

ORNITHOLOGY

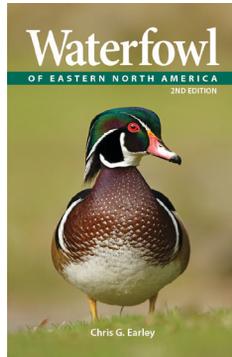
Waterfowl of Eastern North America. Second Edition

By Chris G. Earley. 2020. Firefly Books. 159 pages and 400 colour photographs, 19.95 CAD, Paper.

Many bird-lovers would love to see cats skinned because of all the birds these predators kill. Once it is agreed that cats should be skinned, one may have to select from a plethora of ways to do it.

For example, my first reaction upon seeing this book was, “Why another identification guide to the birds of North America?” (i.e., do we need another method for skinning a cat?) There are more than a dozen: Audubon, Bird, Bull, Crossley, Dorling Floyd, Kaufman, Kindersley, National Geographic, National Wildlife Federation, Sibley, Stokes, Vanner, etc. This is not to mention regional guides that treat only part of North America (e.g., a state, province, or groups of these), or guides that treat only a subset of the birds (e.g., this book’s “waterfowl”).

What does each field guide add to the collective knowledge of bird identification? Very little. The law of diminishing returns applies here. What it may do is present the birds in a different way. My favourite is Peterson’s use of arrows in the drawings that correspond to neighbouring italicized text. Earley’s specialty is that he has selected birds that “have adapted to swimming for a living” (p. 11). Thus, it includes traditional “waterfowl” (ducks, geese, and swans) and some other swimmers: grebes, Common Gallinule, American Coot, loons, cormorants, and pelicans. Strictly marine species, the shorebirds, and some other swimmers are excluded. It is not always clear why certain birds are included while others are not.



I have trouble with the title *Waterfowl of Eastern North America* for two reasons. Given that it includes more than ducks, geese, and swans (i.e., “waterfowl”), a better term may have been “swimming birds”. Limiting the book to eastern North America eliminated only a few western birds, so the book could have treated all North America with little extra effort. This would give us “Swimming Birds of North America”.

This book is meant for all birders, be they novices or experts. The front matter includes a page on Wonderful Waterfowl, another two on How to Use this Book, and some other odds and ends. The bulk of the book consists of species accounts. A nice feature is that each species receives one or two two-page spreads. The spreads feature a paragraph focussing on something special about the species, and several photos (of generally excellent quality) that attempt to cover all the different plumages: e.g., male, female, eclipse male, floating, and in flight. There are also notes on “listen for”, “compare to”, and “nature notes”. Finally, the map shows the distribution of the species in the New World. Unfortunately, like virtually all guides, it is usually not clear whether the species occurs in the Old World.

The back matter has a section on Vagrants and Southern and Coastal Specialties, a page on What I can do to Help Waterfowl?, a section on comparing species morphology within species groups, and a final section called, A Win for Waterfowl: What Can we Learn from Success?

Which way to skin the cat? There is a lot of choice, but if swimming birds intrigue you, this is the one for you.

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