

BOOK REVIEWS

Field Guide to Birds of the Northern California Coast, by Rich Stallcup and Jules Evens. 2014. University of California Press. 294 +xii pp., 133 color photos, 13 graphite (pencil sketches) by Keith Hansen, 13 maps, and 3 figures. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-520-27617-8.

The northern California coastline covered by this guide stretches 800 miles from the southern end of Monterey County north to the Oregon border. This region has a wealth of scenic coastlines, large estuaries, towering redwoods, world-renowned birding hotspots such as Monterey Bay and Point Reyes, and a wealth of bird life. It is also a contrast in terms of urban areas with everything from the urban sprawl of the San Francisco Bay area to Humboldt/Mendocino's Lost Coast, a stretch of coastline over 60 miles long without roads.

As is to be expected for such a region, much has been and continues to be written about its birdlife. Most of the recent literature, however, has been focused on specific areas of the region (breeding bird atlases, county guides, etc.). There is a place for a regional guide for those just learning about the area, such as someone on his or her first nature hike at one of the many national wildlife refuges in the area or for a student in an ornithology class taking a walk along the beach, and UC Press commendably tries to fill this gap. This book is the third of UC Press's California Natural History Guides following *Introduction to California Birdlife* (Evens and Tait 2005) and *Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast* (Lentz 2005) to help introduce beginners to California's rich bird life. The book's stated goal is to follow the standards of those who came before, particularly Ralph Hoffman's *Birds of the Pacific States* (1927) and Joseph Grinnell and Alden Miller's *The Distribution of the Birds of California* (1944) to bring us a book not only scientifically accurate but capturing the beauty and magic of the bird life of the northern California coast for beginning birders or curious naturalists. Though it is called a field guide, the authors state that this is not a standard one, nor is it an introduction to birding (for both the authors helpfully direct the reader to excellent books on those topics). Instead, the book's other stated goal is to be an introduction to the "essence" of a species, and as well as providing behavioral information and understanding a bird's niche in its environment, "a field guide to the birds themselves." Though some sections reach this goal, the application was uneven, leaving a tantalizing idea of what might have been.

Arranged very neatly, the book contains three main chapters, as well as a species-occurrence chart, photos, glossary, and index. The 35-page Introduction starts with an excellent summary of what "birding" is, followed by sections on a diverse set of topics such as habitats (including information on tides, complete with figures), taxonomy, and the ethics of birding. Next is the meat of the book, a 144-page chapter encompassing the Family and Species Accounts covering many of the most common species as well as all families of birds one is likely to see within a few miles of the northern California coast. The last chapter, Birding Opportunities and Roadside Nature Centers, is followed by the occurrence charts, photos, glossary, references, and index. Unfortunately lacking from the book is any information on how the book is arranged or how to use it, or what species were selected and why.

The introduction defines the region's boundaries as the immediate coast and nearshore waters, including large bays and estuaries (San Francisco and Humboldt bays) and some more interior counties such as Solano and Napa (Santa Clara is accidentally omitted though one birding location in that county is mentioned later in the text). Unfortunately these counties are not mentioned again in the book. A map of the region covered does not appear until page 184 (showing the borders of coastal counties only). Those landbirds that occur within the coastal influences are included,

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but species of the arid interior such as the Greater Roadrunner and the California Thrasher are stated not to be included, although there is a species account for the latter. Seabirds that nest close to the coast and those that are commonly seen from the coast are also included.

Other sections covering such topics as climate and habitat are generally good, if a little short, although some information is repeated in more than one section, as in the "Offshore" habitat section. The section "Outer Coast: Beaches and Rocky Shoreline" is particularly interesting and helpful and should be seen as a model for the rest of the habitat sections. I was generally disappointed to not see more information on the unique ecology of the region, and the ecology of the terrestrial and freshwater habitats that occur along the coast, such as freshwater lagoons, coastal chaparral, and riparian, is not addressed. The section on the seasons and migrations section is exemplary, but the taxonomy section is somewhat disorganized and confusing and does not prepare the reader for later discussions such as that on tribes. An insert on citizen science in the region is also included, though it deserved its own chapter. Unfortunately no means of contacting entities such as San Francisco Bird Observatory or Golden Gate Raptor Observatory are included anywhere in the book (including the reference section). Overall the introduction is useful, but some sections such as those on plumage, molt, and ethics (one of the longer sections) seemed outside the scope of a book trying not to repeat information found in basic birding guides. The introduction's maps and figures are generally good but could use captions helping to guide the reader. The map showing the lines of the marine sanctuaries offshore would have been better combined with the map showing the underwater features of Monterey Bay.

