

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

ZOOLOGY

Birds of Europe: Second Edition

By Lars Svensson. 2010. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540 USA. 416 pages. 29.95 USD Paper.

In 2000, I picked up a copy of the *Complete Guide to the Birds of Europe* by Lars Svensson. It was originally printed in Sweden, but had been translated and published in English. I thought it was a fabulous book, easily the best guide in my collection. There was a problem though. It was 32 cm by 22 cm by 3 cm, far too large to be used in the field. Part of the magic were the illustrations and by Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström.

A couple of years later I borrowed a shrunken version that I used in Tunisia. It contained everything in the big book, just that it was reduced to fit a regular field guide format. This new book is the second, revised edition and it is field guide size [19 cm by 13.5 cm by 2.5 cm]

Birds of Europe is a bit of a misnomer as it covers North Africa, Turkey, Egypt and the Middle East. This means birds like Bald Ibis, Sooty Gull, Mourning Wheatear and Nile Valley Sunbird are given coverage in the main text. Also included here are the regularly-occurring stragglers like the American thrushes. In all, the book covers well over 900 species.

The publisher calls this book "this classic guide" and for once I think the hyperbole is right. The illustrations are wonderful and you need to go back to Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935), a wildlife artist who worked mostly in watercolour, to see art of this quality. Not only are the illustrations technically competent, but they capture the essence of the bird. Look at Hawk Owl, with its characteristic, coy over-the-shoulder look or the Goldfinch with its stare-ahead look [you can almost hear the thistle seed being ground in its bill].

But this art must be more than attractive; it must be accurate and it is. Look carefully and you will see the faint bar on the forewing of the Madeiran Storm Petrel or note the characteristic stance of the Black-and-white Warbler. Mullarney and Zetterström have also depicted the range of colour in variable birds like the Willow Warbler and Black-eared Wheatear [both of which have given me problems in the past]. Many birds are depicted in several poses or plumages. Little vignettes give key characteristics like the distinctive wing angle

of the Rough-legged Hawk. All this detail helps develop an understanding of the elusive "jizz."

The text, while not as immediately eye-catching as the art, is also first class. It is written with efficiency and, where warranted, with humour. In the critical areas where identification is difficult, the text is precise and meaningful. For similar species like the Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover and Semi-palmated Plover the critical differences along with the potential pitfalls are described carefully. These factors, coupled with the superb, multiple illustrations make this a "classic guide" indeed.

While the text follows the European English nomenclature [murre are guillemots, longspurs are buntings etc.] it does use American loon instead of diver. This edition is updated to follow the recent changes in taxonomy. For example, Cory's Shearwater now includes Scopoli's Shearwater as an identifiable subspecies [although some authorities split it as a separate species. I have seen flocks in the Dardanelles]. Similar changes to include sub- and full-species can be found in gulls, waterfowl, thrushes warblers, flycatchers, shrikes and finches [including scoters, the "Herring" gulls, wheatears and "Orphean" warblers.] One change I do not like is the conformity to the current taxonomic order. It has become annoying to have the format of books constantly changing. I am used to the Peterson sequence so it is confusing not to be able to automatically open the guide at about the right place. Now you need use the index to see where the genus has moved. I like a recent suggestion by Howell and his coauthors in "Birding" [the American Birding Association's magazine] that field guides follow a logical order for field use, regardless of changes to the taxonomic sequence.

After the main text there are 10 pages of Vagrants – birds that have occurred a dozen or so times in 100 years. Most of these are illustrated. Then follows 3.5 pages of Accidentals [un-illustrated] – birds that have occurred less than three times. In addition there are two pages, illustrated, showing hybrid waterfowl.

To get this book in the smaller format everything is reduced in size, except the well-designed range maps. This means the font is small, and I need spectacles to read it. A few of the illustrations have been cut too. The result is a book you can carry in the field; well worth such sacrifices.

