

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center

US Geological Survey

1997

Birds of Western North America

Lawrence D. Igl

USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, ligl@usgs.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usgsnpwrc>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Igl, Lawrence D., "Birds of Western North America" (1997). *USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center*. 172.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usgsnpwrc/172>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the US Geological Survey at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BIRDS OF WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Western Region. Donald W. Stokes and Lillian Q. Stokes. 1996. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, MA. 519 pages. \$16.95 (cloth).

This photographic identification guide covers more than 530 species of birds that regularly occur in the western half of North America. It is slightly larger than most field guides, including the popular *National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, which is continental in coverage. Nonetheless, it is small and sturdy enough to conveniently carry in a jacket pocket or backpack. The field guide begins with a short section on how to use the book; the bulk of the book consists of species accounts. Each species account occurs on one page (a few species are jointly covered) and includes one to four color photographs (ranging in size from 3.5 X 5.0 cm to 7.5 X 10.0 cm), a species description, a distribution map, and brief notes on feeding, nesting, behavior, habitat, vocalizations, and population trends. All birds in the pictures are oriented in the same direction to simplify comparisons. Species descriptions are brief and emphasize key features with boldface type. Symbols are provided for species that use bird feeders or nest boxes. Interspersed among the individual accounts are several "learning pages" for the more challenging bird groups, including hawks (in flight), shorebirds, gulls, flycatchers, warblers, and sparrows. A glossary, photograph credits, and a general index complete the book. A color tab index and an alphabetical index provide quick access to general bird groups.

The species accounts are purported to be up-to-date and arranged in phylogenetic order in accordance with the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds* and its most recent update. The guide departs from this arrangement for some families or species. Also, the field guide lacks order and family names and detailed descriptions of their unique characters, which would have been useful to the beginner birder.

The guide covers the western portions of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, and all states and provinces to the west. Most common western species are represented in this guide, although the authors omit several species that breed regularly in this region (e.g., ferruginous pygmy-owl, crested myna, red-bellied woodpecker, Carolina chickadee, chestnut-sided warbler, blackburnian warbler). The latter four species occur in the eastern counterpart to this guide (*Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Eastern Region*), which illustrates a major disadvantage of publishing separate field guides for North America. That is, more than one field guide is necessary for birders in the Great Plains and for the itinerant birder. In addition, the authors exclude the western half of Alaska

from consideration, and, in doing so, eliminate several western Alaskan specialties such as the red-faced cormorant, spectacled eider, Steller's eider, Siberian tit, and bluethroat.

Most range maps appear to be accurate, although obvious errors were apparent for some species. The northern range boundaries for the white-faced ibis and snowy egret follow political (i.e., national) boundaries. The actual breeding ranges of some species are less (e.g., many Ciconiiforms, McCown's longspur) or more (e.g., least tern) extensive than those depicted in the range maps. Also, maps of some species (e.g., wood duck, hooded merganser, bald eagle, Mississippi kite, wild turkey, house finch, great-tailed grackle) are outdated and do not reflect recent breeding range expansions.

One objective of this field guide was to make birders more aware of the conservation status of North American birds by providing long-term population trends from the Christmas Bird Count, the Breeding Bird Survey, and other less-known surveys. Although the authors' intentions are laudable, a field guide may not be the best outlet for such information. Population trends can become outdated in just a few years, whereas field guides may be used for decades or, in some cases, a lifetime. A better venue for these data is the Internet, where population trends can be updated regularly.

A quick reading of the text revealed several errors. The island scrub-jay was mistakenly called the Santa Cruz island scrub-jay, the scientific name for the mew gull (*Larus canus*) was incorrectly given as *L. brachyrhynchus*, and the American Ornithologists' Union was erroneously called the American Ornithological Union. Some inconsistencies exist between the text and the photographs (e.g., the Mexican jay is described as "uniformly blue above; gray below; no other markings," whereas the photograph shows a bird with a more-appropriate gray back). Some details in the text are inaccurate or exaggerations. For example, the authors state that dickcissels nest in trees or hedges, whereas many nest in herbaceous vegetation and some nest on the ground. In another example, ospreys are described as a regular food item of the great horned owl; it is disappointing that such a rare occurrence was even mentioned.

Finally, the essence of any field guide is its illustrations. Field guides differ in their depiction of birds: some guides have color photographs and others have color paintings. Most experienced birders prefer paintings to photographs, because artists can orient their subjects in multiple poses to emphasize key features for more accurate identification. Photographs, on the other hand, are more realistic, and good photographs can convey details in plumage, color, and shape that may not be easily illustrated in a painting. But these details can be modified by differences in the production process, lighting, background, film type, or position of subject. The publisher states on the back cover that this field guide contains more than 900 high-resolution

color photographs. The authors should be commended for compiling one of the most thorough picture galleries of western North American birds currently in print. I also applaud the authors for attempting to provide more photographs of seasonal, sex, and age variations than presented in earlier photographic identification guides (e.g., *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: Western Region*). Some of the photographs are spectacular, but most vary in quality, resolution, and details. A few of the photographs are very poor (e.g., shearwaters and storm-petrels, ancient murrelet), but were probably the best available. In some cases, the authors should have exercised better judgment in choosing which photographs to include (e.g., brown thrasher wading belly-deep in water). Several photographs are grainy, which diminishes the quality of the details (e.g. swifts and swallows flying, black-chinned and Brewer's sparrows). A few photographs do not show key field marks that are most useful for identification (e.g. Xantus' murrelet and Craveri's murrelet appear essentially identical). Other photographs were poorly reproduced (e.g., the male black-tailed gnatcatcher and a marbled murrelet have some purple feathers).

Despite the drawbacks noted above, birders and nonbirders alike will enjoy thumbing through this guide to view the colorful variety of North American birds. Using this photographic guide for identification will require discretion by both the expert and novice birder, and thus I recommend that this guide be used in conjunction with another field guide, such as Peterson's *A Field Guide to Western Birds* or *National Geographic*.--Lawrence D. Igl, Northern Prairie Science Center, U.S. Geological Survey-Biological Resources Division, Jamestown, ND 58401.