

BOOK REVIEWS

THE AUDUBON SOCIETY FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN BUTTERFLIES

Robert Michael Pyle. 1981. Knopf. \$11.95

A bird-watcher who strays into the world of butterflies finds much that is familiar. Birds and butterflies are similar in size, color, number of species, and distribution. Both groups are active mostly by day, and both have fascinating, though different, life histories. Then too, the lives of birds and butterflies often converge; birds as predators, butterflies as their prey.

The prey relationship has affected profoundly the way butterflies look. Many species have evolved on the outer edges of their wings colorful eye-like spots that seem to misdirect the stab of a hungry bird. Other species have hair-like tails at the trailing edge of their hind wings. These confuse birds: Which end is the antennae head, where one blow would bring down the victim, and which end the expendable tail?

Some butterflies, in our area notably the Pipevine Swallowtail and the Monarch, taste bad and cause illness when ingested. The poison is held over in the adults from the toxic plants on which they fed as larvae. These butterflies have bold colors and markings. Birds quickly learn to recognize the butterflies they don't like, and to avoid them. But still others, notably the Red Spotted Purple and the Viceroy, mimic the bad-tasting butterflies in appearance. These are, so to speak, tidbits in wolf's clothing, benefactors of false and misleading advertising.

Despite the rich variety of butterflies, most bird-watchers seem to hesitate to commit themselves with the same passion with which they pursue birds. Perhaps the idea still persists that to study butterflies one must possess and be willing to use such nasty objects as nets, killing jars, and pins. The butterfly volume in the Peterson Field Guide Series did nothing to dispel this notion. By Alexander Klotz, it is a fine book despite the slant of both text and illustrations toward identifying the collected specimen. It was published about 30 years ago. Butterfly nomenclature has undergone many a revision since then. New species have been described. Many new facts have been discovered about life histories. And the old guide limited its coverage to North America east of the Rockies. Don't get me wrong, I don't intend to dispose of my copy. I'll keep it on hand and use it often.

Fortunately, the new Audubon Society field guide triumphantly overcomes the shortcomings of the Klotz guide. An astonishing 1086 full-color photographs cover about 600 species, with some 100 others treated in thumbnail drawings and discussions. All of North America north of Mexico falls under the scope of this book. The tropical strays that reach south Florida and Texas lead one's dreams toward Central America the West Indies.

This is a marvelous natural history book, in my opinion the best of the Audubon Society Field Guide Series. We are inspired to identify butterflies in the field and to collect photographs rather than bodies. A marvelous book, but not a masterpiece. A masterpiece would not have so many flash pictures, which give an out-of-this-world look to the butterflies. A good (bad?) example is the Eastern Tailed Blue on the cover. It has the look of metal foil—an effect you'll never see in natural light. That Desert Orangetip, so fetchingly posed on a desert wildflower, has sunk to the petals as though its legs won't support it. I strongly suspect a poison jar or a pinch, both sure to slow a butterfly too frisky for the photographer's convenience. What of the Northwest Alpine? If a better photograph couldn't be found, the artist should have been summoned. But these are isolated flaws. Probably it will be a long time before a better butterfly guide comes along.—JAY SHULER