

BOOK REVIEWS

All About Birds, California, edited by Jill Leichter, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Princeton University Press. 304 pages. Softcover, \$17.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-99005-7.

On 1 March 2022, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology published *seven* field guides covering different regions of North America. Targeting “new and developing birders,” the “All About Birds” series represents a cross-platforming of photos and information culled from the lab’s outstanding web pages. Promotional materials claim that these “definitive” guides “provide the most up-to-date resources and expert coverage on bird species throughout North America.” So, does *All About Birds, California* live up to the hype?

Sadly, no. Which is disappointing, because we all owe a debt of gratitude to the innovative and farsighted folks in Ithaca for doing so much to modernize birding with their impressive and varied online offerings. Cornell’s allaboutbirds.org represents the most comprehensive, useful, and popular web site devoted to bird identification in North America. Without charge, or even the need to register, you can take out your phone and pull up one of 616 species accounts that feature several high-quality images, video and audio files, a range map, and loads of relevant information on the bird’s appearance, regional differences, similar species, habitat, food, nesting, behavior, conservation, and even some “cool facts.” For species encountered less frequently, readers are redirected to Cornell’s other birding sites, ebird.org and the truly comprehensive birdsoftheworld.org, as *The Birds of North America* has now been repackaged (subscription only). Perhaps if more of us had converted our figurative debt into actual donations, Cornell would have spared us, and themselves, this poorly conceived series of guides.

Unlike a phone, *All About Birds, California* does not fit in a pocket. In fact, the book is larded with 70 introductory pages (marketed as “bonus content”) addressing a crazy-quilt of bird-related topics, such as the construction and placement of bird feeders and the qualities of a good birdhouse. The same anodyne material already resides harmlessly at allaboutbirds.org, taking up no space and killing no trees, so why would anyone want to lug it around in a backpack?

The folly of including so much filler comes into stark relief upon realization that *All About Birds, California* covers only 218 species, less than one-third of the species actually known from California and found at allaboutbirds.org. Compounding the problem is the guide’s rigid and inefficient one-species-per-page format. By treating an average of three species per two-page spread and limiting the front matter, the stellar *Birds of Western North America, a Photographic Guide* (Paul Sterry and Brian A. Small, 2009) shoehorns more than 500 species into a book of similar size.

All About Birds, California omits an unconscionable array of species found commonly across wide swaths of the state. Missing are the Ross’s and Cackling geese, Tundra Swan, the teal, goldeneyes, mergansers, and scoters, Ring-necked Duck, Greater Scaup, Horned and Clark’s grebes, Common Poorwill, Vaux’s Swift, the *Rallus* rails, American Avocet, Snowy and Semipalmated plovers, Whimbrel, Black Turnstone, Red Knot, Surf-bird, Dunlin, Least Sandpiper, the dowitchers, phalaropes, and yellowlegs, Wilson’s Snipe, Wandering Tattler, the skuas and jaegers, Bonaparte’s Gull, Caspian Tern, Pacific Loon, all tubenoses, Pelagic Cormorant, Barn Owl, Merlin, Prairie Falcon, the Psittacidae, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cassin’s Kingbird, the *Empidonax* flycatchers, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Bell’s, Hutton’s, Plumbeous, and Cassin’s vireos, California Gnatcatcher, Marsh Wren, the thrashers, Swainson’s Thrush, the pipits and wagtails, Black-chinned, Sagebrush, and Bell’s sparrows, and Nashville, MacGillivray’s, Black-throated Gray, and Hermit warblers. Any species excluded from the guide is treated as nonexistent, so don’t look for, say, a comparative photo of Clark’s Grebe tucked into the Western Grebe account or a Least Sandpiper

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lurking among the Western Sandpipers. It's as if Williams Sonoma published a series of cookbooks, omitted half the ingredients, and failed to mention the missing items.

Axing so many species created a logistical complication for assembling the illustrated index to bird families that folds out of the guide's front cover. In addition to the various families missing entirely from the book, and hence the index, the decision to exclude all species of thrasher led the editors to represent the Mimidae awkwardly and misleadingly as consisting of mockingbirds alone!

With dozens of common and widespread species missing in action, readers may be befuddled to find accounts for numerous species that are rare, uncommon, or localized in California. These include the Chukar, Common Nighthawk, Pigeon Guillemot, Black-legged Kittiwake, Short-billed Gull (under the superseded moniker of "Mew Gull"), Glaucous Gull, Rough-legged Hawk, Barred Owl, Canada Jay, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Juniper Titmouse, Purple Martin, Abert's Towhee, and Summer Tanager. One might hypothesize that the odd inclusion of these species reflects a simple lack of understanding of California's avifauna. Given the decision to purposefully exclude dozens of common and widespread species, however, it's much more likely that these species accounts were developed for inclusion in one or more of the other regional guides, and that Cornell decided opportunistically to re-use them in the California guide to pad the numbers or save money, never mind the editorial dissonance they engender.

