

## COURSE REVIEW

**Great Courses' National Geographic Guide to Birding in North America**, a 24-part series of lectures produced and taught by James Currie for the Teaching Company's "Great Courses" and National Geographic. Available in various formats from <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/the-national-geographic-guide-to-birding-in-north-america>. See website for current price.

[Editor's note: This series was reviewed via DVDs available for purchase through the Great Courses as a 4-DVD set. It is also available through the subscription streaming service Wondrium, through the free online library and streaming service Kanopy, YouTube, and other sources.]

The Great Courses' *National Geographic Guide to Birding in North America* takes on a very challenging task. Birding is a complex topic, but the presenter, James Currie, really does a great job distilling a daunting amount of information into easily digestible lectures. The information contained within this course is targeted at advancing one's ability to find and watch birds in the field. It provides the science aspect in as much detail as it applies to finding and identifying birds. The strength of this series is that it provides enough scientific background to make its points while not drowning the viewer in trivia.

Each disc begins with a table of contents and allows the viewer to select the lecture to be watched. However, the DVDs are accompanied by a book, and this book is the best resource for navigating the material contained throughout the series. Each lecture is approximately 40 minutes; the section that covers "tactics to be a better birder" is separate from the discussion of optics. These in turn are separate from the discussion of using behavioral cues, which is separate from the lecture on birding by habitat. All of these could logically be rolled into one continuous lecture, but the subjects would almost certainly be overwhelming.

The course series begins with a discussion of distribution, endemism, and status. This feels like a logical starting point and provides a great framework with which to learn the birds. Yet, if this introduction is overlooked, it can contribute to many identification problems. The course continues into a fairly basic discussion of habitat and explains how to learn which species to expect where. Like many of the lectures, this section could certainly be developed further, but instead it presents an easily digestible amount of information. For example, the discussion of habitat features a very brief section explaining that the two types of forest are evergreen and deciduous. Obviously, this is a gross oversimplification of the intricacies of North American woodlands. Nevertheless, the lecture then continues into a classic example of the Brown-headed Cowbird parasitizing nests of the threatened Kirtland's Warbler, connecting dots between edge habitat and forest specialists, while making a pointed remark about conservation.

After the course addresses some of the fundamentals of birding, it goes into several units on the identification of various taxonomic groups of birds. Again, rather than drowning the viewer with details for every single species—which would never fit anyway—it emphasizes groups with confusing species and how to distinguish them. For example, in his discussion of swans, Currie mentions the Mute Swan quickly but spends a few minutes on the field marks of the Tundra and Trumpeter Swans. For such a nuanced topic, riddled with exceptions to every rule, this lecture covers the bases very efficiently.

While new and intermediate observers of birds arguably stand to gain the most from these lessons, experienced birders can find useful information within them as well. Is it really important to know that the term "birdwatching" came from a 1901 book? Not critical to one's birding but interesting background just the same. The

## COURSE REVIEW

difference between anisodactyl and zygodactyl? Maybe trivia to some, but not when you're tracking a roadrunner. Currie's discussions of the use of weather, topography, and digital resources like eBird for finding birds should help develop a well-rounded field ornithologist and birder, even one already with years of experience.

The entire course progresses logically and is sufficiently detailed. It serves its intended purpose of being a great aid to learning about birds in the field for a broad audience.

*Ned Bohman  
Outreach Biologist, Great Basin Bird Observatory  
Secretary, Nevada Bird Records Committee  
bohman@gbbo.org*