BOOK REVIEWS

Field Guide to North American Flycatchers: Empidonax and Pewees, by Cin-Ty Lee, illustrated by Andrew Birch. 2023. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. Paperback, 168 pages, 55 color plus black and white illustrations, 19 maps, 53 audiospectrograms. $19.95. ISBN: 97806912400626.

In this meticulously illustrated guide, Lee and Birch synthesize decades of birding, their own identification articles, and specimen research to demystify a supremely puzzling group of smallish flycatchers mostly of the genera *Empidonax* and *Contopus*, known as "empids" and "pewees," respectively. They describe their approach as holistic, and it is, de-emphasizing plumage and what might be called a "field mark approach" in favor of gestalt plus a generous helping of seasonal status and geographical distribution. Once thought to be reliably distinguishable only in the hand—plucked from nets, or, before that, shot out of trees—flycatchers lend themselves well to identification that is strongly comparative and multi-dimensional. This book thus serves as an alternative to regional field guides or, especially, websites, both of which attempt to summarize and reduce the collective knowledge of birders, rather than leveraging and amplifying it as these authors have done.

Lee and Birch begin with a nearly 40-page introductory section laying out flycatcher-specific typology (where terms like "supralore" and "secondary stack" may be unfamiliar to even advanced birders). They then introduce head-related aspects of flycatcher identification, including relative head size, crown shape, and forehead angle. Bills are next (length, mandible color), followed by tail width, the dreaded primary projection, and eye-ring shape. Color gets a nod, but it follows contrast (wing contrast, underparts contrast). These discussions are followed by a fairly complex matrix of characters (13 categories, each with 3 or 4 subcategories), a "visual similarity map" with each species in its own color-shaded text bubble set at variable distances to indicate similarity, and a double panel of breezy, black-and-white sketches showing each species, all of which will be more or less identical to most readers. But that's the point.

The 100+ page "field guide" includes the illustrated comparative species accounts, which comprise "general identification," "voice," "range and habitat," and finally "similar species." Each species account includes multiple (stunningly accurate) illustrations by Birch of the focal species and similar ones, plus three or four spectrograms per species and two sets of highly detailed range (more precisely, migration-timing) maps, one emphasizing spring and the other fall (except for sedentary taxa). Separate "species" accounts are provided for certain species groups (e.g., the Hammond's, Dusky, and Least flycatchers) that present identification challenges for even the most adroit birders in the U.S. and Mexico.

There is so much to like about this book, and the illustrations of posed birds—the abundance of the drawings, and their accuracy—are the real stand-outs. Even the dowdy Gray Flycatcher is afforded eight separate sketches and paintings in its own account (plus a couple more here and there in other species' accounts), basically showing how in slightly different poses it *still* looks like a Gray Flycatcher. As someone who has banded most of these species, and has seen all but the Pine Flycatcher (yes, Lee and Birch include the Pine Flycatcher!) many times over, I find the drawings are just spot-on.

The migration maps are also refreshingly accurate. One can quickly note the differences between the arrival waves of, say, the Pacific-slope vs. Cordilleran flycatchers (recently re-lumped as the Western Flycatcher); in this case, an April migrant in southeastern Arizona would be far more likely to be a Pacific-slope, yet in fall, all bets are off. These maps also help gauge the seasonal probability of a species in

different parts of its range; for example, in western Utah, Hammond's is far more common in fall than spring, yet in southern California this is reversed.

The only possible weakness I found is the brevity of the range and habitat descriptions. With such excellent maps, I'm not even sure the range needs to be written out. But habitat type strikes me as one key to separating the empids, if not the pewees. To pick a few examples, the breeding habitats of those nesting in my local southern California mountains are listed as "shrubby riparian habitats (often around willow thickets)," "lowland deciduous to coniferous forests … shaded microhabitats, preferring the understory or inner canopy," and "open coniferous forests, chaparral habitats and scrubby riparian areas in the mountains and foothills." While these characterizations are correct, I could not match up the species with such vague habitat descriptions. And, virtually no description of stopover and wintering habitats is provided, though these can be especially helpful in distinguishing species that may not co-occur where most birders observe them on their breeding grounds (e.g., Yellow-bellied Flycatchers in the humid understory of shade-grown coffee, Least Flycatchers working the fence lines of adjacent pastures, and Willow Flycatchers out in the pasture itself).

But these are truly minor quibbles—most birders will have at least one decent "general" field guide before they move on to this one, and won't care a whit that the habitat of Hammond's Flycatcher isn't exhaustively described; there are plenty of sources to peek at for that.

Daniel S. Cooper

Bird: Exploring The Winged World. Phaidon, London. 2021. Hardback, 352 pages, 305 illustrations. ISBN: 9781838661403.