Each species account in *All About Birds, California* includes four photos, each confined to its own identical rectangular frame. The images are of high quality, but their reproduction in this book is as dreary and uninspired as the page layout. By contrast, the Sterry/Small photographic guide's boundary-pushing layout showcases vibrant bird images of variable number and size engagingly invading the spaces of their neighbors on the page, with similar species helpfully juxtaposed. To select just one example, their book illustrates 11 species of *Calidris* with 40 photos on five two-page spreads. *All About Birds, California*, by contrast, covers only the Sanderling and Western Sandpiper, and inexplicably places these congeners on different two-page spreads. Other similar species that a better-conceived layout would have situated on facing pages include the Lesser and Common nighthawks, Royal and Elegant terns, Golden and Bald eagles, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, California and Woodhouse's scrub-jays, and Tree and Violet-green swallows.

Each species account provides a tiny range map of North America, with no special attention paid to California. I did not check all of these for accuracy but noticed that the map for the Cactus Wren omits the state's coastal populations.

Textual information about each species, delivered in a chatty style familiar to anyone who has visited a children's science museum, is provided under four headings: Size and Shape, Color Pattern, Behavior, and Habitat. Each account closes with a brief paragraph of whimsical factoids generally unrelated to bird identification. Since any effort to help the reader distinguish one species from another would have only highlighted the book's profound lapses in coverage, this may be the first field guide I've ever read that simply ignores identification challenges altogether. Where one expects to find carefully curated guidance on the specific cues birders rely upon to identify similar-looking birds in the field, *All About Birds, California* delivers banal descriptions of birds and their behaviors, addressing each species in a vacuum. Anna's Hummingbirds "readily come to hummingbird feeders and flowering plants" whereas Black-chinned Hummingbirds "are habitat specialists, found in lowland deserts and mountainous forests, and in naturalized habitats and very urbanized areas, so long as there are tall trees and flowering shrubs and vines." When observing Rufous Hummingbirds, "Look for their fast, darting flight and pinpoint maneuverability," whereas Allen's Hummingbirds "zip from flower to flower hovering above them to drink the nectar, ticking as they go." Costa's Hummingbirds "drink nectar from desert plants and snap up small flying insects in midair," whereas

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Calliope Hummingbirds “take nectar from flowering plants and eat flying insects in midair.” A new or developing observer of birds hoping for useful insights into the craft of birding can only absorb so many of these repetitive clichés and nonsensical self-contradictions before the eyes glaze over in surrender.

The release of this retrograde line of regional guides announces that the bill has come due for all the free, technology-based innovations that Cornell has bestowed upon the birding public. As a tool for identifying birds, *All About Birds, California* is as complete, useful, and serious as an interpretive sign at a nature preserve, or a cookbook missing half its pages. Nevertheless, this superficially attractive offering—or perhaps one of its six sister volumes—seems destined to be the infuriating gift that a nonbirding relative will eventually bestow upon each of us. This book was the cry for help that prompted me to finally start sending Cornell a monthly donation to cover the costs of the online services I use. You might consider doing the same, and letting your family know that, in lieu of purchasing this inferior product, you would prefer that they support Cornell’s many good works through a donation to ebird.org or a year’s subscription to birdsoftheworld.org.

Robert A. Hamilton

North American Hummingbirds: An Identification Guide, by George C. West. 2015. Paperback, \$24.95. University of New Mexico Press. 256 pp., 205 color photos, 153 paintings. ISBN 978-0-8263-3767-2

The hummingbird family includes many of the most beautiful species in North America—but also some of the most difficult to identify. George C. West’s *North American Hummingbirds: An Identification Guide* has successfully captured the beauty of this family and provided helpful field marks for aging, sexing, and identifying hummingbirds.

The book begins with an introduction to identifying hummingbirds in the field, highlighting how to distinguish species by size, shape, and overall color, as well as by wing-feather pattern and tail shape. Next, the book presents species accounts for the 25 species of hummingbirds that have been documented at least once by a specimen, photograph, or sight record within the United States or Canada. Accounts of the 18 regularly occurring species are grouped by the species’ size—large, medium, or small—within these groups, the species are sorted taxonomically. After introducing the species, each account describes the adult male, adult female, juvenile male, and juvenile female in detail. The species accounts are accompanied by West’s numerous original illustrations of dorsal and ventral views, photographs of the various ages and sexes at various angles, and close-up photographs of spread tails. Each account concludes with comparisons with similar species and information about distribution, migration, courtship and nesting, nutrition, and molt. The seven species of accidental vagrants are covered at the end of the book in less depth than the regularly occurring species.

