

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Owls of North America and the Caribbean**, by Scott Weidensaul. 2015. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 333 pp., 334 color photographs, 43 maps. Clothbound, \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-547-84003-1.

With the possible exception of hummingbirds, no avian group is more popular than owls. Perhaps for this reason, the number of owl books that have appeared in recent decades is mind boggling. Some are quite good; far too many are unexceptional. The best have been produced by owl specialists who are excellent researchers but not necessarily great writers. Thus I had high expectations when I learned that Scott Weidensaul had written a new owl book. Not only is he an experienced owl researcher, he's a talented nonfiction writer. His nearly 30 books include *The Ghost with Trembling Wings: Science, Wishful Thinking and the Search for Lost Species* (2002, North Point Press), *Of a Feather: A Brief History of American Birding* (2007, Harcourt), and *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds* (1999, North Point Press). The last was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and is my favorite among his titles.

Weidensaul begins *Owls of North America and the Caribbean* with an 18-page introductory chapter that includes a how-to guide to using the book, a brief treatment of owl ecology and topography, and a detailed explanation of which topics are covered in the species accounts (see below). His geographic scope is Canada, the continental United States, Bermuda, Mexico, and the West Indies, within which 39 owl species breed according to the 7th edition of the *AOU Check-list* and its supplements through 2014. Weidensaul notes that two Old World taxa have strayed to Alaska, the Oriental Scops-Owl (*Otus sunia*) and the Northern Boobook (*Ninox japonica*), but wisely does not include species accounts for these vagrants. A very useful addition to the book is a link to a downloadable album of 86 vocalizations of the 39 species and an annotated list that briefly describes each vocalization (e.g., territorial song, alarm call, food-begging call) and gives the location where the sound was recorded. The vocalizations were obtained from the Macaulay Library of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and range from one to six per species. The introductory chapter concludes with an interesting discussion of owl taxa that went extinct in all or parts of the West Indies since humans came on the scene. Following the species accounts are the acknowledgments, a brief glossary, a general bibliography, and an index that allows one to find every place where a species is mentioned in the text.

Nearly 90% of the book is devoted to the species accounts, which summarize the birds' size (body length, wingspan, and body mass), longevity, systematics and taxonomy (including subspecies), etymology, distribution (including a multicolored range map), plumage characters, vocalizations, habitat, breeding biology, behavior, and conservation status, and end with a list of references. Each account provides interesting tidbits about ecology, the latest thoughts on classification and nomenclature, and brief summaries of pertinent journal articles, many of them recent. Just as important, we learn what is *not* known about the basic biology of many owls, which turns out to be quite a bit. The accounts also include color photographs, which range in number from one for a couple of the poorly known pygmy-owls (*Glaucidium sanchezi* and *G. griseiceps*) to 19 for the Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*). Without exception the photographs are excellent, and the captions that accompany them are informative.

Weidensaul writes in an engaging style, and the book is well designed and nearly free of typographic errors. A few things I expected to find but didn't are minor issues but perhaps worth noting. For example, left unstated is the fact that the hoot of a male Flammulated Owl (*Psiloscoops flammeolus*) is similar to that of a male Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*), which can lead to misidentifications of both species during nocturnal surveys. Also not mentioned is the astounding case of a female Burrowing

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Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) that was banded at a nest with eggs in Arizona in April 2003 and recaptured at a nest with young 1860 km away in Saskatchewan three months later (G. L. Holroyd et al., *Wilson J. Ornithol.* 123:378–381, 2011), thus documenting double brooding, serial polyandry, and long-range dispersal during the breeding season in one fell swoop. Last, in the Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) account one gets the impression that the species breeds almost exclusively in coniferous forests. Yet some of the highest densities of nesting birds have been documented in riparian willows and tree farms of poplars surrounded by shrubsteppe desert in Idaho and Oregon, respectively. I noticed only one mistake and one typo, both of them quite trivial. In the bibliography my name was left off the paper that describes a Flammulated Owl nest in a hollow below ground (K. M. Smucker and J. S. Marks, *J. Raptor Res.* 47:421–422, 2013). That this anecdote was mentioned at all, however, more than makes up for the omission. Similarly, the typo is likely to be noticed only by someone with my first name: it's Jeffrey pine, not Jeffery pine (p. 306). I point these out not as nit-picky criticisms but as examples of how hard one has to work to find any fault with a book such as this one, which has no weaknesses. In summary, my expectations for *Owls of North America and the Caribbean* were met, and then some. It's a wonderful book that will be a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on owls. Anyone with more than a passing interest in nocturnal raptors will enjoy it immensely.

