

The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America

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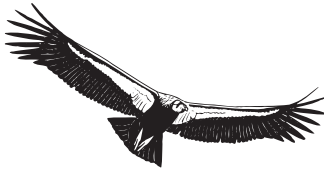
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BOOK REVIEW

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The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America.—Donald and Lillian Stokes. 2010. Little, Brown, New York. 795 pp. ISBN 978-0-316-01050-4. \$24.99 (paperback).

The new field guide from Donald and Lillian Stokes to the birds of North America is a well-done compendium of identification tables, quantitative traits, descriptions, and distribution maps. This book, which includes over 3400 color photographs for 854 species described, surely represents a compact but comprehensive effort. My first impression is that the editors accomplished a meticulous synthesis of their previous field guides, one each to eastern and western North America (Little, Brown, 1996). However, this new book offers additional concise details on subspecies and natural hybridization and has been updated with current taxonomy. It was a pleasant discovery to come across the Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*), a species split from the Winter Wren (*T. hiemalis*) by the North American Check-list Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union only few months before this book's publication (October 2010).

After my enthusiastic introduction, the aim of this review is an impartial assessment of the extent of novelty, valuable originalities, and drawbacks of the Stokes guide. To accomplish this goal I compared it methodically to the *Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Eastern Region*, and I evaluated the photographs of the species, by similarity and difference, with respect to the illustrations in the *Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* (Knopf, 2003) and the pictures offered by Sterry and Small in *Birds of Eastern North America—A Photographic Guide* (Princeton University Press, 2009). I decided to start the evaluation with the Gaviiiformes because I am seldom satisfied with the quality of the pictures of aquatic birds as a consequence of the “bathed in light” effect given by the water and because the winter plumages of immature loons can be an identification challenge. In the identification table for the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), the opening phrase “the most commonly seen loon” in the previous editions of the Stokes guides is replaced by the American Birding Association's code rating occurrence on a scale from 1 to 6. Low numbers indicate species that are seen more often. The Common Loon is rated as 1, immediately giving the reader a sense of the species' abundance relatively to its mapped distribution. For species with a code of 3 or above, however, the distribution map is not provided. Hence for rare species like the Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*), rated as 4, or the Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), rated as 5, the code is generally associated with only a short introductory sentence like “casual vag. to w. North Atl. and Gulf of Mexico” or “Accidental vag. off West Coast,” respectively.

In the identification tables, the latest Stokes guide follows a format standard throughout. The first category, “shape,” is a detailed but concise and handy overview of the most noticeable identification traits of body size and morphology: bill, eye, crest,

neck, tail length, wing span. For the Common Loon, details of the lower mandible are highlighted, and a quick hint to compare the similar Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) facilitates the recognition process. The next categories, “Ad. Summer,” “Ad. Winter,” and “Juv.” detail the species' plumage during the relevant period of the year. Nonetheless, this is just the general scheme; other species accounts are categorized differently for birds observed perching or flying. These supplementary categories are particularly rich in fine identification points for the Accipitridae and Falconidae.

The photographs offered in the identification tables for each species are probably the main features of this field guide, in pursuit of the ambition of generating “the most useful guide to identifying the birds of North America ever published” and of being “the most complete photographic record of these species' plumage and subspecies variations that has ever existed in one guide.” For example, the table for the Common Loon has six photographs, one representing the adult plumage in the summer (Montana, June), one the adult plumage in the winter (Florida, January), two the first-winter plumage (Florida, February; California, November), the adult summer plumage in flight (British Columbia, August), and the adult winter plumage in flight (California, December). The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is illustrated with 23 photographs including the subspecies *borealis*, *fuertesi*, *calurus*, and *harlani* and a comprehensive representation of color morphs. Although the number of photographs in the book is certainly impressive, whether such a large number of pictures, often of small size, really improves the path to an identification is questionable.

The distribution maps, an important characteristic of the book, have been modified and updated since the previous editions of the Stokes field guides by Paul Lehman and digitized by Matthew Carey. The review of bird ranges by Lehman, well known for his contributions to several leading field guides, including Sibley's, conveys a pledge of accuracy. The migration routes and extralimital occurrences so specifically indicated are welcome, but the pale yellow used for migration corridors might be difficult to see in the field.

Additionally, a CD included with the book features the calls and songs of 150 common North American species; all the audio tracks are taken from the *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs: Eastern Region* and *Western Region* CDs. Clearly, this book's CD is just a bonus, a sample of the bird songs, but each track is matched with a picture of the species; it can be downloaded on the computer in good audio quality (mp3 format), and the page numbers of the corresponding species-identification table are provided with the audio file.

Overall, I believe that this field guide is very comprehensive, excellent for beginners and intermediate birders. The large number of pictures and details are better than those offered by

Sterry and Small in their *Birds of Eastern North America—A Photographic Guide*. Experienced birders, however, will probably not abandon the Sibley for Stokes. The primary goal for the Stokes was to provide a stunning photographic field guide, and this goal is accomplished with little doubt, but the finely detailed illustrations by Sibley still offer a superior path to bird identification, especially in the field. Furthermore, at least a few species are represented by photographs of extremely rare or even out-of-range subspecies. For example, the photograph of the juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) is actually of the European subspecies *Dendrocopos major major*, not of *D. m. kamtschaticus*, recorded in Alaska. Also, the photographs of the adult male and the adult female of the Great Spotted Woodpecker are of *D. m. japonicus*, occurring in Korea and Japan. The White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*), rare north of Mexico, is represented with a photograph of the subspecies *S. z. mexicana* (vagrant from Mexico) and with a second photograph of the subspecies *S. z. bouchellii* distributed in Panama and Nicaragua. The Green Violetear (*Colibri thalassinus*), although a visitor to the southern U.S. presumably from Mexico, is represented not

by a photograph of the Mexican *C. t. thalassinus* but by ones of *C. t. cabanidis* and *C. t. crissalis*, of Costa Rica and Bolivia, respectively. These pictures, as the authors state in a footnote, were used because they were good photographs. Even though these and few other rare North American species are illustrated by related subspecies, this practice does not really reduce the strength of the book. Nonetheless, it appears to me as a dubious editorial decision.

To conclude, Donald and Lillian Stokes definitely deserve credit for such an exhaustive compendium of species, illustrations, and birding tips. This publication is an excellent contribution to the recognition of the North America avifauna that I would be glad to keep on my desk for reference. However, every ornithologist or amateur birder adopts a personal favorite bird-identification guide for consultation in the field. This is a choice that everyone makes independently over the time, regardless any of those outstanding, elegant, or adverse book reviews written by others.—ANDREA CONTINA, University of Oklahoma, 111 East Chesapeake St., Norman, OK 73019. E-mail: andrea.contina@ou.edu.