s and returned to enchant us with his narrative.

George A. Jobanek

Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country, by Robert Righter, Rich Levad, Coen Dexter, and Kim Potter. 2004. Grand Valley Audubon Society, Grand Junction, CO. 214 + x pages; numerous color and black-and-white illustrations, range maps, charts, and graphs. Softcover, \$29.95. ISBN 0-9743453-0-X.

There are a few tools that every field ornithologist needs—a serviceable pair of binoculars, for example, and an identification guide. Beginners are inclined toward porro prisms and a Peterson guide, whereas veteran field ornithologists tend toward high-end roof prisms and the Pyle guide. But the tools are basically the same.

There is another indispensable tool, a book on avian status and distribution ("S&D"). Like that for binoculars and identification guides, the need for this tool cuts across all levels of skill and experience. Beginners and veterans alike benefit immeasurably from owning—and regularly consulting—the major S&D guide or guides for their region. And in the case of S&D guides, there is basically no such thing as a beginner version vs. a veteran version: we all benefit from using our S&D guides regularly.

In my home state of Colorado, I refer to regional S&D guides daily. I take them into the bathroom with me. I read them to my kids at bedtime. I can't get enough of them. S&D guides help me to make sense of the complex and dynamic bird communities around my home in the Front Range region, and they also help me to appreciate the amazing avifaunal diversity of Colorado as a whole.

In Colorado and elsewhere, most bird populations are emphatically not evenly distributed across a state or province. Most observers know that in the case of uncommon and/or local populations—say, Grace's Warbler and Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Colorado. But we often fail to recognize distributional differences involving common

BOOK REVIEWS

species. An example in Colorado is the Swainson's Thrush, a species that occurs in ridiculous plentitude during spring migration on the eastern plains. Yet it is almost completely absent from Colorado's western valleys during spring migration, a fact that was gently pointed out to me by Coen Dexter following a talk that I gave in southwestern Colorado a few years ago. During my talk, I glibly stated that Swainson's Thrushes are common migrants in the lowlands—true enough in eastern Colorado, but completely false in western Colorado.

If I had done my homework, I would have known that. Robert Andrews and Robert Righter, in their *Colorado Birds: A Reference to Their Distribution and Habitat* (Denver Museum of Natural History, 1992), clearly state on p. 274 that the Swainson's Thrush is a common to abundant spring migrant on the eastern plains but that it "apparently is absent from the western valleys in migration, at least in the Grand Valley." I might also have consulted *Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country* (Grand Valley Audubon Society, 2004) by Robert Righter, Rich Levad, Coen Dexter, and Kim Potter. Righter and coauthors state on p. 143 that "even during spring and fall migration, [Swainson's Thrushes are] rarely found outside of breeding habitat."

Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country presents S&D data for 373 bird species in the area of coverage, an oblong region running north to south from Wyoming to New Mexico and east to west from Utah to a jagged curve connecting Steamboat Springs, Eagle, Gunnison, and Pagosa Springs. Most species accounts consist of four separate components that, taken together, present a remarkably detailed picture of S&D.

Let's look at these four components as they relate to the Swainson's Thrush. Naturally, we start with the map. It is a multi-color affair about 3 inches high and 1.5 inches wide. The map shows county borders (black dashes), rivers (blue lines), and elevation (shades of tan), and it indicates the breeding range of the Swainson's Thrush in burnt orange.

Of course, the Swainson's Thrush is not a permanent resident in western Colorado, so we turn to the second component: a bar graph showing seasonal abundance. The bar graph indicates that the Swainson's Thrush is uncommon to fairly common from mid-April to mid-May, then common to abundant from late May to late August, then uncommon to fairly common in early September, and then absent from the region thereafter.

The third component is one that I rarely see in S&D guides, but it is essential in any S&D guide for Colorado and, I would argue, for just about anywhere else in western North America. This third component is a graph that plots abundance as a function of elevation (vertical axis) and stage in the life cycle (horizontal axis). We see, for example, that in spring migration Swainson's Thrushes occur from 4500 to 8500 feet elevation but are rare everywhere. Fall migrants are rare, too, but they are annual to 10,500 feet and casual to 11,500 feet.

The fourth and final component is a written description. We learn here about microhabitat preferences on the breeding grounds, about altitudinal variation throughout the coverage region, and, oh yes, about the surprising paucity of birds found away from the breeding grounds.

We are all experts now on the status and distribution of the Swainson's Thrush in western Colorado. That expertise has immediate applications, of course, in the field. It importantly affects our judgments in the bird-identification arena, and it has clear implications in management and conservation settings. It is a sort of expertise that is also intrinsically satisfying. S&D is a fundamental aspect of field ornithology, not requiring any sort of "application." Understanding of S&D delights us in the same way that we are delighted by knowledge of molt and flight calls.

If there is one thing missing from the treatment of the Swainson's Thrush in *Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country*, it is information on subspecies. My assumption is that most or all of western Colorado's Swainson's Thrushes are

BOOK REVIEWS

of the widespread *swainsoni* group. Then again, we've seen that my assumptions regarding Swainson's Thrushes in western Colorado can be fallible. Do individuals of the *ustulatus* group pass through western Colorado? There have been a few recent reports from eastern Colorado, for what that's worth. I would have appreciated a little bit of discussion of the matter, even if it was as brief as "no confirmed occurrences of birds of *ustulatus* group" or "status of *ustulatus* group unknown in region." I hasten to point out that information on subspecies is, indeed, presented for many species in *Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country*. But it is missing for other species, such as the Swainson's Thrush. The treatment of subspecies by Righter and coauthors can most charitably be characterized as uneven, though this is due in part to the absence of recent taxonomic work.

Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country is a colorful book—literally and figuratively. I flipped forward a few pages to p. 114, where I see parti-colored maps, mildly psychedelic plots of altitude and life cycle, and gratuitous but pleasing cumulus clouds extending all the way across the top of the page. The text is colorful, too, and easy-going. In the treatment of the Western Kingbird at the bottom of p. 114, the text states that "western Colorado's entire breeding population seems to appear in about two or three days" and that "these birds disappear [in early September] almost as instantly as they appear in spring." Just as one speaks of "jizz" and "impression" in field identification, then, so one might refer to the essence and even the drama of S&D. Righter and coauthors tell us that "each day of the year, ravens probably soar over almost every square mile of western Colorado" (p. 126), and they describe "a memorable tanager-on-every-fencepost" fallout (p. 162). They tell us that the Grand Junction Christmas Bird Count records more Western Screech-Owls than does any other count (p. 84), and they speculate that the Calliope Hummingbird will soon be added to the list of confirmed breeders in Colorado (p. 100). It's exciting stuff, really.

S&D is fun, safe, and good for you, and that's how S&D is presented by Righter and coauthors. You'll learn a lot from this book. You'll become a better birder by using *Birds of Western Colorado Plateau and Mesa Country*. You might well apply it to important conservation and management actions. Mainly, though, you'll have a lot of fun.

Ted Floyd