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## Books-Identification Guide to North American Birds

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## Books

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**IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS. PART II [:] ANATIDAE TO ALCIDAE.** By Peter Pyle. 2008. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA. xi + 836 pp. \$59.72 and up (including sales tax, handling and shipping) depending on shipping destination; discounts available for multiple copies, including bundled with Part I.

To say that this book was long-awaited and much-anticipated would be an understatement. It is the culmination of a series launched in 1987 with *Identification Guide to North American Passerines* (Pyle et al.), followed ten years later by *Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part I* (Pyle 1997) covering passerines and “near-passerines.” Another 11 years elapsed before the completion of this volume, covering all the remaining North American bird species. Thus, 21 years after the appearance of the first *Identification Guide*, the full range of North American bird species was represented. It was well worth the wait.

Part I, sanctioned before publication by the U.S. Banding Laboratory and Canadian Banding Office, immediately became the standard reference for banders working with the species it covers. The same is true of this volume. As the format of the two volumes is essentially the same, I shall assume that the reader is somewhat familiar with Part I and focus on the differences between them. For a review of Part I, see McNicholl (2000).

As with Part I, Part II contains a lengthy introduction that explains not only how to use the book and interpret its contents, but also presents considerable valuable generic information on molt strategies and ecology, molt and plumage terminology, techniques for age and gender determination and morphometrics measurements. In fact, the introduction alone nearly justifies purchasing the book. Especially valuable are the sections on molt limits and staffelmauser (stepwise or serial molt) and their relevance to age determination. Molt

limits were discussed extensively in Pyle (1997), but prove to be even more useful (and complex) in the long-lived birds covered in Part II.

One of the more significant changes the reader will notice in Part II is its incorporation of modifications to the Humphrey-Parkes molt terminology introduced by Howell et al. (2003), based on their interpretation of molt homologies. This controversial revision was summarized in this journal by Burton (2006). Its foundations are annual molt cycles and four fundamental molt strategies, one of which is exhibited by every bird species. Throughout the book, age classes are linked clearly to the cycles and the plumages [e.g., ‘SY/TY (second cycle, B2-A2),’ meaning second-year/third-year (second cycle, basic 2 to alternate 2)], an important connection that was underemphasized in Part I. Each species account indicates which of the four molt strategies applies to that species. The plethora of question marks attests to our still very limited knowledge of the species’ molt strategies.

Readers trying to wrap their minds around the revision of the Humphrey-Parkes revision may find themselves confused by Pyle’s definitions of the four molt strategies and some of the resulting categorizations. The problem stems from the difficulty of identifying the homology of the first-cycle molt in some species that have a single inserted molt in each cycle. For example, the Double-crested Cormorant has a prealternate molt in every cycle except the first, in which it appears to have a preformative molt. After reading Howell et al. (2003) or Burton (2006), one might expect this species to be classed as a complex alternate strategist without a first prealternate molt because it has a preformative molt. In this book, Pyle takes a more utilitarian approach, defining the strategy based on the *number* of inserted molts, regardless of their homology; and the cormorant winds up as a simple alternate strategist. Howell (2010) follows suit and discusses in greater detail the enigmatic nature of these first-cycle molts. None of Pyle’s

definitions seem to cover species with multiple inserted first-cycle molts and no inserted definitive molts (e.g. Lark Sparrow, Northern Cardinal and Brewer's Blackbird), perhaps because they are all passerines and thus excluded from this book. (I call them *extra* complex basic strategists.)

Those who struggle with Part I's liberal use of abbreviations will not be encouraged by Part II, which is, if anything, even more intimidating in that regard. Every age class, molt, plumage, molt strategy and month is abbreviated, as are most feather tracts and many body parts. The novice may be forgiven for thinking that this book is written in some arcane code that separates the banding elites from mere mortals. Everything, however, is decoded in the introduction and, more helpfully, on the inside and back covers.

