

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rare Birds of North America**, by Steve N. G. Howell, Ian Lewington, and Will Russell. 2014. Princeton University Press. xviii + 422 pp., 275 color plates. Cloth-bound, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-691-11796-6.

Vagrant birds capture the imagination of nearly all birders. How did that Dusky Warbler reach California's Farallon Islands? How did Terry Wahl identify that Solander's Petrel off Washington? Weren't Conover and Myers lucky to find that Crowned Slaty Flycatcher in Louisiana? We find ourselves fascinated by a bird's ability to wander far astray as well as by birders' abilities to locate and identify these wayward creatures. In 1996, Cottridge and Vinicombe (*Rare Birds of Britain and Ireland*, HarperCollins Publishers) produced a solid summary of what was known about the mechanisms of bird vagrancy, perhaps the first such summary widely available to birders. Bertholdt's *Bird Migration: A General Survey* (2001, Oxford University Press) was both excellent and accessible to non-ornithologists, but devoted little space to errant migration. In 2008, Newton (*The Migration Ecology of Birds*, Academic Press) penned a truly comprehensive but exhausting discussion of bird migration that is peppered with errors. Despite these resources, avid birders and field ornithologists were still lacking a comprehensive yet concise review of bird migration and vagrancy. That problem has been solved by the publication of an extraordinary book: *Rare Birds of North America*. This volume provides the keys to understanding how a Dusky Warbler might arrive in central California, how to identify a Solander's Petrel, and why the finding of a Crowned Slaty Flycatcher in coastal Louisiana might be more than luck.

The inside dust jacket summarizes the book's purpose superbly: "explains the causes of avian vagrancy and breaks down patterns of occurrence by region and season, enabling readers to see where, when, and why each species occurs in North America. Detailed species accounts describe key identification features." Note that the primary focus is on mechanisms of vagrancy in general (e.g., misorientation and disorientation) and how these apply to each species discussed (e.g., misorientation in the Dusky Warbler). Indeed, the first 31 pages of the book are devoted exclusively to the mechanisms and general patterns of vagrancy. Though *Rare Birds of North America* is touted as primarily a book about vagrancy, it examines identification in exquisite detail supported by excellent illustrations.

The bulk of the book (357 pages) is devoted to the species accounts, which cover 262 species. In a general fashion, the species selected are those that have been detected in the continental U.S.A. and Canada five or fewer times per annum, on average, from 1950 into 2011/2012. This principle has been (rationally) bent somewhat, so that species with a spike in records during the last 25 or so years (e.g., the Barnacle Goose and Clay-colored Thrush) are sometimes excluded, as are birds that breed locally and are thus not vagrants in the wider sense (e.g., the Brown Jay and Buff-collared Nightjar). On the other hand, some species (e.g., the Wood Sandpiper) that are rather "common" in Beringia but distinctly rare on the North American continent are included. Several species that occurred solely before 1950 are not included in this tome, the most recent of which was the Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, recorded in 1936. *Rare Birds of North America* does include species that have not been accepted by either the American Ornithologists' Union or the American Birding Association (at time of publication). Eleven of these species are controversial because of questions of origin. The Cuban Emerald and the Blyth's Reed Warbler are included, going against decisions made by the American Birding Association and the Alaska bird records committee, respectively. The remaining such species, Zino's Petrel, has been subsequently accepted by the AOU (Chesser et al. 2015).

The species accounts use a sensible format, starting with the English and scientific names, followed by a brief summary of the occurrence of the species in North America

## BOOK REVIEWS

and its taxonomy down to the subspecies level. Next, the "Status and Distribution" section covers global distribution briefly but North American occurrence in detail. Each species' occurrence in North America is then dissected in the innocuously named "Comments" subsection. There, potential mechanisms of vagrancy are analyzed, as are other topics when pertinent, such as changes in vagrancy over time, questions of origin (e.g., wild, escapee, ship-assisted), and, rarely, the validity of individual records. The "Field Identification" section completes each account. For species that are challenging to identify (and most are, at least in some plumages), *Rare Birds of North America* covers identification compulsively, sometimes to a greater extent than in any other single source (e.g., frigatebirds); the detailed text accompanied by accurate and beautiful illustrations.

I am clearly a big fan of this book. It carries its objectives off superbly. As for vagrancy, the authors not only invoke patterns of vagrancy, such as 180° misorientation, but tie these together with other factors when appropriate. A fall Dusky Warbler taking a route 180° off course from its point of hatching in eastern Siberia would find itself pointed roughly at central California. The authors point out that tailwinds correlate significantly with how many Dusky Warblers actually appear in California and when. In other words, it probably takes two factors for a Dusky Warbler to arrive successfully in the contiguous United States: 180° misorientation *and* wind-drift. As for identification, Lewington's illustrations are beautiful, detailed, and accurate. And space is not spared: 30 illustrations are used to aid the discrimination of the Great and Lesser frigatebirds from the Magnificent Frigatebird. Identification is discussed by age and sex for each species.

I struggled to find deficiencies in this book, though I have some quibbles. The La Sagra's Flycatcher, Bahama Mockingbird, and Western Spindalis (along with the Bananaquit) are the most regularly occurring Bahamian vagrants in Florida, and their peak occurrence is during April and May on or near Florida's southeastern coast. For the flycatcher and spindalis, this peak is somewhat written off as being due to observational effects (birds more apparent, observers more active), but for the mockingbird the spring peak "appears real." The differing conclusions do not make sense to me and ignore the more prevalent easterly winds from the Bahamas toward Florida during April and May (Steven Feldstein, in litt.) The inclusion of the White-faced Whistling Duck in the main text (rather than the hypothetical section) seems rather arbitrary and rests partly on the "unprecedented invasion of both Black-bellied and Vicious Whistling-Ducks into North America," followed by the assertion that "something is going on with whistling-ducks." Tying the range of expansion of two species that breed in the United States and nearby Mexico to vagrancy of a bird that breeds no closer than South America seems like quite the stretch. In defense of the authors, they do not argue that this species has definitively occurred in North America as a vagrant, and their plea for a better record of free-flying individuals is one that I support.

