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Birds of Eastern North America. a Photographic Guide by Paul Sterry and Brian E. Small

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REVIEW

Birds of Eastern North America. A Photographic Guide. Paul Sterry and Brian E. Small. 2009. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. ISBN 978-0-691-13425-3 (cloth) \$45; ISBN 978-0-691-13426-0 (paper) \$18.95. 336 pages.

This book (BENA) is one of several recently published identification guides to North America's birds. It is said to be aimed at "the needs of the keen birder . . . while not neglecting the needs of the beginner," a statement that seems a bit ambiguous. Unlike several others that cover all of North America, BENA covers the eastern half of mainland North America, excluding Mexico. The western boundary is unclear in South Texas where some specialties (e.g., Plain Chachalaca, Ringed Kingfisher, Green Jay) are included but others (e.g., Neotropic Cormorant, Olive Sparrow, Tropical Parula) are not. Overall, most bird species that regularly occur in eastern North America seem to be included. A companion volume covers western North America.

BENA starts with a brief table of contents followed by a short chapter on how to use the book, illustrations of the topography of a bird, a glossary, sections on plumage, habitats, how to identify birds, migration, a brief bibliography, and an index. The species accounts, some 300 plus pages, comprise most of the book.

BENA covers 460 species, 407 meriting a full account, 27 with brief accounts as "similar species" next to a full-account species (e.g., European Wigeon with American Wigeon, Spotted Towhee with Eastern Towhee), and 26 listed as "Out of the Ordinary" and placed at the end of the book. The latter include a number of exotic species and vagrants, several Florida specialties (Sooty Tern, Brown Noddy, White-crowned Pigeon), and even Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Range maps are included only for the 407 full-account species.

The format of the species accounts is similar to many other guides, with two or three species per two-page layout. The text, a range map, and often one photograph are on the left page, and one or more photographs are on the right facing page. The text for each species starts with an overview of its major characteristics and field marks including behavioral patterns (foraging, flight, etc.) that are useful for identification. Next the color patterns of adults and juveniles along with seasonal differences are described. Subsections on voice, status and habitat, and observation tips conclude the species accounts. Aspects of breeding biology are not covered. The species accounts seem to be concise and packed with information useful in identification.

The observation tips concentrate on telling where or how to find a species rather than how to identify it. For many species, especially among the nonpasserines, these tips are helpful but in some cases they seem to be a bit trite. In particular among the passerines, the phrases "easy to see", "easy to find in suitable habitat", or "listen for its distinctive song", are used frequently. Such statements are probably true for almost any species so those tips seem of questionable value. Likewise, it may be true that the best place to find American Golden-Plovers and Snowy Owls is on the breeding grounds but where in eastern North America can a birder reasonably gain access to such habitat in summer?

For most range maps, the base map shows all of Canada, continental United States, and northern Mexico with state and provincial borders and large lakes also shown. Different colors are used to show where the species is found year-round, during summer only, or during winter only. Smaller base maps are used for some species such as for Florida Scrub-Jay. I could quibble about some of the maps (e.g., the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck is not shown breeding in Florida) but in general they do a good job of show-

ing a species' distribution. A major departure from most similar guides is that migration pathways are not shown. This reduces the clutter on the maps but may leave some users uncertain on whether a particular species is to be expected in their area during migration. Likewise, records from outside of a species' usual range are not shown, a feature that some users will miss.

With more than 1,100 photographs, BENA is profusely illustrated. The photographs are sharp and show the major field marks for most species. The images are larger than those in some other similar guides, and the birds fill the space, features that users will appreciate. They include a portrait-like side view of the bird, and for most species, additional photographs illustrate a bird in flight, males and females, different age classes, or different plumages. Three or four photographs are provided for many species, a few merit five, and Red-tailed Hawk has six. Inevitably, some users will note omissions but in general, with the images provided, users should be able to identify most individuals of most species they encounter.

Although the quality of the photographs in this guide is very high, my biggest complaint is that I found it difficult to combine those visual images with the text and come away with a good idea of what characteristics to look for. The text for each species is full of good information on how to identify that species but that information is not as readily available to the user as it might be. There are no arrows or lines pointing out key characteristics on the photographs or short statements near the photographs to help the user know what to look for.

Readers of this journal will quickly note that many of the 500 plus species now on the Florida list are not covered. It is not surprising that Florida rarities such as Bahama Mockingbird and Western Spindalis are not included, but others such as Budgerigar, Black-hooded Parakeet, Common Myna, Red-whiskered Bulbul, and Shiny Cowbird are not included either. Most Florida birders, especially beginners and more casual birders, will be satisfied with the coverage but inevitably some of the "keener" birders will be disappointed with some of the exclusions.

Clearly BENA's main goal is bird identification. So the major question is how well does it meet that goal? With the recent appearance of several new field guides, the bar has been set pretty high. Most others cover all of North America and claim to be comprehensive or close to that. This book, with its more limited coverage, also seems to be aimed more at the beginning and learning birder rather than those who have more advanced knowledge. It has great photographs of the birds it covers, and provides a variety of images showing sex, age, and seasonal differences for most species. The maps are also good although the lack of information on migration paths may limit them somewhat. The text is packed with information on how to identify each species. However, the key identification features are not effectively tied to the visual images and thus some users will struggle in trying to understand what they should look for to identify the bird.

Those limitations aside, for most birders, BENA provides basic identification information for nearly all of the species that they would typically encounter in eastern North America and gives birders another choice for their field guide library.

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