

## Book Review

### AUDUBON SOCIETY "FIELD GUIDES"

*The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region.* John Bull and John Farrand, Jr. 1977. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York. 776 pages. \$8.95 (vinyl).

*The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Western Region.* Miklos D. F. Udvardy. 1977. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York. 855 pages. \$8.95 (vinyl).

In objective these recently published companion books are identical to Roger Tory Peterson's eastern and western field guides to North American birds (Houghton Mifflin Co.) and the field guide *Birds of North America* by Robbins, Bruun, and Zim (Golden Press). The geographic area covered in each case is North America north of Mexico, but the line dividing North America into eastern and western regions in the books under review is farther west than that in the Peterson series and traverses eastern Montana instead of central North Dakota.

The Audubon Society guides are significantly different in format from their rivals. A section of color photographs, intended as the basis for field identification, precedes the text, which consists of species accounts arranged under habitat types in which the birds are likely to be encountered; thus the traditional practice of arranging the species in AOU order or in at least a modified evolutionary sequence is completely abandoned here. Each species account includes information on description, voice, habitat, range, and nesting, and additional notes at the end of each account contain other information of interest. Summaries of families are relegated to an appendix following the main text.

Although the photographs are a visual delight, their value for field use is dubious in many cases. They are reasonably effective for a few groups of photogenic birds, such as ducks, but are much less useful for the duller-plumaged smaller birds. For example, it is impossible to discern on the basis of their photographs the differences between the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the Mangrove Cuckoo in the eastern guide or between the Common Redpoll and the Hoary Redpoll in the western guide. Tail patterns and other features important in identification are often obscured; this is not a problem in the Peterson guides or *Birds of North America* since paintings emphasize characteristics useful in identification that are described by the human eye but often missed by the camera shutter. In addition, many plumages of females and immatures are omitted from the Audubon Society guides because of the limited availability of color photographs.

There are a few lapses in the text: Despite the inclusion of the "whinny" call of the Downy Woodpecker, the homologous rattle call of the Hairy Woodpecker is omitted from both eastern and western guides; the simple description in

the eastern guide of the Sprague's Pipit's habitat as "short-grass plains and plowed fields" is misleading; and the western guide describes the Willet's voice as "a loud *kreer-reer-reerr* or *pee-wee-wee*" without mentioning the transliteration "pill-will-willet" that best describes the most characteristic call of the species.

As a whole, however, the text is up-to-date, accurate, and insightful with several interesting features. The descriptions of habitats aren't found in the other field guides and are especially useful for such habitats as "chaparral" in the western guide. Each guide contains a glossary defining such terms as "ecosystem," "gorget," "riparian," and "tarsus." And the information contained in the notes at the end of each species account includes such interesting recent discoveries as the hibernation of the Poor-will.

For the simple reason that these guides are more up-to-date and incorporate recent taxonomic changes (the Thayer's Gull and the Willow and Alder Flycatchers are treated as full species), they do have one advantage over their rivals. Unfortunately, their use of photographs instead of paintings diminishes the books' utility in the field, and they are excelled in this regard by the Peterson guides and *Birds of North America*. The latter is the best field guide to North American birds yet published, and a new revised edition of this book would be especially welcome to birders; but the Peterson guides contain many excellent plates and should also be among the books owned by any serious student. The Audubon Society guides are worth buying for their up-to-date information and other attractive features, but those who do will still need *Birds of North America* or the Peterson guides for use in the field.

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