

BOOK REVIEWS

THE KINGFISHER

David Boag. 1982. The Blandford Press, Dorset, England. Illus. Index. 120 p.

This colorful book is not only fascinating but also fairly easy reading. David Boag deals with all aspects of the species' life in straightforward language that will neither intimidate the layman nor offend the professional. Boag has a thorough knowledge of the Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) through many years of observing this mostly European bird. He narrates many anecdotes to advance his arguments logically. Whenever he contradicts popular theory, he presents enough data to convince the reader, but not to the point of boredom. The book is further enhanced by a chapter on the Kingfisher in myth and legend and an appendix on photography techniques. The photographs are sharp and carefully laid into the text. Anyone who skims this well-done book will surely be drawn to read it.—P.R. FORD

BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA. 1983. Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Brunn, and Herbert S. Zim. Illus. by Arthur Singer. Golden Press, New York. 7½ x 4¾ inches, 360 p. Hardcover, \$10.95; softcover, \$7.95.

FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA. 1983. National Geographic Society, P.O. Box 1640, Washington, D.C. 20013. 8 x 5 inches, 464 p. Softcover, \$13.95 plus \$3 for postage and handling. Not sold in book stores. Available by mail from National Geographic Society and American Birding Association. NGS offers the guide in sets with supplemental materials including a recording of bird sounds.

The ideal bird guide has not been written—and never will be. The very same aspects of bird study that make it a challenging hobby or career also make describing all the species of North America (or even just eastern North America) adequately in one small book an impossibility. Before daring to criticize the two books presently being considered or any other field guide, users should first acknowledge the complexity of the problems facing the authors and illustrators. On the desk before me are copies of Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* (1897), a First Edition of Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1934), a Second Edition Peterson (1959), a Fourth Edition Peterson (1980), a First Edition Robbins (1966), the Revised Edition Robbins (1983), and the National Geographic Society guide (1983). Rapidly growing knowledge and constantly changing bird distributions made each one in some respects outdated when it came off the press.

Chapman's Preface, written in January 1895, begins: "If this book had been written in the last century it might have been entitled 'Ornithology made Simple, or How to Identify Birds with Ease, Certainty, and Dispatch.' It may be unworthy so comprehensive a title, nevertheless I have made an honest endeavor to write a book on birds so free from technicalities that it would be intelligible without reference to a glossary, and I have tried to do this in a volume which could be taken afield in the pocket." Many fine ornithologists, including Roger Tory Peterson, took Chapman's *Handbook* afield in their

pockets. Today, only a decade short of a century since Chapman penned those words, bird watchers cannot imagine trying to identify a new sparrow by running through eight pages of keys and consulting a few small black-and-white drawings. Peterson's first field guide, which was decidedly primitive compared to later editions, was truly "Ornithology made Simple." All subsequent North American bird guides, especially the Robbins edition that was the first one to put text and range maps on pages facing color plates, have been striving to achieve field identification "with Ease, Certainty, and Dispatch." And therein lie the seeds of many difficulties.

As field guides treat larger geographic areas, illustrate more birds in elegant full-color plates (with several plumages shown for many species), and offer range maps instead of generalized range descriptions, the opportunities for errors and oversimplifications multiply rapidly. At the same time, the users—most of whom have never seen a tray full of study skins, all the same species but no two exactly alike—are given a false sense of security, a belief that all birds can be identified in the field with certainty, if not with ease and dispatch. The NGS guide, with Jon L. Dunn and Eirik A. T. Blom as chief consultants, was strongly influenced by the West Coast style of field identification, which stresses going beyond the species level and the easily recognized sex differences to age classes and subtle sex or population characters. As bird study attracts more and more amateurs who go afield with a backpack full of field guides, a powerful telescope, and a strong competitive spirit, editors must become wary of glib descriptions of migrating hawks by age, sex, and race, or of jaegers by age class and color phase. Distinctions that appear simple on the printed page are rarely that clear-cut in the field, where molting birds are unlike anything in any book and light conditions play tricks on everyone. Knowledgeable observers know when to let the bird be just "an accipiter" or "an immature jaeger." In other words, field guides must be used with discretion; sometimes there is no substitute for a collected specimen.