Jeffrey S. Marks

**Peterson Reference Guide to Seawatching**, by Ken Behrens and Cameron Cox. 2013. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 624 pages, over 900 color photographs. Hardback, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-547-23739-8.

Seawatching, as authors Ken Behrens and Cameron Cox define it, is the “challenging act of identifying waterbirds in flight.” The birds are in motion. They are frequently distant and typical field marks may not be useful. More often than not there are no landmarks to orient the observer. And the best conditions for seawatching are often harrowing, when storms blow flocks and normally pelagic species close to shore. But seawatching can also be mind-blowing. Imagine 2000 Sabine's Gulls flying through your field of view, or over 1,000,000 Short-tailed Shearwaters streaming past, or the moment a Great-winged Petrel chances by a tourist-choked promontory in southern California. If you do not have the physical or financial strength to regularly join pelagic excursions, your best bet for encountering ocean-going species is from shore with a spotting scope. Digesting even a small portion of the wealth of information provided in the *Peterson Reference Guide to Seawatching* will doubtlessly enhance your time searching the water, from land or boat.

*Seawatching*, the book, is focused on eastern waterbirds, 111 species in total from 13 families, treating waterfowl, loons, grebes, shearwaters and petrels, storm-petrels, the Magnificent Frigatebird, boobies and the Northern Gannet, cormorants, the Anhinga, pelicans, skuas and jaegers, alcids, and gulls, terns, and the Black Skimmer. While the book covers only those species that occur with regularity in the eastern U.S. and Canada, the overlap with the West is significant, as nearly 70% of the species treated occur with regularity in the Pacific Ocean. For example, the Surf, Black, and White-winged scoters are treated, as are the Common, Pacific, and Red-throated loons, and the three jaeger species. However, the alcids and tubenoses covered are only those regularly recorded in the east and do not include western species (with the exception of the Manx Shearwater and Wilson's Storm-Petrel). While the occurrence in the west of many of the species treated in *Seawatching* is enough to justify

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its inclusion in many western birders' libraries, a full volume dedicated to western waterbirds would be nice. Unfortunately, this is not in the works.

The purpose of *Seawatching* is two-fold: to teach waterbird identification by techniques beyond simple field marks (e.g., by observing flight style and species association) and to inspire more birders to take up seawatching. The book begins with a two-page introduction that touches on migration and conservation and includes a 20-page spread on bird topography. Most of the introduction is dedicated to laying out and defining the authors' set of identification techniques, including relative size, structure, flight style and flock structure, overall coloration, and associations (e.g., Northern Pintails are typically in large monospecific flocks) in order to prepare the reader for the species-identification section of the book. If a lot of the authors' philosophy on waterbird identification sounds similar to hawk watching, it is because Behrens and Cox have also spent a good deal of time doing just that and draw comparisons to *Hawks in Flight*.

The bulk of the book (over 500 pp.) is filled with species accounts arranged in a taxonomy suggested by Howell et al. (2009) in *Birding* that "emphasizes utility and stability over precise taxonomic relationships"; one that would help beginners without hampering advanced birders. Each group begins with a one- or two-page introduction on the family, including an overview of the biology, taxonomy, range, and molt similarities of the species within each family, and briefly mentions additional species *not* covered in the text (e.g. they do not treat the Ancient Murrelet because of its rarity on the east coast). The introduction to the dabbling ducks contains a valuable seven-step process for identifying flocks even at distance. Each species then receives a two- to five-page treatment, with the more common and confusing pairs/groups receiving more discussion (for example, scoters combine for 21 pages). Within each account, a brief summary of the species is provided, leading into a discussion of size, structure, flight style, flocking behavior, appearance (including, where relevant, differences in plumages by season, age, and sex), and, perhaps most helpful, similar species. Also included is a map showing migration routes and seasonal ranges, although this is limited to the eastern U.S. and Canada. But what really catches the eye is the photos in each account.