This hefty, lushly illustrated coffee-table book is a set of more than 300 images curated by Phaidon staff and notable ornithological consultants. It is intended to celebrate the beauty and appeal of birds and illustrate the human relationship with birds and the narrative of the place of birds in art and culture throughout human history. There is an insightful introduction by author and fine artist Katrina van Grouw (*The Unfeathered Bird,* Princeton University Press, 2013) describing how the symbolism of birds has been featured throughout human history, from a fossilized *Archaeopteryx* to the Bald Eagle symbol of the United States. All forms of imagery are covered in this educational, illustrated encyclopedia, ranging from a petroglyph quail dating from 8000 BC (p. 276) to Doug Bowman's Twitter logo *Twitter Bird* (p. 196). The images portray a range of media from physical art such as sculptures and jewelry, detailed oil paintings from 17th and 18th century masters, modern-day photographers, and the evolution of scientific bird art.

Below each image is a 3-column caption, explaining the life and work of the artist and offering a brief analysis of the image. As the images are ordered more by design rather than by date, there is a timeline (p. 328) beginning in 34,000 BC to highlight some of the most important milestones of bird art and bird symbolism.

This book covers the complete range of bird imagery, including physical art such as the Eames House Bird (artist unknown), Joseph Chaumet's 19th-century hummingbird jewel-encrusted brooch (p. 18) and Thomas Poulsom's Lego Northern Lapwing (p. 22) from his book *Birds from Bricks* (2016). Modern art and impressionism are also represented, most notably Marcus Coates' *Common Sandpiper* (p. 23), in which the detailed intricacies of the plumage have been boiled down to about 40 pixel-like squares. Charley Harper's bold, unique, and influential style is also here in the vibrant *We Think the World of Birds* (p. 179).

Some of the more famous masters, many better known for portraits and landscapes, include Vincent van Gogh's impressionist *Four Swifts with Landscape Sketches* (p. 45) and Pablo Picasso's *The Dove of Peace* (p. 187). Not to be missed is Andrew Wyeth's *Soaring* Turkey Vultures (p. 46), Frida Kahlo's *Me and My Parrot* (p. 12), John Singer Sargent's odd but technically stunning *Studies of a Dead Bird* (p. 41), 17th-century pieces from Jan Asselijn's striking *The Threatened Swan* (p. 97), and Carel Fabritius' *The Goldfinch* (p. 209). What these works all have in common is technical excellence and understanding of the shape and structure of the bird (often lacking in contemporary bird studies). The birds are painted in dynamic, unconventional, but natural poses either facing the artist or departing. This is in comparison to more stilted but equally visually stunning work of scientific artists of the 18th and 19th centuries such as Thomas Bewick's *The Magpie* (p. 19) and John James Audubon's iconic and stylized *American Flamingo* (p. 177). Following in that same tradition in the 20th century were fine artists such as Charles Tunnicliffe (*Golden Pheasant*, p. 210), some but not all of whose art featured specimens that were posed and painted in profile or in unnatural positions.

I was on the lookout for some of the work of other artists who most influenced me during the 20th century. I was not disappointed—much of their work was featured, and I couldn't find any glaring omissions. As a young birder wanting to become a better artist, I often spent time thumbing through reproductions of the work of these artists who had a similarly profound impact on many other artists who came after them. I can't mention them all, but Louis Agassiz Fuertes' use of shadow and light in *Nile Helmet Shrike* (p. 121) reminds us why Fuertes is considered such an influence on many contemporary natural history artists. Capping off the highlights for me are Bruno Liljefors' dramatic *Hawk and Black-Game* (p. 175), New Zealand artist Raymond Ching's *The Kiwi and The Goose* (p. 227), which pushes the boundary of dramatic poses, Lars Jonsson's magnificent and moody *Eternal Forces* (p. 281), Peter Scott's *Red-breasted Geese Flying over a Ploughed Field* (p. 316), Darwin's Galapagos Finches (p. 27), and field guide illustrations from David Sibley and Roger Tory Peterson (pp. 324, 325). A whole book dedicated to the evolution of scientific illustration and contemporary natural history could well include the works of others such as Hans Larsson, Ian Lewington, and Killian Mullarney, who are not featured in this book but are nonetheless crafting unique styles.

I had less of an interest in the photographs, but without doubt all the photos featured are remarkable in their own way. For me, two standouts were Frans Lanting's rather painterly composed *Macaws over River* (p. 11) and Steve Torna's dazzling and arresting *Eared Grebes* (p. 117).

Motion-picture imagery is included with a still from Alfred Hitchcock's iconic *The Birds* (p. 35), which perhaps did more to play to the general populace's fear of birds than did any other work featured in this book. The movie has been widely regarded as political allegory about the fear-mongering of the Cold War with a constant threat of nuclear bombs raining down from above and flocks of white gulls suggesting a nuclear cloud. Another evocative movie image is from Ken Loach's 1969 film *Kes* (p. 84), based on Barry Hines' novel *A Kestrel for a Knave*. The movie was a surprise hit, and it pulls some emotional strings as it explores the relationship of a young working-class boy (Billy) who has a bleak future but finds hope and optimism through training his pet Eurasian Kestrel. The black-and-white still reproduced in *Bird: Exploring The Winged World* and featured on the movie's posters depicts a close-up of Billy staring wide-eyed in child-like innocence and awe at the Eurasian Kestrel on his gloved hand. In a way, this image perfectly sums up the human experience with birds. A sense of wonder, respect, a longing to be closer to these magnificent and beautiful creatures, which each of us has a personal responsibility to protect.

Andrew Birch