

BOOK REVIEW

The Warbler Guide, by Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle with drawings by Catherine Hamilton. 2013. Princeton University Press. 560 pp., >1000 color photographs and illustrations, 50 maps. Flexibound, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-15482-4.

Back in the Peterson days we received the wisdom that warblers are confusing. Especially difficult are first-fall birds, but also fall adults having re-robed themselves for the flight south, leaving many of them looking rather plain (compared to their spring livery, that is). Subsequent warbler guides began to elucidate finer identification points—the standout being Dunn and Garrett’s 1997 *A Field Guide to Warblers of North America*—a brick of natural history and identification information and lovely painted plates (the most famous [and useful] of which are the plates of tails/undertails on pp. 105–106). Dunn and Garrett’s had few color photographs and sonograms—and, after revolutions in digital recording and photographic technologies, that is where *The Warbler Guide* steps in. With the help of this new photo- and sonogram-rich guide to these colorful (even in fall) and charismatic nymphs of our nearctic woodlands, much confusion, especially for beginning and intermediate birders, should be dispelled.

The Warbler Guide starts with an introduction covering topography and uses color coding to illustrate where various feathers are located on perched versus flying birds. It is followed by over 55 informative pages detailing what to look for on a bird in the field, such as contrast, color, structure, etc. After a very brief section on aging and sexing, we get to over 30 pages describing sonograms, their interpretation, and various details of identifications of songs and calls. This is followed by 10+ “quick finder” charts, the usefulness of which will vary greatly from reader to reader. A typical species account, such as that for the Yellow Warbler, contains a simple silhouette, a cartoon blimp of the bird’s basic color/patterns, an illustration of the undertail, a very simplified range map, a habitat preference “map” showing the parts of trees/shrubs the species frequents, six pages with ~50 color photos, including similar and/or comparison species, and four pages of sonograms, including similar-sounding species. The guide ends with a brief quiz section, photos and descriptions of warblers in flight, a family tree showing current taxonomy, a table of measurements, a habitat and behavior table, a glossary, and a short list of additional resources.

Photographs make up the bulk of *The Warbler Guide*, and they will be the main draw for most users—multiple pages are devoted to each species and a variety of plumages, ages, and angles are illustrated with >40 photographs per account. The photographic treatments of each species are quite complete and allow for detailed study of many aspects of identification, including aging and sexing. Field-identifiable subspecies are treated separately at the end of the main species accounts and include maps of subspecies’ general distributions.

The most challenging and rewarding component of *The Warbler Guide* is the sonograms. After exposure to far too many poorly phoneticized bird songs (e.g., “ju-ju-ju or gi-gi-gi”), I find the authors’ embrace of a standard for learning songs from a book refreshing, as the sonograms allow for the *visualization* of a decidedly nonvisual component of bird identification. Again with the Yellow Warbler as an example, the section on vocalizations begins with a classic mnemonic, here “Bright yellow lemon meringue pie is ‘sweet, sweet, oh so sweet,’” followed by a summary describing components of the song, phrases, elements, sections, pitch, etc., and different song types and variation. The songs are then divided by type, the Yellow having types A1–A2 and B1–B4—followed by sonograms of similar species. The sonograms are made significantly more useful if one purchases the companion audio files available from the Macaulay Library (available at <http://macaulaylibrary.org/guide/the-warbler-guide> for \$5.99). The audio file corresponds by page to all of the sonograms in *The Warbler Guide* (over 1000 files), making for an excellent audiovisual tool for learning warbler

BOOK REVIEW

vocalizations. It is the authors' hope, as it is mine, that readers will devote serious time to the sonograms; they are worth it.

The Warbler Guide's size is an issue—as it is not a field guide (contrary to the publisher's classification), why isn't it larger? Many of the photographs are very small—each species has at least a few larger photographs (2 × 3 inches), and some species have full-page close-ups. These lack identification notes, and in four cases (the Blackpoll, Black-throated Green, and Connecticut Warblers and Common Yellowthroat; pp. 185, 207, 273, and 263, respectively) the tail is cut off, and in one case (the Blackburnian Warbler, p. 175), the bill is cut off. But the vast majority of the photographs are reproduced at the size of mere postage stamps with the birds themselves taking up a modest fraction of that space. We shouldn't be tempted to drop our binoculars at the door and switch to a loupe when we sit down to study. With a larger-format photographic guide, why not make it *clear* that it's not a field guide, give it a hard cover, and give us some bigger photos? Undoubtedly, economic factors played a role in this decision, but one can hope that future photo guides will more thoroughly unleash the wonders of digital photography. *The Warbler Guide* is also a very busy book, filled with pictures, figures, icons, and abbreviations, and it isn't the easiest to navigate. The "quick finder" concept employed so often seems a bit overdone—which quick finder does one use, and how does one find the finder? In what situations will a birder note that he or she has seen a bird at a 45-degree angle, then flip to *that* quick-finder to seek out the unnamed quarry? Finally, the lack of natural history information stands out. To be fair, *The Warbler Guide* does not claim to be a "complete" reference, and clearly this choice was made to limit the size and scope of the work, but natural history notes complement identification data. The token "colored tree" habitat maps are very general, as admitted by the authors (for example, that Yellow Warblers use all of a shrub and eschew the top 90% of trees; p. 466). A chart listing foraging behavior and location, general breeding habitat, and vagrancy is limited in scope and is in no way tied to the text (it's hidden on pp. 546–548).

In sum, *The Warbler Guide* should be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of anyone with an interest in the identification and field observation of wood-warblers, especially those of us who still hear the phrase "confusing fall warblers" ringing in our ears every August. Its treatment of this family is effective and it opens up a new door to learning the vocalizations of this diverse group. Study the photographs and sonograms (especially the latter) and get outside and look at and listen to these birds; they and this book are worth your time.

Adam Searcy