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Stalking the Big Bird: A Tale of Turkeys, Biologists, and Bureaucrats

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Books

STALKING THE BIG BIRD [:] A TALE OF TURKEYS, BIOLOGISTS, AND BUREAUCRATS.

By Harley Shaw. 2004. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson. Paperback. 145 pp. \$17.95.

This book provides an account by a veteran "wildlife manager" of the mix of administrative bureaucracy, endurance, frustration, innovation, persistence and political expediency involved in attempting to apply scientific research findings to conservation and "management" of wildlife. Although based primarily on research on Merriam's race of the Wild Turkey in Arizona, its theme is more on the problems of "single species" management instead of a more wholistic ecological approach and the problems that government agencies face in trying to incorporate scientific integrity into "mission-oriented" research, as well as the machinations required to obtain adequate funding and maintain focus in spite of the many factors that influence the ever-changing emphasis of any agency that operates against a backdrop of political fashion and whim. Although my own experience with wildlife agencies has been primarily in outside contract positions, my familiarity with the challenges and successes of colleagues and friends in many such provincial, national and state agencies in several countries causes me to agree with Braun (2004) that most biologists in such agencies will find this account both entertaining and interesting.

Shaw has organized the book into 19 chapters, based primarily on his own experiences. Literature is not cited directly, but Shaw occasionally refers to details from the literature and anecdotes of colleagues and a paragraph near the end of the book (p. 143) outlines major books on turkeys and/or their management. A series of footnotes near the end of the book also expands on one to four details each in seven chapters. A short preface explains that the book is more about the problems of "single species" [or subspecies] wildlife management than about turkeys per se, although plenty of information on turkey biology is included. The text is written in a folksy, often humorous, style. The chapters cover methods of study and refinement of equipment, classification, ecology, evolution, foods, genetics, habitat use and change, historical populations and natural history of turkeys, as well as the operations of a state game/wildlife agency.

The book provides a detailed example of the evolution of a state game department dedicated primarily to increasing populations of "game" animals into a more wholistic wildlife agency dedicated to attaining better ecological balance. Shaw laments the decline in the use of hunter check stations for collecting data on some aspects of population dynamics. He also recounts some of the successes and failures of attempts to reintroduce Merriam's Turkeys into parts of its range from which it had been extirpated and to introduce them into provinces, states and countries in which they did not occur naturally. The gradual incorporation of research on habitat use and population dynamics into wildlife management programs is documented and the difficulty of attaining multi-agency consensus discussed. The need for still greater understanding of habitat uses and still greater emphasis on using research findings in wildlife management is also stressed.

Material of interest to banders in this book is extensive. The first chapter begins with capture attempts and considerable portions of the book cover methods of capture and trap designs, various marking techniques and capture-recapture analysis to estimate survival rates in both natural and introduced populations. Historians of natural history will be especially interested in the progress in capture techniques (such as the introduction of cannon and rocket nets, development of color markers and evolution of radio telemetry). Shaw's accounts of each new technique include the problems associated with it and modifications designed to improve upon it. Color bands and telemetry greatly increased researchers' abilities to collect data on seasonal differences in habitat use and social groupings, movements, seasonal shifts in roost sites, duration of use of such sites and numbers of birds using them, and other parameters, but introduced new biases (such as band reports of colors not used or in combinations not used) and new technical problems. Historians of wildlife research will find considerable detail on changes from cumbersome equipment and unreliable batteries to more helpful and reliable devices, as well as gradual improvements in our abilities to collect and interpret data collected through high tech. methods. Data collected

through banding and telemetry equipment influenced forestry practices in Arizona and showed that yearling turkeys do not nest in some populations, but do in others. Radio telemetry not only greatly increased the sample size of nest sites, but also shifted our perception of them, as most sites located earlier were those that were easiest to find, often by stumbling across them, whereas the proportion of better concealed nests found was less than the proportion in the population.

The informal style of the book will probably irritate some more technically oriented readers, but will increase its appeal to many others. Most of the errors are minor grammatical points, such as split infinitives. Most biologists regard the terms "subspecies" and "race" as synonymous, rather than restricting the latter to humans (p. 17). Shaw's use of the term "racial hybrids" (p. 39) may be less technically desirable than "intergrade," but provides a nice, concise definition. Nomenclature and classification of birds in North America is determined by a committee of the American Ornithologists' Union, not an International Ornithologists' Union (p.23), although the A.O.U. committee is working increasingly with similar committees on other continents. Shaw uses at least two long outdated English species names (Hungarian for Gray Partridge; English for House Sparrow) and refers to Great Auks as Greater Auks and Steller's Jays as Stellar Jays. Great Auks and Dodos were not merely extirpated (p. 131), but exterminated (became extinct). These criticisms are minor quibbles that did not detract from my overall enjoyment of Shaw's interesting account.

In short, Shaw has provided an entertaining and informative account of Merriam's race of Wild Turkey, plenty of detail on banding and radio-telemetry techniques and results and the challenges and evolution of wildlife management, primarily in Arizona, but applicable to

much of North America. Most modern biologists and ecologists would concur with Shaw's assertion that each species or subspecies does not merely live within a given habitat, but is also a component of that habitat.

LITERATURE CITED

Braun, C. E. 2004. Wild Turkeys and biologist tales. *Prairie Nat.* 36:193-194.

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**FIFTY COMMON BIRDS OF THE UPPER
MIDWEST.** By Dana Gardner and Nancy Overcott. 2006. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, IA. 50 watercolors. 107 pp. \$9.95.

What is the definition of "common" and how can the book be limited to just "fifty" species? These were two serious questions that Gardner (the illustrator) and Overcott (the writer) had in selecting the species for this book. The authors "solved" these questions by concentrating on inhabitants of the forests and grasslands near their common home in southeastern Minnesota. Even though the book includes at least one representative of most bird families from waterfowl through finches (including nocturnal species), it also excludes, by the limitation of 50, many "common" species.

The primary purpose of the book is "...to present a sketch of each bird that will give you a feeling for its personality and the way it lives its life..." Overcott achieved this by portraying each species as it progresses through life stages from egg to breeding bird and by including habits and habitats, food and foraging behavior, vocalizations, migration and distribution. Overcott's accounts are pleasurable to read and Gardner's bright, full-page water colors make this an attractive coffee-table book.

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