

ORNITHOLOGY

The Birds of Vancouver Island's West Coast

By Adrian Dorst. 2018. UBC Press, On Point Press. 544 pages and 140 black and white photographs/maps, 39.95 CAD, Cloth.

Adrian Dorst's new book on the birds of the wild west coast of Vancouver Island is an engagingly-written, straightforward, and thorough account of the region's avifauna. The author has lived in Tofino for over four decades and has spent all those years "recording the comings and goings of birds" (p. 13) in his wilderness neighbour-



hood. He knows the region intimately—the rich pelagic waters, the wave-scoured rocks, the long beaches that stretch off into the mist, the quiet inlets, the great forests, and the rugged, almost inaccessible mountains. He also loves this area, and this love comes through on every page.

This is not a field guide, but rather a detailed account of the occurrence and ecology of each of the 360 bird species known from the region. In addition to his extensive personal experience, the author has gathered information from a wide variety of sources, including birding websites, the scientific literature (355 references are cited at the back of the book), the four volumes

of *The Birds of British Columbia* (Royal BC Museum and UBC Press, 1997–2001), and an earlier account of the region's birds that he co-authored, the *Birds of Pacific Rim National Park* (BC Provincial Museum, 1978). The acknowledgments run to three and a half pages! Black-and-white photographs are scattered through the book—Adrian Dorst is well-known as a photographer, so these illustrations are all high-quality.

Following a brief but informative introduction dealing with the climate, topography, and ecology of the west coast, the story of each species is told in individual accounts of up to four pages. Each species account begins with a short, one- or two-paragraph introduction describing the bird and its global and provincial range, and then proceeds to detail regional habitat use, migration timing and other changes through the year, and trends over the decades.

The accounts are clearly and cleanly written in narrative form and although the subject is scientific, the prose is not technical. This is a book that one can pick up and pick a page at random and enjoy learning about a particular bird during a brief read. A flavour of the style can be seen in sentences like the one describing a recent increase in Hairy Woodpecker records, particularly those by a certain young birder—“Keep in mind that most of us do not have the benefit of Ian's acute hearing” (p. 339). (I have also gone birding with the young man in question and can attest to the acuity of his hearing and accuracy of his identifications!)

Although this is a style that I enjoy, another aspect of the accounts can make the biological story a little harder to follow than it needs to be. What is absent are graphs that could summarize changes through the year, or changes over the decades (for example, a graph of records through the year could quickly show a migration pattern). This may be simply a personal preference but, for readers like me, it would be easier to see those stories visually, rather than read detailed sentences about numbers.

Although the book is focussed on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the author makes sure that the reader knows the big picture story of the region's birds. For

example, he tells the story of the Short-tailed Albatross's near-extinction on its Japanese nesting islands, and mentions threats facing shearwaters on their distant breeding grounds. We learn that the Japanese tsunami of 2011 killed an astonishing 110 000 Laysan Albatross chicks and 2000 adults on Midway Atoll. A detailed account of Canada Goose numbers over time includes a discussion of the effect of the 1964 Alaska earthquake on the breeding geese that migrate through Tofino.

“Nature nuggets” are similarly sprinkled through the text. For example, we learn that Pacific and Winter Wrens diverged as long ago as 4.3 million years and, because Golden-crowned Sparrows love to nip off the tender leaves of garden vegetables, “[l]ong-time gardeners may therefore be more knowledgeable than field ornithologists as to just when the migration period begins and ends” (p. 454). I was surprised to read that Steller's Jays are absent year-round from the Broken Group in Barkley Sound, presumably because they are reluctant to cross an expanse of open water. Another surprise was an account of a small wintering population of Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warblers on Stubbs Island near Tofino, where they feed on the berries of “a profusion of wax-myrtle [Pacific bayberry] bushes” (p. 440).

Keen birders know that the west coast of Vancouver Island is a magnet for wandering birds that have gone astray. The book concludes with detailed accounts of the 50 accidental species recorded for the region, from Solander's Petrel (the first well-documented record for North America) and Falcated Duck (I remember the spur-of-the-moment drive from Victoria to ‘tick’ that one!) to an astonishing Prothonotary Warbler. A further 26 species are listed as “Hypothetical”, because they lack photographic or other evidence.

For any naturalist visiting the west coast of British Columbia, this is a valuable reference and an enjoyable book to read. Happy birding!

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