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## Better Birding Tips, Tools and Concepts for the Field *by George L. Armistead and Brian L. Sullivan*

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Better Birding: Tips, Tools and Concepts for the Field.** George L. Armistead and Brian L. Sullivan. 2016. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 318 pages; \$29.95, softbound. ISBN: 978-0691129662.

The authors have produced a useful tool for the dynamic world of birding. Birds are a very visible and easily observed group of animals. Some people take bird observation further than the daily incidental sightings and try to identify every bird they see, while others actively seek out rarities and travel long distances to get a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of seldom seen species. The authors have written a book that provides a new avenue of exploration for the fine-tuning of our birding skills.

The book is divided into 10 chapters. Chapter one, the introduction, covers the purpose of the book, good birding techniques, rare birds, eBird, bird sounds, bird molting, and taxonomy. The main chapters are: Waterbirds, Coastal Birds, Seabirds, Large Shorebirds, Skulkers, Birds of Forest and Edge, Aerial Insectivores, Night Birds, and Open-country Birds. Each main chapter is split into smaller sections. For example, the seabird chapter is separated into 3 sections: sulids, tropical terns, and Atlantic gadflies. The organization of the book ties closely with habitat; a variety of species are treated in the chapters covering coasts, seas, and shores—3 key habitats rich in avian biodiversity. However, keep in mind that this book is not a field guide. Only 24 groups are treated in the book because the authors reasoned that the observation and study of these species in the field will build core birding skills, which can be applied to other species not included in the book. In addition, the authors chose some of the groups because they thought the groups were interesting and felt their skill-building approach would provide a refreshing look at the species.

The authors focus on the concept of “getting to know your bird.” Sometimes field guides focus too much on field marks, and this sort of thinking may hinder bird identification, but

the authors suggest looking at the bird in context—view the bird in terms of the big picture (called “wide-angle birding” by the authors). Noticing the habitat, behavior, sounds, plumage, season, general shape, and flight style/pattern will help readers correctly identify difficult birds. Also covered are wintering ecology, migration, and occurrence on the fringe of a range.

The focus chapters are rich in photographs illustrating key bird identification nuances. In addition, photos showing various important behaviors, such as flight and foraging, are included to aid in identification. One highlight of the book is a full-page layout of photos comparing structure, dark/light patterns, flight style, and tail shape of closely related birds. A layout of 4 species of swifts on pages 222–223 shows these identification points. The authors also include photographic quizzes with answers provided at the end of the section for readers to practice their identification skills. Chapter text covers a variety of topics including identification tips, hints, considerations (information on habitat, calls, and other factors), and taxonomy. Natural history notes bring an additional level of interest. Focus birds are covered in a succinct species account that addresses the various differences between sexes, age, time of year, and season. Although the authors’ approach is holistic, field marks are discussed in detail. The end of each section has a list of references cited in the text.

Overall, the book is a valuable addition to the library of the birder, ornithologist, and natural history student. Although the book is generally geared toward an audience already familiar with birding techniques, beginners can also benefit from studying the authors’ approach. I highly recommend this book for those interested in improving their identification skills of various groups of birds in the field.

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