

BOOK REVIEW

Handbook of Oregon birds: a field companion to birds of Oregon, by Hendrik J. Herlyn and Alan L. Contreras. 2009. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. 287 pages; some color illustrations and numerous black and white range maps and graphs. Softcover, \$22.95. ISBN 978-0-87071-571-6.

Typically, state bird books fall into one of two categories. They are either a reference describing the status and distribution of the state's avifauna or a guide to bird finding in the region. The *Handbook of Oregon Birds* does not fall neatly into either category, but rather is described as a "field friendly" condensation of the comprehensive reference book: *Birds of Oregon: a general reference* (2003), with some supplemental material and some identification material. *Birds of Oregon: a general reference* (BOGR) is a typical reference book and is not designed for use in the field. Since most state reference volumes are not meant as field guides, many birders will rely on the rudimentary status information in a bird finding guide as their field reference, and later consult the state book for more comprehensive information. Hence, Oregon birders might welcome this Handbook as a source for information in the field.

The Handbook is almost pocket-sized. Following a relatively short introduction, the majority of the 287 pages are devoted to 519 species accounts. The accounts vary in length and coverage, from a couple of sentences for species with only one or two records, to several paragraphs for some regular species. Many accounts include a map and either a table with arrival dates or a seasonal bar chart.

The Handbook maps include more data sources than the BOGR maps, which were based primarily on Atlas data, and they are shaded to depict differing densities. Unfortunately, other than a brief mention of consultation with local observers, there is no description of the methodology used to generate range or density information depicted in the maps. This is an unfortunate omission, as a comparison of the maps in BOGR and the Handbook suggests that the Handbook maps have filled in areas where BOGR showed a gap due to lack of coverage; the method used to extrapolate should have been described. And, the criteria for different breeding densities depicted on the maps are not described, so the reader cannot discern what level of abundance the shadings refer to. While these would be acceptable shortcomings in a bird finding guide, they are fairly serious omissions in a reference book, where the maps are scientific reference material.

The accounts in the Handbook are usually a verbatim distillation of the more extensive species accounts in BOGR. In some cases the accounts have been updated, expanded or modified, although it is generally unclear which species are treated differently and which are merely "condensed". Trend data are treated inconsistently; several examples are illustrative: the Short-eared Owl account describes local declines in breeding popula-

tion, while the account of Marbled Murrelet, which is listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act, makes only an indirect reference to population decline, and the Spotted Owl account does not mention population declines at all. Further, the Caspian Tern account mentions that the lower Columbia River colony is currently the largest in the world, without mention of the spectacular population increase over the last three decades, then enigmatically notes “but the future of this colony is uncertain” without elaboration. The extensive three-page Caspian Tern account in BOGR provides an excellent description of both the rapid growth of the population and the management challenges which are facing this colony. I did find a few cases where the Handbook authors improved on BOGR accounts, such as their treatment of Manx Shearwater and Cattle Egret. Manx Shearwaters now occur annually off Oregon, but were only mentioned under the Black-vented Shearwater account in BOGR. The Handbook account for Cattle Egret describes the decline in occurrence since the mid-1990s; the BOGR account describes only the increasing trend of the 1970s and 1980s.

The abundance terms used throughout the text are not defined, so the reader is left with no key as to the difference between “abundant,” “common,” “fairly common,” “uncommon,” and “rare.” I presume that the Handbook authors were adopting the definitions used in the BOGR, since the abundance terms are identical; a short table in the Introduction section with the definition of terms would have been useful.

The Handbook includes information on average spring arrival dates from more locales than were cited in the BOGR. These additional data could be quite useful, particularly as evidence accumulates about changes in spring arrival dates on a continental scale, apparently in response to climate change. However, without a listing of the range of years covered in each locale, it is difficult to understand what time period recent data are measured against¹. And, there are some noticeable but unexplained discrepancies between dates cited in BOGR and the Handbook. BOGR cites average Willow Flycatcher arrival dates of 15 May in Corvallis, 15 May in Bend, and 12 May at Malheur. The Handbook cites 16 May, 19 May and 14 May for the same three locations, and in two cases the same observers. Have Willow Flycatcher arrivals really moved one to four days later between 2001 and 2009? More likely, the same data sets were analyzed differently for BOGR and the Handbook, but neither volume describes their methods.

Identification notes are sprinkled throughout, in text boxes. Very few of the notes are referenced, and they vary greatly in nature. Some are notes of caution, such as the reminder to Westside observers that winter sapsuckers are as likely Yellow-bellied as Red-naped. Others describe behavioral differences, for instance reporting that Mew Gulls have a greater tendency to “stand or land in the wettest part of beaches.” I am uncon-

¹ The Oregon Field Ornithologists website apparently has the same phenological data, and includes the information on the range of years for each set.

vinced that this is accurate, but I am also not concerned that it would lead to many misidentifications.

The illustrations consist of a set of eight plates in the center of the Handbook; four are plates by Oregon artist Ramiel Papish, and four are photo groupings. While I enjoyed Papish's work, I found several errors. The lack of wing stripe on the oversized Red Phalarope is unfortunate. The juvenile swallow plate illustrates body and wing shape differences well, but the perched Violet-green Swallow is unrecognizable without white patches on the sides of the rump and with an unpatterned face. The plate depicting a flying acid shows birds in breeding plumage; why not non-breeding plumage as the other seabird plate displayed? A juvenile sparrow plate is a good idea, but all the species appear similarly sized, yet Lark Sparrows are almost 2.5 cm longer than and twice as bulky as a Spizella. The photographs are less useful, and seem to have some editing errors: the same photo is repeated in two sizes for Hutton's Vireo, alongside an unusable small one. The Purple Finch photos are much smaller than the Cassin's Finch photos, making comparisons quite difficult.

There is a two-page section at the end, containing a checklist and timing bar charts for pelagic species, which includes 6 species that are not mentioned in the main text. The Handbook lacks an index, a fairly serious shortcoming for a reference book. The state map in the front of the book identifies many of the locations mentioned in the species accounts, but its small size makes its use very difficult for those of us who depend on reading glasses.

No aspect of a state reference book becomes outdated more quickly than the treatment of rarities, and for that reason, I think the updated treatment of rarities is one of the most useful aspects of the Handbook. Records reviewed by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OBRC) through 2008 are included, along with some reports yet to be reviewed. The authors were even able to include Oregon's first White-eyed Vireo, reported from June 2009, as an addendum. Species accounts for Review species with more than five records, along with some species that are no longer on the OBRC review list but are still rare, include a seasonal bar chart, and some also include distribution maps. The Tropical Kingbird account, for example, includes a seasonal bar chart accompanying the text summary of their unusual fall distribution. The authors rely primarily on OBRC deliberations, and clearly state where and why they are including reports that have not been accepted by the OBRC.

Does this new format work? I do not think there is a clear answer. For the serious student of status and distribution, this is not a stand-alone reference, as it does not provide the essential underpinnings of a reference such as definition of terms, description of methods and summary of the data. I would not recommend that any Northwest birder, naturalist or scientist attempt to use this book as anything more than the condensed field version of the more authoritative BOGR. It does work as a quick reference in the field, and it does a very good job of updating distribution and occurrence of rarities. As a full-fledged state book, the Handbook would be

a disappointment, but for those who value the portable format and the up-to-date summary of rarities it is probably a worthwhile acquisition.

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LITERATURE CITED

Marshall, D.B., M.G. Hunter and A.L. Contreras, Editors. 2003. *Birds of Oregon: a general reference*. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon.