

BOOK REVIEW

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of the United States and Canada—West and **National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of the United States and Canada—East**, both second edition by Ted Floyd. February 2025. National Geographic, 496 and 448 pages, respectively, softcover, each \$24.99. ISBN 9781426222788 and 9781426222771, respectively.

The release of *The National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of the United States and Canada, Eighth Edition* affirms a pleasing paradox. In a digital age when identification aids, distribution data, and taxonomic relationships are, quite literally, at one's fingertips, the demand for hard-copy books on birds has never been greater.

Consider the number of new or revised works specific to North America to have come out in just the last 5 years. From an assortment of field guides for kids to an updated edition of Peter Pyle's magnum opus on North American bird identification, new literature abounds at every level. Several titans of nature publishing—the National Audubon Society, the American Museum of Natural History, Reader's Digest, and Pelagic Publications—have weighed in with new or updated offerings, while lesser-known houses, like the purveyors of Ethan Wilder's *North America Birdwatching* and Jason Stuttler's *Bird Watcher's Guide to North America*, have joined the fold. Not to be outdone, the imprint of Harper Collins that now holds the rights to the Peterson series, Mariner Books, has burnished its flagship best-seller, *A Field Guide to the Birds*—still going strong after 90 years.

Enter National Geographic. The self-described “all-new edition” of its popular field guide does more than keep pace with a dizzying number of nomenclatural and classification-related changes; it receives new authorship, updated range maps, contributions from citizen science, and even a tweak to its name. (Formerly the *Field Guide to Birds of North America*, the new title aligns it with an American Birding Association checklist that now includes Hawaiian birds, while acknowledging that it does not cover Mexico.) There are more illustrations than ever, and while most of them are an obvious response to the expanded area of coverage, they now include hitherto unrendered examples of hybridization, like the adult Tufted × Black-crested Titmouse tucked in as a head portrait alongside the pictures of its parent taxa. Other welcome additions to the gallery of plates are several that provide situational context to easily confused species, such as male Red-winged and Tricolored blackbirds in flight.

Otherwise, pictorially speaking, the eighth edition doesn't differ much from the seventh. The editors have prudently carried over the contributions of some 20 artists without alteration or substitution, preserving the visual distinctiveness associated with the Geographic “look”: vibrant colors, crisply delineated field marks, and unexaggerated subject matter displayed, diorama-like, in animated poses against vignettes of befitting habitat or with typical plant associations. The accuracy and stylistic coherence of these plates are in large part a credit to the work of preceding co-authors Jon Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer, both of whom had connections to the project from the time of its launch in 1983 until the release date of its penultimate edition in 2017.

If illustrative continuity has been maintained from earlier editions, however, matters of text and substance have not. Current author Ted Floyd has written new descriptions for every bird and reorganized discussions of habitat, seasonal occurrence, and migration patterns. This undertaking feels incomplete and may even be in a testing phase: as of this writing, the book exists in two volumes, East and West, that are noticeably dissimilar in structure and tone. Birds West, for example, accompanies each entry with a dedicated category, Behaviors, that is absent from Birds East.

BOOK REVIEW

Descriptions in *Birds West* also have an air of formality, while those in *Birds East* are more lyrical, sometimes opening with a pithy observation as quotable as a movie tag line. “Little bird, big nest,” writes Floyd as his introduction to the Verdin. “An urban gothic spectacle” he notes when describing the eventide roosts of American Crow. And headlining Pine Siskin: “Pound for pound, these little finches may be the most expensive of all our birds to feed.” Such epigrams are curiously absent from *Birds West* (even when the same bird appears in both volumes), and it will be a matter of interest to see how the editors at the National Geographic Society decide to resolve this disparity when they release a single-bound version sometime in fall.

If their ultimate aim is achieving a balance that appeals to the widest possible readership, their choice of author is a fitting one. Ted Floyd is a prolific writer of books and articles, as well as a teacher, lecturer, and the longstanding editor of *Birding Magazine*. He knows a thing or two about delivering a product that can be both accessible and technically engaging. Beginning birders will appreciate his inviting touches, such as introducing bird families by way of color-backed, banner-like overviews enlivened with interesting facts and statistics, similar to self-guiding plaques in a museum. Advanced birders will applaud his tact for keeping current with some of birding’s hottest topics, like that of Red Crossbill “types” and all the taxonomic and habitat-related ramifications thereof.