The NGS guide was produced by a large staff in cooperation with numerous artists and consultants. Among the artists is H. Douglas Pratt, whose first pen-and-ink drawing appeared on the cover of *Chat* in 1967. Doug's nuthatch plate is particularly pleasing to me. The artwork as a whole is very good and remarkably well coordinated, considering that the identification plates are the work of 13 artists. The only major flaw I see in this book is the use of yellow as a color in the range maps. In many places, particularly where narrow bands follow coastlines, the yellow, unless viewed under a strong light, is obscured by the underlying black lines.

The Revised Edition of the Robbins guide is just that. Some of the plates have been redrawn to add species and update bird names, the range maps have been improved, and the typeface selected for the text is easier to read than the sans serif face of the First Edition. However, at least in my copy, the color reproduction is not as good as in the First Edition. The yellows are exaggerated on several plates, particularly in the flycatchers. Other plates are too pink or too blue. I hope that the entire pressrun does not suffer from these defects.

Guy McCaskie compares the Robbins and NGS guides in a lengthy review in the February 1984 issue of *Birding* (16:25-32). He offers an extensive list of good and bad points. Where I have adequate knowledge of the point in question, I tend to agree with his judgments. However, one of his statements reinforces my belief that the ideal guide never will be published. He takes the authors of the NGS book to task for saying "yellow

ridge on top of adult's bill" instead of the (to McCaskie) more appropriate "yellow culmen of adult's bill." I am far more concerned that the illustration on page 10 has a single line labeled "culmen" pointing to the top of the upper mandible without any indication that this term applies only to the central ridge running from the base of the bill to the tip. Someone reading "yellow culmen" and consulting that diagram might well expect the entire upper mandible to be yellow. The line labeled "mantle" also points to a single spot on the back (apparently following terminology proposed for use in Great Britain), although in the text (gull accounts) the word is used, as in other North American guides, to refer to the back, the scapulars, and the upper surface of the wings collectively. Apparently the time has come for adding a glossary to the standard field guide. In trying to deal with details formerly of concern only to professional and advanced amateur ornithologists armed with an adequate series of study skins, the NGS guide is unquestionably leading field identification away from the species-level simplicity prized by Chapman, Peterson, and Robbins.

Despite their various shortcomings, the Robbins and NGS North American bird guides, along with Peterson's Eastern guide, give Carolina bird students three excellent choices. Because the Peterson guide is restricted to eastern North America, it remains the recommended first choice for beginning bird students. The large page size, generous margins, and detailed illustrations of NGS guide give it a luxurious appearance that appeals to nearly everyone. The Robbins guide still has a unique feature that I find very helpful: the two double-page spreads featuring male warblers in spring and immature warblers in fall. Serious bird students will pack all three of these books (and probably several others) in the car, but the Peterson and Robbins guides undoubtedly will be preferred in the field because of their smaller size, lighter weight, and lower replacement cost if dropped in a swamp.—EFP

THE PEACOCKS OF BABOQUIVARI

Erma J. Fisk. 1983. W.W. Norton, New York. Illus. by Louise Russell. 284 p. \$14.95.

In 1978 Erma J. Fisk, a 73-year-old widow, left the warmth of Florida to spend the winter on a lonely ranch beneath Mount Baboquivari in Arizona. Her purpose in going there was to count birds for the Nature Conservancy. Appropriately, this chronicle of her work there has been published for the benefit of the Conservancy.

Mrs. Fisk spent one of Arizona's rainiest winters manning up to 14 mist nets in which she caught 70 species of birds. Whereas the disappointment of few birds per day might make dull reading, Mrs. Fisk avoids this by filling her journal in a conversational manner with descriptions of people, mini-essays, spunky but gentle humor, and trivia, including the number of feathers on a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Although her journal would have benefitted from some judicious editing to delete repetition and improve hastily written sentences, the book should be enjoyed by naturalists and bird students. Mrs. Fisk constantly reminds the reader of the marvels of nature and the fact that amateurs can contribute to ornithology.—P.R. FORD