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- BIRDS OF NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA: AN IDENTIFICATION GUIDE (2 volumes).—Robin Restall, Clemencia Rodner, and Miguel Lentino. 2007. Yale University Press, New Haven, and Christopher Helm, London. Volume 1: 880 pp., ISBN 978-0-300-10862-0, \$95.00. Volume 2: 656 pp., ISBN 978-0-300-12415-6, \$65.00. Volumes 1 and 2: \$150.00.

This is quite simply a remarkable book, owing to its thoughtful design, attention to detail, and its inclusion of all subspecies and plumage variations found throughout the region of coverage. Bound as two volumes, *The Birds of Northern South America* is a complete guide to all 2,308 breeding, regularly visiting and vagrant species occurring in Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. More pertinent to readers of this journal, the book also covers the birds of the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Trinidad, and Tobago— islands which are considered zoogeographically South American. As we have seen in a few other recent bird guides, the authors and publishers have chosen to separate the species accounts in one volume, with the plates and range maps in a second volume. With such a huge avifauna to cover, this facilitates portability, but as the authors make clear, the guide is not primarily intended for use in the field, but as a companion volume and complement to national field guides and as a reference for ornithologists and museum staff. In these respects the book excels.

Each volume of this guide is prefaced by identical introductions to taxonomy and nomenclature, molt and ageing, how to read the species accounts and plates, and bird topography. In the first volume, there also follows a discussion of climate, and vegetation and habitats of the region. A glossary of 40 habitat types varies from coastal marine and mangrove habitats to the *páramo* of the high Andes, and certainly provides an indication of why we see such remarkable diversity in the region. Also included is a brief overview of avian diversity, an ornithological history of the region, a presentation of Nearctic, austral and intra-tropical migrants, and a lucid overview of the state of avian conservation in northern South America.

Volume 1 presents succinct species accounts that complement well the plates of Volume 2. These accounts include English and scientific names, a reference to the plate(s) illustrating the species, and descriptions for identification. The descriptions emphasize the most typical representative plumage of

the species, and include mention of similar species with which it may be confused. Species accounts continue with a separate section on known subspecies which includes their geographic ranges and distinguishing features, behavioral habits of the species, status, habitat, and voice. For some species there is also a section of notes, most frequently discussing taxonomic histories and the potential to recognize some subspecies as full species. I found the species descriptions to be carefully done and complete without resorting to overly long and adjective-laden sentences, or obscure abbreviations. This is in part due to the creativity of the authors who seem to be able to capture the essence of a bird with a few choice phrases. For example, the Rufous-browed Peppershrike (*Cyclarhis gujanensis*) is described as “chunky and bull-headed,” while the Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) flashes in short flights its “yellow legs against its dark body ... giving the impression of a small hawk.” This volume concludes with a remarkable discography collected from 51 cassette and CD titles which lists in more than 30 pages where recordings for each species can be found. Emphasis is placed on recordings made in the region. There follows a short glossary, an extensive bibliography focusing on taxonomy, status, and distribution, and an index which nicely combines English and scientific names, including all species and subspecies names.

What makes *The Birds of Northern South America* really exceptional though are the 306 color plates with more than 6,400 images illustrating every distinct plumage of these birds. Illustrations include not just the typical adult male and female, but juvenile or immature plumages, every visually distinct subspecies, and a representative range of geographic variation occurring across the region. The authors chose to include this astounding variation in the plates because they had too often seen birders and museum visitors trying to “shoehorn” an observed bird into fitting an illustration. When a single plumage is depicted, the tendency is to try to force an identification to an illustration despite differences between the unknown bird and the illustration. Having available for the first time the full range of plumages should increase the accuracy of identifications, and also lead to advances in knowledge of ranges and distributions, as well as aspects of ecology dependent on accurate species identities. Such detail is even more amazing when placed into the context that the 2,300 species occurring in the region and presented in this guide are almost 25% of the global avifauna.

Technically I find the plates of high quality. The number of images for a species may vary from as few as one, to 10 of the Ochre-breasted Brush Finch (*Atlapetes semirufus*) and 12 of the Red-backed Hawk (*Buteo polyosoma*). This is effective when plumages change among subspecies and with age (as in the case of the brush finch), but is initially confusing when multiple images are simply labeled male, female, or immature, and the variation represents simply races or morphs (as in the case of the hawk). The birds are presented in a somewhat ritualized manner as the best way to show particular plumage traits. This is clearly seen, for example, in the nightjars, some of which are shown in a stylized pose to emphasize wing and tail patterns in flight. In a number of cases the species in flight is found on a different plate than the same species perched. This is effective for hawks, I think, which a birder might frequently see *either* perched or flying, but will see less often both perched and flying. But other species, like ducks, may be more frequently seen swimming and taking flight, and then it may be more useful to have the birds in flight depicted alongside the swimming portraits. In many species, pointers indicate key distinguishing features, much like those pioneered by Roger Tory Peterson. I find these very useful, especially with such a large avifauna, but I think the authors could have been more consistent and liberal in their use, as many species lack such pointers.

Perhaps taking a cue from David Sibley, the authors have included short notes concerning behaviors or habitat associations alongside many of the illustrations, and these too can be used in identification. Some of these refer to the bird's participation in mixed-species flocks, but with others we learn that the Pale-winged Trumpeter (*Psophia leucoptera*) “wanders peacefully” and the Blue-grey Tanager (*Thraupis episcopus*) is “frequently bickering.” These descriptors are almost invariably useful, but at times the language may interfere. For example, the Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) is said to have “whitish *roundels*” while the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) “*jinks* and *tilts*.” Perhaps these terms reflect British English or a broader vocabulary than I have, but I suspect the former as the book retains the British spelling of many words (i.e. moult, labour, favour) despite being published by Yale University Press. Similarly, there are frequent references to plant genera that may not always be familiar to the lay birder, but would be very useful to those familiar with regional botany.

Complementing the fine artwork are the range

maps which are conveniently placed on the same plate as the illustration of the species. Maps cover the entire region and are enhanced with river systems and political boundaries. Arrows are sometimes used to highlight very small or isolated populations, but unfortunately these arrows are so small as to be largely ineffective. General ranges of each subspecies are also indicated, although the authors caution that in most cases these are not well known.

In summary, this guide is extremely well thought out. I find that the book combines some of the best elements from a wide variety of field guides, while

leaping forward with its recognition of the importance of subspecies and regional diversity, and its outstanding depictions of variation in plumages. This clearly represents a new generation of bird guides. I congratulate the authors, especially the senior author and illustrator Robin Restall, on a landmark publication that will advance ornithology and conservation in our region and beyond.—STEVEN C. LATTA, *National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA*; e-mail: [steven.latta@aviary.org](mailto:steven.latta@aviary.org).

### RECENT ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE FROM THE CARIBBEAN

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With this issue of *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* we are introducing a new column that will summarize recent ornithological literature from the Caribbean basin. Each article that appears in this column will include a full citation, usually a short summary of the main theme of the paper, and when possible, an e-mail address or website where a pdf of the article can be requested. We invite readers of the JCO to alert our compiler, Steven Latta, to other articles that should be highlighted in this section. We would also like to include here any unpublished theses, or other reports that may be difficult to find in more universally available abstract services. Our hope is that by providing these summaries we will increase the exchange of knowledge among Caribbean ornithologists and conservationists.—STEVEN C. LATTA, *National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA*; e-mail: [steven.latta@aviary.org](mailto:steven.latta@aviary.org).

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