As to identification matters, I find very little to complain about. A minor omission is that Masked Boobies, even as adults, lack white central rectrices, whereas many adult Nazca Boobies have white central rectrices; thus the presence of white central rectrices should establish a booby's identification as Nazca versus Masked (Roberson, 1998, *National Audubon Society Field Notes* 52:276–287). Another oversight is the limited discussion of ornamental plumes in the Little and Snowy egrets. The well-known differences in the head plume are reviewed, but differences in the scapular plumes (which come off the lower back) and chest plumes are not mentioned (though are illustrated to some extent).

Perhaps the greatest criticism of *Rare Birds of North America* is the question of its utility for some, perhaps many, North American birders: If I live in Indiana and rarely bird outside of the Midwest, why does any of this matter? One might argue that a frigatebird might soar by you one day, and its identification will be greatly enhanced by access to this tome, but we all understand that few of us will be so lucky. I would

## BOOK REVIEWS

argue that this book should be of interest not only to those living near coasts or the Mexican border but to anyone interested in migration and vagrancy as well. Some of the factors involved in an Olive-backed Pipit reaching California likely also apply to the appearance of a Yellow-throated Warbler in the mountains of Washington during winter. Similarly, the occurrence of an Asian Rosy-Finch in Alaska likely involves a mechanism similar to that which might cause a Pine Grosbeak to wander to Oklahoma.

If you are a birder who lives on the coast or the Mexican border in North America and are interested in vagrants from afar, this book is a must-have. Your ability to find, identify, and understand the context of vagrants from other countries will be hugely advanced. Even if you are a birder who expects to rarely visit such regions of North America, this book might well be worth the purchase solely for an enhanced understanding of migration and vagrancy.

Steven Mlodinow

**Solano County Breeding Bird Atlas**, by Murray Berner. 2015. Self-published; available at [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com). viii + 189 pp., 23 color photographs, 148 maps. Paperback, \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-32-050679-3.

Less than one year after California's Napa-Solano Audubon Society published its lavishly illustrated, coffee table-sized *Breeding Birds of Solano County* (BBSC), Murray Berner's *Solano County Breeding Bird Atlas* has appeared. It is a handy-sized book that aims "to present a basic representation of Solano County and its breeding bird atlas, including sufficient information to prepare and entice the reader to read every species account—the location of almost everything we know about the breeding birds of Solano." It succeeds admirably.

The book contains a 16-page introduction, species accounts, and 19 pages of references. The accounts describe 145 species recorded breeding in the county during the six-year (2005–2010) atlas period, plus the Northern Saw-whet Owl (first confirmed breeding in 2014) and Lawrence's Goldfinch (currently lacking a breeding population, but having nested at least twice beforehand); this species is included simply to honor the late Rich Stallcup. The Common Merganser, Western Grebe, Clark's Grebe, and Forster's Tern, all discussed in BBSC, were not included in this book after further review of their atlas-period breeding evidence.

Accounts begin with a bold-faced summary statement that sets the tone for what follows: "The Burrowing Owl lives rough, among stones and dust beaten hard by the Central Valley wind" is one of my favorites. Many accounts are rich in historical background, much of it stemming from long-time Benicia resident Emerson Stoner's observations from the 1920s onward. Berner's descriptions of nesting habits, habitats, and representative locations display the mark of a field ornithologist who is intimately familiar with the bird and the county. Most accounts are identical to those in BBSC (which Berner wrote) or only slightly edited. A handful were updated, e.g., to reflect current taxonomic treatment (Ridgway's Rail), 2015 nesting experience (Say's Phoebe) or conservation status (Tricolored Blackbird), or to incorporate a recent reference (Osprey). The accounts are not illustrated.

As in other atlases, color-coded blocks overlaid on a county map identify where confirmed, probable, or possible evidence of breeding was detected. Each account and its associated map fits onto a single 8" × 10" page except that the Song Sparrow account employs three maps and two pages to cover the county's four breeding subspecies. Though the maps are barely more than one-third the size of those in BBSC, Rusty Scalf's skillful choice of font sizes makes them at least equally readable.

The book's introduction identifies the county's three major biogeographic regions—the upland Coast Range, the plain of the Sacramento Valley and its Delta, and the estuarine Suisun and Napa-Sonoma marshes—and within each region, representative

## BOOK REVIEWS

locations, land features, habitats, and breeding species. Dozens of place names appear in this useful section and in the species accounts, but there is no map to visually locate them. I heartily wished that the book contained BBSC's *Solano County Place Names* map or something similar. Also included are brief discussions of Solano County's census-related data, its lakes and ponds, cities and towns, and climate. The atlas's methods and results are outlined, as are the content of the species accounts and the history and purposes of breeding bird atlases.

This book provides a fine overview of Solano County's geography, habitats, ornithological history, and current breeding bird life for those who are unacquainted with the county. For those more familiar with the county, the book also provides not just enticement to read every species account, but inspiration to seek out its breeding birds and information to help succeed in the quest. Anyone birding the county will benefit from having this book along for company.

*David E. Quady*



Bullock's Oriole

*Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig*