

A Field Guide to the Birds of Brazil

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A Field Guide to the Birds of Brazil.—Ber van Perlo. 2009. Oxford University Press, New York. 480 pp., 187 color plates, 1,791 distribution maps, 5 line illustrations. ISBN 9780195301557. Paper, \$39.95.—This latest publication of a field guide to Brazilian birds moves the bar a couple of notches above the several existing recent attempts, all of which have been published in Brazil. It is certainly the single most useful book for field identification of Brazil's enormous and complex birdlife currently available, and I recommend it to everyone interested in identifying birds in *terra brasilis*. If you are among this fast-growing crowd, you may want to keep reading. If you are not, you probably ought to stop now and save some time and money.

The book is an acceptable size (16.5 × 24 cm) and weight (1 kg) for a field guide, but both dimensions probably could have been reduced by omitting the essentially empty 22-mm-wide gray band across the top of every plate. The paper is “just right,” not too heavy or thin, and has good opacity and whiteness. The cover and binding look to be reasonably durable, but only time and the dogged birder will tell. The design is clean and simple: color plates with about 10 species each and facing-page range maps and text, the basic layout that a true field guide needs to have. Ber van Perlo's illustrations are utilitarian for field identification and often very good. Having considerable field experience with Brazilian birds, I could readily identify about 95% of the illustrations—I figured out the flying Laughing Falcon (*Herpetotheres cachinmans*; plate 24.9) despite the misleadingly white lower back and rump, but the drongo-like Tufted Antshrike (*Mackenziaena severa*; plate 101.5) induced a wince. This metric probably translates to something like 70% of birds being recognizable in the field for a novice birder. Many plates have a large amount of empty space that could have been used to make the illustrations larger (although the art might not hold up to much enlargement), especially on plates that feature species of similar size.

The birds are said to be depicted in “a more or less standardized stance” to make it “easier to compare similar species.” The result, of course, is that many species look confusingly more similar than they really are, especially for those not familiar with these birds. This point would perhaps be acceptable if the text adequately described characteristic postures and behaviors, but it is essentially useless in this regard; not even the diagnostic and widely known tail-shivering motion of Oustalet’s Tyrannulet (*Phylloscartes oustaleti*; plate 136.2) is mentioned. What became increasingly apparent, as I leafed through the book, is that van Perlo is a prolific bird artist who has had woefully insufficient firsthand experience to write a field guide to the birds of Brazil. The plates carry a huge load of the identification burden, to be sure, but the “guide” part kicks in with the text, which is the most complicated contribution of a field guide. This is why many field guides to birds around the world, like this one, are loaded with illustrations accompanied by no or only cursory text. There is heavy reliance on the user to match birds seen in the field to illustrations in the book—and besides, it’s a whole lot easier and faster to skip the writing stage. If the illustrations are reasonably good, as is the case here, the no-help plan works well for identification of most birds—and fails miserably for all of the species that are difficult to distinguish in the field, especially the ones that require having specific information to identify (i.e., the ones you bought the book for). There is plenty of space on most text pages for more information, and the point size of the species accounts would be user-friendly if larger.

The species accounts and other texts are sloppy with typos (e.g., “Homans” Schulenberg? [page 411]; “rare” is “garo” in Portuguese [page 25]), inconsistencies, and frustratingly useless verbiage (a typical statement: euphonias are “generally fairly conspicuous”). The content is often erroneous (*campinaranas* are never “thorny” and, in fact, none are shown on the map [page 7]; the Spot-winged Falconet [*Spizapteryx circumcincta*; plate 24.8] has never made it to the São Pedro and São Paulo Archipelago). In an unusual attempt to get specific about field marks, in the account for Zimmer’s Tody-Tyrant (*Hemitriccus minimus*), we read, “Broad yellow edges on inner wing feathers and darker edge of outer wing feathers causes 2-toned effect on wing, unlike 138.4, 138.9, 138.10.” But species number 138.10 is Zimmer’s Tody-Tyrant. The Swallow-tailed Cotinga (*Phibalura flavirostris*; plate 124.6) illustrated is a female, not a male as stated . . . the list is exhausting.

