

Alberta Birds, 1971–80, Volume 1: Non-passerines

By Harold W. Pinel, Wayne W. Smith, and Cleve R. Wershler. 1991. Calgary Field Naturalists Society, 1017-19 Avenue N.W., Calgary T2M 0Z8. 243 pp. \$15.50.

Birds attract a wide audience. The most causal watchers are those who look for the first robin of spring, others maintain feeders, while the serious call themselves birders and ornithologists. *Alberta Birds, 1971-80* will appeal to the latter groups, particularly individuals who have a strong interest in bird distribution. Those looking for illustrations, identification tips, or location of hotspots will be disappointed.

The stated goal of the authors is to summarize and analyze reports of Alberta birds for the 1970s. The data have been extracted from natural history society records, museum specimens, nest records, and publications. Records noted include migratory information, range extensions, significant breeding and wintering records, resightings of "hypothetical" species, population changes, and habitat preferences.

There is little to quarrel with in this book. More records and discussion could be asked for but is likely not feasible. The introductory section is short; locations are listed and cross-referenced to a map, significance codes are listed, and species for which interesting records have occurred in the decade are listed according to category of significance. One shortfall is the lack of discussion of what constitutes significant records, but many are intuitive or recognizable to those with a knowledge of Alberta bird distribution.

Most accounts are about a page in length and contain as many as 15 records for the decade. Dis-

cussion of typical migratory and nesting patterns are included, as are particularly significant records or those of great interest. When records indicate differences from previously published references these are highlighted. Records have been listed by year and do not require reading of the text. Some significant records have been missed, but since most are likely not published or readily accessible to the authors, the authors are not to be faulted. If birders were asked for their records, this book could easily have increased by hundreds of pages.

One problematic aspect of this, and many other bird books is the use of the term "hypothetical". Hypothetical in this volume is applied to records for which material evidence does not exist and is applied to documented sight records that lack a specimen or photograph. Many rare bird committees and authors have discarded this term and are willing to accept well-documented conclusive written descriptions. A species such as Ivory Gull can be identified and separated from other species and albinistic individuals without the need for a specimen.

While a truly comprehensive book on the birdlife of Alberta is still warranted, this book, along with the recently published *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta* will help towards this goal. The present publication is commendable as many significant records have been compiled into a single accessible book. I look forward to reading Volume 2. Passerines.

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ENVIRONMENT

The Diversity of Life

By E. O. Wilson. 1992. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 424 pp., illus. U.S. \$29.95

There is only one planet in the universe that is known to contain life, the one which we inhabit. Cataloguing the diversity of life on this little known planet has been an ongoing task for more than 2000 years and yet there are probably many generations of work left before it is complete. The greatest significance of the work completed in the last 100 years is not to be found in the tens of thousands of additions to the catalogue, but in the greater appreciation of how much is yet to be accomplished. The daunting work of the cataloguing is, however, being simplified by the rapid deletion of forms, as yet undocumented, at the hands of the cataloguers. The rate of

elimination of species, prior to knowledge of their existence, ensures that the task is dwindling.

Wilson has produced a number of syntheses on a range of biological subjects that are a joy to read. His remarkably broad knowledge and writing ability have resulted in books that appeal to, and are read by, large audiences. Sometimes opinionated and controversial, they are always thought provoking. His talents are abundantly evident in the latest book, *The Diversity of Life*. In this book he tries to impress upon the reader the extraordinary multiplicity of life, the rapid rate of its diminution, and the significance of its loss. How life on earth became diverse is not dealt with in great detail (this is not a book about evolutionary process), but the trend and present pattern is admirably documented with extensive exam-

ples drawn from disparate sources. One is left staggered by the multiplicity and richness of pattern and with a sense of urgency as the riches slip through our fingers. Just what the author intended. Far from just telling a tale of woe, Wilson also puts forward a series of practical suggestions that could be initiated to moderate the loss of biodiversity.

As well as a glossary of terms, thirty-five pages of notes at the end of the book form a bibliography for further reading. These are thoughtful additions for a book intended for a general audience, especially as the concepts and deluge of details, names and terms may be a bit overwhelming for those with little formal biological training. This latter problem is inherent in the subject itself; life is very complex and the factors effecting ecosystem integrity are very complex. It is possible only to scratch the surface in 424 pages.

As biological forms that are adapted to perceive the special and temporal environment in which we move and spend our lives, it is with great difficulty that we appreciate environments of much greater or lesser magnitude. The "deep time" of the history of the earth, about 4.5 billion years, is practically an abstract concept for minds that operate on a scale of a few decades. The existence of many millions of species spread over the entire globe, on virtually every bit of surface and volume in the biosphere, is just as intractable to "visualize" as interstellar distances. Our inability to grasp scales of this magnitude is probably a key to some of the impending disaster society finds itself facing today. Reductionist procedure for under-

standing complex systems is the basic protocol for understanding function, but once the reassembly of components reach a "critical mass" the generalizations required to maintain the ecumenical perspective result in over-simplification and distortion. This flaw is evident in many "popular" works on biodiversity and ecosystems. Wilson's unapologetic approach to complexity and scale is a welcome contribution to environmental understanding.

Authors are not generally requested to justify their products. It is usually enough that the reader gets enjoyment and the publisher profit. Wilson may have better justification and competency than most to produce such a book. The publisher has indicated the use of 50% recycled fibre (minimum 10% post-consumer waste), but one should keep in mind the consumption required to produce even "environmentally conscious" books. Among the torrent of published material presently being produced in the name of environmentalism this book may be one of the least "evil", balancing benefit of education against habitat destruction. Product consumers can further weight the side of benefit by seeking out a library copy rather than purchasing their own. I have deposited the review copy at the Ottawa Public Library.

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The Scientific Management of Temperate Communities for Conservation: The 31st Symposium of the British Ecological Society, Southampton, 1989

Edited by I. F. Spellerberg, F. B. Goldsmith and M. G. Morris. 1991. Blackwell Scientific Publications, London. 566 pp.

The Scientific Management of Temperate Communities for Conservation is the symposium volume of the successful 31st symposium of the British Ecological Society which occurred on 4-6 April 1989 in Southampton. The editors hoped to provide a volume which relayed the enthusiasm of the participants of the symposium and to make a significant contribution to conservation literature.

The information found within this volume originates mainly in the northern hemisphere, with papers from the British Isles dominating. However, the information provided is not limited by geographical location. The information is presented in a well organized manner, starting with an introduction to the importance of conservation of temperate communities, followed with papers discussing conservation of flora and fauna of communities, then terrestrial and aquatic

ecosystems, and wrapped up with discussion chapters on techniques and future research needs. Each chapter has been written by a recognized expert in the field and most were able to provide examples and discussion to promote further discussion and thought.

Unfortunately the book does have a flaw, although not a problem with the written contents. The publisher concedes all volumes of this printing are missing a number of columns on the left hand side of page 395 making this page difficult to read.

Without this defect, *The Scientific Management of Temperate Communities for Conservation* is another high quality British Ecological Society symposium proceedings. A book which would be an excellent addition to anyone's library who has an interest in temperate community conservation and management.

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