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Review of *Some Scarce Birds of the Upper Midwest* by Dana Gardner and Nancy Overcott

Stephen J. Dinsmore

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SOME SCARCE BIRDS OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

Fifty Uncommon Birds of the Upper Midwest. Watercolors by Dana Gardner; text by Nancy Overcott. 2007. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa. 112 pages. \$34.95 (cloth).

Nancy Overcott has written series of short essays of birds found in the Upper Midwest and assembled them in an easy-to-read book. As an ornithologist and avid birder in this region, I'll admit that I didn't know what to expect when I opened the cover-would the focus be on rarities, would there be an identification component, are there tips for finding each species, and at what audience was the book aimed? Ultimately, I enjoyed the personal touch to Overcott's story-telling and found this an entertaining read, although the content did not increase my understanding of the birds of this region.

The book includes a short introduction followed by 50 essays, one per species (each nicely illustrated by Dana Gardner), and ends with a short list of supplemental references. The content of each species account varied, although most generally included information about seasonal occurrence, typical habitat(s) used, and a reference to their general range. I liked the personal story used to introduce most species as this gives the reader a better feel for the bird by knowing something about the encounter.

My quick scan of the list of species found a few surprises, and based on the title of the book I would have used a much different list. Species such as the surf scoter, whooping crane, and hooded warbler are indeed deserving of being labeled uncommon in the Upper Midwest. However, I would hardly label species such as hooded merganser, sora, brown thrasher, or dickcissel uncommon-all can be readily found, sometimes in large numbers, throughout the region at the appropriate season. Perhaps Overcott uses "uncommon" interchangeably with "sought-after," which I believe is a more appropriate way to describe the species that were included. It is also unclear how "Upper Midwest" is defined. My impression is that it includes the states of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and possibly others, although this is never stated. If so, the list seems odder because of the inclusion of western species like white-faced ibis and Townsend's solitaire. I wonder why the list doesn't include species such as canvasback, piping plover, black and Forster's terns, or Lapland longspur.

At the end of the introduction, the author states that the book seeks to give readers "the information necessary to find" each species. This is a slight overstatement of the content, which should not be viewed as a bird-finding guide. For some species there are general tips for finding them in the Upper Midwest, while for many others this information is missing. This lack of detail on finding each species in the region was probably the biggest disappointment for me, although that information is available from other sources.

A review of this book would not be complete without mention of the beautiful illustrations of each species by Dana Gardner. I've always had mixed feelings about watercolors, but after seeing these I'm definitely a bigger fan! Each species appears in a simple yet realistic setting and the reproduction of color, features, and posture are accurate for most species (the owls in particular don't look lifelike). While it's difficult to pick a favorite, I was especially impressed with the drawings of American bittern, northern shrike, and western meadowlark. Each drawing was a full page and nicely complemented the single page of text for each species.

Overall, *Fifty Uncommon Birds of the Upper Midwest* provides a different and unique look at a subset of the midcontinent's birds. Each species account is easy to read and complemented with a nice illustration, although the book definitely falls short of being considered a field guide or a serious bird-finding guide for the Upper Midwest.—*Stephen J. Dinsmore, Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.*