

BOOK REVIEWS

The Sibley Guide to Birds (2nd ed.), by David Allen Sibley. 2014. Alfred A. Knopf. 624 pages, nearly 7000 paintings, more than 700 maps. Flexibound, \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-307-95790-0.

When David Sibley first released his concept of a bird guide into the wild at the turn of the century, Jon Dunn and colleagues had already demonstrated how a formidable team of experts working under the auspices of a first-rate organization, the National Geographic Society, could outshine even the legendary suite of talents of a Roger Tory Peterson. Featuring the work of numerous talented artists and including all of the rarities that drive so many birders to go birding in the first place, the National Geographic guide seemed invincible. The upstart *Sibley Guide to Birds* represented one inspired person's singular vision of what a field guide should look like and the topics it should cover, and, shockingly, it just said "no" to all those fancy strays from abroad. The layout, with its family/group accounts, flight silhouettes, in-flight depictions of each species, and extensive depictions of seasonal and geographic variation, as well as hybrids, was unlike any other North American guide. The artwork was distinctive and instantly recognizable, incorporating Sibley's refined eye for structure and detail only where it needed to be. As everyone now knows, there was more than enough room for both approaches. In the 14 years that have passed, Sibley has kept himself busy putting out two regional bird guides, books on birding basics and bird behavior, a birding app (now being updated to the new standard), and even a well-received guide to the trees of North America, all while maintaining a useful and eclectic web site (www.sibleyguides.com). Oh, and completing a painstaking makeover and expansion of his magnum opus.

The second edition's cover, emblazoned with a lip-smacking Magnolia Warbler in place of the familiar Red-tailed Hawk, announces that this is more than an incremental update, including "600 new paintings and 111 rare species added, new information on habitat and behavior, and more tips on finding species in the field." This new cover-bird, a classic "eastern" species, actually harkens back to the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, where noted ornithologist Fred Sibley mist-netted a male Magnolia Warbler and revealed it to his precocious son, seven-year-old David, before releasing the brilliant gem back into the woods. Intimate touches like this help maintain the "personal quest" aspect of Sibley's work even as his name continues to evolve into a powerful and diversified corporate brand.

In a nod to the team concept, Sibley collaborated on the look of the second edition with Charles Nix of the nature-oriented design firm of Scott & Nix. The columnar organization remains, but it has been opened up and softened by removing the bar of text across the tops of the accounts, increasing the size of the images, removing the boxes from around the range maps, eliminating most of the pointers, reducing the fonts, breaking up solid blocks of text and allowing the birds to form looser flocks. At last, the pages breathe. The birds, 15–20% larger and printed on brighter white paper, pop. In virtually every respect, the new guide's design aesthetic surpasses the original. The range maps, Achilles' heel of the first edition, have been upgraded to Paul Lehman's industry-standard depictions. No longer must the distribution of every species be shown in relation to the entire continent. In all respects—clarity, level of detail, and degree of accuracy—these maps are truly impressive. I take issue only with the portrayal of the Canada Goose as a winter visitor in coastal southern California; eBird data demonstrate residency south to at least Orange County.

Sibley's dedication to teaching comes through more clearly than ever in this edition. By my count, the number of educational sidebars has increased from 56 to 69, and they now cover such topics as "Snowy Egret vs. Little Blue Heron" and "Taxonomic Outliers," the latter reviewing how modern DNA studies have resolved some vexing

BOOK REVIEWS

questions of classification. The revised and expanded discussions of populations, habitat preferences, species associations, and other topics add depth to the treatment of many species, providing additional identification clues without crossing the line into something closer to a natural history text. Supplemental paintings now show the alcaids as we most often see them, skittering directly away from the boat. To meet his stated goal of including every species likely to be seen free-flying in the coverage area, Sibley has carefully depicted dozens of exotic species that confuse so many birders. And, of course, this edition follows the latest taxonomic order (I am hoping that time spent with this book will help me resolve the disorienting effects of recent decisions made by our ornithological overlords). The closer you look, the more new and helpful details you will find. If you don't learn something new perusing this book for even just a few minutes you're probably not paying close enough attention.

