

Puerto Rico's Birds in Photographs

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Puerto Rico's Birds in Photographs.—Mark W. Oberle. 2000. Editorial Humanitas, Mr. Mark Oberle, 2006. 23rd Ave. E. Seattle, Washington, 98112–2936, USA. 129 pp. 301 color plates. CDROM. ISBN 0-9650104-1-4. Paperback \$29.95.—Designed to be used by “students, tourists and anyone who wants to understand Puerto Rico's natural heritage by learning about its birds” this compact but comprehensive book is the product of a collaborative effort involving the author and 48 photographers, with input and advice from many technical experts. As a result, it is densely packed with information and the accompanying CD-ROM contains even more. The latter—free from the constraints of printed media—includes all the material in the book, plus additional text, photographs and sound clips. It requires web browser software such as Netscape or Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher, with a plug-in to play audio (.wav) files. It is easy to use, providing 1,350 photographs of 340 species of birds (including races not found in Puerto Rico), many of them augmented by sound clips. The recordings are generally of high quality and clean, although they do not pretend to be comprehensive. To be able to play a bird's song or call at the same time as looking at its image on the screen is very useful, although one would have to transfer the sounds to another CD to be able to use them in the field. The plethora of useful information makes the CD a valuable resource, and its layout makes it easier to use and more attractive than the book.

Both the book and the CD contain detailed accounts of the identification, habits, habitats, status and conservation, range and taxonomy of the common birds (and many rare ones) of Puerto Rico, with a variety of photographs illustrating plumages and behavior. The species accounts are complemented by a series of short, popular background essays describing the biogeography and migration patterns of Puerto Rican birds and conservation issues. The discussions of conservation in the introduction and in the species accounts are very welcome. The CD has several additional, very useful features including chapters designed for beginners on how to look for and recognize birds, guidelines for a two to three day bird watching tour, the American Birding Association “Code of Ethics,” and a scientific bibliography. Perhaps surprisingly however, given the stated objective of the book and the CD—to make people aware of Puerto Rican natural heritage through birds—there is no description of habitats. Even more surprisingly, there are no maps at all—a serious limitation for visitors to Puerto Rico.

The author has packed a huge amount of information into a small space. The text is comprehensive, full of interesting local information and is mostly written in nontechnical language. Detailed review of a random sample of the species accounts revealed no major errors and very few typographic mistakes. However, there were a few inconsistencies; for example, the text states that Ovenbirds (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) are generally silent on the wintering grounds, but that is certainly not the case in Jamaica.

Unfortunately the high cost of printing has obviously influenced the layout of the book, to its detriment. The pages are crowded to the limit with pictures and text, even the margins of the pages have been minimized. The result does not do justice to the quality of some of the pictures, and is visually unsatisfactory and somewhat unattractive. Inevitably, with so many photographers, there is a great variety in quality and style of the photographs. Many, like Bruce Hallett's White-tailed Tropicbirds (*Phaethon lepturus*) are outstanding, but ~15% are out of focus, grainy, taken in unfavorable lighting, of badly positioned birds, or otherwise obscure. Some, like the Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*) and Plain Pigeon (*Columba inornata*), have suffered badly in the printing process and appear in never-before-seen plumages. Many of the lower quality images could have been left to the CD, creating more space for good photographs and text in the book. Another problem with the photographs is that the name of the photographer is over-printed in a large font, which is distracting. In the book, the pictures have no captions or titles. From the reader's point of view, the name of the photographer is less interesting than a short title indicating age and sex of the bird illustrated. Age and sex differences are sometimes mentioned in the text (e.g. Puerto Rican Spindalis [*Spindalis puertoricensis*]), sometimes not (e.g. Common Ground Dove [*Columbina passerina*]). This can be perplexing. For example, do the two photographs of the Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*), showing vinaceous and ruddy individuals, illustrate different color phases or morphs, or is this just an artifact of printing? The lack of captions and the unevenness of the quality of the pictures means that it is very difficult to use the book to make field identifications or comparisons of plumages, with Puerto Rican birds or other birds in the region.

All the endemic species are grouped at the beginning of the book. That unusual arrangement is difficult to use and would tend to discourage the inexperienced person from comparing endemic species with their nonendemic relatives.

The format of the species descriptions is uneven. Some birds (mostly endemics and common species) get a whole page, with details under various sub-headings, whereas others are described tantalizingly in a single paragraph. The authors suggest that this is because the photographs take priority in the book.

Thus Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) gets three quarters of a page and two photographs, whereas Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) (a bird which is of more interest to visiting birders) is squeezed into a quarter page with only one photograph. Why does the introduced Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) get a whole page, whereas the West Indian endemic White-crowned Pigeon (*Columba leucocephala*) receives less? And so on. The answers no doubt relate to the availability of space and pictures.

Within the detailed accounts the information does not appear to be consistently allocated to categories. Information relevant to taxonomy sometimes appears in a separate section (e.g. Adelaide's Warbler [*Dendroica adelaidae*]) or sometimes under the heading "Species and Conservation" (e.g. Puerto Rican Bullfinch [*Loxigilla puertoricensis*]). Odd (but interesting) scraps of information crop up in unexpected places (such as the description of the source of the name of Adelaide's Warbler, under the heading "Identification").

Nevertheless the publication, particularly the CD-ROM, is full of useful information. It makes no pretense of being a field guide, but provides much that is missing from the existing field guides. It offers something for everyone—the general reader and students of natural history will find the general ecological information fascinating, birders will value the suggestions of where to look for birds, whereas scientists will benefit from the bibliography. Generally, however, it will be students and Puerto Ricans who are just getting interested in bird watching who will find this book most useful. Unfortunately, while the CD-ROM is in English and Spanish, the book seems only to be available in English, which will limit its usefulness in Puerto Rico.

Buy this nontechnical publication to add to your West Indian library, and take it with you in addition to your field guide when you visit Puerto Rico, whether to watch or study the birds or simply to appreciate its natural heritage. And if you find that it has some weaknesses, take the author up on his challenge, and contribute your scientific information, field notes, comments, photographs, videos, and sound clips to improve it.—ANN HAYNES SUTTON and ROBERT SUTTON, *Marshall's Pen, P.O. Box 58, Mandeville, Jamaica. E-mail: asutton@cwjamaica.com*