

THE LINNAEAN  
**NEWS**



**LETTER**

Volume 67, Number 5

October 2013

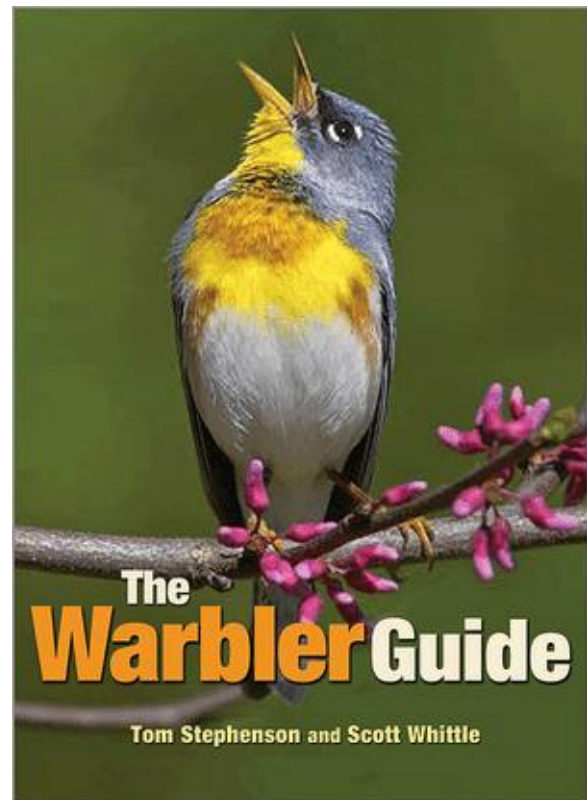
**REVIEW – THE WARBLER GUIDE**

Joseph DiCostanzo

[*The Warbler Guide* by Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle. Drawings by Catherine Hamilton. 2013. 560 pp. Princeton University Press. \$29.95]

*The Warbler Guide* joins an ever growing list of reference guides aimed at aiding in the identification of single groups of birds. Seabirds, hawks, shorebirds, hummingbirds, pigeons, woodpeckers, and sparrows, to name just a few, have all had guides covering them published in the last twenty to thirty years. Some groups have had multiple treatments. Indeed, this is not the first treatment for New World warblers. That distinction probably goes to *Warblers of the Americas: An Identification Guide* by Jon Curson, David Quinn, and David Beadle (1994, Houghton Mifflin Co.), closely followed in time by *Warblers* by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett (1997, Houghton Mifflin Co.). Though both books were from the same publisher, the former covered the entire family including Central and South American species, while the latter (part of the Peterson Field Guides series) covered only species north of the Mexican border, as does the new Stephenson and Whittle book.

The two earlier warbler guides followed an older field guide tradition of being illustrated exclusively, or nearly so, by paintings while the new guide uses photographs. I must confess to a longstanding bias towards artwork over photographs in field guides.



However, the tremendous increase in the capability of photography with the advent of digital technology and the huge increase in the availability of quality photographs is forcing me to reevaluate my old biases, at least for some uses. I still think good artwork works best for the traditional field guide, especially for new birders and country wide guides. But

**PLEASE SEE IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS ON LAST PAGE**

for specialty guides focusing on specific groups such as this guide, the ability to present over a thousand photographs as this guide does, showing birds from many different angles demonstrates that photography is adding new dimensions to the identification guide. Artwork, however, is not completely obsolete. There are two pages (pp. 114-115) of drawings illustrating undertails by Catherine Hamilton as well as two pages of silhouettes (pp. 544-545) and probably hundreds of drawn icons.

In its use of photographs this guide seems to me to be like the recent Crossley Guides (*The Crossley Guide: Eastern Birds* by Richard Crossley (2011) and *The Crossley Guide: Raptors* by Richard Crossley, Jerry Liguori, and Brian Sullivan (2013), both Princeton University Press). These books are attempting to give the birder the kind of broad experience with seeing birds from many angles and situations that in the past was only possible with years of field experience. While they can certainly help immensely with that goal there is still no substitute for actual time spent in the field.

