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Spring 2001

Review of *Great Texas Birds*

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Johnsgard, Paul A., "Review of *Great Texas Birds* " (2001). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 549.
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Great Texas Birds. Paintings by John P. O'Neill. Edited by Suzanne Winckler. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. Color plates, figures. \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 0-292-76053-1).

John O'Neill is unique: the only active professional bird artist who is also a world-class ornithologist. He is thus a kind of reincarnation of George M. Sutton, O'Neill's mentor and the idol of thousands of lovers of birds and fine bird art. Since graduating from the University of Oklahoma, O'Neill has repeatedly visited the Peruvian tropics, discovering more than a dozen species (more than any other living biologist) and illustrating hundreds more for field guides and other ornithological books. His subjects are generally more detailed, and his palette brighter, than Sutton's, but he is able to use white space and vegetational backgrounds just as effectively as did Sutton himself.

This book is derived from O'Neill's decision to paint nearly fifty "great" Texas birds, a list he developed with the help of Suzanne Winckler, a highly talented writer with long birding and book-editing experience in Texas. A group of writers—nearly all Texans—was chosen to describe each

of the species he illustrated. The University of Texas Press, long a leader in fine natural history books, published the volume.

And what a volume it is! Its format is extra-large (ca. 10" x 13"), with heavy coated paper and generous margins. The plates are nearly full-page, with text on facing pages, much like the lavish nineteenth-century monographs of John Gould. Many of the images are vignettted in a manner similar to Gould's, while others are painted with background habitats extending all the way to their borders. Mentioning my favorites would probably be unfair to many others, but O'Neill's chachalacas would be hard to imagine portrayed any better, and the summer tanager (shown in its cloud-forest winter habitat) is breathtaking. Most of the other paintings show typical Texas scenes. The images of perched birds are perhaps more effective than those in flight; it is a sad truth that no painting or photo can ever really capture the sense of movement that is one of the most attractive aspects of bird life. The blurry-winged hummingbird paintings, however, are wonderful in attempting this evocation and offer gorgeous flowers as a bonus.

The contributed texts range from the informative but fairly pedestrian to those as brilliantly iridescent as a magpie's tail under a midday Texas sun. Two outstanding pieces are by Jim Bones and Suzanne Winckler. Somehow Winckler makes her experience of encountering an apparently talking bush while traveling down Nebraska's Niobrara River as memorable and exciting as Moses' equally surprising encounter with an unusually flammable bush. **Paul A. Johnsgard**, *School of Biological Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.