

Birder's Conservation Handbook: 100 North American Birds at Risk

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Birder's Conservation Handbook: 100 North American Birds at Risk.—Jeffrey V. Wells. 2007. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 464 pp. ISBN: 978-0691123233. Paper, \$35.00.—It is said that when a science book goes to print it is already two years out of date. Even so, it is a testament to the rapidity of change in our times that *Birder's Conservation Handbook*, published in 2007, sometimes reads like a quaint treatise from a bygone era. This is not the author's fault. Jeffrey Wells has good credentials in the field of bird conservation, and his catalogue of the threats to bird species in North America is informed and exhaustive. The principal cause of the temporal dissonance is the growing realization that global climate change alters our very concepts of conservation. It is too much to say that the knowledge and tools

of conservation developed over the past century are useless, but we now know that if we are to succeed in this century, the gains of those accomplishments must be applied in novel ways. For example, habitat loss has been and remains the most ubiquitous driver of biodiversity loss on the planet. However, the traditional remedy of protecting large blocks of *in situ* habitat may prove futile if the climate of the location changes beyond the tolerance of local species. Wells acknowledges the magnitude of the climate-change threat and predicts that the issue will dwarf all others in bird conservation. In the few years since this book was published, the scenarios have only become worse and the difficulties of mitigation and adaptation more disheartening. Other, less daunting issues have changed as well. The egregious practice of mountain-top mining has been halted, hopefully for good, and changes in economic conditions have slowed both the housing boom and the rapid transition of land to corn ethanol production, even if temporarily. Wells's intent was not to write a book on the future of bird conservation, but rather "to provide a book that presents the facts but that also offers hope, encouragement, and inspiration for those who want to take action to protect our birds and our environment" (page 1). It is on this measure that the book should be judged.

Birder's Conservation Handbook is composed of two parts (three, if you count the appendices): the introductory material and the species accounts. Usually, little attention is paid to the introductory material of field guides (did you ever really read the introduction in your *Sibley Guide*?), but for Wells's book the introduction is essential reading, if for no other reason than to understand how he settled on a list of *only* 100 North American birds at risk. On reading, one quickly discovers that these are not "North America's most threatened birds" as stated on the back cover. Only about 80 of the species are universally acknowledged as critically endangered because of small population size and limited range. The remaining species constitute an odd menagerie, with the only shared characteristic being a greater than 50% population decline over the past five decades. I understand the author's justification for including bird species that are not critically imperiled. In doing so, he broadens the review of ecosystems, conservation issues, and bird families (two orders, Charadriiformes and Passeriformes, make up 60% of the species in the book). However, it gives one pause to see the American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) on the list—a species subject to legal harvest of hundreds of thousands each year and one for which land managers continually provide habitat in hopes of increasing hunting opportunities.

The species accounts are condensed versions of what is available in *Birds of North America*. Ornithologists will tend to use the latter, rather than this book, as a source of hard data. Each account includes a distribution map and a line drawing of the species. The text includes status and distribution, ecology, threats, conservation action, conservation needs, and references. Of these, the sections on status and distribution and on threats are particularly informative.

What sets this book apart from other bird guides is an emphasis on conservation actions and needs. There are introductory chapters on major conservation issues, the state of bird conservation in North America, and what actions individuals can take to promote bird conservation. These general discussions are then made specific to each species in the accounts. Whereas most natural-history books assail the reader with a frightening barrage of seemingly overwhelming forces driving species to extinction, Wells provides histories of successful conservation actions that prevented the demise of species. Each species account ends with a bulleted list of conservation needs that the reader can act on. The ordered presentation of threats, actions, and needs for each species generates a rare and welcome sense of optimism for readers who, if they are concerned with natural resources, suffer a near daily onslaught of bad news.

Wells's writing style is clear and inviting. Unfortunately, entire paragraphs are copied between species accounts. This may be efficient in cataloguing threats or actions that are shared among species, but it is disconcerting to the reader. At 450 pages, the book is a little too bulky to take into the field, and given that it lacks any bird identification information, there is no need to take it off the desk.

Overall, the *Birder's Conservation Handbook* is an attempt to combine two books—a volume on the issues of bird conservation in North America and how to address them, and a reference to the ecology and status of 100 species of birds—into one. Unfortunately, each part contributes less than half to the whole. The elements of a more complete discourse on bird conservation are present in the book, but it lacks the broad review and synthesis that would truly contribute to the reader's understanding of the issue. For example, under "conservation needs," Wells includes the creation and maintenance of shrub-scrub habitat in the eastern United States to benefit Golden-winged Warblers (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) as well as the preservation of forests in the same region to benefit Cerulean Warblers (*Dendroica cerulea*)—a paradox for the average reader, who may not be aware of the role played by the succession of abandoned farmland across the overlapping ranges of these species. As for this book's appeal to birders (rather than professional ornithologists), it fails in visual appeal. The line drawings are very good, but they don't dazzle as color plates do. The text is informative, but not very helpful in determining where to look for the species.

Wells deserves credit for realizing the need to inform and empower the birding community with knowledge and advice on how to conserve birds, and his *Birder's Conservation Handbook* goes some way in addressing this need. The book will be most appropriate for the amateur birder or conservation neophyte who wants to take the next step toward becoming a more knowledgeable and effective advocate for bird conservation.—JOHN CURNUTT, *Regional Wildlife Ecologist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Eastern Region, 626 East Wisconsin Avenue, 7th floor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53203, USA. E-mail: jcurnutt@fs.fed.us*.