Pick this book up if for no other reason than the sheer volume of photos (900+!). It is easy to get lost just turning the pages. The authors provided most of the photos, but nearly 100 photographers are credited. The intent is to show what birds look like under field conditions, but a book of strictly distant flocks and silhouettes would not be as attractive as the mix of full-frame, medium-distance, and silhouette shots *Seawatching* actually contains. Some of the photos are full-page, jaw-dropping crushes (first-cycle Bonaparte's Gull, p. 441). Some are wonderful compositions (a Razorbill flying past a lighthouse, p. 268; King Eiders flying through snow, pp. 166–167). Some capture chance encounters (a Brown Booby catching a flying fish, p. 344; Black Terns exchanging food, p. 515). But the real value lies in the hundreds of photos of mixed flocks (especially of ducks), where the authors point out the keys to identification and occasionally quiz the reader. There are nearly 40 such quizzes, involving finding and identifying certain species within a mixed flock or aging/sexing individuals ("What ages are the Little Gulls?"). The answers, with often lengthy explanations, are in an appendix. While the quality of the majority of the photos is good, a few choices for full-page reproduction should have been left at a half page or smaller, as they are not fully in focus or appear overcropped and pixelated (e.g., Surf Scoter, p. 175; Manx Shearwater, p. 305; Magnificent Frigatebird, p. 329; Wilson's Storm-Petrel, p. 321).

Though discussing similar species at length, the authors manage to keep the writing fresh. The Harlequin Duck tends to "pop its head up and down" like "an anxious turtle." The Great Skua is a "stovepipe with wings." Long-tailed Jaegers are "playful," but they "haunt the migratory footsteps of Arctic Terns." Parasitic Jaegers "will mark

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a victim from a distance ... and pummel it." If the photos do not carry you out over the breaking waves, the language will.

The book closes with a glossary, an extensive and up-to-date bibliography, and an appendix entitled "Where to Watch," which describes nearly 47 popular watch sites from South Padre Island, Texas, to Whitefish Point, Michigan, to Cape Spear, Newfoundland. Each site description includes a summary of the location, timing of migration, and species occurrences but is really relevant only to travelers to the east coast. Who knew that people "seawatched" along the Mississippi River?

While not specifically focused on western birds, the overlap in coverage is good, and the techniques in *Seawatching* are usable in any location where waterbirds are in flight. Whether you are a seasoned veteran with a salt-encrusted tripod at Point Pinos or a beginner curious about the group of people staring out at the open ocean in La Jolla (with no whales in sight), this book hopes to "capture some of the simple joy of being outside ... and looking at birds" and will be a book you return to time and again.

*Justyn Stahl*

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## THANKS TO WESTERN BIRDS' REVIEWERS AND ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Peer review is a critical step in the publication of a scientific journal. I thank the following people for their generosity in taking the time to provide this essential service sustaining the scientific quality of *Western Birds* for volume 46: George F. Barrowclough, Peter Bloom, Russell Bradley, M. Ralph Browning, Bruce E. Beyers, G. Vernon Byrd, David A. Cimprich\*, Alan Contreras, Jon L. Dunn\*, Kimball L. Garrett, T. Luke George, James J. Giocomo, Mélanie F. Guigueno, Ralph J. Gutiérrez, Les Gyug, Lauren B. Harter, Steven C. Heinl\*, Steve N. G. Howell, David J. T. Hussell, Juan Diego Ibáñez-Alamo, Todd Katzner, David J. Krueper, Jeffrey L. Lincer, Mark W. Lockwood, Michael C. Long, Mark B. Mendelsohn, Joel E. Pagel, Peter Pyle\*, Kurt Radamaker, Leslie Robb, Michael A. Schroeder, Steve Shunk, Dan Small, Mark R. Stromberg, Bridget J. Stutchbury, David Vander Pluym, Greg Wann, Sartor O. Williams III, and Christopher C. Witt. Asterisks designate reviewers who reviewed more than one paper.

I must thank also our associate editors, Kenneth P. Able, Daniel S. Cooper, Doug Faulkner, Thomas Gardali, Daniel D. Gibson, Robert E. Gill, Paul E. Lehman, Ronald R. LeValley, and Dan Reinking, plus featured-photo editor John Sterling, who also serve as reviewers of the manuscripts whose review they coordinate. *Western Birds* is not possible without their dedication. Doug Faulkner has stepped down after nine years of valuable service, as has Paul Lehman after five. Thank you, Doug and Paul, for all your work on behalf of *Western Birds* and WFO. I'm very happy to welcome as new associate editors Matthew J. Baumann of New Mexico and Daniel R. Ruthrauff of Alaska—I look forward to working with you and benefiting from your expertise. And I thank Dan Gibson, Ginger Johnson, Peter LaTourrette, and Tim Brittain for continuing in their roles as vital players in our team producing *Western Birds*.

*Philip Unitt*