The bulk of the book, and its strongest point, are the Family and Species Accounts. Though the family accounts largely follow the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist through the 53rd supplement (2012), the White-faced Ibis is not segregated in the family Threskiornithidae, the pelicans and cormorants remain in one order, and the gallinaceous birds are listed after terns. Most of the accounts are well written, helpful, and informative, but the rationale for what species were selected for their own account is not stated. The introduction states that an emphasis was placed on common species, so rarities such as the Emperor Goose and Arctic Loon being given their own species account seems odd. Little information is given for the rarities and may lead to misidentification, such as the brief note that white flanks distinguish the Arctic Loon from other loons (p. 59). The space could have been better used with an expanded introduction or more information on common species.

The accounts typically include some information on a species' ecology, status, behavior, identification, or interesting facts, including if it has a special status in the region, and sometimes all aspects are covered. Though overall the accounts are good, they suffer from the unevenness found throughout the book. Some accounts are excellent, such as that for the Brant, which gives information on migration timing, behavior, and where it may be found. Compare it with the Canada Goose account, which spends too much space on the various subspecies, with several unhelpful identification points. The account of the Aleutian Cackling Goose would have benefited from more discussion of its recovery and status along the coast. Some accounts are uneven internally; for example, the Horned Grebe account has useful information on status and behavior, but I found the identification section not very helpful.

Scattered throughout the accounts are a few citations, primarily from seemingly randomly chosen *Birds of North America* accounts, giving the impression of being intended to lend the accounts an air of scientific accuracy. The species accounts include some often artistically written quotations that can add a little flair into otherwise dry text. For species of special concern or listed as endangered a "Special Status" section is included. But what the special statuses mean has been omitted, weakening their usefulness.

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The chapter on birding opportunities and roadside nature trails covers a few select birding locations along the coast as well as a few in the San Francisco Bay area. These are primarily locations with visitor centers and museums, and the information about visiting them is useful. Maps provide general reference for some of the locations in reference to major cities and highways (missing are maps of the south San Francisco Bay area and Humboldt County) but are of little use for actually getting to a location. Unfortunately this chapter suffers the same unevenness as the others. The entry for Elkhorn Slough, for example, is well written, clarifying what to expect as well as directions to the location. In contrast, that for Virgin Creek in Mendocino County tells only it is about 1.5 miles from town, nothing on amenities. Locations mentioned in the family/species accounts, such as Southeast Farallon Island, the Palo Alto Baylands, or anywhere offshore, may not be included as birding opportunities. Confusingly, in the family/species accounts Goat Rock (Sonoma County) is mentioned many times for its seabird colony, but this likely refers to Goat Island (Mendocino County); neither is in the index, and the family/species accounts do not direct you to either in the Birding Opportunities chapter.

The occurrence chart is a useful addition to the book and one that can help fledgling birders understand what birds occur when. Limiting its usefulness, however, is the lack of a key to what the abundance codes mean. Though they might be intuitive to more advanced users, what really is the difference between rare to uncommon, very rare, and extremely rare? What does the difference between the sizes of the irregular bars mean? Also, there is no indication of what species were picked for the chart, which could lead readers astray. A few species mentioned in either the family accounts or the Birding Opportunities section were omitted, such as the Pomarine Jaeger, Gray Jay, and Emperor Goose (yet the equally rare King Eider is present though mentioned nowhere else). Given the long coastline this book covers, I found it helpful that several species were listed as local or occurring primarily in the northern or southern counties. Unfortunately, the designation as local seems random, with the "local" Barred Owl and Horned Lark being more widespread in the region than the Ruffed Grouse or Black Rail, for example. Though the chart seems balanced overall, a few entries are odd and hard to understand without a key. For example, the Cackling Goose is not listed as occurring in April, when the Birding Opportunities chapter states that thousands can occur locally in Del Norte County. The Sooty Shearwater is listed as rare to uncommon in summer when hundreds of thousands often occur on Monterey Bay and can be seen from shore.

The 13 sketches scattered throughout the text are excellent, often with very helpful captions. Their topics range from how a loon swims (p. 61) and to how to distinguish a crow from a raven (p. 161). The 133 color photos, some of which include dates, are typically of good quality (though not always useful for identification) with good captions that typically stand alone. Some captions are helpful, such as that advising leaving basic-plumaged dowitchers unidentified to species (plate 84), but others are less so, such as that for plate 14, which states that four subspecies of the Cackling Goose occur in coastal northern California—though only two are listed in the text and only three are known to occur in California regularly. Though the caption for plate 77 makes a good point about the differing colors of the Whimbrel and Marbled Godwit/Long-billed Curlew, the photo used unfortunately was taken in the evening sun, lending all three individuals an orange tinge. Fortunately these mistakes are few, making the photo captions one of the book's main strengths. My main issue with the photos is the order in which they are presented, in neither taxonomic order nor as discussed in the text. Some comparisons are far apart, such as that of the alternate (breeding) and basic (nonbreeding) plumages of the Black-bellied Plover (plates 66 and 2, respectively). It would have been more helpful if the photos were scattered more throughout the book, accompanying their respective families.

