

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE <sup>1</sup>

A FIELD KEY TO OUR COMMON BIRDS. By Irene T. Rorimer. Pocket Natural History No. 8, Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Cleveland, Ohio. November, 1940: 4 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$  in., 158 pp., 18 plates, 4 in color, 27 text figs. \$1.50.

The purpose of this booklet is to present a "simple formula" for identifying the common birds of northern Ohio in the field. Only "pertinent facts" are given, and in the order of their importance these are habitat, size, and color. The originality of this treatment consequently is that it *reverses* the order ordinarily used in keys in the past, which have been based on color and size, with occasional notes only on habitat. There is much in the author's claim as to the importance of habitat, and undoubtedly the stressing of this point will give useful information to many a beginner, who would otherwise acquire it by the slow process of accumulated experience. Turning to the table of habitats and sizes (p. 13) we find the following classification: I. Water Habitats (a) open water, lakes, ponds, streams; (b) beaches, mud flats; (c) marshes, reeds, wet meadows. II. Land Habitats (d) open country, grassy and cultivated fields, brushy fence rows and swamps; (e) semi-open country, scrubby fields and swamps, landscaped areas, orchards, farms, cities; (f) wooded country, a more or less closed growth of trees. The author is probably wise not to have attempted more than these six categories; indeed we can easily imagine a student about to identify a bird and wondering in just what habitat he is! Perhaps the absence of the "wooded swamp" is the most obvious mistake. Nothing could be more certain than that some birds are severely restricted in habitat. But the great difficulty with using it as a primary key character is that many birds occur commonly in two or more. Some birds will be found in two or more places in this key, but this has been done nowhere nearly enough. For instance, no hawks can be found in section F, though most of them nest there; the Woodcock is absurd in C, in spite of its convenient juxtaposition with the Snipe; it is properly in F, but lacking from E, perhaps the best place of all. While the Rusty Blackbird and Grackle can be found in two or three their habitats, while thumbing its pages. Actually there is no "simple formula" rather than E and F. The absence of the swallows from A and C where they are abundant, is noteworthy. The author is aware that innumerable woodland (F) land-bird transients occur on migration in several habitats in section E.

Many decades of experience has proved color more important than size. An appreciation of relative size, allowing for distance, poor light, etc., is the last technique acquired by the most expert, and no field ornithologist ever lived whose judgment of size was not at times seriously at fault. In many cases the author of this key has relied too much on the linear measurement of total length, leading to such misleading characterizations as the Pigeon Hawk "Robin-size" and the Little Blue Heron "Crow-size." It must be admitted that the key is a marvel of ingenuity in a great many respects. As it includes about 200 species of birds on pages 15-71, it is really highly intricate, anything but a "simple formula." The beginner, in endeavoring to use it, will undoubtedly learn a lot about birds and their habitats, while thumbing its pages. Actually there is no "simple formula" for learning birds.

In my judgment the user of the key would be completely lost without the descriptions on pages 88-154, arranged by families in the accepted sequence. These are an obvious imitation of the method invented by Peterson in his "Field Guide," a copyrighted book. Especially in the first half of the families, the actual clauses in Peterson's descriptions are often inverted only, or are given verbatim in a different order, and the highly original descriptive adjectives used by that author are carried over bodily, all to a degree which is improper without ample acknowledgement, and a statement to the effect that permission to do so has been secured.

<sup>1</sup> For additional reviews see pages 21 and 40.



In the mass the descriptions average more abbreviated, and too often more important diagnostic characters are omitted, while less important ones are retained. In certain cases bad judgment and ignorance result in absurdity. Thus Peterson, in comparing the immature Bay-breasted and Blackpoll Warblers, says "The fall Blackpoll . . . has more distinct streakings on the sides and *white* under tail-coverts instead of yellow." Mrs. Rorimer omits the second clause (which *can* be used) and alters the first character (which *cannot* safely be used, though correct) to read "The Blackpoll may have faint streaks on the breast which the Bay-breasted always lacks." In many cases where the description is wholly original, some important diagnostic character is omitted, while others are erroneous. The notes of the two Yellowlegs are reversed; the Olive-sided Flycatcher is not olive green above and not the largest of the flycatchers, as stated. Peterson's few minor inaccuracies are all faithfully repeated, and his few omissions of worthwhile characters are not repaired in the descriptions before me, which contain far too many errors of omission or commission. Another line gives the status of each species. Summer residents and transients are given an arrival date in spring, but no departure dates; winter visitants are given no dates at all; in all cases room exists for these on the one line. Habitat summaries are usually excellent, but sometimes do not coincide wholly with the Key habitat. (Example, Lincoln's Sparrow, D group in Key, E group on page 153.)

There is no table of contents, but an alphabetical index of the birds comes first, which refers to the illustration, if any, and the description. It should also have referred to the places in the key where the bird is found. The Key contains references under every bird to its description, but the descriptions contain no reference to the same bird in the Key. An appendix gives 30 "rare or uncommon" species, again by habitat, size, and color description. In those cases where a bird is listed under two habitats, the cross reference is erroneous in every case, referring to the second habitat in the appendix. Barring this editorial *lapsus*, the very difficult proofreading, especially the complicated numbering and indentations of the Key, is notably excellent, as in the paper, printing, and typography. The illustrations are by Roger T. Peterson, continuing his well known style, and all the figures have been conscientiously redrawn. In the four colored plates, the figures are often minute, in spite of which the reproduction is remarkably good. The illustrations are excellent, their reproduction does credit to artist and publisher, and greatly enhance the value of this attractive little booklet.—Ludlow Griscom.

#### SHORT PAPERS

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- ARVEY, M. DALE. A New Race of Bush-tit from Southeastern California. *Condor*, 43, No. 1, Jan., 1941:74-5. (*Psaltiriparus minimus providentialis* subsp. nov. from Providence Mts.)
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- BARNES, V. and W. H. PHELPS. Las Aves de la Peninsula de Paraguana Venezuela. *Bol. Soc. Venez. Cien. Nat.*, No. 46, 1940:269-301 (repaged 1-33 in reprint).
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