A major improvement over Part I is that characteristics for identifying species, subspecies, age and sex are now listed in decreasing order of diagnostic strength rather than topographically, allowing the user to focus readily on those criteria more likely to produce results. This should speed up the process considerably. However, I feel that age and sex criteria should have been separated in descriptions referring to both age and sex (e.g., AHY/ASY male). Since age criteria are seldom sex-specific but sex criteria are often age-specific, and because age criteria are often consistent across species within a group whereas sex criteria are species-specific, a nested approach, with sex criteria listed separately under the appropriate age criteria, would have reduced redundancy and made the book far more streamlined and efficient.

Another improvement is that measurements of related species (and, in the case of tubenoses, breeding and molt timing) are now presented in tables rather than buried in the text, with page numbers in the text directing the reader to the tables. Changes such as these may seem trivial but in a case such as this, in which the amount of information is overwhelming and time is often of the essence,

anything that makes the book easier and faster to use is significant and worth mentioning.

In my opinion, one of the greatest strengths of this book is its abundant and generally superb illustrations by Steve Howell and, mostly, Siobhan Ruck. As thorough and accurate as a written description may be, it is no substitute for a picture, and if a picture is worth a thousand birds (sorry, could not resist), this book's are worth, as it turns out, approximately the number of ducks breeding in Montana during the year of its publication. The captions and labels in Part II do a much better job than those in Part I of allowing the illustrations to stand on their own by indicating exactly what each depicted item represents, yet another valuable time-saver that users of this book will appreciate.

Because the birds covered (and therefore the criteria discussed) in this volume are mostly relatively large, and because the people banding them normally work with just a single species or family, I think that the book should have at least as much utility among other birders as banders. However, those who complain about lugging Sibley's (2000) guide around will be deterred by this book's considerably greater thickness (nearly two inches [50 mm]) and very slightly greater weight (nearly three pounds [1.4 kg]). Still, a copy in the car or field station will be a valuable complement to the field guides already there. Photocopies of some of the figures (e.g., dowitcher tertials, gull primaries, jaeger heads) would make great field guide bookmarks. Participants in beached-bird surveys, such as the Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team, should find this book extremely helpful.

To a greater extent in this volume than in Part I, the material presented is based on original research rather than previously published information (though the 42-page bibliography in nearly microscopic type amply demonstrates that the author did his homework with regard to the literature). As Pyle points out, this is a double-edged sword: while the new information has exceptional potential value, it remains to be seen

how well the often small samples used to generate it represent the whole. Is inaccurate information better than no information at all? Many would argue not, though works such as this are guaranteed to stimulate further discussion, research and publication. As always, Pyle expects criticism and welcomes corrections. I was disappointed, however, to discover that, two years after publication, the errata were not yet available on the publisher's web-site.

I have had little opportunity to field-test this book and thus solicited input for this review from banders and curators studying these species. The feedback that I received was generally quite positive. Problems pointed out to me include mention of a breeding-season suspension of primary molt in *Aethia* auklets that does not actually occur, apparent age-related eye-color change with age in mergansers that Pyle overlooks and typographical errors in some raptor accounts that may affect age or sex determinations. Some of the band sizes suggested for small alcids were reported to be too large, but Pyle merely reiterates the BBL's recommendations, which may need revision. Hipfner (2009) describes some inaccuracies in Pyle's descriptions of soft-part coloration in alcids, perhaps resulting from fading of museum specimens. Esler (*in* Hipfner 2009) pointed to several errors related to age and sex in the scoter accounts.

In summary, despite inevitable (and undoubtedly numerous) inaccuracies and a few disappointing formatting decisions, I cannot recommend this book highly enough to those who want to know more about this diverse assortment of birds, whether they handle them or not, and who are willing to accept it for what it is: a springboard for further exploration. Pyle and his collaborators are to be commended for a daring work of great magnitude and importance.

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