

BOOK REVIEWS

The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America by Donald and Lillian Stokes. 2010. 792 pages. 14.25 x 21 cms. 3400 colour photographs. 700+ range maps. Little, Brown and Company, New York, Boston, and London, Hachette Book Group, 237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Softcover. \$27.99 Can. *Reviewed by Chris Siddle.*

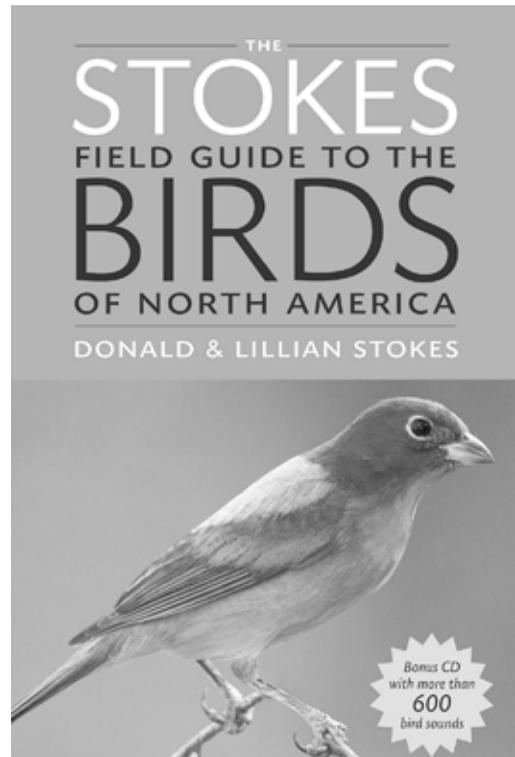
During the late 1970s and 1980s, Donald and Lillian Stokes produced popular nature guides to bird behaviour, winter insects, animal tracks, and several other phenomena. In the 1990s, they brought out their “Backyard Nature Books” covering bird feeding, orioles, and Purple Martins, as well as their field guides to birds, both eastern and western. Their latest title, *The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, took over six years to assemble. Lillian collected the photographs and Donald wrote the text. The resulting volume is almost four centimetres thick, containing photographs of many more bird species than in any other photographic field guide on the market. But one wonders, who did they write it for?

Clearly the new Stokes Field Guide is meant to compete with other “advanced” field guides, like the National Geographic or the Sibley guides. Does it make the grade?

Most species are illustrated by multiple images that show different plumages based upon age, gender, and race. For species like the Yellow-rumped Warbler, which has a diversity of plumages, there may be as many as 11 or more photographs. Some other samples: Laughing Gull – 11 photos; Stilt Sandpiper – six photos including a bird in flight; Blue-winged Warbler – 5 images; and Broad-winged Hawk – 8 images. Even casual species like the Rustic Bunting have 3+ images. Each photo is labeled as to which state or province it was taken in and the month when it was taken. This helps birders understand complex plumage sequences like those of the Bald Eagle (11 images- 6 flight shots and 5 of birds perched; five plumages illustrated).

The text is brief and in point form, covering descriptions of plumages, habitat, and voice. Of note

is a very brief section on subspecies, unfortunately flawed with mistakes, for example, stating that “Ward’s” subspecies of Great Blue Heron occurs in southern B.C. when it actually occurs in the southeastern U.S., or claiming wrongly that the Ruddy Turnstone has no subspecies in North America. Such basic errors are surprising given the expertise of the well-known birders and ornithologists who are acknowledged as checking parts of the text and photos. Range maps are by Paul Lehmann who does range maps for the National Geographic Field Guide as well.



As well, each species is given a difficulty-to-find scale from 1- easy to observe to 6 – extinct or unable to sustain itself in the wild, courtesy of the American Birding Association. Also included where relevant are notes as to which species each type of bird has

hybridized with.

In the competitive world of publishing, a gimmick may help to sell your product. With *The Stokes Field Guide* it's an emphasis upon each species' shape. The front flyleaf proclaims in red print that this book is "[u]sing Quantitative Shape to Identify Species", a "cutting edge" approach to identification. The rest of the flyleaf illustrates through photos of Sharp-shinned Hawk, Eastern Phoebe, Greater Scaup and Royal Tern how "birds carry their own rulers" which means that a birder should compare, say, bill length to head length in the case of terns, or tail length to wing width in the case of the Sharp-shinned Hawk. I think it unlikely that quantitative shape will revolutionize bird identification.

