

BOOK REVIEW

Birdpedia: A Brief Compendium of Avian Lore, by Christopher W. Leahy. 2021. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 272 pp.; hardbound with black and white sketches. \$16.95. ISBN978-0-691-20966-1.

Having spent parts of my life in the worlds of academic biochemistry, the medical device business, and ornithology, I know only too well how much those who dwell in these fields love to use jargon. In some cases, the jargon provides a more succinct way to describe an observation (it is easier to say that the Common Nighthawk is largely crepuscular than to say it is most active in the twilight of evening and early morning). On the other hand, if you saw a Bald Eagle steal a fish from an Osprey, you are just showing off if you insist, in polite conversation, on saying that the eagle kleptoparasitized the Osprey. Use of such terms can create a barrier to those just getting interested in birds and ornithology. Leahy's earlier tomes, *The Birdwatcher's Companion* (1982) and *The Birdwatcher's Companion to North American Birdlife* (2004), provided a source for those of all levels of interest to translate our ornithological jargon into plain English. These books also provided a fairly exhaustive treatment of many aspects of the field, including the history and personalities that shaped ornithology in North America. In many ways, one can consider *Birdpedia* a "sampler" from those larger books. Indeed, in his preface Leahy refers to this book as a "teaser," with the intent to turn a "nagging curiosity into a compelling fascination ... with the natural world." In this sense, the target reader is likely someone who birds and is becoming more interested in understanding the world of birds more broadly and deeply.

This is not to say that even one relatively steeped in ornithology might not learn some new things from this book. Did you know that most hawks and owls tend to be left-handed (or, rather, "left-footed")? However, *Birdpedia* is likely to be of more value to someone listening to birders refer to "caching," or "brood parasitism," and wanting to understand these terms. And yes, the book defines crepuscular and kleptoparasitism, though the latter is buried under the term "piracy" in this alphabetically arranged format (an index would have been a very useful addition). *Birdpedia* goes beyond defining terms and explains many aspects of avian behavior, elegantly summarizing the most recent findings in many areas of ethology. In spite of the condensed form of this book, Leahy gives outstanding and surprisingly thorough reviews of aspects of bird navigation and evolution.

I enjoyed his short bios of important names in ornithological history, including some often overlooked contributors such as Florence Merriam Bailey. And I was very pleased to see that Leahy and I are in full agreement that Alexander Wilson is "even more deserving than Audubon of the title of Father of American Ornithology."

While understanding that the book's intent is to give one just a taste, I still often found myself perplexed by what was included and what was omitted. For example, Leahy defines contour feathers, down, filoplumes, and vibrissae, but nowhere could I find definitions of even more commonly used terms for plumage such as primaries, secondaries, tertials, or rectrices.

All in all, while it isn't for everyone, I recommend *Birdpedia* for those who are finding themselves with a growing interest in, and curiosity about, ornithology. I think that may describe many WFO members, or those who might find themselves on the gift lists of WFO members.

Edward R. Pandolfino