

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.

Editor's Note. The address of the Birds of Northumberland County website has been changed to <http://www.willowbeachfieldnaturalists.org/Northumberland-County>. This is part of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists' website, but the URL above will take you directly to the Birds of Northumberland County. Please note that the URL is case sensitive. From Clive Goodwin.

ZOOLOGY

All the Birds of Nova Scotia

By Ian McLaren. 2012. Gaspereau Press, 47 Church Avenue, Kentville, Nova Scotia B4N 2M7. 336 pages. 47.95 CAD. Cloth.

More years ago than I care to remember I needed help with a mammal problem. I was referred to an expert, Dr. Ian McLaren, who answered my questions expertly. I have run in to Ian many times since that time and realised that Ian is not just knowledgeable about mammals but is one of the finest birders I have met. He has now written a scholarly book on the birds of his adopted province.

Going birding with Ian McLaren you quickly realise that he is far more careful and discerning than most birders. Where I might be content to call a bird an immature Ring-billed Gull, McLaren will be looking at individual feathers to determine its subspecies, age or point of origin. This is an ideal trait for the author of this book.

The Nova Scotia bird list is unlike that of central Canada. Birds that are abundant here [American Goldfinch] occur commonly, but in much lower numbers and are more infrequent. Even the over-abundant Red-winged Blackbird is much scarcer. Nova Scotia lists many seabirds and shorebirds. A Razorbill in Ottawa pulled in many birders to see this vagrant, but it is fairly easy to find in offshore Nova Scotia. While we chase a Black-legged Kittiwake or feel elated to see some Ruddy Turnstones, these are common birds for McLaren. What really boosts the NS list though is the large number of rarities.

When tropical storms devastate the Caribbean, odd birds reach Upper Canada. This forced dispersal is filtered by the landmass of the USA. Not so for Nova Scotia – birds are swept along the seaboard to add boobies and frigate birds to the provincial total. A number of small land birds also are pushed north [vireos, warblers]. Birds from Europe are driven west [thrushes], although some may hitch rides on ships. McLaren argues that the Magpie seen in 2008 is a ship-assisted

European bird. Birds also drift from the west. It is annoying to think that many of these birds went through eastern Canada unnoticed until they were stopped at the coast to be found by an alert Nova Scotian.

For this book McLaren systematically reviewed the historical and contemporary records for all the sightings in Nova Scotia and summarised his findings for each species. For the common birds he gives the range and status by season. Sensibly he includes all the records of vagrants. This includes likely, but unproven birds. For example, for Bahama Swallow he notes a probable sighting, but adds “photographs would be needed for wide acceptance of such a record.” This gives readers a chance to decide for themselves and alerts them to the possibility of seeing this species. It also alerts the observer for the need of proof, in such cases.

The book is well supplied with photographs, many by McLaren, and mostly of the vagrants. The professor uses these as a teaching opportunity to highlight the characteristics that confirm the identification. Insert photos of look-alike species help the author point out the critical plumage details. For example, the page on the Willet shows both eastern and western forms and McLaren discusses the finer minutiae. There is one analysis I have trouble with however – the magpie record. Taxonomists [or is it systematists?] have split the black-and-white magpies into three to five species depending on their criteria. I have trouble separating these supposed species. McLaren suggest the Clam bay, 2008, sighting is a Eurasian Magpie [not a Black-billed Magpie], based on plumage and calls. The 10 magpies I saw in Russia last month did not appear any different from those I saw in Calgary in January. I tried side-by-side comparison of photos on the net and the variability caused by the disparity in light swamped any dif-

ferences in plumage colour. Simultaneous playing of Xeno Canto recordings of both species showed that magpie calls are varied and similar.

The other photograph that caught my attention was of two American Crows. One is remarkably smaller than the other. Again McLaren uses subtle plumage characters and call to identify this bird as a runt American Crow. This time I was happy with the identification as the likely vagrant, Fish Crow, has a clearly different call and an observable divergence in appearance. We need to remember there can be small individuals.

Many years ago I visited a rising star birder and was surprised to see a bulletin board covered in weather maps. This person has repeatedly been in the right

place at the right time, due to this studious approach. McLaren too includes a substantial discussion of weather patterns in NS and how these link to bird movements. This is an area we could all benefit from, by paying more attention to the role weather plays.

I really enjoyed reading this book. I brought back good memories and I learnt a lot from the identification discussions. The text on Status and I.D. Issues is clear and informative without being repetitive or stuffy. It will make a fine present for your favourite birding friend.

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