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**A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America.**—Steve N. G. Howell and Sophie Webb. 1995. Oxford University Press, Oxford. xvi + 851 pp., 71 color plates. ISBN 0-19-854013-2. Cloth, \$75.00; Paper, \$39.95.—After years of using outdated field guides in Mexico and Central America, we awaited the arrival of the *Guide to the Birds of Mexico* with great anticipation. The guide is lengthy, totaling 851 pages and 71 plates full of illustrations. Its 87-page introductory section presents brief but useful treatments of geography, climate, habitats, migration, ornithological history, conservation, birding, taxonomy, molts and plumages, structure of the species accounts, and a glossary of important terms. Species accounts include separate sections on identification, voice, habits and habitats, similar species, status and distribution within Mexico, general range, and range maps. Most, but not all, species are illustrated in the color plates, which are made more useful by brief notes regarding distribution, habitats, and field marks on the facing pages. We found much material deserving of comment regarding the *Guide*, which falls into three general categories: as a field guide, a taxonomic treatment, and a distributional summary.

*Field guide.*—Although not so titled, we assume that the primary purpose of the *Guide* is as a field guide; as such, it performs quite well. The level of detail ranks with Stiles and Skutch (*A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*) and Hilty and Brown (*A Guide to the Birds of Colombia*), making it a rich store of information regarding field marks, habits, and vocalizations. The information presented is especially abundant regarding field marks, with somewhat less detail regarding habits and ecology, especially in comparison with Stiles and Skutch. Still, the *Guide* is replete with new tidbits and observations that make it indispensable for any birder in the northern Neotropics. One criticism is that the very length of the species descriptions makes extracting particular details in field situations difficult. The authors attempted to remedy this problem by italicizing important phrases and points. However, so many points are italicized that critical field marks are often obscured, making the detail provided less useful.

The authors' treatment of intraspecific variation and potentially unrecognized species is quite useful (see below); however, their citation of subspecies for species not showing geographic variation is not. This practice, in most cases, serves only to cloud the picture with still more names, which may have little biological reality and will be of no use or importance to the average user of the book.

The plates accompanying the text are variable, certainly not living up to the glowing description on the back cover. To list a few problems, groups such as trogons and ground-doves are outlined with a dark line, making them appear artificial; the *Claravis* ground-doves are too robust, and the back of *C. mondetoura* is painted far too dark in color; the *Columba* pigeons are shown all of the same size and posture, obscuring the marked differences between, for example, *C. fasciata* and *C. nigrirostris*; the wings of most of the swifts are too broad; trogons are depicted as overly humpbacked; and the gorget color of the *margaritae* form of *Lampornis amethystinus* is too purple, and not sufficiently blue. The brief text accompanying the plates suffers from overly liberal use of the word "unmistakable," which is too like the phrase "You can't miss it" in directions to prime birding spots. In general, then, although the plates are not great works of art, generally they do a good job of communicating important field marks.

*Taxonomy.*—Although the book is not presented as a taxonomic treatment, Howell and Webb make numerous changes to generally accepted taxonomies, many of which will be used in future work by the authors and others in the region. It may be a bit unfair to judge the *Guide* as a taxonomic work, however, because the authors are evidently not well versed in avian systematics. For example, they state on page 73, "All passerines in the taxonomic sequence from larks to finches are oscines; other landbirds from pigeons through tyrant-flycatchers are known as suboscines."

On more subtle notes, on pages 61–62, "The PSC [phylogenetic species concept] often relies on trivial differences in morphology or plumage and overlooks important biological information; such an approach seems to derive from the inability of persons to understand a complex natural world. . ." Or, on page 63, "While we recognize that biochemistry can, and should, contribute another facet to understanding taxonomic relationships, such techniques are still in their infancy and most results have yet to be widely accepted." Thus, although based on extensive field experience, the authors have little theoretical basis for revising Mexican bird taxonomy.

Above the species level, the book generally follows the established "phylogenetic" sequence of the 6th edition of the AOU Check-list, making no major changes in sequences. Several quandaries as to higher-level relationships, such as that concerning the relationships of the Rosy Thrush-Tanager (*Rhodinocichla rosea*), are not mentioned. The authors make at least 22 changes in generic allocations, ranging from simple recognition of monotypic genera, such as *Phlogothraupis* (which may cause paraphyly in genera from which distinctive species were removed), to dangerous moves that imply knowledge of phylogenetic relationships. For example, merging *Stellula* and *Calyptropterus* into *Archilochus*, apart from a united *Atthis* and *Selasphorus*; submerging *Pardirallus* in *Rallus*, *Melanopitila* in *Dumetella*, *Limnothlypis* in *Helmitheros*, *Euthlypis* in *Basileuterus*, and *Xenospiza* in *Ammodramus*; and transferring *Thryomanes sissonii* to *Troglodytes* and *Parula superciliosa* to *Vermivora* all imply relationships not presently supported by phylogenetic studies or other scientific evidence.

