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REVIEW: National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Third Edition, 1999

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Although not the most suitable guide for those only casually interested in birds, the newly revised version of this popular book should appeal to all who profess a serious interest. Currently our only field guide with up-to-date taxonomy and nomenclature, it also incorporates a distillation of the voluminous material on identification and distribution that has accumulated during the 16 years since publication of the second edition. Some 35 new color plates have been added, and others significantly changed, to accommodate forms and plumages not shown before. Eighty species covered in this book were not included in earlier editions. These considerations alone should convince you to part with the \$21.95 required to place a copy in your car or home.

Upon opening the book, one is struck by the new deeper colors on the distribution maps. They provide yet another incentive for purchase of this edition. Though the maps are no larger, some show a smaller geographic area, thus greater range detail. Careful perusal may reveal minor errors. I note, for example, that White-winged Dove is not shown as a permanent resident in southwestern New Mexico.

The 'Geographic' guide has always suffered from a lack of plate uniformity resulting from different painting styles, a condition exacerbated in this edition to which 20 different bird artists contributed. New plates, and separate figures added here and there (e.g. the pallid Mexican Jay), fit in poorly with the original art work. Too many plates, in my opinion, show an excess of foliage and other distracting accessory material. As before, many bird figures are on the small side (e.g. some shorebirds, gulls), and not always have the artists captured the essence of their birds, a factor of some importance in field guide illustration. There are occasional problems with proportions and/or general shapes (e.g. Common Nighthawks, certain finches and sparrows, flying swallows). Nevertheless, all of the plates are adequate. Indeed, some are exceptionally good, though others are not.

Plate changes abound. The loons, for example, two pages of them, are all new and much better than before. The improved albatrosses and several additional procellariiform birds are noteworthy. The booby plate is new and improved as well. Among the shorebirds are seven wholly new plates, two of them for plovers. One new *Calidris* plate provides better (though smaller) knots, Sanderlings, Curlew Sandpipers and Dunlins. Like the all new Buff-breasted, Upland, Pectoral and Sharp-tailed sandpiper page, however, it is too pale, in contrast to the older, darker shorebird paintings. Phalarope figures, 12 originally, now number over 20, and although small and pale, they should be more useful. Some other shorebird plates have been upgraded. That of the dowitchers, with 14 full figures instead of ten, conveys more information than before, as does the revised text.

The sparrow plates, not the best to begin with, are worse in the new edition, as color values have shifted from the original bright buffs and rufous browns to duller, dimmer hues. Extreme examples in my copies are the olive-gray Bachman's Sparrow and a plumbeous-chested Rufous-crowned. Some of the Fox Sparrows have suddenly evolved into different, darker subspecies, belying their (unwisely) provided racial designations. On the positive side, we have new sharp-tailed (seven figures of the two species) and LeConte's sparrows, all well-produced. (The old Seaside on the same plate have gone somewhat darker.) The new Vesper Sparrow, very different from the original, is hardly an improvement, and I do not know why. *Aimophila botterii texana* was deleted. Grayer than Arizona Botteri's, it was worth showing. Savannah Sparrow, so frequently misidentified (and not only by beginners) is still inadequately treated. Many birders who have problems with that species and other common sparrows may do better with a Peterson guide.

I was somewhat surprised to see that the slender-billed, dark race *taverneri* of Brewer's Sparrow, a likely candidate for future splitting (cf. Klicka et al., Condor 101: 577-588, 1999), is not illustrated. Originally described as a separate species, Timberline Sparrow, this form is only briefly referred to in the text where its bill is said to be larger than that of nominate *breweri* (contra Pyle, *Identification Guide to North American Birds*, 1997: 554).

Among the flycatchers, *Empidonax* are revealed in 33 full figures (plus 11 bills, from underneath), almost double the original number; but don't expect all things to be covered. Neither plates nor text, for example, will tell you that the bills of adult Dusky Flycatchers can be nearly all dark below, puzzling many an observer. On quick perusal, most *Empidonax* paintings appear reasonable, although the spring Cordilleran is much too dull. Again, new plates are incompatible with the old. Put yourself in a beginning birder's shoes and compare any *Empidonax* with the wood pewees immediately preceding. You'd not guess from the pictures that people could (and regularly do) confuse these birds. The text, alas, won't help anyone distinguish a pewee from an empid -- an example of the inappropriateness of the Geographic guide for inexperienced birders. The new *Myiarchus* plate might have been done more realistically, and in greater harmony with other flycatcher illustrations. The retained original plate of yellow-bellied kingbirds could have profited from one or two additional heads to bridge the extremes of Couch's and Tropical kingbirds bills shown. (The text fails to caution that these birds' bills can be impossibly similar in appearance.) The row of kingbird tails, poorly portrayed, could have been replaced by something more useful.

