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## Review of *Basic Texas Birds: A Field Guide* by Mark W. Lockwood

Thomas M. Langschied

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## A TEXAS BIRD HANDBOOK

*Basic Texas Birds: A Field Guide.* Mark W. Lockwood. 2007. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas. 403 pages. \$22.95 (paper).

Texas has an incredible diversity of birds. This diversity is a result of its geographic location, size, and diversity of habitats. Given this wealth of birds, there is a wonderful opportunity in Texas for both residents and visitors alike to learn and appreciate the birdlife found there.

Basic Texas Birds has been written to provide a foundation for anyone who is either new to bird-watching or has been bird-watching casually for several years. The book covers 161 commonly occurring birds in Texas and includes an additional 23 species that are considered Texas specialty birds, those that occur regularly in Texas but nowhere else in the United States.

This book is filled with beautiful pictures, clear and accurate range maps, and an abundance of interesting natural history information in an easy-to-handle small form. Each species gets two pages worth of coverage, which includes the species' background, identification, similar species, habitat, status, and distribution.

Unfortunately, I believe the book has several shortcomings. The first and foremost is a matter of semantics as it relates to the subtitle. It is subtitled as "A Field Guide," yet its format is not effective for identifying birds in the field. Perhaps a more appropriate subtitle would be A Natural History Handbook. The term "field guide" implies a book that can be used in the field to identify some particular subject. Even the author, whom I respect greatly, candidly mentions in the section "How to use this book" that a more-inclusive guide will be needed when observing birds. Unfortunately this ignores the basic human behavior of not reading the fine print and blazing to the main text or illustrations and thus potentially bolstering unrealistic expectations.

There are several species accounts that either do not illustrate both a male and female or include a picture that does not adequately accentuate the best identifiable characteristics. There seemed to be a strong interest in including pictures that were aesthetically pleasing or illustrating some unique behavioral perspective. This is quite appropriate for a natural history book, but a shortcoming for a field guide.

Two species accounts contain minor errors. The first deals with the brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). The map for the bronzed cowbird (*M. aeneus*) was repeated in the brown-headed cowbird account. The second error is subjective on my part, but one I feel is important. That is the reference of the crested caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) as the Mexican eagle. I and others believe that the crested caracara is not the true national bird of Mexico. The crested caracara/Mexican eagle issue is an unfortunate one that is often repeated by many authors out of convenience and not, in my opinion, based on a true evaluation of the Mexican coat of arms and flag as well as the legend where it was born.

I also found the index very confusing with some dead-end leads and difficulty in locating the treatment of a particular species. I believe the author, in an attempt to fill in the gap of species not covered by the book, added many species in the “similar species” category and thus made for a congested and deceptive index.

If this book is purchased with the hopes of being used as an actual field guide, the reader may well be disappointed and frustrated. The 184 bird species that *Basic Texas Birds* specifically covers pale in light of the 600+ species that have been recorded in the state. When this book first appeared on the shelves of a local bookstore, I initially was excited at its title, the author, and the thoughts of a good field guide focusing specifically on Texas birds, something that is really lacking. My initial perusal quickly made me realize that it had some of the same limitations of other recently published Texas “bird field guides”: a limited number of species illustrated and an inefficient field guide format, typically with one species illustrated per page. Unlike other Texas field guides, the range maps in *Basic Texas Birds* are some of the best I have seen. An appendix includes the entire list of birds documented in Texas as of December 2006.

I cannot recommend this book as a primary guide for bird identification. But outside of that issue, it does provide good natural history coverage of each species in a consistent and thorough manner within the space available. If it is used as a convenient supplement to a more standard field guide in dealing with the birds of Texas, your disappointment will be limited only to the species not covered by the book.—*Thomas M. Langschied, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Kingsville, TX 78363.*