

BOOK REVIEW: Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part I

by Trevor Lloyd-Evans

Identification Guide to North American Birds. Part I (Columbidae to Ploceidae), by Peter Pyle with Steve N. G. Howell, David F. DeSante, Robert P. Yunick, and Mary Gustafson. Illustrated by Steve N. G. Howell. Bolinas, California: Slate Creek Press. 1997. 732 pages, extensively illustrated.

In the small, but growing, world of those birders, banders, and professional ornithologists who inquire deeply into molts and plumages, ageing and sexing, or geographical variation, this is a monumental work. Since I fit into all of the above categories, it was a pleasure to field test this new reference book, with the help of all the banders at Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, during the spring 1998 migration. The soft-bound book is a fat 9 x 6 x 1.5 inches and weighs in at two pounds, five ounces — a bit much for all but the most capacious pockets. Of course, like this volume, we are all metric now; so make that 23.5 x 15.5 x 4 cm and 1,050 grams.

The flier from Slate Creek Press succinctly summarizes the rather astonishing amount of information packed between the basic black covers:

- 395 species treated (doves through weavers)
- 349 figures with close to 1,000 separate illustrations
- 11 tables with measurement data by species, subspecies, age, and/or sex
- Expanded, thirty-eight page introduction
- Detailed sections of molt and ageing of near-passerines, owls, woodpeckers, and passerines; identification of female-plumaged hummingbirds and *Empidonax* flycatchers; ageing and sexing of *Dendroica* warblers
- Descriptors (including new information and measurements) for 857 subspecies
- Expanded and detailed sections on molt of all species
- Bar graphs representing the standards of United States and Canadian banding lab acceptance criteria, and indicating reliability, by month, of ageing and sexing each species
- All known hybrids listed
- 2,442 cited references.

I have been a bird ringer/bander on four continents since the early 1960s, and there has been a world of change in the quality of the literature during this time. The Europeans took an early lead in molt studies with the publication (in German) of *Die Mauser der Vogel* in 1966. In New England terms, Professor Erwin Stresemann was the Ludlow Griscom of moult/molt, introducing the concept of the genetically precise and consistent patterns of molt in different

species, and their use in age and sex studies. The first comprehensive American entry in molt studies was *The Sequence of Plumages and Moults of the Passerine Birds of New York* (Dwight 1900), while a good early field reference from Britain was the thirty-page *A Guide to Molt in British Birds* (Snow 1967). One of the best modern species-by-species guides to age and sex criteria was the *Identification Guide to European Passerines* (Svensson 1970), which is now in its fourth edition and pioneered the methods seen in Pyle of age and sex summaries for species, critical measurements, wing formulae, and copious illustrations.

In North America we learned to "skull" birds early on. This involves moistening the feathers and skin of the bird's head with water and looking through the transparent skin to determine the degree of skull ossification, and hence the bird's age for up to a year after hatching. This led to less emphasis on plumage color, shape, and feather wear by banders, an omission that Pyle fully corrects in this volume. Thus, eastern banders and museum workers used such early references as Roberts (1955), Wood (1969), the *Bird Banding Manual. Vol. II. Bird Banding Techniques* (United States Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service 1977), and Pyle et al. (1987). Pyle and his co-authors acknowledged that the 1987 edition was far from complete and hoped it would stimulate all those who had better data to publish it or contribute their work to this later volume. The 1997 Pyle has far fewer errors, though some are inevitable. It also benefits greatly from the inclusion of the U.S. Bird Banding Lab and Canadian Wildlife Service data, principally via Mary Gustafson, one of Pyle's collaborators.

How easy is it to use? The answer from many banders and detail-oriented birders is, "not very." The first problem is the long list of technical jargon which is then abbreviated to save space. Thus, from the account of the Magnolia Warbler, "Molt-PB:HY partial (Jun-Aug)" means that during those months, birds hatched in the current calendar year have a prebasic molt (from juvenal to fall plumage) that involves all the head and body feathers, and median and lesser coverts, but not the flight feathers of wing and tail, or primary coverts or alula. ". . . white on r2" refers to the tail feather next to either central rectrix, and "CP/BP (May-Aug)" suggests the months to look for external signs of breeding in adults with either a swollen cloaca in the male, or a brood patch in the female.

The second problem is that the bar graphs for age coding take some getting used to. If the graph for Northern Cardinals in October suggests 25-95 percent reliability for age AHY (nonhatching-year birds), this is because a fully ossified skull safely denotes an adult bird from October 1-15, but falls below the desired 95 percent certainty after that time. It does not mean that the age determination is accurate somewhere between 25 and 95 percent of the time. If this drives you crazy, this is not a book for you. If not, it is all explained in the introduction, and practice makes it somewhat easier.

Third, now you are ready to identify Alder and Willow flycatchers in the hand by the critical formula $R = [(longest\ p - p6) + (p9 - p5) + (wg - tl)] \div [(p6 - p10) + \text{bill from tip of nares}]$. Or if that is inconclusive, try plotting formula I against bill (anterior nares to tip) by age class, and hope your data point falls outside the 30 percent buffer zone around the optimal equation, based on Hussell (1990). I did this with some late migrant "Traill's" Flycatchers with large crown spots, pale lores, short bills, and long, pointed wings. On June 10, when only Alder calls were heard, the three birds banded keyed out as Alder, but Seutin (1991) would suggest more caution than Pyle, especially for eastern Willow immatures in the fall.

Fourth, it is just hard to find a species account quickly in such a turgid mass of data, and the book tends to close as soon as you let go!

Overall, this is a major step forward in North American age and sex techniques for banders and museum workers. It is perhaps best used in addition to your favorite keys, as you are sometimes not sure which of the characters mentioned is critical, and which is merely a useful supporting datum. Much of the information is new, and it is hoped that the fact of publishing it will stimulate others to confirm or amend the text in the light of their own experience. If you not handling birds, some of the measurement data are not relevant, but the information on plumage and molts will help in the field. The 2,442 references are excellent and very comprehensive, but if you abhor obscure abbreviations in the text, or can't stand less than 100 percent certainty in all conclusions, try a field guide instead.

References

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