Additions to the mainly satisfactory parulid plates are Fan-tailed Warbler, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat and two more Yellow-breasted Chats. Some warbler figures suffer from increased color saturation. The immature Prairie, whose almost whitish undertail coverts were corrected in the second edition from their original yellow, has these feathers again concolorous with the bright belly. Similarly, the immature MacGillivray's is now too yellow-throated to appear typical. All the vireos are disappointing, especially the three new Warblings. Paintings of that species, Philadelphia and Gray in the first two editions all were superior to their replacements. The misleading stubby bills on the earlier editions' Hutton Vireos sneaked through again. Bell's Vireo still looks too neatly spectacled, and the kinglet on that plate is not quite right.

Several other mistakes remain uncorrected from the second edition. The breeding male Black-capped Gnatcatcher has the black extending much too far below the eye, and the juvenile Mexican Jay's bill still shows as largely yellow (almost ochre in the revision). It should be pink or whitish. The immature Thick-billed Kingbird should show a more discrete dark mask contrasting with the rest of the head. And ever since the first edition, the diagnostic bill of the female Cinnamon Teal remains in the water, defying comparison with the female Blue-winged above.

The 14 new spotted thrush figures are all smaller, but more richly and more realistically colored than the original ten. Sprague's Pipit and the two Asian pipits shown, are now more convincing. So are the Curve-billed Thrashers (although they look rather like pasted cut-outs). New Rufous-sided towhees (an entire plate) are much improved. The other towhees are somewhat better than before. Meadowlarks have been wholly done over (ten full figures now), but perhaps are no more useful. The meadowlark text continues to stress the more extensively white tail of southwestern *lilanae*, but there is no mention of the plain whitish auriculars, a more useful field mark. The new oriole plates are better, though less than ideal, and for some reason, the adult female Scott's was deleted. *Piranga* tanagers are not as nicely done as before (more 'cut-outs'), but as compensation we have one additional Western and three Flame-colored. However, the 'gray' morph female Western is hardly that, looking as olive-yellow as the other female figure. Loss of the streaked juvenile Hepatic is unfortunate. There are now four Stripe-headed Tanagers, three Yellow-faced Grassquits and another White-collared Seedeater. It would have been much more useful to have refurbished *Carpodacus* finches, better immature Black-headed and Blue grosbeaks, or more realistic female and young cowbirds.

I have mentioned some sparrows becoming dark and dull, but they are not alone. Throughout my copies, colors on numerous other birds are considerably deeper than they were in the second edition. We now have a chestnut young harrier, a slaty Say's Phoebe, a nearly black-backed Rock Wren, lusterless swallows, and accipiters which are almost sooty above instead of blue-gray.

Selection of 'accidental' species for inclusion in this edition was somewhat arbitrary, but most, we're told, have appeared in North America "at least three times in the past two decades or five times in this century." The infamous Shiny Cowbird is present and accounted for, and one of the modified tyrannid plates places the vagrant Piratic and Variegated flycatchers alongside Sulphur-bellied. (However, the text is incorrect in referring to our state's only Piratic as being from "southwest" New Mexico. The record in question was from

near Carlsbad. The second edition had done the same thing with our Slate-throated Redstart record, now correctly referenced.)

Introduced birds warrant brief comment. At last, Eurasian Collared-Dove is illustrated. The familiar Java Sparrow is gone, replaced by Nutmeg Mannikin and by *Euplectes franciscanus*, long and widely known in its native Africa and the cage bird trade as (Northern) Red Bishop, but unfortunately called 'Orange Bishop' here. (The bird is more red than orange.) Himalayan Snowcock remains, but three other galliforms and several waterfowl have been banished, and we now have over twice as many exotic psittacids illustrated as in the second edition.

The Geographic's text generally has been considered superior to those of other recent field guides. It contains the most, and, now, the most current information. One only wishes there were more of it, but the trend of having all text opposite the pictures precludes optimal detail. Vocalizations, for example, would appear to be treated almost as an afterthought, and any hopes harbored for improvement in the new edition have been dashed. Perhaps it's too much to expect in our field guides such things as distinctions between the different Red Crossbills' calls, but voices in general are short-changed here. It may have been felt that such information was readily available elsewhere, but often it is inconvenient to play recordings or seek additional literature. Even advanced students, to whom this guide caters, feel the need to review seasonal vocalizations. Birders trying to match a song they're hearing with the descriptions provided are likely to be frustrated. For Rock Wren, is "a variable mix of buzzes and trills" really sufficient? Could anyone hearing the unique song of Bell's Vireo link it to "a series of harsh scolding notes"? Oddly, that description's most useful word, "fast," was dropped after the second edition! The song offering under Hutton's Vireo is no more helpful; and there too, a key word, "repeated," was deleted during the revision. For both Summer and Hepatic tanagers, we're told simply: "Song is robin-like." Under Western Tanager, song is not mentioned! The reader is told that Black-headed and Rose-breasted grosbeaks have nearly identical voices, but there is nothing here to distinguish their songs from those of tanagers or robin. One could easily cite other examples. (For most birds, the song descriptions in the *second* edition of Peterson's western guide -- not the "improved" third, itself a victim of the mandatory text-opposite-plate syndrome -- are still the best around. Sadly, most newer birders have never owned that book. If you have one, hang on to it.)

