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Book Review: *Sparrows of North America*

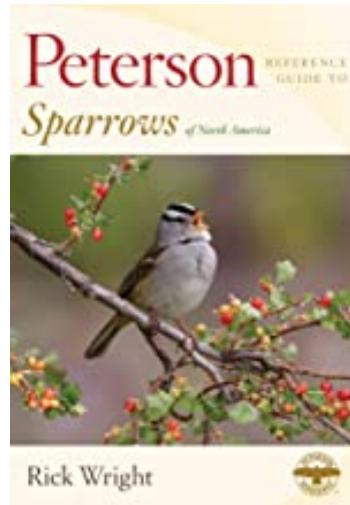
By Rick Wright

Published 2019 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in the Peterson Reference Guide Series.

Review by Ross Silcock, Tabor, IA.

This book is a tour de force.

Not only is it a comprehensive summary of field identification, range, and taxonomy of species of the New World family *Passerellidae*, but the introductory paragraphs for each species, which describe the provenance of the English and Latin species names we know today, read like a historical novel that is a perfect vehicle for Wright to display his well-known erudition and could quite justifiably stand alone. Wright's extensive research into often obscure places and sources that may be penetrated and interpreted only by one with his classical literary background is clear in these historical accounts. I could cite several examples, but a couple suffice:



Nevertheless, the naming of Savannah Sparrow races remained a thriving exercise in the first half of the twentieth century, coming eventually to a total of 28 described races. The descriptive tradition reached what was presumably intended to be its acme in the revision carried out by James L. Peters and Ludlow Griscom in 1938. As an exercise in typological connoisseurship conducted by two pairs of keen and experienced eyes, the paper they produced is a monument to taxonomic methods that would soon be rendered obsolete by advances in genetics, evolutionary theory, and molecular biology.

And, in the Brewer's Sparrow account, one example among many Wright provides that illuminate the often-acrimonious competitiveness that existed among ornithologists racing to be first to name new taxa during the "sparrow wars" of the late 1870s quotes stunningly harsh comments by Elliott Coues, a prominent curmudgeon of his day:

Everybody knows Brewer made a fool of himself about the Sparrows for years, and the fact that he then died does not alter the fact of what he did when he was alive. Many other persons ... did the same, but Dr. Brewer's foolishness was more conspicuous because he pretended to be an ornithologist. The harm he did is incalculable, and his name deserves to be stigmatized Dying makes a great difference to the person chiefly concerned but has no retroactive

effect upon the events of his life, and only sentimentalists allow it to influence their estimate of personal character.

But enough of my admiration of Wright's prose, perhaps a personal bias of mine, having known him for some 35+ years beginning when he was a young birder in Nebraska, a state whose birds I must admit I have gone after and written about more extensively than those of Iowa, my domicile. To mitigate (or to increase) my bias somewhat, however, I point out that Wright's extensive use of "eponymous", perhaps unavoidable in a work like this that deals with naming of species, got my attention. I still struggle to understand how this word fits properly into English syntax- even Roget's Thesaurus doesn't go there! Relevant to the context of eponymy are Wright's comments under Black-chinned Sparrow on page 313:

It is easy to determine who deserves the credit- or who should shoulder the blame- for the scientific names assigned to any of the world's 10,000 and more species of birds. The matter of just which ornithologist, explorer, or lighthouse keeper's cat actually "discovered" the bird can be far more difficult to settle. Not only are the precise historical circumstances of these first encounters often elusive, but credit is frequently obscured by the way in which those circumstances are recounted, with the participants' roles sometimes defined less by their actions than by their place in a scientific hierarchy.

Sparrows of North America begins with an Introduction which consists of sections entitled "What is a Sparrow?", "Taxonomy and Classification", "A Note on English Names", "Historical Approaches to Sparrow Identification", "Ruling Out the Non-Sparrow", and "The Genera and Species of North American Sparrows".

Although all of these sections are well done, I found the last three especially innovative and useful. In "Historical Approaches ...", Wright traces the development of sparrow identification from its early, "centuries-long phase of ornithological prospecting" through the early attempts to illustrate North America's sparrows that were, however, "not intended to ease their identification in the field", to the first field guides, published as early as 1828, and, of course, Roger Tory Peterson's famous *A Field Guide to the Birds* in 1934. Wright points out and strongly supports the more recent de-emphasis of arrow-driven field marks in favor of what many birders refer to as "giss" or "jizz", the overall shape and proportions of the parts of the bird, an approach popularized by Kenn Kaufman in his 1990 *Advanced Birding*.

The section on "Ruling Out the Non-Sparrow" I found to be a pleasant and innovative surprise. We have all been fooled, at least for a short time, by female Red-winged Blackbirds, female Bobolinks, and juvenile Brown-headed Cowbirds and others; Wright deals with these and several others in an informative and enlightening manner.

