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Birds of Costa Rica

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Books

BIRDS OF COSTA RICA. By Richard Garrigues and Robert Dean. 2007. A Zona Tropical Publication, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY. xxvi + 387 pp. \$29.95.

This is a welcome compact field guide for those birders (and banders) going to Costa Rica. Prior to this book, we relied on and lugged around the monstrous work of Stiles and Skutch (1989), although many (most?) of us defiled our copies by removing and binding the plates to take into the field.

Garrigues is one of the preeminent birding tour guides in Costa Rica and Dean is the illustrator. The format is that of a traditional field guide. A description of the bird with salient, key characteristics in bold is given on the left, along with differences between males and females and to separate similar species. The sizes of the birds on a particular page are proportional, but this does not apply from page to page. There is a distribution map, which one can consult at a glance to determine whether a species occurs in your area. Often the text further elaborates on the distribution and abundance of the species. For example, if you are along the Caribbean coast, a gnatcatcher is most likely a Tropical rather than the similar White-lored, which is restricted to the Pacific, specifically the Guanacaste area. A description of the vocalization of the bird is given as well. About a quarter of the bird species of Costa Rica are migrants, so Garrigues and Dean divide them into passage migrants and winter residents, as well as give their approximate passage times (north and south) or residency. If something about its habits or habitat aids in its identification (e.g., follows army-ants), this is noted. The one missing piece of information that I would have liked to see is the Latin American names for these birds. There is plenty of room for this small addition.

The names have been updated from those used by Stiles and Skutch (1989), which is now 20 years old, and all changes are listed at the back (e.g.,

Violet-crowned Woodnymph—formerly Crowned Woodnymph, Long-billed Hermit—formerly Long-tailed Hermit, Northern Barred Woodcreeper—separated from Barred Woodcreeper and Variable Seedeater, *Sporophila americana*—now includes *S. aurita*.

Most of us are used to scanning through a dozen or more birds on one page in Stiles and Skutch (1989) to find what we saw, while in Garrigues and Dean (2007) we must flip through a half dozen pages. But then, old timers remember the many birds per page in Peterson's guides to a few birds per page when National Geographic's first edition came out (and how we complained!) to one bird per page in Sibley's guide.

Illustrations of the birds are on the right side. The illustrations are nice and large, with both sexes of sexually dimorphic species represented. At most, a half dozen bird species are covered per page. Most are perched or standing, but flight illustrations are shown for those in which they are helpful in identification.

The major complaint that I have with the guide by Garrigues and Dean is the general quality of the illustrations. Overall, they are light in color. A quick side by side comparison between Robert Dean's illustrations and Dana Gardner's illustrations in the guide by Stiles and Skutch makes this quite obvious (or National Geographic's or Sibley's for Neotropical migrants). Granted that we are looking at different subspecies, compare the House Wren illustrations in the National Geographic or Sibley guides, with which we are more familiar to the House Wren depicted (p. 243) in the Garrigues and Dean guide. The Chestnut-backed Antbirds (p. 179) that I have banded have a vibrant chestnut colored back, more like the illustration of Dana Gardner in the guide by Stiles and Skutch. Similarly, the back of the male Olive-backed Euphonia that I have also banded had an almost dark olive-green back compared to the illustration (p. 325), where the back is almost a light green and

certainly several shades lighter. If it were not for the yellow forecrown and rufous belly, I would not have been sure what this bird was. Garrigues and Dean's Ringed and Belted kingfishers look almost "powder blue" instead of their slate blue color. A few birds always seem to be off color. The Blue-gray Tanager looks pale blue in both the guides of Garrigues and Dean and of Stiles and Skutch, but in the hand the blue is much more vibrant. I suspect that this is because in the field the bird does look pale blue through a pair of binoculars.

I noted a few technical errors. Garrigues and Dean state that the male, female and juvenile Yellow-breasted Chats are virtually identical, but banders are aware of the black lores of males and gray lores of females, distinguishable in the field. But, many birders are more concerned with species rather than the sex of the bird.

There are some omissions from Garrigues and Dean's guide which are out of choice. Pelagic birds are omitted to keep the size of the volume down. Besides, who goes to Costa Rica to see a Cory's Shearwater? Extremely rare birds are mentioned, but illustrations are omitted. They omitted much of the natural history of each bird species found in the guide by Stiles and Skutch to save space and are the first to admit this. They go out of their way to suggest that any birder interested in the natural

history of Costa Rican birds should have a copy of the book by Stiles and Skutch.

Finally, at the back of the book is a taxonomic listing of all species of birds found in Costa Rica and indices of birds by species and common names. At the very end is a chart of vultures and raptors in flight.

Garrigues and Dean are the first to admit that their guide does not replace that of Stiles and Skutch, which is based on over 50 years of natural history observations in the tropics. Rather, it is a complement. This field guide received nothing but glowing comments from birders and banders I've worked with while in Costa Rica. I highly recommend that any amateur or serious birder or bander going to Costa Rica should take this book along.

LITERATURE CITED

Stiles, F. G. and A. F. Skutch. 1989. A guide to the birds of Costa Rica. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

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