As touched upon previously, Sibley's first edition diverged from orthodoxy in excluding dozens of species encountered rarely in its coverage area. Reasonable as this was, it made National Geographic the default guide of choice for boundary-pushers and day-dreamers. The second edition brings Sibley's bird-universe much closer to that of its main rival. Another 80 pages do add a bit of bulk to the new book, but the difference is incremental and will not be problematic for anyone already comfortable enough with the large format of the first edition. And, honestly, I can't remember the last time I saw a birder leafing through a field guide every time he or she encountered an unfamiliar bird. These books tend to stay in the car or at home, where size and weight are much less important than depth of treatment. From the Great-winged Petrel to Eurasian Kestrel to Piratic Flycatcher to Stonechat to Black-vented Oriole, the new Sibley gives western birders a treasure-trove of far-fetched potentialities to mull over and set our hearts upon during those long car trips and boat rides, and a solid place to start the identification process when lightning eventually strikes. The decisions about which vagrants to add were made by Sibley, who favored taxa found widely across North America over those with records limited to, say, the Aleutian Islands (sorry, Steller's Sea-Eagle!). He also leaned toward adding species that might easily be mistaken for something common, as with the Gray Heron and Mangrove Swallow. I would have liked to have seen the Nazca Booby at least mentioned in the Masked Booby account, although with zero accepted records it's not exactly an oversight. In some borderline cases, the choices reflect Sibley's intuition about the species likely to be encountered in the future as they do the number of records in the past. For example, the European Turtle-Dove, with two accepted records, made the cut, whereas the Ruddy Quail-Dove, which has been recorded about six times, did not.

A complaint frequently expressed in users' reviews at amazon.com, and elsewhere online, is that the new fonts are too small and fine to be legible, especially for older readers. My 49-year-old eyes had absolutely no trouble handling the brief snippets of text interspersed throughout the species accounts. To the contrary, I truly appreciate how the unobtrusive, sans-serif font complements the artwork and opens up the layout. Only with regard to the introductory essays do I side with the sniping squinters. I could not get through them in one or even two sittings, not because of poor writing but because the absurdly tiny font caused my eyes to glaze over. Some of the longer sidebars caused minor ocular distress, although not enough to make me put the book down. With font-fixes said to be in the works for future printings, I hope the designers can refrain from throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The book does contain some typos and other minor errors unrelated to the printing process itself: three misspellings inside the front cover ("gves," "nuber," and "comparitively"); comma used in place of period in the key to the range map for winter; hybrid geese mislabeled at the bottom of page 4; "Tri-colored" on page 113; the Purple Gallinule placed in the wrong genus on page 144; the Black-tailed and Heermann's Gulls mislabeled on page 197; the Calliope Hummingbird retained in the defunct genus *Stellula* (only in the species account); male and female Green-breasted Mangos

BOOK REVIEWS

misabeled; Thick-billed Kingbird measurements incorrect; the Eastern Phoebe listed under a genus "*Phoebe*" instead of *Sayornis* on page 341; breeding female and non-breeding male Magnolia Warblers mislabeled on pages 485, xxiv, and on the inside of the front cover; and the breeding male Scarlet Tanager mislabeled as nonbreeding. In the index, the two *Agelaius* blackbirds should be grouped together under the genus name; an extraneous listing of *Catharus* is inserted into the list of species in that genus; the three *Melospiza* towhees are broken into two listings; likewise the three *Molothrus* cowbirds; and the listing of the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush violates format. The depiction of the "Coastal California" Cactus Wren also counts as an error. As in the first edition, this wren is shown as lacking a conglomeration of spots on the chest and also lacking buff below. These marks set Cactus Wren populations of the central and southern Baja California Peninsula apart from all others, including the subspecies *sandiegensis*.

Rest assured, the one questionable Cactus Wren rendering is an outlier. To my eye, there is no group of birds that Sibley has not mastered in terms of postures, patterns, and overall gestalt. Nearly all of the artwork has been improved by the opening up of the layout, the substantially increased image sizes, and, yes, the darkening of most of the images. No part of the guide has improved more than the seabird section, which has swelled by more than a dozen species, all expertly rendered. The gulls, terns, and jaegers that seemed puny, pinched, and hemmed in by the original layout now flow harmoniously across the pages. And, of course, Sibley shows the widest range of geographic, seasonal, and age/sex related variation, as well as many hybrids and aberrant plumages. I could go on and on about the new edition's many strengths, innovations, and major improvements, but this review must address the shaky reproduction of color on some of the plates.

My initial impression, like that of many others, was that large swaths of the book are just too darned dark. Responding on 31 January 2014 to an early review by Brooke MacDonald at naturetravelnetwork.com, Sibley stated, "There is a fairly dramatic contrast between the colors of the first and second editions. I would describe the new printing as rich, deep colors and excellent detail, on bright white paper, and the first edition actually looks washed-out in comparison. It's possible that some will find the new colors too dark, or it may just take some getting-used-to after using the first edition for years."

