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## The Quintessential Companion for North American Birders

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## Book Reviews

### THE QUINTESSENTIAL COMPANION FOR NORTH AMERICAN BIRDERS

*The Birdwatcher's Companion to North American Birdlife.* Christopher W. Leahy. 2004. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 1039 pages. \$39.50 (cloth).

How do birds drink? How fast can a hummingbird fly? Why do some birds balance on one leg? How fast can an ostrich run? Why do some birds hop and others walk? What is the most abundant bird in the world? As an avian ecologist, these are just a smidgen of the many questions I have been asked by the public during the past several years. To answer these and similar questions, I typically do not reach for a text on ornithology or avian ecology. Rather, I have come to rely on a number of quick-reference, encyclopedic resources on birds, including John Terre's *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, Paul Ehrlich et al.'s *The Birder's Handbook*, David Bird's *Birder's Almanac*, Frank Todd's *10,001 Titillating Tidbits of Avian Trivia*, and Christopher Leahy's *The Birdwatcher's Companion: an Encyclopedic Handbook of North American Birdlife*. Each of these resources has its merits and shortcomings, but the latter tome has always held a special place in my heart and on my shelf because it was one of the first bird books that I had purchased as a budding birder and ecologist.

*The Birdwatcher's Companion* was revised in 2004 under a new title, *The Birdwatcher's Companion to North American Birdlife*, and by a new publisher, Princeton University Press. This substantial work builds on Leahy's previous edition published in 1982. Hailed by the publisher as the quintessential, alphabetically arranged guide to North American birdlife, the new edition of *The Birdwatcher's Companion* is over 100 pages longer than the first edition, but, overall, the style and format have not changed much between the two editions. The *Companion* begins with a brief chapter in which the author describes how to use the book, how it is organized, and what features or topics are and are not included. Although the title suggests that the book covers birds from all of North America, it focuses on the continental United States and Canada. For some broad or unique topics, however, Leahy borrows examples from other regions (e.g., ostrich running speed, megapode incubation).

The heart of the *Companion* is its authoritative definitions and essays on topics related to birds and bird study. The author has revised and updated some entries, added new ones, and deleted or combined others. For example, our understanding of the evolution of birds, feathers, and flight, although still incomplete, has advanced substantially since the first edition, and Leahy makes an

admirable effort to update this entry with some recent discoveries (see EVOLUTION OF BIRDLIFE). Another entry explains the politically correct reasons behind the recent name change from OLDSQUAW to long-tailed duck. Some new entries, such as BIRD CHAT GROUPS, LISTSERVS, and RARE BIRD ALERTS, reflect recent changes in our modes of communication. The sections on ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, PRIBOLOF ISLANDS, and GAMBELL in the first edition are incorporated into a new section called ALASKA in the current edition. The text of most sections, however, has not changed from the original edition.

The book ends with a subject-specific bibliography and six appendices, including 1) an up-to-date checklist of North American birds, 2) a checklist of casual and accidental species, 3) Sibley and Monroe's alternative phylogeny of North American bird families, 4) a classification of major categories of extinct birds, 5) a list of exotic species, and 6) a birdwatcher's calendar (which addresses temporal aspects of bird finding). Over 25 illustrations (pen-and-ink line drawings) by Gordon Morrison were updated and refreshed; many of the line drawings are vast improvements over the originals. Gone are the color plates that graced the original edition; some have been converted to black-and-white line drawings and others have been eliminated altogether.

As with the first edition, I was impressed with the breadth and content of the new edition. At times, I found myself randomly thumbing through the entries, learning about the meanings of esoteric words or the origins of colloquial names. I found few things in the recent edition to quibble about. There were a few typographic errors (e.g., on page 678, BIRD CHAT was listed as BIRDCHAT), but overall these were inconsequential. In some entries, I was disappointed that the information in the recent edition remained essentially unchanged from the original edition. For example, despite many recent publications on grit in birds (e.g., its digestive functions, its retention time), Leahy incorrectly states that grit "accumulates in the stomach throughout the bird's life." The individual entries of well-known birding-finding localities seemed biased toward the coastal regions or the author's experiences. Where, for example, are the entries for the Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge in Kansas, two of the most important stopover areas for migratory shorebirds in the western hemisphere? As in other encyclopedic works, the author uses cross-referencing to create a balance between excessive consolidation and unnecessary repetition. Some entries, however, could have used more cross-referencing. For example, PTILOPODY (i.e., feathered toes and legs) is defined and then cross-referenced to LEG/FOOT, but ptilopody is not mentioned by name in the text of the latter section even though feathered toes and legs were mentioned twice. Some words are not cross-referenced and thus may be found only by chance or by extensive searching. For example, below are two questions that were posed to me by colleagues. What is the term that is used to describe scientific names in which the generic and specific epithets are identical, as in *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* (yellow-headed blackbird) and *Perdix perdix*

(gray partridge)? What term is used to describe a bird that has characteristics of both a male and a female? The answers to these questions are in this book, but there is no easy way to find them. (For the trivia or crossword buffs, TAUTONYM is a Latin binomial in which the generic and specific names are the same, and GYNANDROMORPHISM is a rare genetic abnormality in which characters of both individuals are combined in a single individual.)

Despite these shortcomings, as with the previous edition, I enjoyed perusing the contents of this book and randomly reading essays and definitions. The *Companion* is not a compendium of everything known about North American birds, but it is an impressive and authoritative compilation of information on one of the most-studied groups of organisms in North America. Birders and bird enthusiasts will enjoy browsing through this book for its myriad of facts and entertaining essays. Leahy's light-hearted writing style, humorous anecdotes, and personal experiences add zest to many topics. Weighing just over 3.5 pounds, this beefy reference book is well worth the cost for any birder and will become a valuable resource for any biologist, ecologist, or manager who responds to questions from the ever-inquisitive public. In short, this book will appeal to those who love birds.—Lawrence D. Igl, *Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, U.S. Geological Survey, 8711 37th Street SE, Jamestown, ND 58401.*