"The Genera and Species of North American Sparrows" is a straightforward, clearly-delineated and handy summary of the taxonomy Wright uses; it is a useful genus-by-genus outline of the taxa treated in the Species Accounts, not all of which currently are consistently recognized at the species level by various authorities. I

applaud Wright's use of the terms "hybrid" and "intergrade"; although they are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings that are relevant to discussions of pairs of taxa that meet and interbreed in "hybrid zones", this latter a term that in my opinion is also too loosely bandied about.

There are 76 species accounts in this 434-page book, but fear not, there are a couple of reasons for this surprisingly large number. First, Wright's definition of "North America" extending south to the "volcanic belt that crosses Mexico from Jalisco in the west to Veracruz in the east", but not including Caribbean island species, results in inclusion of some 20 species that essentially occur only in Mexico. Second, Wright treats at the species level several taxa that are currently in taxonomic limbo; taking into account such taxa as those included in "umbrella" species like Savannah and Fox Sparrows and the Junco complex, the list of species drops to a more manageable 44 that we "Lower 48" birders are mostly familiar with. Wright covers in the book species included in the New World family *Passerellidae* as erected by Klicka et al. (2014) but excluding their "bush tanager" genus *Chlorospingus*. Also, admittedly not everyone's favorite topic, Wright provides an interesting history of taxonomy in the Spotted Towhee account on page 168; in the same account, Wright adds a brief account of the bizarre and thankfully short-lived "quinary" system of taxonomy espoused by William Swainson.

Each species account consists of the introductory historical paragraphs alluded to above, as well as two further sections, "Field Identification", and "Range and Geographic Variation". Throughout, eschewing traditional citations such as "(Klicka et al. 2014)", which are often clumsy and interfere with flow for the reader, Wright uses a note system, whereby the reader can refer to a lengthy appendix (51 pages!) entitled "Notes" that either elaborates on a particular comment in a given Species Account or indeed provides a traditional reference to the literature. I found this system easy to use and informative, as well as adding greatly to the readability of Wright's accounts.

As discussed above, "Field Identification" leans heavily on Kaufman's techniques of "the generic approach", perhaps more aptly referred to by Wright as the "genus approach", whereby sparrows can be readily identified by following the sequence first of shape, then habitat and habits, and finally plumage/field marks. Wright contends that "using this more thoughtful approach, most sparrows can be readily identifiable by careful observers". This technique is amply and expertly developed in Wright's carefully considered, detailed, up-to-date, and often lengthy "Field Identification" sections in the Species Accounts.

The section "Range and Geographic Variation" includes distribution described in detail down to the subspecies level. I applaud Wright's detailed consideration of subspecies, rarely done in a comprehensive manner since Peter Pyle's landmark two-volume *Identification Guide to North American Birds* published in 1997 and 2008. To my mind, understanding the nuances of distribution is difficult and often misleading without considering subspecies; in addition, subspecies help bridge the gap between distribution and taxonomy. Wright provides identification details for subspecies, but at the same time wisely issues many caveats pointing out that away

from their core breeding ranges, subspecies identification in the field in most cases should not be attempted. This section includes useful comments about “confusion species”, those that most resemble the subject species, and strongly emphasizes the “shape, habitat and habits, plumage/field marks” sequence for accurate field identification.

Overall, I highly recommend this book, even if only for its readable and entertaining historical account of North American sparrows. However, it is much more: it is a complete and wide-ranging compendium of the latest knowledge on distribution, identification, and taxonomy to the subspecies levels that will serve as an icon of its genre, an icon attainable only by the few writers able to delve into the eclectic combination of subject areas expounded upon by Wright.

NOU Spring Field Days and Annual Meeting

Fairbury, May 17-19, 2019

by Janis Paseka

The NOU Annual Meeting and Spring Field Days, organized by Jan Johnson, was held in Fairbury on May 17-19, 2019, with 64 in attendance. Our meetings and meals took place in the 4-H building at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds. Despite the forecast for rain, the weather was perfect on Saturday morning, with rain arriving only in the late afternoon. Wind made listening for nightjars difficult on both evenings and it continued to be a problem on Sunday, but the total species list for the meeting was 165. Field trips were led by Shari Schwartz, John Carlini, Bill Flack, and Ross Silcock, and destinations included Rock Creek Station WMA and SRA, Rock Glen WMA, Flathead WMA, Rose Creek WMA, Crystal Springs Lakes, Buckley Creek Reservoir, Alexandria SRA and WMA, Little Blue WMA, and Father Hupp WMA. Evening trips to listen for nightjars were led by Joe Gubanyi.

Among the highlights were Mississippi Kite, Snowy Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Chuck-will's-widow, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Pileated Woodpecker, Philadelphia Vireo, Louisiana and Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Lazuli Bunting.

On Friday evening, we heard from Jeff Bargar, Superintendent of Rock Creek SRA. In the 1850s and 1860s, Rock Creek Station, which was on the Oregon and California trails and was a Pony Express station for a time, had a toll bridge over Rock Creek, and served as a supply center and campground for emigrants. The park, along