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Review of *The American Robin* by Roland H. Wauer

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The American Robin. Roland H. Wauer. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. vii+93 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography. \$17.95 cloth (ISBN 0-292-79123-2).

Bookstore shelves bulge with bird books: field guides, feeding and birdhouse books, guides to hot spots, and books about individual families and species. One gaping hole in the body of bird literature has been a book about one of our most common and beloved songbirds, the American Robin. Robins nest in backyards and on buildings throughout much of the US and Canada and are one of the most familiar birds on the continent. A good book about them could fill an important niche.

Roland H. Wauer's lean volume is a start. Chapters include an overview of the robin's popularity, robin statistics, the robin's biology, distribution, related birds, behavior, life history, enemies and threats, and a much-too-short chapter about attracting robins. Fourteen color photos illustrate interesting aspects of robin life.

The American Robin belongs to a series its publisher describes as "slim, elegant volumes of natural history." Unfortunately, a random arrangement of unrelated facts takes the place of organization, clear writing, and careful research; moreover, the book has too little information to warrant its \$17.95 price. Despite the 1999 publication date, most references are from the 1970s and earlier. Many are still valid, but current research would have strengthened the work. For example, Wauer writes, "Smell, at least for passerines, is limited to the bird's ability to test food held in its mouth." One laboratory study published in the 90s indicates that at least some berry-eating songbirds have a fairly good sense of smell. Further on the subject of food, most current bird-feeding books mention mealworms as an excellent offering for overwintering and migrating robins, especially during bad weather. Mealworms are nutritious and easy to maintain, and Wauer should have made at least a passing reference to them.

The author lists the maximum age for robins as seventeen years without mentioning that only captive robins have been recorded living that long. The oldest known banded robin survived thirteen years eleven months in the wild. This pertinent statistic would have required a single line.

Wauer correctly states that the European robin isn't closely related to our robin, yet cites as literary references lines from Shakespeare and John Webster, English playwrights who both referred to the European robin. He quotes a book of superstitions published by the Oxford University Press, again discussing the English species.

Of the robin's song, Wauer writes: ". . . everyone can agree that it is joyful and cheerful, an outpouring of liquid notes . . . full of enthusiasm." That seems like excessive anthropomorphism for a work published by a university press. "They are one of our most courageous songbirds, defending their nests and nestlings against a host of threats" also has no place in a book by a scientist. All songbirds protect their nests, and kingbirds and blue jays wage battle with more dangerous enemies than robins usually tackle. In several places Wauer makes empty comparisons like this when straight facts would have been powerful enough.

Robins range from northern and eastern forests to the Great Plains to southwestern deserts. It would have been interesting to read about behavior, feeding, and plumage differences in these varied habitats, and how robins adapted as they invaded the Prairie, but this brief overview doesn't provide that much depth.

The American Robin will suffice until a longer, more comprehensive book about this fascinating species is written. Meanwhile, I hope Wauer corrects some of his excesses and omissions to produce an improved second edition. **Laura Erickson**, *Creative Birding*, Duluth.