Though the authors made an admirable attempt at a regional guide that goes

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beyond just field identification, the book misses the target more often than it hits. Though parts of the book give us a glimpse of what the authors were going for, the book needs more thorough editing for content and even tone, a section on how it is to be used, and a better expanded introduction before it is truly useful to beginners.

David Vander Pluym

Facing Extinction, by Paul F. Donald, Nigel J. Collar, Stuart J. Marsden, and Deborah J. Pain. 2013. Helm. 2nd edition. 320 pp., 125 photos, 17 tables, 42 maps, drawings and other figures. Paperback, \$42.95. ISBN 978-1-4081-8966-5.

There is a subliminal draw to things that we believe are scarce and/or difficult to obtain, observe, or experience, and birders are often intoxicated by this chase. This book's cover photo of a breeding-plumaged Spoon-billed Sandpiper, arguably one of the world's most recognizable and charismatic critically endangered birds, is nicely chosen to grab the reader's attention. Within, the text details the great conservation efforts that are keeping some of the world's most endangered bird species from extinction, as well as a few of the ones that didn't make it.

The book is softbound but sturdy. Its square glossy pages and size are reminiscent of an academic textbook-appendix volume. It rode around in my backpack for a month and showed only minimal wear on the covers. I found a few minor typos, but nothing of consequence or confusion. This is a second edition published three years after the first with updates to the species accounts and a new cover photo.

The chapters are grouped into four sections, each with a slightly different conservation theme. These sections include an introductory chapter and several example species accounts. The species accounts detail the natural history, sometimes the political history, and the challenges and accomplishments (or not) of conservation efforts. The authors are honest and refreshing in their coverage of the species, focusing not just on species relegated to history or those with the rosy success stories. The rare species included in this book run the gamut from the well-known and well-studied, with massive continuing conservation efforts (e.g., the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Kakapo) to those that still remain mysterious, with their conservation complicated (Spix's Macaw), to a few for which optimism has essentially run out (Eskimo Curlew and Po'ouli) and a species that went extinct nearly as soon as it was discovered (Stephens Island Wren). Each species account is engaging and well written, reading more like a biography than an academic text. Since the book is about conservation, it also hits the headline stories, like the die-offs of Asian vultures and the rediscovery of the Forest Owlet. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is discussed only briefly and with the same even hand, faint glow of optimism, and sober language as the other species for which humanity has almost certainly seen its last.

The authors make no effort to be comprehensive with all species considered critically endangered. Twenty-three species are treated in detail, and more are mentioned tangentially. A comprehensive treatment is probably not feasible in any book, partly because of the dynamic status of some species, the lack of information available for many others, and simply not enough space in a single volume. Some well-known and critically endangered species for which large-scale conservation efforts continue (e.g., the California Condor) are not treated in detail, though this may be, in part, thanks to their thorough treatment by other sources.

In addition to simply being a great read and a source of birders' dinner-party discussion, it is also a must for anyone working in the conservation field. The details of past efforts, successes and failures, will be valuable information for those who will be involved in the great conservation projects of the future. Though the latest

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news of the rare species (as of the time of publication) is fascinating, a periodical or web medium, rather than a book, probably best suits this dynamic information. Any shortcoming there is compensated for by the excellent natural histories, the summary of conservation techniques, and the extensive bibliography. Furthermore, royalties from sales go to BirdLife International's Preventing Extinction program. So, even if this book gets flipped through once or twice before it heads to cold storage on the end of a bookshelf, its purchase may be doing something for posterity.

Jon Feenstra

Wing your way to....

Billings, Montana 10–14 June 2015

The 40th annual conference of Western Field Ornithologists will take us to Montana for the first time. Field trips will visit a variety of habitats from the high mountains (Black Rosy-Finch) to the grasslands (Sprague's Pipit). We'll see courting McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs in their finest plumage, Upland Sandpipers, and Lark Buntings. History buffs will delight in viewing the Little Bighorn Battlefield where Custer saw his last Sharp-tailed Grouse.

There will be workshops on the field identification of sparrows (Jon Dunn) and flycatchers (Dan Casey), natural history of owls (Denver Holt), bird-sound identification (Nathan Pieplow), and more. Friday and Saturday afternoon science sessions will update you on the most current avian research from the region, and the Saturday evening banquet will feature a keynote address by Stephen Dinsmore on the Mountain Plover. Ed Harper and Nathan Pieplow will again offer their ever-popular sessions on bird ID by sight and sound.

Registration for the conference is now open. Go to westernfieldornithologists.org/conference.php to register. If you are NOT currently on our electronic mailing list, please send an e-mail to erpfromca@aol.com, include your full name and city and state of residence, and we'll put you on. WFO members are able to register for our conferences at a reduced rate and have early access to registration. If you are not currently a WFO member, you can join at westernfieldornithologists.org/join.php.