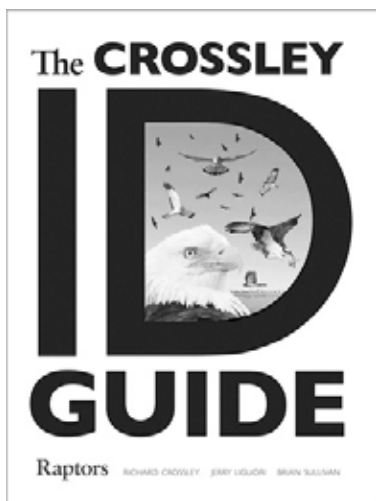


BOOK REVIEWS

Compiled and Reviewed by Chris Siddle

The Crossley ID Guide: Raptors by Richard Crossley, Jerry Liguori and Brian Sullivan. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William St., Princeton, NJ 08540. Flex cover. 19 x 25 cm. 286 pages. Colour photographs throughout. \$29.95 US.



In a highly competitive market, Richard Crossley is making his mark by compiling (with the help of other experts) field guides full of colour photographs where digital images of several species are skillfully placed against a shared photographic background. The resulting panorama-like photos show species in a wide variety of postures and plumages. The result is 101 colour “plates”, most covering single species like Black Vulture (see page 16 where at least 20 Blacks as well as several Double-crested Cormorants are shown against a backdrop of Anhinga Pond in Everglades National Park, Florida) or Rough-legged Hawk – dark morphs (pages 84-85 with eight birds perched or flying against a snowy cornfield). However, 32 spreads show several species for comparative purposes like “Perched Buteos” (pages 148-149) or “Into the Sun”, which shows several species strongly backlit. One plate even renders soaring raptors in black-and-white! The multi-species panoramas with birds numbered,

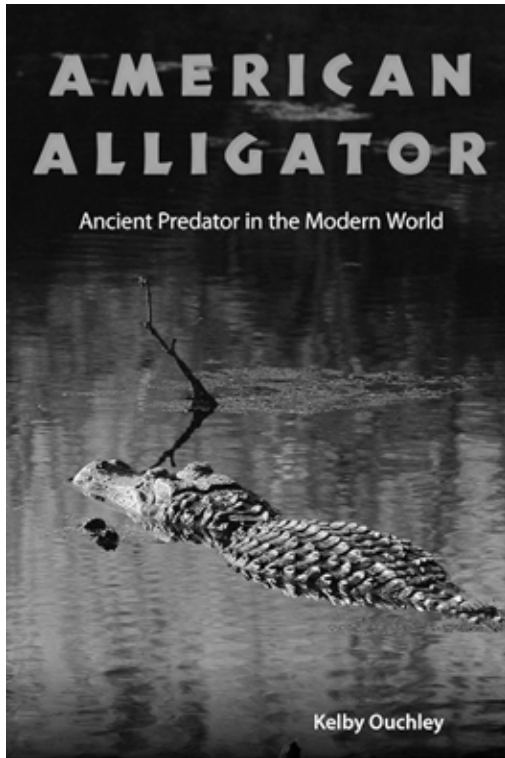
but not identified, are quizzes with answers at the back of the book. Each answer is accompanied by a brief explanation as to why the bird is the species named. Also the answer section is introduced with four important tips about using the quizzes. Be sure to read and practice these steps!

The second half of the book contains 34 species accounts each one to four pages long (e.g., Crested Caracara is 2 pages, Golden Eagle is 4 pages, and Red-tailed Hawk is 6 pages) each with a range map, a short, sometimes fanciful prose introduction, an overview of identification, flight style, size and shape, plumage, geographic variation, molt, similar species, status and distribution, migration, and vocalizations. Unfortunately, like so many American texts, the range maps are restricted to North America from central Mexico north, which is annoying for species widely distributed south of the United States and for species like Swainson’s Hawk, which spends at least half of its life in southern South America or migrating from one hemisphere to reach the other.

The species’ account makes reference to only one page of photographs even though other images may exist for the bird, or images of the bird appear in the “Mystery Photos” that show several species. To partially compensate for this organizational problem the authors include a synopsis of identification as a caption for each single species plate.

I can’t imagine a beginning birder finding this book very helpful except for its text. There are just too many images of raptors to look at. However, for an intermediate or advanced birder, the book is an important addition to a library. The book’s hundreds of images and its quizzes are among its strengths. Another strength is the inclusion of photos that duplicate as much as possible how raptors look under different field conditions, such as sunrise, sunset, and backlighting. *The Crossley ID Guide Raptors* will not solve all of a birder’s raptor identification problems, but it will act as a valuable educational aid that will help the intermediate raptor enthusiasts advance their skills and will help experts maintain their standing. Highly recommended.

American Alligator: Ancient Predator in the Modern World by Kelby Ouchley. 2013. University Press of Florida, 15 Northwest 15th St., Gainesville, FL 32611-2079. 16 x 23 cm. 8 colour and 21 black and white photographs. 138 pages. \$19.95 Can.



Kelby Ouchley is a retired biologist who managed National Wildlife Refuges for the United States Fish and Wildlife service for 30 years. He has assembled a very readable introduction to the American Alligator covering all the basics from the animal's prehistory to techniques of modern alligator farming.

