

BOOK REVIEW

BIRDS OF THE WEST INDIES.—Norman Arlott. 2010. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 240 pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-14780-2.

One of the latest examples of a book targeting the Caribbean birdwatcher is this pocket guide issued as part of Princeton's "Illustrated Checklists" series. Just what an illustrated checklist is intended to be has never been clear to me. Perhaps the closest we come to an explanation is found in this book's introduction, where author Norman Arlott writes, "My vision was for this book to be a reminder of birds seen as well as a helpful nudge towards what to look for when searching for new birds." Arlott goes on to suggest that "more in-depth tomes will be required for some of the trickier species." So, perhaps this checklist is not intended as a field guide, but more of a ready reference for the birdwatcher who is comfortable with most birds in the region but is still wanting to have something in their back pocket just in case the unexpected appears? Yet the publisher advertises the book as, "the complete guide for identifying all of the diverse birds in these island territories," while "the guide's 80 vivid color plates are accompanied by succinct text focusing on key field-identification characteristics."

It is this confusion over the purpose of the book that I find as its greatest weakness. A compact, lightweight, and very portable paperback, the illustrated checklist describes a large number of birds. As expected, the prolific author and artist has produced illustrations which are, on the whole, pleasing and generally accurate. But I find these illustrations to be somewhat stiff and lacking in detail. Too often subtle changes in plumage coloration or the presence of streaking or scalloping are lost. Of course, some of this may be the result of the printing process, as for example, the overly-brilliant red of the bullfinches (*Loxigilla* spp.), or detail may have been lost in the reduction of the images to an annoyingly small size to fit the small checklist format. Such are the pitfalls of the format. But other issues abound. For example, while both males and females of dimorphic species are illustrated, juvenile plumages are not included. Though non-breeding plumages of shorebirds are included, non-breeding plumages of overwintering migratory warblers are largely ignored. Instead, the birds are shown in a breeding plumage that is at best briefly seen in the West Indies, and full songs are described which are rarely

heard in the winter. Since migrants are a large component of the avifauna in some habitats, this seems like a gross oversight. Finally, the maps are placed inconveniently at the end of the book, 8 maps to a page, and are not referenced from the species account by page number. Rather, the reader must search by plate number. While the maps themselves are reasonably large, the nature of small islands makes the use of the maps sometimes difficult. This is exacerbated by the author's tendency to simply claim an entire island or country as the range of a species—such as that of Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*), Eastern Chat-Tanager (*Calyptophilus frugivorus*), and Western Chat-Tanager (*Calyptophilus tertius*)—when in fact the range is a tiny fraction of the island or country. If the book is intended as a reminder of what we know, perhaps these details can be overlooked. But if the book is intended as a guide for the new Caribbean birdwatcher as well, these details are important.

Of critical importance to the birdwatcher too is that the text be both accurate and informative. Here the illustrated checklist disappoints. While more than 550 species are described, some unusual bird records are included, prompting one to wonder what standards for acceptance of a report were used. For example, Arlott includes the (North Atlantic) Little Shearwater (*Puffinus assimilis*), which has been apparently reported once in Puerto Rican waters but was not included in any other regional works, and he reports the Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*), repeatedly misspelled as a "towee," as a vagrant to Cuba. Other terminology sometimes reflects an Old World bias, I suppose, as the Hispaniolan Crossbill (*Loxia megalaga*) has been "recently split from Two-bar Crossbill" (Two-barred Crossbill or White-winged Crossbill, *Loxia leucoptera*). Within a species account, while the format requires that the descriptions accompanying each species must understandably be short and succinct, most accounts focus on behavior (especially mode of foraging), diet, and voice, with a nod to general habitat and broadly defined distribution. Seldom is there any mention of key characteristics or "field marks" for identification, despite the publisher's publicity. According to Arlott, plumage descriptions are mostly used only to "mention facets of identification that are hidden in a standing or perched bird." Particularly disappointing too is the

fact that Arlott encourages the birdwatcher to seek out “more in-depth tomes” for more information, yet the acknowledgments make no mention of anyone from the region, and the list of “Further Reading” includes only two of the many fine field guides that have come out of the region, and is instead dominated by generalized accounts of birds of the world and bird families. One begins to wonder how familiar the author is with the region!

Finally, I must point out that perhaps Princeton University Press does not know what this book is either. In the book’s short introduction, Arlott writes, “I had long realised that the West Indies needed a ‘pocket’ book...” This is a very strange comment indeed as Princeton itself published Raffaele *et al.*’s (2003) *Birds of the West Indies*, which is a highly successful, condensed version of Raffaele *et al.*’s (1998) *A guide to the birds of the West Indies*. Raffaele *et al.* (2003) is only very slightly larger than Arlott’s checklist (either one will fit in my jeans pocket), and it is lighter in weight while still containing 94 color plates compared to Arlott’s 80 plates. More importantly, Raffaele *et al.* (2003)

has larger, more detailed illustrations, more complete descriptions for identification, and range maps placed opposite the plates. In short, in my view, the Raffaele *et al.* (2003) does a far better job at providing the birdwatcher with a pocket-size guide for identification of the region’s birds without sacrificing quality and accuracy. Why this same publisher would invest in an inferior work when they already have a fine book for the same market just baffles me. One wonders, “What were they thinking?”—STEVEN C. LATTA, *National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA*; e-mail: steven.latta@aviary.org.

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