The Geographic revision is only for the moment the 'last word' in field guides; but, shortcomings aside, it is the best we have. Two other comprehensive North American field guides are in the works, one of them reportedly nearing completion, but at least until they become available, the present volume is indispensable for active birders.

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NEW MEXICO IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS PROGRAM

The State Audubon Office is beginning to catalog the state's Important Bird Areas (IBA) and is seeking your help. The IBA program, originally conceived by Birdlife International in Europe, is organized in the United States and Canada by the American Bird Conservancy and National Audubon. Each state in the U.S. has been asked to determine important bird areas through state or regional Audubon offices. In New Mexico, the Randall Davey Audubon Center and Hawks Aloft are sponsoring the IBA program.

Criteria for national IBAs have been established and two sites in New Mexico have already been nominated. These sites are Bosque del Apache and Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuges. These refuges contain over 10,000 waterfowl in a day and/or federally listed species. Criteria for IBA inclusion on a state level were established by the New Mexico Audubon Council in 1996.

Criteria for site nomination in New Mexico include:

1) Numbers of birds:

Any site through which over 2,000 raptors pass during a given season or,

Any site which at anyone time during the year has:

- a) 2,000 or more waterfowl
- b) 25 pairs or more, of breeding long-legged waders (Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, etc.)
- c) 100 or more shorebirds
- d) a demonstrated wide variety of migrant species (flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, warblers, tanagers, sparrows, etc.)
- e) a significant concentration of any single bird species.

2) State Threatened or Endangered Species:

Any site containing more than 2% of state breeding populations of New Mexico Threatened or Endangered (T&E) species. These species include Neotropic Cormorant, Common Black-Hawk, Common Ground-Dove, Mexican Spotted Owl, Lucifer and Costa's Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Gray Vireo, Abert's Towhee and Varied Bunting. Additionally, sites which may regularly contain state T&E species such as Piping Plover, White-eared Hummingbird, and Baird's Sparrow during other times of the year qualify.

3) New Mexico Partners in Flight (NMPIF) Priority Species

New Mexico Partners in Flight has determined priority species using a number of variables. Any site containing about 5% or more, of the known breeding populations of priority birds would be considered an IBA. These species include: Clark's Grebe, American Bittern, Mississippi Kite, Long-billed Curlew, Lewis's Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Olive-sided, Hammond's, and Gray Flycatchers, Greater Pewee, American Dipper, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Veery, Bendire's Thrasher, Virginia's, Lucy's, Black-throated Gray, Grace's and Red-faced Warbler, Black-chinned Sparrow, Dickcissel and Hooded Oriole. A complete list is available at the NM PIF page at the Hawks Aloft website www.rt66.com/~hawksnm/pif/login. For a password to enter the site call Hawks Aloft at (505) 343-0111 and ask for Christopher Rustay or e-mail him at: crustay@rt66.com.

4) Representative Habitat

Any site which is highly representative of a PIF habitat designation, regardless of the number of priority birds may be considered for nomination. These habitat designations are:

Chihuahuan Desert Grassland, Mesas & Plains Grasslands, Wet Meadows, Alpine Tundra, Chihuahuan Desert Shrub, Sand Sage Shrub (includes shinners oak), Montane Shrub, Great Basin Desert Shrub, Southwest Riparian, Middle Elevation Riparian, High Elevation Riparian, Non-riparian Wetlands, Madrean Pine-Oak Woodlands, Pinyon-Juniper Woodlands, Ponderosa Pine Forest, Mixed Conifer Forest and Spruce-Fir Forest. While some of these designations may seem obvious, others may not be. Further explanation of these designations can be found at the NM PIF website.

You may nominate any sites which you feel are important to the state. These may include private as well as public lands. However, landowners and managers must agree to participate in the program before the site will be considered. Once sites have been nominated, Audubon will work to develop conservation plans for the area *in concert with the land owner/manager*. No plans for the land will be made without consultation *and the agreement* of the owner/manager.

Sites on public lands which might qualify for nomination include Dripping Springs Wildlife area near Las Cruces, San Andres National Wildlife Refuge, Rattlesnake Springs Picnic Area at Carlsbad Caverns National Park, Grulla National Wildlife Refuge near Portales, Clanton Canyon in the Peloncillo Mountains, portions of the Gila River, Perch a Dam State Park, Water Canyon in the Magdalena Mountains, the Rio Grande Bosque in Albuquerque, Kirtland Air Force Base, Jemez Falls, Maxwell National Wildlife Refuge, the Valle Vidal near Cimarron, the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness south of Bloomfield and the Cruces Basin

Wilderness near Chama. Areas which are good for migrants, especially on the eastern plains, the Rio Grande Valley and the desert northwest may qualify. Many are on private land and may be known to just a few people. These areas in particular are those which Audubon would like to see nominated, assuming landowner/manager participation.

For site nomination forms or further information contact the Randall Davey Audubon Center at (505) 983-4609 or e-mail at: rdac@trail.com.