After reading this explanation I resolved to banish prejudice from my mind and to spend more time with the book before forming an opinion. My one critical piece of advice to readers is to study these plates in good light. Not necessarily bright light, but good light. Suddenly, muted colors of the *Empidonax* flycatchers begin to assert themselves. The suggestion of feathering emerges on the upperparts of the waterthrushes. The adult dipper morphs from an inkblot into a charming little dark gray bird with a brown head! In keeping with the Sibley philosophy, the new plates mimic the way we see birds in the field: Great looks in good light yield subtle details, but under less ideal conditions the process of identification requires developing a solid understanding of shapes and patterns, as well as sounds, habitat preferences, and distribution. In all these respects, the new incarnation of the Sibley Guide is without peer.

That said, the initial printing is not without color problems. Here are the plates that bother me enough to mention: Reds/oranges too dark on some images of the Laughing, Heermann's, and Black-tailed Gulls, Common and Royal Terns, Cliff Swallow, Spotted Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Scarlet Tanager, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, European Goldfinch, and Orange Bishop; images of the Red-tailed Hawk and California Towhee too dark across the board; older Thayer's Gulls shown as consistently paler than same-aged Iceland Gulls; leg colors washed out on adult Thayer's, Slaty-backed, and Great Black-backed Gulls; base of mandible too dark on the Dusky Flycatcher; throat and chest too dark and crown not brown enough on the Ash-throated Flycatcher (also on page 341); pink tones lacking on

BOOK REVIEWS

the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher; colors too dull on some Arctic, Yellow-browed, Olive, Prothonotary, Blackburnian, and Wilson's Warblers and the Yellow-breasted Chat, too bright on the Pacific subspecies of the Orange-crowned Warbler; and dark streaks missing from the Golden-cheeked Warbler's undertail coverts. I detected these issues not only in my copy but also in four others.

Finally, in two instances the relative scale among species is distorted enough to warrant a second look by the design team. Most critically, the perched Sharp-shinned Hawks are about half the size of the adjacent Cooper's Hawks. Perhaps the layout should be changed to convey an accurate impression of the relative sizes of these oft-confused accipiters. Also, the Java Sparrow appears at a comically small scale, as if disappearing into a white void; measurements suggest it should be the largest of the four exotic species on page 581.

Even with the handful of cosmetic miscues, and even fewer substantive ones, taken into account, this thoughtful and ambitious upgrade elevates *The Sibley Guide* to the unparalleled gold standard, with platinum clearly an achievable goal. Fixable shortfalls identified in this and other reviews should be useful to the author and his design team as they regroup for the next printing. Before purchasing a book from the first printing, I recommend that birders examine a copy and see whether they regard the tiny fonts and funky colors as deal-breakers.

Robert A. Hamilton

Birds of the Grand Canyon Region: An Annotated Checklist (3rd ed.), by Brian P. Gatlin. 2013. Grand Canyon Association, Grand Canyon, AZ. 104 pages, eight full-page black-and-white photographs. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN 978-1-934656-40-2.

World-famous for its spectacular scenery and rich geologic history, the Grand Canyon is not generally regarded as a birding destination. Nonetheless, the Grand Canyon region has produced some remarkable bird records, most notably of a White Wagtail, as well as the only Arizona records of the Common Redpoll and White-winged Crossbill. With the reintroduction of the California Condor in 1996 and the more recent advent of sharing sightings through www.eBird.org, birding in the Grand Canyon is becoming more popular among birders beyond the few dedicated observers who regularly report from the region. The most dedicated among these is Brian Gatlin, who arrived at the Grand Canyon in 2002 and has studied the status and distribution of birds in the area intensively ever since. Now, Gatlin has produced this update to the second edition of the *Annotated Checklist* (1984), long awaited by birders and ornithologists interested in the Grand Canyon region.

The basic format remains unchanged from the second edition. This book is larger than a field guide but slim, better suited for a backpack, the car, or use as a desk reference. Introductory materials are followed by a brief overview of habitats and, the meat of the book, the species accounts.

