

## BOOK REVIEW

**Rogue Birder: The Making of a Modern Ornithologist**, by M. Ralph Browning. 2018. Oregon Review Books, 170 pages, 24 black and white photos. Paperback, \$15.00. ISBN-13: 978-1729308134.

This freewheeling, readable memoir describes youthful passion, a deep affection for a rural, wild place and its birdlife, and the early formative experiences that led the author to eventually migrate from Oregon to a career with the Biological Survey at the U.S. National Museum. The book's title hints at a double meaning, which is its intent: "A Rogue Birder birds the Rogue River watershed. A Rogue Birder is also a state of mind, an attitude." The author perceives himself, and rightly so, as a gentle gadfly who enjoys challenging the conclusions about the taxonomy and distribution of Oregon birds. The natural setting is the vast and diverse Rogue River Valley of southwestern Oregon. The climate and vegetation here "bridged the gap between environments of the Coast Range and east to the Great Basin." In the 1950s, when this tale begins, this region's birdlife was little explored. Over the decades, Browning made it a life's goal to fill in the blanks by documenting range extensions and new records. As a result, "Rogue Birder" teaches a lot about the distributional limits of birds in southern Oregon. The book is organized into 16 chapters which carry us on a meandering path that reveals the many early field adventures that led to deeper thinking about bird biology and science. While it follows a general chronology, the chapters do not have to be read sequentially for the memoir to be appreciated. Browning makes passing mention of his scientific papers, but the reader could have appreciated his many contributions more fully if a bibliography of his publications had been included.

Browning's narrative is sprinkled with word play, a wry sense of humor, and segues that drift off into side topics that captured the author's imagination while putting pen to paper. These tangential forays, sometimes far from the beaten track, add some spice and give the book a light-hearted and very personal angle. Browning clearly does not take himself too seriously. He alternates frequently between the first- and third-person points of view, a style that struck me at first as awkward, but it works. He pays homage throughout to a number of local birders and to well-known systematic ornithologists whom he encountered over the years, telling us how they helped influence his thinking. Field trips as a teenager with friends and mentors, in his dad's Willys jeep and later his own VW bug, remind some of us of our own early days on the loose. An intimate familiarity with the region allows Browning to reminisce authoritatively about how the Rogue River country's habitats have changed since the 1950s and 1960s. As everywhere, pristine places became less so, and dams altered forever the free-flowing creeks and rivers. Field notes were taken with a troublesome rapidograph pen that needed constant shaking to keep the India ink flowing. I too struggled with those pens.

In 1957, the publication of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the American Ornithologists' Union's Check-list was a watershed event in ornithology. The Check-list provided the official word on nomenclature, distribution, and, importantly in this edition, the subspecies of all North American birds. Browning writes about marking up his original Peterson field guide with the new names that had supplanted the old ones. The Check-list's distributional details on some species occupying southern Oregon were sketchy, and he remarks on several. Indeed, ideas that he questioned in the 1960s he followed up on later as subjects of his research. He shares his philosophy about subspecies and related subjects at various places throughout.

I especially enjoyed reading about the trips Browning made by small skiff to flat-topped but inaccessible Goat Island near Brookings in spring 1966. This is the largest island on the Oregon coast, and in 1940 was the sole breeding bird island

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in the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge. No one had been on Goat Island for many decades before his visit. Ralph and compadre Bill went there primarily to explore for subterranean-nesting sea birds. To this end they were successful. After finding a tiny beach to land their craft and space to pitch a tent, they were off searching and inspecting burrows in the deep, soft soil. They found a colony of Cassin's Auklets and a lone Rhinoceros Auklet, at that time hundreds of miles south of known breeding locales. By extrapolating from burrow counts they estimated a nesting colony of over a half million Leach's Storm-petrels. Subsequent surveys determined that their estimate of Leach's was too high by a factor of five, but their efforts laid the groundwork for more sophisticated surveys later.

Of note, Browning played a role in bringing to light the Wrentit's recent expansion into the Rogue River country. This followed from finding populations that appeared to be different from those in adjacent regions. From plumage coloration of specimens he'd collected and from museum collections, he argued that the local populations represented a distinct subspecies, which he described as *Chamaea fasciata margra*. He laments that his subspecies may be in taxonomic jeopardy.

Throughout the book, Browning circles again and again between his early years in southern Oregon to his time at the National Museum, but always returns to his home in the Rogue Valley. Written with unbridled enthusiasm, this memoir is a fun read filled with tales and stories to which many can enjoy and relate. All of us who also have a love for the place where they developed their early love for birding, and perhaps for ornithology, will find this book a delight.

*Christopher W. Swarth*