

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

The Prairie Naturalist

Great Plains Natural Science Society

---

5-2019

Review of *Birds of Prey of the West: A Field Guide*, by Brian K. Wheeler

Daniel Casey

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



Part of the [Biodiversity Commons](#), [Botany Commons](#), [Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Commons](#), [Natural Resources and Conservation Commons](#), [Systems Biology Commons](#), and the [Weed Science Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Natural Science Society at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Naturalist by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

### BIRDS OF PREY OF THE WEST: A FIELD GUIDE.

Brian K. Wheeler. 2018. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 360 pages. \$27.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-691-11718-8.

Birds of prey epitomize much of what attracts us to birding. Many are large and easy to observe, particularly in open landscapes. Their predatory nature and behavior give them an added aura of wildness; their migrations can be spectacular. And even veteran birders should enjoy the challenge of identifying the myriad of plumage variations shown by different ages, sexes, subspecies, and color morphs. With his newest effort, *Birds of Prey of the West*, Brian Wheeler has compiled a comprehensive and enhanced field guide with illustrations that stunningly capture that variation, combined with enough additional context to make it a valuable desk reference for birders of all levels.

The geographic scope of this book is the United States north of Mexico and west of the Mississippi River, and Canada west of Manitoba and the western shore of Hudson Bay, north into Nunavut and across western Canada and Alaska. It covers nearly all the regularly occurring raptors of North America, excluding only the Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) of the southeast and a few species of Eurasian and Mexican vagrants (e.g., Steller's Sea Eagle [*Haliaeetus pelagicus*] and Roadside Hawk [*Rupornis magnirostris*]). As such, it may appeal to birders beyond the geography covered, although a companion volume is also available for the East (Wheeler 2018).

The Preface clarifies the author's labor of love in preparing this book over a 13-year period. Although some may find his lengthy descriptions of how he arrived at creating this book and the history of his work as a birder and artist to be self-indulgent, they certainly make one appreciate the massive scope of this effort by the author of several previous works on birds of prey (e.g., Clark and Wheeler 1987, Wheeler and Clark 1995, Wheeler 2003).

The detailed Introduction includes sections on Taxonomy, Book Format, Identifying Birds of Prey, Age Classification and Molt Stages, and an Anatomy and Plumage Glossary. This is followed by Species Accounts for 33 species of hawks, eagles, vultures, and falcons, each of which begins with one or more plates illustrating the breadth of plumage variation by age, sex, subspecies, and color morph (as appropriate). Each plate is accompanied by text describing Size, Habits, Food, Flight, and Voice. The plates are followed by a more extensive section for each species, describing Habitat, Status, Nesting, Movements, and Comparisons with other species; many plates include photographs of typical habitats. Detailed seasonal maps also accompany each species account.

*Birds of Prey of the West* would be worth the purchase price solely for the remarkable detail in the Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) species account. The 14 plates devoted to the various subspecies and plumages of the Red-tailed

Hawk include a staggering 66 illustrations of perched birds, 59 of birds in flight, and 92 of tail, head, feather, and opening details. They are followed by 27 pages of text, maps and illustrative photos. Indeed, the detail provided for this species, which varies so dramatically in the region, might be the strongest justification for having companion East and West volumes.

The book is well researched, with abundant surprises and attention to detail throughout. Never before has one source illustrated such diverse variation as Sutton's (southern Arizona) and Queen Charlotte (coastal western Canada and southeastern Alaska) Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*), "bibbed" type Northern Goshawk (*A. gentilis*), or the varied number of tail bands shown by Broad-winged Hawks (*B. platypterus*), Rough-legged Hawks (*B. lagopus*), and Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*). The many range maps were clearly also based on extensive review and research from diverse sources (extensively acknowledged). I was able to discern those localized areas in Montana, my home state, where species such as Ferruginous Hawk (*B. regalis*) and Harlan's Hawk (*B. jamaicensis harlani*) are known to winter.

Many people will buy and use the book for the illustrations first, and then will discover the wealth of other information contained within. One example is the discussion on molt, a process poorly understood by many (even experienced) birders. The section may take several readings for those that have not spent time as banders or field biologists, but it is an enlightening discussion of the relationship between molt patterns, taxonomy, and identification. A bit more cross-referencing between the text and subsequent figures to illustrate the patterns described may have improved this section. The sections for the Aplomado Falcon (*Falco femoralis*) and California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) include discussions on, not only their status and reasons for declines, but also the challenges faced by those working on reintroductions. Lead poisoning, wind tower threats, and habitat degradation are topics not often covered in "field guides".

The inclusion of such a huge amount of content in a field guide-sized book (13 × 20 cm) did involve some compromises. Although the font size used in the Introduction and the Red-tailed Hawk is reasonable, I found the font size in the text accompanying the plates to be frustratingly small. Given that the book will serve better as a shelf reference than field guide (in my opinion), I think a larger format would have been preferable. I spent little time looking for typographical errors, but one inaccuracy did jump out at me: in the "Anatomy and Plumage Glossary" section, the text erroneously stated "... three toes in front and two in the rear".

I found the author's choice of non-white backgrounds to truly enhance the impact and contrast of the illustrations, as he had intended. I also appreciated the author's choice to use "repetitive same-position poses for optimal comparison between similar species", though the occasional inclusion of a

similar species might have enhanced some of the plates. I did find the proportions on many of the flight illustrations to be less than lifelike; heads often appear to be disproportionately large and necks too thick. In some cases, overall body shape seems compressed; I found this to be particularly noticeable on the Swainson's Hawk (*B. swainsoni*) plates. Nevertheless, there has never been such a comprehensive identification tool for western raptors, and I really enjoyed using this book to sort through various winter buteos on the Montana prairie.

Field guides dedicated to a single taxon or groups of taxa and regional geographies have become increasingly popular in recent decades. My own bookshelf includes no less than 22 such books, covering everything from seabirds to sparrows, including five focused on raptors: two earlier works by this author (Clark and Wheeler 1987, Wheeler and Clark 1996), and three more recent photographic guides (Liguori 2011, Dunne et al. 2012, Crossley 2013). This new effort complements those resources with minimal redundancy, and this thoroughly researched, innovative, and comprehensive guide to western raptors may set a new standard for such works. This informative, richly illustrated book certainly deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in birds of prey or in the intricacies of bird identification in general.—*Daniel Casey, Coordinator, Northern Great Plains Joint Venture, 3302 4th Avenue North, Suite 120, Billings, Montana 59101, USA.*

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Clark, W. S., and B. K. Wheeler. 1987. A field guide to hawks of North America. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.
- Crossley, R., J. Liguori, and B. Sullivan. 2013. The Crossley ID Guide: Raptors. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
- Dunne, P., D. Sibley, and C. Sutton. 2012. Hawks in flight. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.
- Liguori, J. 2011. Hawks at a distance, identification of migrant raptors. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
- Wheeler, B. K. 2003. Raptors of western North America. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
- Wheeler, B. K. 2018. Birds of prey of the East: a field guide. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
- Wheeler, B. K., and W. S. Clark. 1995. A photographic guide to North American raptors. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.