At the species level, the authors' field experience served them well in detecting differences in many cases overlooked by ornithologists. In all, they make over 100 actual changes or suggestions regarding possible species-level breaks. Many of these adjustments are important distinctions that were long in coming, such as the rearrangements of *Aratinga*, *Glaucidium*, and *Chlorostilbon*. Other equally distinctive forms, however, were missed entirely, such as the Lamb's Screech-Owl (*Otus [cooperi] lambi*), three forms of Scaled Antpitta (*Grallaria guatemalensis*), and the Baja California Sur form of the Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*). Decisions as to whether to recognize taxa fully appear somewhat haphazard, as seen in full recognition of allopatric taxa such as *Accipiter chionogaster*, but treatment of the distinctive toucanet *Aulacorhynchus wagleri* as a subspecies of *A. prasinus*. Thus, although full of important ideas and insights regarding species-level taxonomy, the *Guide* is based on an eclectic understanding and should not be considered an authoritative taxonomy. Many of our complaints regarding taxonomic changes could have been avoided by including an Appendix summarizing taxonomic changes and their bases. To avoid augmenting the size of the book further, an Appendix could easily be

abbreviated, or even printed in small type. As it stands, however, the book presents a great number of taxonomic changes with little or no justification.

The authors make a number of changes in common names. Some of these adjustments are very reasonable, such as Eared Quetzal (*Euptilotis neoxenus*) in place of Eared Trogon. Spanish names given, however, too often are mere translations of English names, with no acceptance among Spanish speakers. Worse still, names not translated often are erroneous. For example, the term "chara" for jays is used nowhere in Mexico south to at least Chiapas (names used are "urraça," "pajaro azul," or "azulejo"); "bolsero" is given for orioles, which in Mexico are referred to as "calandria," but not for oropendolas, which do usually take that name. Because the purpose of common names should be to facilitate communication with persons lacking access to field guides or scientific literature, Howell and Webb's Spanish names are best disregarded.

*Distributional summary.*—The purpose of the range maps and distributional summaries in the *Guide* lies somewhere between that of providing general distributional data to accompany the field guide, and constituting a new distributional summary of the Mexican avifauna. Different levels of detail in different maps make comparisons difficult. See, for example, the detailed map for Brown-backed Solitaire (*Myadestes occidentalis*), as compared to the general outline provided for Slaty Vireo (*Vireo brevipennis*). In general, the maps could have been improved substantially by illustrating ranges of different subspecies groups to show the geographic situations of potential splits. Inclusion of extralimital records immediately adjacent to continuous ranges of species is not useful and only makes the maps harder to read. Finally, using dots to indicate breeding colonies, but asterisks to indicate extralimital records, crowds the map with symbols that are not readily interpretable.

Focusing on the details of bird distributions presented in the *Guide*, some errors are apparent. For example, Yellow Rails (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) still occur in the Transvolcanic Belt, as do Military Macaws (*Ara militaris*) in the southern portion of their Mexican range, and Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) in the Isthmus region of southern Mexico. The breeding ranges of the Flammulated (*Otus flammeolus*) and Elf (*Micrathene whitneyi*) owls are more extensive than shown on the maps, and Azure-hooded Jays (*Cyanolyca cucullata*) are present in the Chimalapas region of eastern Oaxaca. Published distributional records such as those of Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) in coastal Michoacan (Villaseñor, *Wilson Bulletin* 105:364–365, 1993) were missed. Therefore, whereas the *Guide's* distributional maps include much new and important information, distinguishing what is new and what was missed can at times be difficult.

Howell and Webb were appropriately cautious regarding acceptance of sight records (see their Appendix B). However, their caution did not extend to their

own sightings, as evidenced by the acceptance of their own record of an Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*) from Baja California based on a sketch, and winter records of Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) in western Mexico when the species is otherwise known only from South America in that season. Also based on observations only were Broad-billed Hummingbirds (*Cyananthus latirostris*) in coastal western Guerrero that were noted not to show signs of intergradation with nearby Doubleday's Hummingbird (*C. doubledayi*). All of these records would have benefitted enormously from limited scientific collecting, providing reliable documentation available for study and examination.

*Conclusions.*—Howell and Webb have produced an attractive book that will serve a great number of users in a wide variety of ways. The book is attractively and tastefully composed, and seems to hold up reasonably well to the abuse that accompanies field work. Typographical errors are fairly scarce (notwithstanding the unfortunate *Atlapetes gutteralis* [sic]), making reading relatively pleasant.

Some of the authors' attitudes are irksome. The contributions of systematic ornithology are undervalued, and the vast store of information in systematic collections was in many cases not tapped. For example, the authors stated that records of the kingfisher *Chloroceryle aenea* in San Luis Potosi need confirmation. Had they contacted the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science, they would have found 10 well-documented specimens! In like manner, the important contributions of Mexican scientists to our understanding of Mexican ornithology (see Escalante-Pliego et al., pp. 281–307 in *Biological Diversity of Mexico*, 1993) are all but ignored in the historical summary, as are recent contributions by other Mexican scientists (e.g. Arizmendi et al., *Avifauna de la Región de Chamela, Jalisco*, 1990; Navarro et al., *Listados Faunísticos de México. IV. Las Aves del Estado de Querétaro, México*, 1993; and Morales and Navarro, *Anales del Instituto de Biología, UNAM* 62:497–510, 1991).

It is important, however, to bear in mind the uses for which such a work is appropriate. The book provides an enormously useful aid in the study and identification of the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. As discussed above, however, it should not be taken as an authoritative systematic treatment or distributional summary; many problems could have been avoided had the book been reviewed critically by a systematic ornithologist. Nevertheless, this book belongs on the shelf and in the field pack of each and every ornithologist working in the northern Neotropics. It is by far the best field guide and summary of bird diversity available anywhere in the region.—A. TOWNSEND PETERSON AND ADOLFO G. NAVARRO-SIGUENZA, *Natural History Museum, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045, USA; and (A.G.N.-S.) Museo de Zoología, Facultad de Ciencias Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Apartado Postal 70-399, México, D.F. 04510, México.*