About the time that dinosaurs were appearing, ancestors of crocodylians began to show up as archosaurs, splitting away from the branch that was to blossom with birds about 254 million years ago. About 100 million years later the ur-crocs began to take powerful slow steps toward an aquatic lifestyle, bodies growing streamlined, skulls flattening, and jaws gaining enormous power. One such alligator

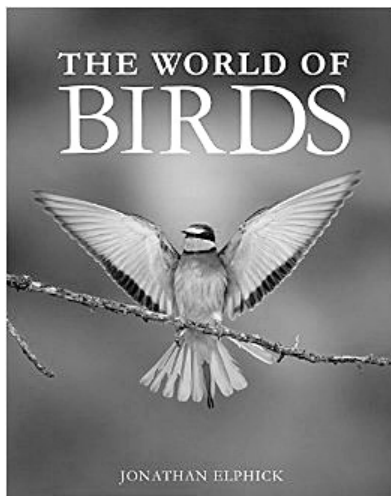
ancestor was the infamous *Deinosuchus*, a low slung rapacious set of jaws set on four short powerful legs, the total package 12 m long and weighing 8.5 tons!

For such an ancient creature, the alligator has done really well, surviving asteroid impacts, global warming (both natural and unnatural), volcanic eruptions, and perhaps most devastating of all, European settlement of North America. One of the reasons for its survival is that the American Alligator will eat anything that moves, as Ouchley shows in a table of foods identified in alligator stomachs. Fishes, from gars to needlefish figure prominently, as do reptiles including snakes, turtles, and fellow alligators. Insects, snails, crabs, clams, earthworms, mussels, beetles, spiders, and shrimp act as appetizers, while birds from ducks and coots to rails and Purple Martins have been consumed. Mammalian prey includes the expected marsh-dwelling muskrats, Nutria, Raccoons and Opossums, as well as bigger mammals such as White-tailed Deer and, around human settlements, dogs and cats. Although not particularly predatory on *Homo sapiens*, alligators have been known to kill and consume people, as the author carefully documents with brief descriptions of 22 fatal attacks in Florida between 1948 and 2012. The author does not sensationalize such events; he makes it quite clear that such attacks are rare.

American Alligator... is full of interesting facts about the animal's diet, growth, and reproduction. In addition, Ouchley outlines the impact that alligators have upon popular culture from brand names for everything from molasses to shirts, to musical titles, cartoon characters, movies, and television series, including a mercifully brief mention of that the "reality" TV series, Swamp People, which other series like Honey Boo Boo and Lizard Towing, have contributed to a general lowering of America's I.Q. Ouchley points out that as apex predators, alligators accumulate toxic chemicals and so can act as canaries in the coal mine. If chemical "X" enters our water system and makes an alligator sick, it's likely that human health is being negatively impacted, too.

In summary *American Alligator...* is a fascinating, scientifically accurate, well-written brief account of a fascinating and ancient reptile. Highly recommended.

The World of Birds by Jonathan Elphick. 2014. Firefly Books, 50 Staples Ave., Unit 1, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 0A7. 23 x 28.5 cm. Hundreds of colour photos, glossary, appendix. 608 pp. \$75.00 Can.



Every decade or so a good introduction to the world of birds is produced, written at the layman's level and full of up-to-date ornithological and conservation information. In 2003, it was an updated edition of *Firefly Encyclopedia of Birds*, illustrated with colour photos and painted images and full of interesting sidebars in addition to a survey of birds in our world. It was edited by C.M. Perrins and written with contributions of several experts. Crammed with information, Perrins's book is still worth consulting; however, no single volume can meaningfully deal with all 10,000 bird species so such books usually represent about 1 in 10 to 1 in 20 species, illustrating or describing "typical" members of genera.

The latest reincarnation of this genre is a lovely book, *The World of Birds*, by English ornithologist Jonathan Elphick who is associated with the Natural History Museum in London. It is two books in one: part one is almost 250 pages covering the fossil record, anatomy and physiology, flight, food and feeding, bird society and populations, breeding, distribution and habitat, migration, and birds and humans. This half is full of classic diagrams: air-flow over variously angled wings, different types of feathers, a longitudinal

section of a pigeon brain, and different hummingbird species' bill lengths matching various types of flowers. In addition to the main text, there are fascinating sidebars exploring diverse subjects like the Hoatzin's adaptation to its seemingly indigestible diet of tough leaves, the biogeographic Wallace's and Lydekker's lines between Borneo and Australia; birds that migrate by swimming; and seabird mortality due to longlines. Always aware that he is working with a book and not a web site, the editors (behind the scenes) have nicely balanced the sidebars so that the reader is not overwhelmed by interruptions to main text and too many images of too many sizes.

Part Two is a 300-page survey of the 32 orders and 195 families of birds of the world, working through orders, each with a general introduction, families that each have a "compact factual panel" very much like Perrins's *Firefly Encyclopedia*, giving the basics: number of genera, species, ranges of length and weight, distribution and habitats, social behaviors, nests, eggs, incubation, fledging period, food, voices, migration, and conservation status. For some families such information seemingly shows how little the member species have diverged. The general text often addresses the genera within the family, showing similarities and differences between the species. This sounds like dry reading but it is enlivened by surprising facts for almost each group.

The World of Birds is illustrated with over 1,000 photographs by award-winning English nature photographer, David Tipling. His images are crisp and bright and illustrate key species the world over. Captions often contain place and time-of-year the photo was taken. I find *The World of Birds* somewhat more attractively designed than the rather busy *Firefly Encyclopedia*, which from a design point of view shows its age.

The only criticism I have is that the book has not kept up with some recent nomenclature. Snowy Owl is still presented as *Nyctea* instead of *Bubo* and a Dusky Grouse on p. 224 is identified as a Blue Grouse. As the book is written for a world audience, such slipups are surprising and disappointing.

However, *The World of Birds* is an up-to-date compendium of ornithological information, attractively presented and not unreasonably priced. Highly recommended.