The preface provides a detailed and interesting overview of research in the region since 1984. Unfortunately, the rich ornithological history of the region prior to 1984 included in the second edition is not reproduced here. Some major changes in status and distribution, or our understanding thereof, are described, such as the reintroduction of the California Condor and the discovery of the Burrowing Owl in the region. A few species have also been removed from the list for various reasons, including past misidentifications, lack of self-sustaining breeding populations, and lack of adequate documentation for extremely unlikely occurrences.

The introduction provides a very brief overview of the Grand Canyon region itself, including a detailed description of the area covered, a feature lacking in all too many

BOOK REVIEWS

guides to status and distribution. The wide area of coverage includes the Colorado River between Page and Lake Mead, the Coconino Plateau south of the river to the Valle and Peach Springs areas, the Kaibab Plateau north of the river, and much of the Arizona Strip. Most information, however, centers on the main river corridor and the rims, where most research and birder activity are focused. Briefly described are the possible effects on birds of anthropogenic changes since 1984, including the introduction of the tamarisk leaf beetle and fire management. Also nestled in the introduction is a two-page map of the region, one of the finest features of this edition. This map includes an outline of the checklist region and many geographic features, as well as towns, roads, and boundaries of public lands. Two features not found on this map that would have been useful are the Mohave/Coconino county line and river miles. The latter are used frequently to describe locations and distributional limits on the Colorado River.

Chapter 1 includes two pages of habitat descriptions, background information useful to the species accounts. This chapter is brief but adequate, and also references prior published works with more detailed information about the region's diverse habitats. This is followed by a useful introduction to the species accounts, including details on criteria for inclusion of noteworthy records, definitions of abundance and seasons, and a key to the bar graphs. The species accounts themselves cover 360 species documented in the region, plus two supplemental accounts of birds that are not on the Arizona state list, the Greater Sage-Grouse and Pileated Woodpecker. Each account includes a brief paragraph with pertinent information on status and distribution, habitat, seasonality, and more as appropriate for the species. The corresponding bar graph is located on the same page, saving the user the trouble of flipping to another section of the book to see specific information on seasonality and abundance. The checklist concludes with an excellent bibliography covering more than five pages of references and an unusually arranged index of the birds sorted only by common name.

The brief species accounts are impressively specific as to habitats and seasonality; for example, the American Wigeon is described as being abundant between Glen Canyon Dam and Soap Creek from November through March, and rare elsewhere in March–April and September–October (p. 27). Dates of migration outside of breeding areas are also given for some species. Descriptions of changes in status and distribution since the last checklist are also interesting. In general, subspecies are neglected. For example, the subspecies group of the White Wagtail is not mentioned (p. 72), nor are then-subspecies of the Sage Sparrow (p. 80). There are several exceptions, as subspecies of Northern Flicker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Fox Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco are discussed. The coverage of the junco even includes separate accounts and bar charts for subspecies groups (p. 82).

The bar charts contain a wealth of information, available at a glance under the species' description. It is very useful to have specific dates of occurrence and arrival/departure dates listed on the bar charts, although I could find no reference as to whether arrival and departure dates represented typical or record dates. Unfortunately, the bar charts are represented in shades of gray, which I find difficult to distinguish. Bars of varying width would have been preferable.

The inclusion of notable records was clearly considered with caution, and the removal from the main list of two species not on the Arizona state list, the Greater Sage-Grouse and Pileated Woodpecker, was a wise choice. This checklist does not follow the Arizona Bird Committee strictly, however. Many reports of the Black Rosy-Finch are listed, for example, but the Arizona Bird Committee has accepted no records from the region. The first accepted Arizona record of the Bay-breasted Warbler is from 1972, but there is a report here from 1971. Other apparently unsubmitted recent reports of species the committee reviews include the Golden-winged and Magnolia warblers and Baltimore Oriole. Still, the care with which Gatlin compiled bird records is commendable. Some species accounts address gaps in current knowledge, such as

BOOK REVIEWS

the winter status of the Ferruginous Hawk (p. 39). Of course, status and distribution are continually changing. The Neotropic Cormorant is rapidly becoming more regular in the region, as Gatlin predicts. These changes are acknowledged in the introduction, where the author requests reports to be e-mailed directly to him (although these reports should also be submitted to the Arizona Bird Committee).

Although there are a few small problems such as the difficult grayscale of the bar charts and the simplistic index, most features of this book are very useful and well done. Ideal for everything from short visits to long-term reference, this new edition will be handy for anyone interested in the avifauna of northern Arizona or southern Utah, and indispensable for anyone interested in the Grand Canyon itself.

Lauren B. Harter



California Condor

Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig