

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of the Pacific States, by Ralph Hoffmann. 1927. The Riverside Press, Cambridge, MA. 353 pp. Includes many pen and ink drawings and 10 color paintings by Allan Brooks. Hardcover. Out of print, but available used from many sources. Now available online at <https://archive.org/details/birdsofpacificst00hoff>.

If you ask almost any birder to name the person who created the first modern field guide to North American birds, one designed to help identify birds in the field, pointing out a few key field marks for each along with descriptions of their sounds—you will be confidently assured that Roger Tory Peterson was that person. It turns out that “almost any birder” would be dead wrong. Peterson’s classic 1934 *The Field Guide to the Birds* gets credit as the first of its kind, a publication that led the transition from birding with a shotgun to birding with binoculars. Seven years before that, however, Ralph Hoffmann published *Birds of the Pacific States*, a book that described the birds of Washington, Oregon, and California and included drawings, detailed descriptions with specific field marks noted, information on the birds’ habitats and behavior, and notes on their sounds. In fact, fully 30 years before Peterson’s book, Hoffmann published *A Guide to the Birds of New England and Eastern New York* (1904) that included nearly all of these features. Peterson’s primary innovation was including little arrows on the illustrations to draw attention to those key field marks.

You may well ask, why should we review a book published nearly a century ago? Two reasons: first, *Birds of the Pacific States* is now available online at the Internet Archive, and second, Hoffmann deserves to be much better known and acknowledged for his work.

What really sets Hoffmann’s book apart are his simple but intensely evocative descriptions of each bird’s typical habitat and behavior, features mostly lacking in Peterson’s guide. And this sort of information can often be as helpful to the birder as field marks.

This is how Hoffmann introduces us to the Snow Goose: “*A fringe of distant white on a green marshy meadow in winter may be a line of White Pelican or a flock of Snow Geese. If through a glass we see birds moving forward, cropping the grass with necks bent, we can decide at once that they are geese. When we approach, the long necks are raised, the birds stand watchful or rise with much flapping of wings and a jangle of discordant cries like the yelping of a pack of hounds.*” His book is rich with narratives that place the reader directly in the field, as with a flock of foraging Bushtits: “*From a live oak a cloud of little gray birds with long tails hurriedly and in twos and threes cross the open space to the next shelter. Twenty or thirty have crossed the open, and still one or two keep crossing and when the observer is sure that the last has crossed, still another flies out and hurries to join the rest. All the time the flock utters gentle high-pitched twittering notes....*” I was only a few years into my bird obsession when my wife, Kathleen, found Hoffmann’s book in a used book store (Yes, kids, there used to be places where one could go and actually touch real books.). Every time I read an account I just said, “That’s it! That’s it exactly!” I suspect that anyone who peruses this delightful book will have the same reaction, again and again.

Ralph Hoffmann was born in Massachusetts in 1870 and became an excellent botanist, ornithologist, and dedicated teacher. He moved to California in 1919 and traveled all around the state from his home in Carpinteria (Santa Barbara County). After six years as headmaster of a private school, he took over from William Dawson as director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Hoffmann had a particular interest in the flora of the Channel Islands and visited them often. On 21 July 1932, on his last trip to the islands, he went in search of a rare species of buckwheat and fell from a cliff to his death.

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A line from the preface to *Birds of the Pacific States* says much about his approach to writing, “I have tried to make this book readable as well as accurate,” and thoughts expressed in the introduction reveal what he considered most important in life, “If a parent wishes to give his children three gifts for the years to come, I should put next to a passion for truth and a sense of humor, love of beauty in any form. Who will deny that birds are a conspicuous manifestation of beauty in nature?”

Edward R. Pandolfino



A photo from Albert Einstein's 1931 visit to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. From left to right are Ludwig Katz, Ralph Hoffmann, Albert Einstein, Elsa Einstein, and Gertrude Hoffmann.

Photo courtesy of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.