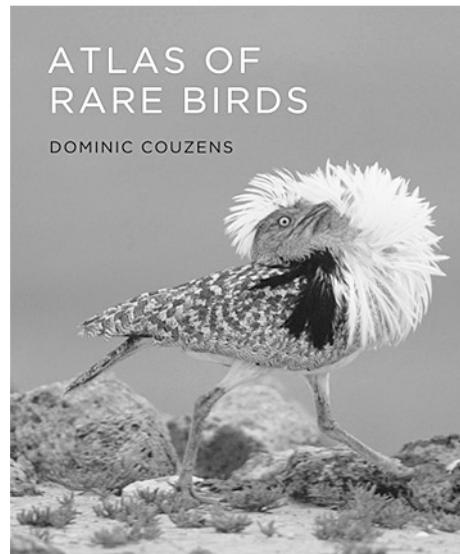
In spite of my quibbles, *The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America* is an impressive photographic bird guide. Hopefully errors will be corrected in a future edition. In the meantime, I highly recommend this book as an important reference work. However, use it with some caution.

Atlas of Rare Birds by Dominic Couzens. 2010. 234 pages. 23 x 26.5 cms. 200 colour photos. 61 maps. List of further reading. The MIT Press, 55 Howard St., Cambridge, Mass. 02142. \$31.50 Can. (Hardcover with wrapper). *Reviewed by Chris Siddle.*

Although the decline and disappearance of many of the world's bird species can be a depressing litany of human ignorance, resource exploitation, and environmental neglect, Dominic Couzens, author of the excellent *Atlas of Rare Birds*, avoids the heaviness inherent in the topic by focusing upon what we can learn from the histories of 50 species of rare birds.

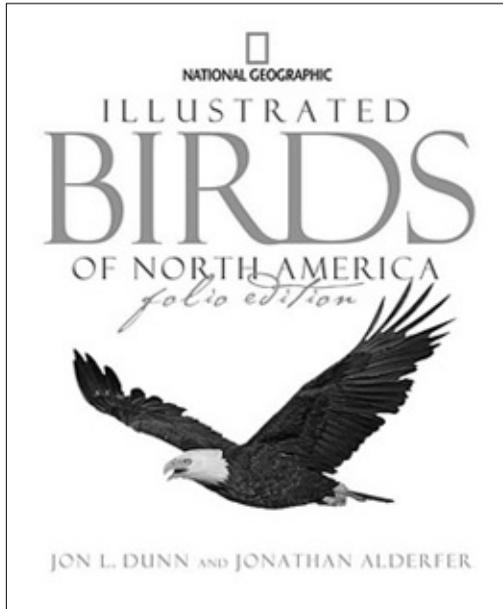
Couzens is an English naturalist and writer well known in the United Kingdom for field guides to bird and mammal behavior and identification. So far he has about 17 books to his credit. As in his other works his style in the *Atlas* is deft and entertaining, and his focus is sure, taking each bird's account far beyond a mere collection of facts. He writes interesting narratives of each species' history, usually organized around a single crucial survival factor like the habitat "pickiness" of the Kirtland's Warbler, or the actively volcanic nature of the Monstret Oriole's home island.

The book is organized around ten themes – for example, species threatened by hazards during migration, species recently re-discovered; species formerly secure on islands and now threatened; species with very specialized habitat requirements; species that may be lost causes; species hanging on by a toetail-- with five species per chapter illustrating the variable ways each theme has played out. Some of the fifty species are familiar to North American readers – Whooping Crane, Spotted Owl, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and Kirtland's Warbler, but most species are not, like the Ultramarine Lorikeet of the Marquesas Islands, Gurney's Pitta of Myanmar, and the newly re-discovered New Zealand Storm-Petrel. Each account is about 4 pages long, with one map that focuses upon sites significant to the bird's history and conservation, and an average of 2-5 photographs that show the species in one or two plumages, and its habitat.



The average reader is going to learn a fair bit about bird biology and conservation as well as specific species' requirements, and develop a wider world view of conservation efforts because the author has wisely not allowed one world hemisphere to dominate his choices of species whose histories he tells. Highly recommended.

Illustrated Birds of North America Folio Edition edited by Jon Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer. 2009. 24 x 31 cms. About 4000 colour bird images by 20 artists. Range maps. National Geographic Society, 1145 17th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-4688. Hard cover. \$62.00 Can. *Reviewed by Chris Siddle.*



Released in October 2009, this is a coffee table version of the fifth edition of National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America (2006). For those of you who are not bibliophilic enough to tell apart the various editions of the NGS Field Guide as it is commonly referred to, the fifth edition is the one with the black cover, the thumb indentation on the page edges, and the nifty flyleaves that fold out as quick indexes to bird families (front) and last names (back cover). The Folio's page size has been increased by 30% and a handsome white dust jacket hard has been wrapped around its shiny black boards. The range maps have been updated (by Paul Lehmann) and in some cases re-formatted; however, the text and paintings are from 2006. Even the pagination is identical to the fifth edition.

Why did the National Geographic Society bother to publish such a book? One look inside will be

enough for many potential buyers. The bird images are about 30% larger than in the field guide and appear stunning. Take page 75, the small grebes, as an example. Rendered 30% larger the grebes become works of art. The downy chicks are now printed large enough to become miniature masterpieces. If you are partial to "field guide art" you will find the Folio Edition hard to resist. This is a book meant for leisurely study and enjoyment, and as such is reasonably priced. Recommended.