The first thing that needs to be said about this guide is that it is **not a field guide!** This is in no way meant as a criticism. I don't think the authors intended birders to be carrying this guide around in their back pockets – it is just too big and heavy for that! It will, however, become I believe, a constantly used resource for the vast amount of information contained in it about warbler ID. The book begins with 130 pages of introductory material on the organization of the book, what to look for in identifying warblers, ageing and sexing warblers and the single largest section, learning and identifying warbler songs, chip notes and flight calls. The information is generally clearly presented and often extensively and well-illustrated. I did note a small handful of things that I thought were slips or odd choices. There is a well done and fairly extensive four page (pp. 12-15) “Topographic Tour” labeling the various parts and feather groups and the terms for them that will be important in understanding

identification points in the main species accounts. However, four pages later in a section on “Facial contrast” the captions of the illustrations of Townsend's and Black-throated Green warblers refer to “auriculars”, but that term is not defined until p. 27. In the topography section the auriculars are labeled “cheek patch”. A similar mixing of terms occurs on p. 27 where in a photo of the head of a male Blackburnian Warbler it is described as having a “Distinctive triangular cheek patch” while on p. 28 a female Blackburnian is described with “dark facial marks form a triangular pattern”. I also found a couple of the choices of species to illustrate points to be a little odd. On p. 26 a photograph merely labeled “Redstart” is used to illustrate the behavior of flashing tail and wing feathers while feeding. The “Redstart” pictured is a Painted Redstart from the southwest. Why not use a picture of an American Redstart, a far more common and widespread bird that many birders will encounter? Similarly, on p. 30 the bird chosen to illustrate “eyelines” is a Golden-cheeked Warbler which has a limited range in Texas. Why not a Blue-winged Warbler, widespread in the eastern United States? These are I admit minor points and I have had enough experience with publishing that I suspect a number of these choices may have been made by photo editors, rather than the authors.

The heart of the introductory material is the large section on warbler vocalizations. In teaching warbler songs, rather than the transliterations (i.e. a Yellow Warbler's *sweet, sweet, oh so sweet*) used in most guides, the authors use sonograms, an illustrative method pioneered in field guides by Chandler Robbins, Bertel Bruun and Herbert Zim in their classic *Birds of North America* field guide (1966, Golden Press). However, Stephenson's and Whittle's use of sonograms is far more extensive and elaborate than in that earlier guide. Serious warbler students will want to download the companion audio files available for \$5.99 from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Macaulay Library website at: [macaulaylibrary.org/guide/the-warbler-guide](http://macaulaylibrary.org/guide/the-warbler-guide).

The introductory material ends with an extensive set of usually double page “quick finder” charts to aid in rapidly narrowing down an identification of a warbler. There are spreads of photos of warbler faces, full profiles of side views, 45° angle views, underside views, and illustrations of spring and fall eastern warblers and one spread of western species. These are followed by the previously mentioned two pages of undertail drawings. Finally, in keeping with the authors stress on learning warbler vocalizations there are 22 pages of sonogram “finder charts” to help in narrowing down and identifying warbler songs, chip notes and flight calls. I cannot in this short review do justice to the authors’ extensive and truly impressive organization and presentation of this sonogram material. All of this is introductory to the extensive presentation of sonograms of warbler songs in each individual species account to be found in the main part of the book. The coverage of warbler vocalizations is truly the most ground-breaking part of this very impressive guide.

The main part of the book is, of course the actual species accounts. Once again, the authors use an innovative approach in their arrangement of the species accounts. Rather than a traditional taxonomic sequence found in many guides or some arbitrary arrangement by color or habitat or some other chosen character, the species are arranged alphabetically by English name. When I saw this arrangement upon first opening the book I was prepared not to like it, being a traditionalist and usually favoring a taxonomic sequence, but the more I used the book the more I found the arrangement quite handy. There is a two page (pp. 540-541) presentation of the current thinking on warbler taxonomy.

The individual species accounts contain information on field marks, close-up photos of “Distinctive Views”, a section of “Additional Photos”, a section on “Comparison Species”, a section on ageing and sexing, range maps, and of course, an extensive presentation of sonograms of songs with comparisons to similar songs of other

species. A problem I found with some of the range maps is that where a river forms the boundary between states, the river is shown, but not the heavier line of the state border. This can be confusing, especially along the Rio Grande on the Texas/Mexico border.

