

The Warbler Guide

By Tom Stephenson, and Scott Whittle. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 514 pages, 29.95, Paper.

Warblers are the crown jewels of the Americas avifauna. Exquisitely plumaged in spring, many assume cryptic plumages in fall, morphing from among the most beautiful of birds to tricky identification challenges. Indeed, for many Canadian observers learning fall warblers is their first great birding milestone. Add to this an array of songs and you have the complete avian package. As an added bonus, warblers are a key part of our summer ecosystem; and witnessing mixed species migration fallout is among the greatest spectacles that await the Canadian birder.

Warblers are well treated in standard field guides, which are more than adequate for most identifications. However, due to their intrinsic beauty and the interest they invoke, several family monographs have been produced, of which this is the most recent. At over 500 pages it is a stay-at-home reference work, not a field guide. It starts with an extensive introductory section including an easy to follow “topographic tour”, tips on what to look for, and an extensive segment on how to use sonograms. Indeed, a unique feature of this book is its extensive treatment of vocalizations. Every species has a comprehensive collection of sonograms, and there are stand alone sections visually comparing the songs, chip notes and flight calls of similar species. Not everybody “gets” sonograms, but if you are one of those who does, this will be a selling point. There is also an extensive and well-organized photographic “quick finder guide”. Particularly useful for suffers from “warbler neck” are plates portraying undertail patterns. The end pieces include a fun test quiz and an intriguing section on hybrids.

Most of the book consists of species accounts. Every regularly occurring species in North America is exhaustively treated, with multiple photographs of all distinct plumages, close ups of key features, useful studies of comparison species, a treatment of aging and sexing, accurate, easy to read range maps, and sonograms. To

provide a random example: the species account for Canada Warbler has 37 photographs, nine sonograms and two range maps (one each for fall and spring migration). Additional photographs and sonograms of the species are found elsewhere in the book. On the other hand, the text is minimalist, consisting mostly of concise descriptions of the key features illustrated in each figure. Rarely occurring species are afforded less space but are more extensively treated than in a standard field guide.

The audience for this book are more experienced observers; neophytes will be better served by standard field guides. The current work will help you figure out if that Common Yellowthroat you are saw was a first winter male or female, sort out American Redstart aging and sexing, or help with that tricky *Oporornis* identification. I “test drove” the book several times this fall, checking it against birds seen that day or testing to see if it was up to the challenge of identifying “mystery bird” photographs posted to various web groups, which it was, often using second order identification clues beyond those included in standard works.

How does it stack up? The most important comparison is “A Field Guide to Warblers of North America” by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett. In effect the two works are complementary, Dunn and Garrett has a more textual approach with detailed written descriptions and greater detail on ecology and range, whereas the current work is unabashedly visual. Warbler officiantos will want to own both. The bottom line? Get this book if you are an experienced observer looking to take your warbling to the next level. Like me, you will probably find yourself turning to it from time to time, either to verify particularly tough identifications or to admire its many fine photographs.

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