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Birds of Montana

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BOOK REVIEW

Birds of Montana

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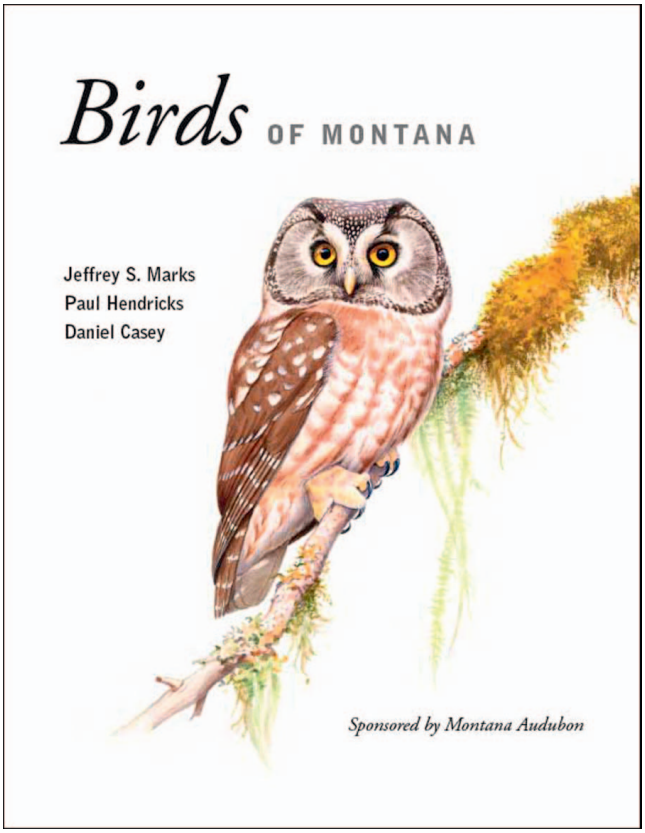
Birds of Montana by Jeffrey S. Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Daniel Casey. 2016. Buteo Books, Arlington, VA, USA. xii + 659 pp., 155 color range maps, 73 original illustrations of individual species, 16 full-color habitat photos. $75 (hardcover). ISBN 9780931130199.

This valuable, up-to-date reference work gathers detailed information on 433 species documented in Montana from 1889 (statehood) to 2015. The book begins with a five-page Introduction that provides useful background information on how the species accounts were developed, what information they contain, and what sources of information were used. The Introduction is followed by three chapters that provide interesting and useful overviews of (1) Montana's geography, topography, habitats, and ecoregions (16 pages, with 16 color photographs of habitats and a map of ecoregions); (2) the history of ornithology in Montana (20 pages); and (3) bird conservation in the state (nine pages). Chapters 1 and 3 will help those unfamiliar with Montana birding quickly get oriented to the available habitats and develop a broad understanding of which federal and state agencies and nongovernmental organizations are responsible for, and involved in, bird conservation in the state. Given Montana's large size and diverse habitats, along with the large number of stakeholders involved in conservation, having such information so clearly presented in one book should prove valuable. I truly enjoyed the history presented in Chapter 2, which is engagingly written and includes information that was new to me. The chapter discusses, in chronological order, the contributions of historical figures of European descent (all deceased) who made important contributions to the scientific understanding of Montana's birds from 1805 through about 2010. I think that many who are interested in the birds of Montana will enjoy having such a rich history presented so efficiently.



The bulk of the book (pp. 55–580) is the species accounts. Each account begins with introductory material, including a few natural-history anecdotes, which I found enjoyable and informative. For example, the book notes that the Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*) is

> North America's most unusual woodpecker [because it] feeds by fly-catching rather than by excavating in trees, flies like a corvid, and has a splash of color on its belly that recalls the inside of a ripe watermelon.... It was named by Alexander Wilson for Meriwether Lewis,... who provided the first description of the species on the basis of a bird he saw in Montana in 1805.... A Lewis's

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> Woodpecker skin at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology that is missing its original label is believed to be the type specimen.... If so, it is the only bird skin that remains from that historic expedition. (p. 307)

The introductory material thus serves to provide interesting facts about the species, which brings each bird to life a bit, and most of the information presented (aside from the global distribution information) complements rather than duplicates the type of information found in field guides.

Each species account next provides information on status and occurrence of the species in Montana. As such, the information is very specific to the state and provides a diversity of information on distribution and timing of key events in the annual cycle that should prove valuable to those designing research and monitoring programs, as well as to birdwatchers. Some snippets of text from the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) account indicate the type of information provided:

> Presumed occasional breeding resident, with at least 35 records statewide, although no nests have been found.... The most recent observations were made by... near...on.... Most Montana sightings are from riparian cottonwoods and willows with a dense understory of shrubs.... Yellow-billed Cuckoos have received almost no attention in the state, and it is surprising that the species has been reported only twice since 2002. (p. 259)

For those species that don't nest throughout the state, each account provides a state map (with county boundaries) that uses color coding to indicate where the species occurs at various times of year and, when appropriate, the historical range and/or areas of range expansion. The careful work that led to these maps makes them a valuable resource that goes beyond the quality of information available in typical field guides.

Habitat preferences for nesting and foraging are reviewed next: Relevant studies conducted on habitat use in Montana are nicely reviewed and literature citations provided. Each account then includes notes on the species' conservation status, historical notes based on any work done in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and a review of work done since 1955. All these sections provide useful citations to the literature. Indeed, I found the treatment of the literature to be thorough and appropriate throughout the book. The extensive number of resources that have been cited (the authors report that they consulted 2,000 publications while preparing the book) will provide an important collective resource for those interested in quickly and comprehensively updating the current status of multiple species of interest. Although a number of excellent books and websites now provide very useful species accounts that can produce a tremendous amount of information rather quickly, it is not an easy matter to find the information organized so well, especially at the state level. A further benefit of the book, and one that cannot be duplicated easily, is the information provided on reencounters of birds banded in the state.

The authors clearly have gone to great lengths to organize a tremendous amount of material and present it in a well-organized manner. As such, the book is an important resource for ornithologists interested in birds of Montana. Of course, the quantity of information presented makes it large and hefty—not a book one can readily bring along on a typical field outing. This is unfortunate, as it would be great to have access to the book's species accounts while in the field. Perhaps in the future the book might be produced in a digital form that would allow for ready field use. In the meantime, it is a great resource that I'm very glad to have in my office and that I expect to use regularly while teaching ornithology and conducting work on birds in the state of Montana.

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