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6-2016

## Book Review: Better Birding: Tips, Tools, and Concepts for the Field. George L. Armistead and Brian L. Sullivan.

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### **Better Birding: Tips, Tools, and Concepts for the Field.**

George L. Armistead and Brian L. Sullivan. 2016. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 318 pages. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-691-12966-2.

George Armistead and Brian Sullivan have written a book whose aim is to provide birders with a solid foundation upon which to develop better birding skills. They advocate a more holistic approach to bird identification than simply looking at a set of predetermined field marks. To that end, their approach combines traditional field identification approaches with behavioral and habitat cues, as well as natural history, to broaden bird identification skills. This is not the first book to make a case for looking at bird identification more broadly, although their specific approach seems unique. The authors offer constructive criticism of “traditional” field guides that focus on a relatively few signature field marks, thereby causing birders to avoid understanding birds in greater detail. As an ornithologist and birder, I certainly appreciate birds far beyond the basic field identification challenges. The natural history of birds is fascinating, and we still have much to learn! But I wonder, is this field guide the answer? Probably not. A book covering all North American birds, modeled after *Better Birding*, might run into the thousands of pages and would hardly be usable in the field.

The book begins with a short introduction that is followed by nine sections that each focus on a particular group of birds. The introduction clearly states the book’s overall intent and includes short sections on topics such as how to become a “good birder”, the basics of bird sounds, molt, and taxonomy. The “good birder” discussion is nicely written and makes good reading for someone who aspires to better their birding skills. Many of the best birders fully appreciate the breadth of factors that can affect bird identification, which often also involves carefully weighing the odds of location, season, and other considerations. The plug for eBird is understandable, but I wonder why there was no mention of other long-running, standardized bird sampling programs? The Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) and Christmas Bird Count (CBC) are two that come to mind. Sadly, eBird lacks a formal sampling design that greatly limits the value of its data to researchers and conservationists. I might suggest that the best way to “make your birding count” is to let the BBS and CBC be the “science” of birding while eBird serves as an educational and listing tool that also can help track bird distributions and migration phenology. I also should add that while the concepts in this book are definitely field-oriented, its large size may be better suited to a reference guide for home or the car.

The bulk of the book is the nine chapters that delve into the identification details of 24 groups of birds. These groups highlight many of the better known identification challenges in North America under the groupings “Coastal Birds”, “Seabirds”, “Skulkers”, and more. I did not find any discussion about why these particular groups were chosen, but they

seem like good choices. Some of the groups (e.g., swans [*Cygnus*] and gadfly petrels [*Pterodroma*]) have been well covered in the birding literature while others (e.g., the cowbirds [*Molothrus*]) have received less press. And I suspect some birders will be surprised at the identification challenges in some of the groups. For example, how many people fully appreciate some of the difficulties in separating the three species of curlews (*Numenius*)? I particularly enjoyed reading about murrelets (*Brachyramphus*), marsh sparrows (*Ammodramus*), swifts (*Aeronautes*, *Apus*, *Chaetura*, *Cypseloides*, *Hirundapus*, *Streptoprocne*, and *Tachornis*), and longspurs (*Calcarius* and *Rhynchophanes*), although each of the sections held something of interest to me. It should be immediately apparent that this is not a typical field guide that covers *all* species; rather, this book includes more detailed coverage of a much smaller number of species. After all, there is probably no compelling reason to add sections on the identification of North American pelicans (*Pelecanus*) or waxwings (*Bombycilla*), for example, but this reduced coverage should not be seen as a weakness of the book. The in-depth accounts are filled with lots of good information that is organized with a brief introduction to the group, a Natural History Note (I really enjoyed reading these), Hints and Considerations, and then an Identification section that covers each species. For me, the Hints and Considerations section was the most interesting because it merges many sources of information to provide the reader with an approach to identifying the species within the group. There was a lot of natural history information scattered throughout each account, all of which is useful when seeking a better understanding of bird identification. Like any topic, the fine details are subject to change in response to our understanding of identification, or perhaps because distribution patterns are changing. One example that caught my eye was the comment in the Sulid section that Blue-footed Booby (*Sula nebouxi*) is the most likely species to occur inland in North America. That may be true, but there sure have been a lot of inland records of Brown Booby (*S. leucogaster*) in the eastern U.S. in the last five years, and I am guessing this species will surpass the Blue-footed Booby as the inland champion soon, if it has not already!

One other topic worth mentioning is the photographs. The quality of the photographs is excellent, and many appear to have been carefully chosen to illustrate key identification points. In a few places (e.g., the tropical terns [*Onychoprion* and *Anous*]) the authors have photo-shopped a large format photo to include multiple individuals of one or more species. The obvious advantage is an ability to directly compare individuals and plumages, but in many cases, I found the panoramic to be too busy. These photos will remind some readers of the approach used in the *Crossley* identification field guides. In my opinion, photographs can only depict so much, and I believe that there is no substitute for a high quality illustration. A good artist can remove individual anomalies, poor lighting, and a host of other factors that can cause a

photograph to deviate from illustrating the “average” individual bird. Birders vary in their preference for illustrations or photographs in field guides, and in the end it comes down to personal preference.

Overall, *Better Birding: Tips, Tools, and Concepts for the Field* provides a thoughtful and holistic approach to bird identification that often is missing from traditional field guides. I enjoyed my read of the book, learned some new bird

identification tips, and appreciated many of the finer elements of the authors’ approach to the field identification of birds. This book will make a nice addition to any library of field identification texts, and there is something in it for novices and expert birders alike.—*Stephen J. Dinsmore, Professor, Associate Department Chair, and Director of Graduate Education, Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011, USA.*