Is it perfect? Not really as I saw a few tiny items to question [I have never seen a Red-eyed Vireo quite that green.], but I think I would justify my wife's label of me

as grumpy if I raised these points. This book is meant to be used to identify birds in the field with a high chance of being correct. It achieves this and more. If only other field guides were as good. Although meant for birdwatchers in Europe [in the broadest geographical sense] non-Europeans might want to spend the \$30 [excellent value] just to be able to drool and dream.

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Bear Wrangler: Memoirs of an Alaska Pioneer Biologist

By W. Troyer. 2010. The University of Chicago Press, 1427 East 60th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637 USA. 256 pages. 19.95 USD, Paper.

In 1951, Will Troyer began a 30-year career with the U.S. Department of the Interior. *Bear Wrangler* is an intimate story of Troyer's experiences as a pioneer biologist in the Alaskan wilderness. Troyer narrates his life story in 26 short but compelling chapters in the 250-page book. The most significant and memorable events highlight each chapter, which are organized chronologically and by themes (e.g., "Fish Cop", "Wrangling Kodiak Bears", "Managing the Kenai Refuge"). Charming black-and-white photographs are interspersed throughout the text providing a welcome visual backdrop to the memories and experiences that Troyer recounts.

Troyer's engaging prose shows just how passionate he is about nature; one can really sense his deep connection to the natural world as revealed in his words. He is certainly a keen-eyed and knowledgeable naturalist. Though some natural history observations are only briefly reported, many are intimately discussed with informative notes (e.g., his birding forays in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, formerly the Clarence Rhode National Wildlife Refuge). No scientific names are used in the text, a somewhat curious omission since taxonomy is an integral component of studies in natural history, but certainly does not detract from the value of the information presented.

Troyer eventually landed his dream job as a wildlife biologist in Alaska, but experienced many hardships. Travelling and working in a rugged landscape like Alaska presented many challenges and hazards, some of which nearly cost him his life. Some of the inherent dangers that Troyer faced were associated with his work on brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) when he became manager of the Kodiak Island brown bear preserve in 1955. Studying and working with such large, powerful, and unpredictable carnivores always involves acknowledging and contending with certain risks; as a pioneer in brown bear field research in Alaska, Troyer was breaking new ground. Even so, Troyer freely admits that he and colleagues often took many unnecessary risks out in the field when anaesthetizing brown

bears. Though the conduct of he and his assistants did not approach the controversial behaviour of other more (arguably) eccentric bear biologists (e.g., Timothy Treadwell), some actions did reflect rather poor judgement. As a professional biologist, I fully acknowledge and appreciate the need and pressure to acquire data out in the field. However, doing so at the expense of one's own safety (if not life), as well as that of others, is generally reckless and lamentable behaviour and is something that I (any many other biologists I know) do not condone. Troyer also took risks in some of his other Alaskan wilderness adventures. For example, his dogged determination in photographing mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*) by himself at Horn's Cliff almost resulted in him losing his right eye. Having worked in the field and experienced several close calls with eye injuries, I could certainly empathize with the feelings of angst, panic, and fear that Troyer articulates when he was facing the grim possibility of (partly) losing his vision. Some misadventures while learning to pilot some planes were also frightening recollections. One can argue that Troyer's daring and adventurous spirit served as a source of strength for him in his profession as a wildlife biologist in Alaska. However, that same spirit was also arguably a potential weakness of Troyer's character, and in the context of Alaska's sometimes harsh and unforgiving wilderness, it sometimes did him more harm than good.

Wildlife management was a different profession in the 1950s, with many practices reflecting the ignorance of humans toward the ecological integrity of nature. For example, predator control during that time involved putting out poisoned bait to kill wolves and coyotes without thought and consideration of the consequences of removing predators from ecosystems. Conservation biology and wildlife management are branches in the biological sciences that are intrinsically value laden. They are also intimately linked to politics. Hence, like politics, these fields can often be best described as an art of attempting to achieve compromise between conflicting parties – in this case,



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