

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

Handbook of Birds of the World. Volume 16

Tanagers to New World Blackbirds. Edited by: Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David Christie. 2012. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 896 pages. 277.00 USD. Cloth.

When I opened the box containing HBW 16 I half-expected to hear a loud trumpet fanfare. Volume 1 appeared in 1992 and it has taken almost twenty years to complete the first book series to cover an entire Class of the Animal Kingdom. This has required more than 200 writers, 35 illustrators and 834 photographers from over 40 countries. The last volume published in December 2011 covers the Thraupidae (Tanagers), Cardinalidae (Cardinals), Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows) and the Icteridae (New World Blackbirds).

It is almost mundane to say the text illustrations and photographs are uniformly excellent. For Americans this book contains a lot of familiar species. In 2009 issue of *The Auk*, the Fiftieth Supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds deprived of our Canadian Tanagers, although we still call them tanagers. HBW 16 has given us our tanagers back, at least temporarily. More important, the information provided on Scarlet and Western Tanagers would have been valuable in identifying an out-of-range Western Tanager some years ago. This dull-plumaged bird generated a long debate, in part caused by lack of information.

Most of us have taken trips to the Caribbean and South America where the bulk of the Tanagers [including Euphonias, Spindalis, Dacnis and Honeycreepers] live. Going through the pages you can find old friends and colourful new birds you have yet to see. As usual the prominent subspecies are illustrated. There are four subspecies of the common Blue-grey Tanager next to the similar Sayaca Tanager. I must say I cheated earlier this year when I identified the Sayaca Tanager by geographic range. The variable-plumaged Bananaquit has 41 subspecies of which 10 are shown. They are treated as a single species, but the taxonomic discussion leaves room for future changes. There are 283 species in this family and some have restricted ranges so seeing them all would be an expensive challenge. HBW 16 will provide a good planning tool for such a venture.

The Cardinals family also has some colourful species, again with many familiar to North Americans. It also includes saltators, grosbeaks and buntings. Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows) and this

includes several "cardinals" and not all of them are red. It also includes those birds that can give people a hard time, giving them the acronym LBJ or little brown job. A couple of years ago I visited a grassy sparrow field. Several species of sparrow were calling, including some Grasshopper Sparrows. One popped out on a plant stem and I took some nice photos. Back home I realised my photos showed the birds had yellow on the face and at the bend of the wing. Had I misidentified this creature? I searched some field guides, but found nothing on this feature until I reached Earl Godfrey's classic "Birds of Canada." Then I tried the Internet and many photos showed the yellow marks. I suppose we cannot expect all books to be perfect and HBW 16 does not mention the yellow on the lesser wing coverts.

I was surprised to see the authors had split the Fox Sparrow into four species. While the geographical difference in colour has long been known, these have been regarded as sub-species. Recent DNA analysis has suggested there are three, maybe four, separate species. No decision has been made before further studies of hybridization are done. This is especially true of the uncertainly distinct Slate-colored and Thick-billed Fox Sparrows.

The last family, and it is the *last*, is the Icteridae (New World Blackbirds). The last bird is the fluty-songed Western Meadowlark, but mostly this section covers the exotic orioles and oropendolas. Not the Eurasian orioles [Oriolidae] of course, as these are in HBW 13. By splitting the Amazonian Oropendula in to two HBW recognizes 10 species of the raucous birds. While the illustrations for the Baltimore Oriole are wonderful, nothing can capture the glow of a spring. This only lasts a week or so and then these birds look like the illustrations.

The book has two other features. There is an essay on the impact of climate change on birds [Note – it is titled correctly and not as global warming]. Ignoring the debate about the cause of the current changes, the weather is different and this impacts birds. The author present the results of numerous studies, mostly from Europe, that document observed differences in breeding, migration and other aspects of their annual cycle.

The author is careful in his interpretation of the data, so the effects of other, confounding changes [e.g., in land use] are eliminated. This is an excellent summary of our current knowledge and if you read nothing else of this fine essay, at least read Andres Moller's thoughtful conclusion.

There is a plasticized index to the passerines [volumes 8 to 16]. The index to the non-passerines was in volume 7 and has been incredibly useful. The size of each volume and the mass of all 16 volumes makes it hard to search for a single species. These indices are a godsend.

So we have come to the end of an era [and likely the beginning of a new one]. My congratulations to all the people involved for you have created 16 volumes that are a treasure trove of solid information for all naturalists. Admittedly the early books are now "old" but on checking recent splits I found the authors to be prophetic and the new species illustrated [as a subspecies]. I am sure it will still be the major reference in another 20 years.

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