More pagination is devoted to vocalizations than to any other topic of field identification, with an attempt made to define parameters used in describing voices. One example is “Speed, expressed in the number of notes per time unit (that which can be measured by a speedometer) and described as very slow, slow, calm, rapid, hurried, fast, very fast.” This does not inspire confidence. Van Perlo goes on to recommend the use of publications of bird sounds, which is where he should have left it, omitting almost all of the vocal descriptions and including much more behavioral and habitat information. Some voice descriptions are good (e.g., White-breasted Tapaculo [*Eleoscytalopus indigoticus*]; plate 120.7) but overall they are astoundingly poor. Consider, for example, the locally sympatric Spectacled Owl (*Pulsatrix perspicillata*; plate 59.1) and Tawny-browed Owl (*P. koeniswaldiana*; plate 59.2); it would seem from the descriptions that these two species’ similar primary vocalizations are nothing alike. What is needed here is how to distinguish the voice of one from the other. The song of

the Pale-crested Woodpecker (*Celeus lugubris*; plate 84.4) “may be a very high, slackening, fluted, ‘twee-twee-tee-tee-tee.’” It sounds, in fact, very much like its close relative, the Blond-crested Woodpecker (*C. flavescens*; plate 84.5), the song of which is described as “e.g., loud, calm, ringing, piped ‘peep-peep-peep—’ (15 × ‘peep’). . . .” Knowing the voices of these woodpeckers, I can begin to imagine what van Perlo intended, as inadequate as these descriptions are, but I pity the inexperienced birder out there. The confusingly similar songs of the Helmeted Woodpecker (*Dryocopus galeatus*; plate 85.5) and the Lineated Woodpecker (*D. lineatus*; plate 85.7) are not even mentioned.

Many of the plates show birds at the wrong relative scales, sometimes egregiously so (Hoatzins [*Opisthocomus hoazin*] are much bigger than Small-billed Tinamous [*Crypturellus parvirostris*], and Limpkins [*Aramus guarauna*] are a good bit taller than either). It is the plates with relative sizes less grossly distorted (e.g., 39, 97, 99, 101, 124, 131, 186) that may ultimately cause more headaches. Although the introduction tells us that an attempt has been made to group similar species on plates regardless of taxonomy, this rarely went into practice (e.g., the Limpkin appears with tinamous and trumpeters rather than herons, ibises, and storks). Flycatcher plates 148 and 149 should have bunched the most similar species, particularly Piratic Flycatcher (*Legatus leucophaius*) with Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*), and the same should have been done with sympatric species of tyrannulets. Manakins in the genus *Machaeropterus* are on different plates. In a surprise move, gnatcatchers are grouped with yellow-finches.

Plate 132 features 10 species in the genus *Elaenia*, most of which are tough to identify although a high proportion of individuals seen well in the field is clearly assignable to species. This book exacerbates identification problems, giving us frustrating tutelage like the warning that species number 132.4, the White-crested Elaenia (*E. albiceps*), is “not safely separable from 132.5,” the Small-billed Elaenia (*E. parvirostris*), the account for which says, “Both have whitish (not yellowish) mid-belly, grayish chest often tinged olive, bold whitish eyering, and little or no crest. Sp. 132.4 usually has two wing bars and white streak on crown visible; 132.5 usually has three wing bars and crown streak often hidden, but these variable in both.” It is impossible to do anything with this, especially because the facing-page illustrations of both birds show crests up with a conspicuous amount of white. The book is replete with problems on this level. Dozens, quite possibly hundreds, of birds are said to be “unmistakable,” including one that the author has sorely mistaken, illustrating the male Rondonia Bushbird (*Clytoctantes atrogularis*) as entirely black, not gray with a black throat and chest, and telling us that the female has a “black tip, unlike 97.5,” the Peruvian Recurvebill (*Simoxenops ucayalae*)—whatever a “black tip” is meant to be. The Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*; plate 32.8), a vagrant to Brazil, is said to be “unmistakable by very dark color pattern.” This ignores the fact that almost all juvenile rails are little black birds. To the point, any bird can sometimes be mistaken for another (or even an inanimate object!), for any number of reasons. On the other hand, field identification characters are proffered for two species that are not safely separable (except by voice, in my opinion)—the Ferruginous Antbird (*Drymophila ferruginea*; plate 111.1) and Bertoni’s Antbird (*D. rubricollis*; plate 111.2)—and the female Bertoni’s is misleadingly shown with a plain, tan crown.

The maps are too small, and zooms on restricted distributions are often not tight enough, which results in problems like the Black-hooded Antwren (*Formicivora erythronotos*; plate 110.6) being shown north of the city of Rio de Janeiro in the same spot as the allopatric Restinga Antwren (*F. littoralis*; plate 100.5), but about 95% of species' ranges seem to be mapped well. There is a bibliography and a list of references for print, audio, and Internet resources, but no mention of seminal works like Sick's *Birds in Brazil* (1993; Princeton University Press) or Belton's *Birds of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil* (1984, 1985; Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History), nor of useful CD publications like those covering all the species of parrots and antbirds published a few years ago by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. It was a great idea to include a birder-oriented English–Portuguese dictionary.

If you live in or soon plan to go birding in Brazil, buy this book and make the best of it; it will help you immensely! If a trip to Brazil is not likely to happen for you in the next few years, I recommend holding off until some much better, in-progress field guides from Princeton University Press and Lynx Edicions hit the stands.—BRET M. WHITNEY, *Museum of Natural Science*, 119 Foster Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803, USA. E-mail: ictinia@earthlink.net