But fans of the Geo brand may not wish to part company with their copies of Dunn and Alderfer just yet. The newest version tries a little too hard to be all-embracing, and the result is a text that has been shorn of some of its earlier charms. Piquant terms like “mirrors” in the wings of gulls and “lateral crown stripes” on the heads of songbirds have been scrubbed, and deep dives into the identification of notable subspecies (for the Short-billed Dowitcher, Hermit Thrush, White-crowned Sparrow, et al.) have been scaled back to proverbial toe dips. Anyone who has attended a workshop with Jon Dunn knows of his enthusiasm for sharing this undervalued facet of birding, and his insights into polytypic species inform the descriptions and annotations for quite a few entries in edition 7. Floyd treats the subject more superficially, preferring to leave a more nuanced appreciation of subspecies to the specialty books and monographs.

Another shortfall of the eighth edition concerns its range maps. In his preface, Floyd states that he has shifted the emphasis of these valuable graphics from thumb-nail overviews of seasonal occurrence to “phases of a bird’s life cycle.” Unfortunately, as part of this makeover, he has reduced the amount of information the maps provide, lessening the number of colors from six to four and dropping all directional indicators and boundary lines. The map for the Blackpoll Warbler, for example, does not reveal that the bird’s fall migration route is heavily weighted toward the eastern seaboard and not the continent’s midsection, as it is in spring. Instead, we learn that the wide swath of a single color (yellow) that appears in place of areas once coded green, mustard, and yellow corresponds to the bird’s “pre- and postbreeding migration season.” Ironically, this distillation occurs at a time when the very same maps benefited from the recent surge of crowd-sourced data (compliments of eBird.org), vastly improving their accuracy. Had the updating been combined with the excellent cartographic work done by Paul Lehman in edition 7, the maps would have been all the richer and more edifying.

The typeface and quality of paper selected for the current two-part set are markedly inferior to their counterparts in the seventh edition. The sans serif lettering selected for these books is smaller and lighter, and the weight, texture, and tone of the printed page are flimsier, coarser, and whiter. A lengthy session of perusing the text actually gave me eye strain. The previous version contained sharply defined lettering set against a slightly off-white background, making it more agreeable to read and easier on the eyes. It also made more judicious use of boldface, allowing

BOOK REVIEW

for easier page navigation. It is my fervent hope that the publishers will choose a different type font and paper stock, as well as rework the layout, prior to consolidating these two books into a single volume.

And where does this book rank in the pantheon of other popular field guides? One in particular, *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (in need of an update of its own; the last one was in 2014), sets the benchmark against which excellence in the genre is measured. The Geo Guide compares well, to be sure, but more because of its own merits than as the result of a side-by-side assessment. Floyd gives us a companion that is taut, approachable, mildly flamboyant, and colorfully written. Sibley's volume is heftier, replete with detail, subtler in tone, and designed for more contemplative reading. These two masterworks should be regarded more as complementary than competitive.

Indeed, taking on a subject as vast and varied as a continent's avifauna is a bit like conducting a Beethoven symphony. The author, like the conductor, must harmonize a large number of constituent parts into a seamless whole while appealing to a wide range of tastes. The respective maestro for each, while governed by fixed elements (a species checklist; a score), has an enormous amount of freedom in shaping and modulating the wealth of material before him. As such, the consummate birder should be as devoted to owning more than one North American field guide as the connoisseur of music should be to having multiple recordings of a single great work.

The *National Geographic Field Guide to Birds, Eighth Edition* is a worthy addition to one's home library, avian-themed or otherwise. Questionable amendments aside, its lofty place in the hierarchy of field guides remains uncontested. Freshened in 2025 to keep pace with whirlwind advances in ornithology and the never-ending scrum of renamed and resequenced subject matter, the book's greatest strengths may actually lie in its ability to overcome a growing infatuation with birding apps and social media, and to hold its own as a perennial favorite in a crowded field of competing resources. Its triumph is also its *raison d'être*, reaffirming the relevance of an old-school tool in a technology-driven age.

David Koepfel