The book is highly comprehensive, well documented, and beautifully illustrated, and would be ideal for anyone interested taking a deep dive into hummingbird identification. The book’s sections on the aging and sexing of each species are well equipped with detailed supporting descriptions. The images of the spread tail of each age/sex category of each species are very useful for aging, sexing, and identifying birds in the hand as well as from photographs. The choice of photography is effective; most photographic guides choose crisp, close-up photos of birds, but this guide also features photographs of hummingbirds that are distant, not particularly sharp, or show multiple birds—an apt inclusion since hummingbirds frequently move, often

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at high speeds, and they can be difficult to scrutinize up close at leisure. The section “Courtship and Nesting” is very informative and filled with interesting tidbits about hummingbirds’ life cycle. Likewise, the section “Nutrition and Molt” contains detailed information on diet, feeding behavior, and the timing and sequence of molt.

Field biologists such as bird banders would benefit from this book because of the detailed information on the morphology of each hummingbird species. In an appendix, the book provides data on the length, wing chord, culmen length, and weight of both sexes of each species. In some cases, more information, such as the width of rectrix 5 in the Rufous and Allen’s Hummingbirds, is provided. This, combined with the many photographs of morphological features, spread-tail photographs, and illustrations of all ages and sexes, will be very helpful to banders aging, sexing, and identifying hummingbirds in the hand.

Birders and surveyors would also benefit from this book, especially in distinguishing the often difficult to identify females. With its detailed descriptions, multiple illustrations, and photographs of females of various ages, this book provides the information needed for their identification in nearly all cases. For example, the section dedicated to distinguishing the female Black-chinned and Ruby-throated clearly details the differences in primary feather shape and is accompanied by clear photographs of the spread wing. The book also addresses the identification challenge of the females of Rivoli’s Hummingbird and the Blue-throated Mountain-Gem.

However, there are a number of reasons this book’s appeal to field observers may be more limited. First, there are no range maps, crucial for any birder hoping to learn status and distribution and especially important for traveling birders. Second, details on vagrancy of hummingbirds are inconsistent. For example, nothing is mentioned about the vagrancy of the Broad-billed Hummingbird, despite its being a regular vagrant throughout the western United States (and a less regular vagrant in the eastern United States). The book does mention the vagrancy of Rivoli’s Hummingbird, however, despite its being much rarer as a vagrant than the Broad-billed Hummingbird. Third, the “similar species” section could also go more in depth at times. For example, when comparing Costa’s and Anna’s Hummingbirds, the book merely mentions, “Costa’s is smaller than Anna’s, with a shorter bill and tail.” But size can be difficult to judge on lone birds, and a juvenile Anna’s could have a bill shorter than an adult’s. The book could have instead mentioned the white line connecting the eye and sides on a Costa’s, as well as the far less heavily marked throat. As another example, the book mentions the Costa’s and Bumblebee Hummingbirds as species similar to the Calliope, but it does not mention that it is in fact the Rufous and Allen’s that resemble the Calliope more closely. Finally, the accounts of most species lack a “voice” section, which would be helpful for the field observer given that most hummingbirds regularly call and sing, and in some cases, voice is as good or better a field mark than any visual characteristic (e.g., the calls of female Costa’s and female Anna’s Hummingbirds).

West’s *North American Hummingbirds: An Identification Guide* contains more detailed information on sexing and aging than other hummingbird-identification guides, such as Williamson’s *Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America* and Howell’s *Hummingbirds of North America: The Photographic Guide*. In addition, West provides many more details on courtship, nesting, and nutrition, valuable for anyone hoping to learn about the life of hummingbirds. Between the early 2000’s (when Williamson’s and Howell’s books were published) and 2015 (when West’s book was published), birders’ understanding of vagrant hummingbirds in the United States has increased greatly, and West has done an excellent job of covering these accidentals and outlining records and vagrancy patterns. Therefore, having all three guides (Williamson’s and Howell’s for their range maps, differentiation of similar species, and information on voice, and West’s for information on aging, sexing, the life cycle, and vagrants) will provide the most value to hummingbird enthusiasts.

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Overall, the book is highly informative and visually appealing. Its effective format, combining detailed text with many photographs and illustrations, provides valuable insights on hummingbird aging, sexing, and identification. It would be an indispensable guide for banders identifying hummingbirds in the hand, and it would be an excellent choice for field observers to supplement their general field guides.

Desmond E. Sieburth