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For the Birds: Book Reviews of a Trio of Guides and an Encyclopedia

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FOR THE BIRDS: BOOK REVIEWS OF A TRIO OF GUIDES AND AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

Among the plethora of books to review, 3 bird guides and a large, much acclaimed encyclopedia all appeared more or less at the same time. The guides are all of different genres.

National Geographic Photography Field Guide: Birds. Rulon E. Simmons with photographs by Bates Littlehales. National Geographic Books, Washington, DC. 2002. \$21.95, paperback; 159 page, 1 to several photographs per page. ISBN 0-7922-6878-4.

This is a “how-to” guide for photographing birds. Lavish photographs help illustrate techniques while the text offers the reader some interesting biology along the way. Topical matter includes such items as what makes a good photograph, getting started, luring birds, stalking, nesting, blinds, using different light, favorite locations for photographing birds (a run through most states and provinces starting in Alaska and ending in Canada), useful information, and web sites. Every few pages there are side bars providing tips relating to the subject matter.

The author addresses frequently asked questions about what equipment to use for best results, tips for getting close to the birds you want to photograph, how to take advantage of challenging weather conditions, and how to make interesting backgrounds for bird photography. This is an instructive booklet for those who want to photograph birds.

A Birders Guide to Alaska. George C. West. American Birding Association, Inc., ABA Birdfinding Guide, Colorado Springs, CO. 2002. \$28.95, paper with wire O-binding; 586 pages + vii, 83 route maps + 47 insert maps + 3 color maps, 63 pen-and-ink author’s drawings, 2 color photographs, 5 appendices. ISBN 1-878788-19-1.

George West, a long-time resident of Alaska who arrived there in 1963, knows the state

and her birds intimately. He is well qualified to organize a birders guide. In compiling this book, he has recruited 39 authors to write various parts of chapters or regions with which they are particularly familiar. This is the classic American Birding Association bird-finding guide that reviews the state, geographic region by geographic region, giving locations to find birds along certain routes within each region. The text lists places to stay in the region, details on transportation to and from the area, and birds one can expect at various locations discussed.

The appendices give a checklist of specific locations, organizations of interest to birders, a gazetteer and Alaska pronunciation guide, references and selected readings, and lastly a list of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes of Alaska. This is a must for anyone going to Alaska intent upon bird-watching.

Monterey Birds: Status and Distribution of Birds in Monterey County, California. 2nd edition. Don Roberson. Monterey Peninsula Audubon Society, Carmel, CA (distributor ABA Sales, Colorado Springs, CO). 2002. \$21.95, paper; 536 pages + viii + 16 color plates, many B&W photos, maps for most breeding species accounts + 3 appendices. ISBN 0-9615798-2-X.

There are 482 species of birds verified for Monterey County, and the bulk of this book, starting on page 72, consists of species accounts. As preface material to the accounts, the author gives 32 pages of birding routes, a discussion of birding services and resources within the county, and 26 pages of material that introduces the species accounts. Each account has a bar graph showing the temporal period and numerical status in the county. Accounts of breeding species are accompanied by a map highlighting distribution within Monterey County. The accounts vary in length but are consistent with what is known about the

species there. Many photographs are reproduced, mainly for vagrants or rarities, as verification of the species identity.

Of special interest are 2 pages of history of the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) that ranged into Monterey County until 1980, and data on its recent reintroduction into the county. Three pairs hatched wild-laid eggs in 2002.

Appendix A is a chronology of species indicating the first Monterey record since 1900. Other appendices cover unsuccessful introductions and escaped exotic species, selected records published in the first edition (1985) but not in this one, and lastly a checklist indicating the occurrence and status of each species by month and duplicating the bar graph that accompanies each species account. For those interested in birds of California, in general, or birding within Monterey County, in particular, this is a very useful book.

Firefly Encyclopedia of Birds. Edited by Christopher Perrins. Firefly Books Ltd., Toronto, Canada. 2003. \$59.95, hardcover; 640 pages, 2000 color photographs + range maps + hundreds of illustrations + glossary and index. ISBN 1-55297-777-3.

In some ways this book is a disappointment despite all its acclaim. In part it is new material, especially the photographs, but in part it is a hybrid of 2 other books that Perrins also edited: *Birds: Their Life, Their Ways, Their World* published by the Reader's Digest Association in 1979 (basically world bird families) and *The Encyclopedia of Birds* published by Facts on File in 1985 (basically world bird families). The Firefly Encyclopedia contains many of the same pieces of artwork as the previous books. For example, the heads of the various rails on page 208 of the Firefly Encyclopedia come from page 236 of Reader's Digest Birds, while the artwork for the families of mesites, finfoots and seriemas, pages 219, 222 and 223 in the Firefly Encyclopedia, comes from pages 158 and 159 of the older encyclopedia. Perhaps this is to be expected because the same person edited the two books, or per-

haps the Firefly Encyclopedia purchased copyrights. Some format and layout are also the same for both encyclopedias.

Both encyclopedias have a suite of contributing authors covering various chapters, some 80 in the older versus more than 140 in the newer book, though many are the same people. When the same authors give an account for a specific family in both books, much of the material is the same, but this is to be expected considering space constraints for each family account. The Firefly has a strange method of presenting bird names. Conventionally, the Sandhill Crane, for example, is capitalized for both names. The Firefly book uses an initial capital letter for the first name but not the second.

The Firefly book marches through the bird world family by family using the older but more classical system devised by Alexander Wetmore, the Wetmorean system, although there is a discussion of newer classifications based on molecular evidence. The molecular system (mainly DNA) is much harder to represent because the families do not seem to fall out in the same neat and somewhat clean categories. Each family is accompanied by a "Factfile" that briefly details the physical features, distribution, evolutionary history, classification, some breeding biology, and conservation status for that family. This is most useful. Some families have photo essays, such as the cranes, showing the dance of the Japanese Crane. The topical matter for each family follows a similar format and sequence. As an example, the discussion topics for one of the better-known families, the Kingfishers, are form and function, distribution patterns, diet, breeding biology, and conservation and environment.

For my picky quarrel with the Firefly Encyclopedia, it is a wonderful contribution, it is in print whereas the Reader's Digest book is out of print, and it is within relatively easy monetary reach of most people. I recommend it.

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