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Waterfowl of Eastern North America

By Chris G. Earley. 2005. Firefly Books: Buffalo, New York; and 3680 Victoria Park Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M2H 3K1 Canada. 158 pages. \$19.95 Paper.

This attractive bird identification book is clearly aimed at the beginner birder. It is the fourth in a series of similar books by the same author and publisher. Earley properly cautions new birders about hasty and uncertain judgments in the often perplexing task of bird identification.

A cursory review of this handsomely printed, full-color book, measuring 5½" (14.0 cm) by 8½" (21.6 cm) by ½" (1.3 cm), makes a favorable first impression. In particular, the photographs of individual birds, usually in nuptial plumage, on the water and flying, and when used in comparison with look-alike birds, are excellent. Two pages are usually devoted to each species, including photographs, a small range map, and brief text mostly descriptive of non-breeding season plumages. Two to four sentences tell a bit about each species and a sentence or two under "Nature Notes" provides additional eclectic, often trivial information.

Unfortunately, my initial favorable impressions soon changed. First, the title is a misnomer. A substantial number of the species included are not waterfowl as defined by the AOU checklist, which the author references. Rather, the author re-defines waterfowl to include other "ducklike birds", such as some species of loons, grebes, pelicans, cormorants, rails, and gallinules. Attention to these species comprises about a quarter of the pages accorded the true waterfowl.

North America and Eastern North America are not defined. By AOU definition the mainland of North America extends south through Panama, including associated islands. Consequently, some native North American species are missing. On the other hand, several exotic or species of rare or irregular occurrence are addressed (e.g., Mute Swan, Barnacle Goose, Garganey, Tufted Duck, and Smew). Oddly, four full pages are devoted to each of three species rarely (unlikely ever to be) seen by many birders (the King and Common eiders and the Long-tailed Duck); but the commonest North American duck, the Mallard, receives only two pages.

Other problems arise. The range maps are too small, especially for coastal species when the pale yellow representing winter range is cast against the light gray background. The map depicting the wintering range of the Blue-winged Teal (page 47) as including north-eastern Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and extreme southern Brazil is incorrect. Upon close examination,

the unnatural, vertically-flying shoveler (page 9) is certainly a cropped view of the horizontally-flying bird depicted on page 14 with the photo reversed and rotated 90 degrees. The photograph of a flying male Common Merganser (page 147) is mis-labeled as a Hooded Merganser.

The two-page chart titled "Seasonal Status of Waterfowl" (pages 16-17) is based solely on observations at Point Pelee National Park [Ontario]. While perhaps useful in showing relative species abundance and temporal distribution in the Great Lakes region, it has questionable relevance elsewhere.

"What can I do to help waterfowl?" (pages 130-131) is largely about nesting boxes. Only a half-dozen or so waterfowl utilize such structures. Nothing is said about North American waterfowl being protected by international treaties, federal laws, and laws and regulations of the various states and provinces.

The list of references (pages 154-155) is peculiar. Some entries are outdated (e.g., Studer, 1881) or are primarily of works of art (e.g., Brasher 1962, Lansdowne 1980). While the definitive AOU *The Birds of North America* monographs (Poole and Gill, eds.) are noted, their scientific excellence, content, and format are undescribed and their general unavailability, except in larger libraries, is unmentioned.

A number of important waterfowl references are overlooked (e.g., Delacour's four-volume *The Waterfowl of the World*; Palmer's *Handbook of North American Birds*, Volumes 2 and 3, Waterfowl; Volume 1 (Ostrich to Ducks) of the magnificent *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, edited by del Hoyo, Elliott, and Sargatal; and even the early but enduring John C. Phillips' four-volume opus, *A Natural History of the Ducks*. Despite the attention given wood ducks and nesting boxes, Frank Bellrose's splendid monograph (*Ecology and Management of the Wood Duck*) is likewise missing. All of these basic references could easily have been accommodated in the large blank space on page 155.

Much of what the novice birder learns in this book will have to be forgotten should his early interest in birding lead him forward. Perhaps the concerns and errors noted above, and others unexpressed, will be corrected in a reprinting. In the meantime one would be wiser to spend a few more dollars for one of several time-tested, authoritative field guides listed among the author's references.

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