



Shorebirds of North America: The Photographic Guide, by D. Paulson, 2005, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 353 p., softcover, USD 29.95, ISBN: 0-691-12107-9

I have been a birder for the majority of my life. Having always been fascinated by birds of all type, I have voraciously read birding field guides of all sorts from cover to cover. I have always been extremely skeptical of photographic guides, however, for the sole reason that they often use only one, or perhaps two pictures of a single species, and do not have the depth and description that many of the drawing-oriented birding guides. As a result, when I was first handed a copy of *Shorebirds of North America*, I thought “Well, great, another mediocre field guide.”

I turned out to be wrong. Once I actually sat down and began to read the book, it became evident that this was not just another “mediocre field guide,” as I had previously thought. *Shorebirds of North America* is a surprisingly complete and detailed photographic guide that contains hundreds of crisp, full-color images. Unlike many other photographic guides, *Shorebirds* has multiple pictures for most species included in its pages; more often than not, three or more pictures of various plumages and ages are included for each species. This large amount of photographs also covers a wide range of individuals, and therefore ensures that plumage, skin tone, and other characteristics are not based off of a single individual. Individuals vary, and single-photograph field guides may not show the best or most common characteristics of each species. This is especially true if the single photograph is not taken in optimal lighting conditions or good weather. Many identifying features can be subtle on shorebirds and require good lighting and fair skies to properly document in a photograph. Multiple photographs also help capture multiple angles, the better to see the shape and outline of the bird from many angles, rather than simply one.

Why is it important to have repetition and multiple examples in a guide to shorebirds especially? As any birder—both experienced and inexperienced—will tell you, shorebirds are difficult to tell apart. I know that in roughly 15 years as a birder, too often I have just had to say, “Well, it’s a sandpiper of some sort,” and leave it at that. Even with equipment such as a spotting scope, oftentimes shorebirds prove tricky to identify, and many field guides do not show the differences—often subtle—between

certain species, subspecies, and yearly molts. Including multiple photographs, often multiple shots of each molt, can help even the most inexperienced birder determine a shorebird down to the species level. While nonphotographic guides (field guides with drawings instead of photographs) can often include great detail, a drawing will never capture the crisp detail of a good photograph. Nonphotographic guides also tend to have fewer drawings of plumages, especially full-body drawings of juveniles and various adult plumages.

The written descriptions and figure captions are excellent features of this book. The written descriptions have several sections, including the usual for field guides: a description of the plumage, the range of the bird, the habitat it is found in, the voice, identification tips, and its size. These are all standard in any reputable field guide, but unlike many other guides, *Shorebirds* also includes a section for behavior, which may be extremely useful to shorebird identification. The picture captions are also detailed, stating the sex, age, and plumage of the bird. Often it will also describe behavior, and includes where and when the photograph was taken—an excellent tip for birding hotspots!

The book is not without its shortcomings. The written description, while detailed and expansive enough to encompass all the necessary subjects for bird identification, is not clearly broken down into the categories of breeding adult, nonbreeding adult, male, female, and juvenile. The categories *do* exist; the labels are italicized and scattered throughout the paragraph, rather than broken out into separate paragraphs or sections. In the majority of circumstances, the italicized label is at the beginning of a sentence; however, this is not always the case. While occasionally annoying and hard to distinguish, this is not enough of a problem to make the book ineffectual to birders, but a little more hunting and pecking is necessary to break out and digest the information needed.

Possibly the greatest shortcoming of the book is its lack of range maps. While maps are not necessary, they do make birding much easier by providing a quick and easy way to determine the likelihood of seeing a particular species in a certain area. Maps simply make it easier for beginning and intermediate

birders to understand the range that a bird is most likely to be found in, and this can help prevent misidentification, especially among shorebirds. Maps also provide a handy visual guide to the summer, winter, and migration ranges of birds, as well as offer a way to narrow down possible species or, if no question remains, to ascertain that a rare visitor to an area is present. A written description of a range is just as effective, but takes longer to use, and the bird may have flown away by the time the section is read.

Overall, this book is one of the best guides I have seen. It is without a doubt the best photographic guide I have ever seen. I would consider this book a great asset to any birder's collection, whether they are a serious or recreational birder. It combines the

right amount of description and photographs, neither skimming nor embellishing on one or the other. This well-balanced guide can certainly help all ranges of birders visualize and distinguish the differences between several hard-to-identify shorebirds and will help many to see the differences between the various plumages that many shorebirds have. No longer will I have to resign myself to seeing just a sandpiper.

Amanda Falk
Department of Geology
University of Kansas
amandarfalk@gmail.com