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BOOK REVIEWS

The Complete Birder, A Guide to Better Birding, Jack Connor, illustrated by Margaret LaFarge, xiii + 285 pp., Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, softcover \$8.95.

The Complete Birder is divided into twelve chapters that can aid both the serious birder and the beginning birder. Connor opens with a chapter entitled "The Sporting Science". In this chapter he unequivocally states outright that birding is not easy, no matter how experienced one is nor how well equipped. He does say, and I tend to agree, that "birding can be exhilarating, enlightening, evocative, or exasperating -- and often all of these at once --". He uses this chapter to historically relate his development as a birder. The process was a slow, prolonged, tortuous development.

Excellent chapters on optics and acoustics follow. Connor explains all the details to look for when buying the right binoculars, spotting scopes, and tripods. He states that the road to good birding is done by upgrading the binoculars the birder uses. To do this involves comparison shopping and careful analysis of the technical information. One needs to know what one wants to do as a birder. Then one goes out and finds the binoculars and other equipment that best suit one's needs. Once one has binoculars, one needs to use them in the field on a regular basis. Becoming a good birder cannot be accomplished by resting on the living room sofa in front of the television set. Birding experience is gained through contact with nature. In addition, the author leads

the reader through the various ways the reader can use the bird songs and calls to become a better birder. This requires practice and a number of other fine-honed mnemonic skills. These skills are not acquired overnight.

Three chapters cover migration, winter birds, and summer birds. The chapter on migration explains this interesting phenomenon and how migration relates to birding. The winter and the summer chapters explain how these two seasons vary as to what birds are to be found in various geographical regions of the United States. All three chapters are interesting to read and are useful to the birder.

The next five chapters deal with birds that are difficult to identify when encountered across the country during different times of the year. The five groups of birds are warblers, hawks, shorebirds, terns, and gulls. These five chapters provide detailed, often subtle, points on how to identify these problem birds when encountered in the field. Connor gives adequate details to separate similar-appearing birds from each other, using geographic range, season of the year, flight patterns, songs and calls, plumage variations, other morphological features, and behavior. The advice that Connor gives to make crucial identifications is excellent, although distinctions are often subtle, requiring a practiced eye for detail and an excellent memory. This can only come from experience and perseverance. Generally, Connor uses sections of the United States, namely, the Atlantic states, Great Lake states, Gulf Coast states, and western regions, including the Pacific Ocean states and the desert southwest. This sort of breakdown does not assist birders much in some sections of the country, especially the Midwest. Even if one visited these areas, one would have trouble applying the information needed to separate the troublesome birds encountered. For most of these areas, the problem birds are not conveniently tabulated for ready reference and instant retrieval. (If one has ample time, one can do such tabulations by laboriously extricating pertinent information from the text and transferring this information to note cards for the regions one is interested in.)

If one is truly interested in improving one's birding, then it is important to take notes and to incorporate these descriptive notes into one's field guide. These note tips should be reviewed often or else the tips fade rapidly from memory. (A WARNING: Sadly, I did not take notes when I read the book, therefore I have nothing to show for it.) As I stated above, Connor should have used tables to facilitate the transference of information for identifying difficult, similar-appearing birds. By universally using more self-help tables and other guides, one would have a very useful tool to launch oneself into better birding. In its current format, most of the helpful tips will soon be forgotten unless one takes notes.

Connor is my kind of birder. He flavors each chapter with numerous real-life anecdotes. Connor's basic conclusion: even the best birders make mistakes, although fewer of them. If one is birding alone, one should be extra careful in making crucial identifications. One should take detailed notes in the field when rarities and unusual sightings are encountered. If one is birding with others, dare them to actively scrutinize the bird in view so that it can be quickly and correctly identified. (I try to play devil's advocate when I bird alone or with others.) In a group, I more often than not blurt out spontaneously identifications, which often miss the mark, or I recklessly gabble the wrong name as I sometimes do: ring-billed duck for ring-necked duck, or hooded grebe for horned grebe, and so on. This kind of maneuver is due more to my idiopathic excitement than anything else; however, it does help to get others to think about what they see and hear. In the flurry of activity, I become hyperexcited. I guess that is the way I am -- quirks, idiosyncrasies, personality warps, myopic vision, warts, and all. As Connor states, the mind can play all kinds of tricks, whether one is alone or in the company of others. These tricks can be embarrassing and frustrating at times and on other occasions these tricks can transform situations into enjoyable, rewarding experiences. While birding, one will encounter the whole gamut of birder types. THE LIFE OF A BIRDER IS NEVER DULL.

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The Maine Woods, Henry David Thoreau, introduction by Edward Hoagland, xxxiii + 442, indexed, Penguin Books, New York, soft cover \$7.95

Another of the Penguin Nature Library. This book describes Thoreau's trips to Maine's backwoods (when they really were) in 1846, 1853, and 1857. He gives the details of getting to the outposts, and of the trips in the woods. He covers the geography, the weather, the fauna, the flora - anything that comes to his notice. Maine, contrasted to Massachusetts, paid for water troughs (for stock) by its highways, and was banishing bar-rooms from them. Homesteads in the woods were cleared by cutting the trees and burning them (presumably not enough timber involved to warrant a timber drive). Thoreau didn't mind this, except that until the land was completely cleared it made hard walking when they had to cross such an area, but he disapproved of the slaughter of moose for their hides (for moccasins). Usually most, if not all, of the meat was left unused. The perpetrators were not subject to the harassment now given to those who are cutting down the tropical forests, or killing elephants and rhinoceroses. It is interesting reading without bothering with such comparisons, but if one is interested in detail one should get a fairly detailed map of Maine, to follow the trips (hoping that the names of rivers, lakes, and mountains are still the same), and read, or at least be aware of, the appendices at the back with the names of trees, plants, animals, and birds. On the last trip, especially, they were botanizing most of the time, with fishing maybe second in the use of spare time. Thoreau, on the advice of his Indian guide, reports that Red-headed Woodpeckers are good to eat. For at least one bird, both the common and the scientific names have changed. The spirit duck, or dipper, *Fuligula albicollis*, is now known as the Bufflehead, *Bucephala albeola*.