At the back of the book are some pages on “Similar Non-warbler Species”, two pages on hybrid warblers (though Brewster’s and Lawrence’s, included here, already had a spread in the main species accounts), a quiz and review section, flight photos and discussion, charts of measurements and habitat and behavior information and a glossary.

Two-page accounts for seven warbler species found only on the US/Mexico border (Crescent-chested, Fan-tailed, etc.) are included in the back of the book after the Yellow-throated Warbler account, though the Table of Contents in the front places them in alphabetical order with the rest. There is no mention that this is a section of border rarities. These seven accounts contain a glaring layout error: for each species the three “Additional Photos” are unlabeled on the bottom of the first page of the write-up and the “Comparison Species” photos at the top of the second page are mislabeled as “Distinctive Views”.

Overall, this is a very impressive guide and the few problems I have noted can be easily corrected in later printings or editions.

~~~~~

## **PEREGRINES ALONG THE HUDSON**

Stephen Quinn

One day, while coming down the West Side Highway with the Hudson River on my right, I became aware of two birds flying fast out over the water, pacing me as I drove south. They were two adult Peregrine Falcons, one flying about twenty to thirty feet behind the other, and beyond them, flying in the same direction, farther out over the water, was a pigeon. I had the definite impression the Peregrines were holding the pigeon beyond

them, out over the water, preventing it from accessing land, where they knew it could escape. All were flying as fast as I was driving (approximately 60 mph) and about fifteen to twenty feet over the water. In a split second, as I watched, while trying to keep the jeep on the road in my excited state, the lead Peregrine put on a burst of speed, raced ahead and banked back, driving the pigeon into the second Peregrine, which rose up away from the water and struck the pigeon in a great puff of feathers while it struggled to turn! It then towered higher over the water with the pigeon in its talons and, at a height of, I'm guessing, thirty feet, dropped it in midair! Before it hit the water, the lead Peregrine had doubled back, swooped down and caught the dead pigeon in its talons! Together the pair then raced ahead of me, up and over the West Side Highway, with their breakfast, flying in the direction of the Riverside Church steeple, where they either, had hungry nestlings to feed, or, have a romantic perch to share, while overlooking the Hudson and dining together. Ain't nature grand! We humans think we're such hot stuff, but these birds share these sorts of exciting experiences every time they have breakfast!

~~~~~

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**PROGRAM CHANGE**

October 8 Meeting: Tom Stephenson, the speaker listed in the 2013-2014 Schedule of Events, will be joined by Scott Whittle, his co-author of the recently published *The Warbler Guide* and both will talk about the finer points of warbler identification by sight and sound. *The Warbler Guide* will be for sale at the meeting.

**BIRD BOOKS FOR SALE**

Starr Saphir's daughter, Shauna Leigh, generously donated many of Starr's books to the Linnaean Society, among them the non-North American field guides and bird-finding guides

listed below. We are selling them at \$5 each. They can be ordered by calling or emailing Jeff Nulle (212-864-4703, [jnulle@yahoo.com](mailto:jnulle@yahoo.com)) and taking delivery at a Linnaean meeting or as otherwise arranged.

Field guides to the birds of:

- Australia
- Britain and Europe (Peterson)
- Britain and Europe (Collins)
- Britain and Europe (with North Africa and the Middle East)
- China
- Colombia
- Cuba
- East Africa
- Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific
- The Indian Sub-Continent
- Jordan
- Mexico (Peterson)
- Middle East and North Africa
- New Zealand
- Panama
- South East Asia
- Trinidad and Tobago (French)
- Trinidad and Tobago (Herklots)
- West Indies (Peterson)
- West Indies (Princeton)
- West Indies (Bond)

Bird-finding guides to:

- Britain and Europe
- South Africa and Madagascar
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Venezuela
- Western South Africa

~~~~~

**LINNAEAN NEWS-LETTER**

Editor: Joseph DiCostanzo  
 Linnaean News-Letter  
 15 West 77<sup>th</sup> Street  
 New York, NY 10024  
[newsletter@linnaeannewyork.org](mailto:newsletter@linnaeannewyork.org)  
 Manuscript acquisition: Helen Hays  
 Production and mailing: Thomas Endrey