

Ornithological Literature

Robert B. Payne, Review Editor

FIELD GUIDE TO THE SONGBIRDS OF SOUTH AMERICA: THE PASSERINES. By Robert S. Ridgely and Guy Tudor. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, USA. 2009: 750 pages and 122 color plates with facing-page maps. ISBN: 978-0-292-71979-8. \$49.95 (paper).—There is much to celebrate with publication of this revamp and update of the first two volumes of *The Birds of South America (BOSA: Oscine passerines, 1989; Suboscine passerines 1994)* in a more compact format under a single cover. Undoubtedly the most anxiously awaited aspect of *Songbirds* is the tremendous contribution of Guy Tudor's new art; illustrations of 406 species (some as only busts) have been added to the ~1,220 previously depicted ones, a whopping 33% increase. There remain not illustrated about 347 native species of South American passerines, roughly 18% of the authors' total number of ~1,974 (excluding a few vagrants). Now represented are all but one (I think) standing genus (*Stymphalornis* antbirds, endemic to southeast Brazil).

The back cover calls attention to the need for "a more compact guide that birders can take into the field." Given that they intend to show us how to identify 1,981 species of passerine birds, some of which are hard to see well, all while traipsing through the rainforests and deserts on the Bird Continent, they may have set themselves up for disappointment. On some levels, they have succeeded, it's just hard to say whether they have tackled the monster or the monster has tackled them. Weighing in at 1.28 kg, the book *can* be carried in the field by most birders, but not very comfortably by anyone. Perhaps most tellingly, almost no one has opted to tote it on recent South American birding walks where most folks would like to be carrying a field guide. I've not yet seen anyone with the plates cut out and bound separately, all too often the fate of *BOSA*, but the specter has already come up. The ideal bulk may lie about halfway between *Songbirds* and the much smaller *Birds of South America: Non-passerines* (Erize et al. 2006, Princeton University Press).

Tudor's illustrations are wonderful; it's hard to

imagine ever seeing paintings of many of these birds that are more "spot-on." In large measure because he is an avid and highly observant birder who understands the importance of accurate shapes and postures, Tudor is able to encapsulate what we need for *field identification* in the strict confines of a *field guide*. As is inevitably the case when a large number of species is treated, a few illustrations leave much to be desired (most of which are holdovers from *BOSA*). White-bearded Antshrike (*Biatas nigropectus*, Plate 20, #3) never appears uncrested (except in a museum tray)—the new, undersized male figure and a female bust, at appropriate scale, could have admirably replaced the poor *BOSA* ones; Plain-crested Elaenia (*Elaenia cristata*, Plate 44, #7), unrecognizable as is, shows a sharp, spiky crest virtually all the time; White-winged Cotinga (*Xipholena atropurpurea*, Plate 69, #7) is a much darker "blackish-purple" as described in the text; Black-collared Swallow (*Atticora melanoleuca*, Plate 76, #10) invariably looks black-and-white (not navy blue) in the field even at close range, and the posture is atypical; and all of the pipits (*Anthus* spp., Plate 84, perhaps with the exception of Correndera Pipit, *A. correndera*) remain unidentifiable in and of themselves.

Other closely similar groups of birds, such as the dreaded "tyrannulets," are well done although there are regrettable problems with a few species that occur in syntopy (together in the same habitat) through much of their ranges, particularly Rough-legged Tyrannulet (*Phylloscopus burmeisteri*, Plate 41, #16); Greenish Tyrannulet (*P. virescens*, Plate 41, #17); and Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulet (*Phylloscopus ventralis*, Plate 46, #4). The most similar-looking small tyrannids, scattered over several plates (mostly 41, 42, 46), could have been grouped in a much more useful manner for field identification, for starters by separating exclusively Andean from non-Andean species on different plates, then bunching the members of each broad group that actually overlap geographically and occur in the same habitats. Because the small South American tyrannids, too many of which are not illustrated, present the most complex field identification

problems (female *Sporophila* seedeaters aside), I had hoped they would be given high priority in *Songbirds*.

The choice was made to insert many of the new illustrations at varying scales different from the rest of the (existing) figures on the plate. Some of the most problematic instances are Plate 52, #8, 11; Plate 53, #3, 4, 11, 13 relative to the themselves and the rest of that plate; Plate 61, #5, 7; Plate 71, #4; Plate 101, #2, 3; and Plate 114, #12 (Dickcissel [*Spiza americana*] should be significantly larger than Greenish Yellowfinch [*Sicalis olivascens*]!). It is disheartening to see the stunning Araripe Manakin (*Antilophia bokermanni*, Plate 64, #17) relegated to a corner-squeeze at about half-size, below its sister, Helmeted Manakin (*A. galeata*). Its illustration points to another unfortunate feature of all plates having new illustrations: something happened in the production stage so all of the new figures look faded relative to those in *BOSA*. Thus, the red and black on the Araripe Manakin are significantly paler or less saturated than these same colors on the Helmeted Manakin. A number of figures of females also have been newly illustrated, an important advancement, but a field guide really must treat all distinctive female plumages (of the species illustrated at all). Almost no juvenal plumages are shown or described. One of the few, Andean Laniisoma (*Laniisoma buckleyi*, Plate 66, #8), is mislabeled the adult female. I love the new illustrations of the mockingbirds (Plate 83) in flight; it would have been great to see much more of this kind of field-oriented illustration.

On the plates, each species illustration is numbered and some also have letters A, B, C, indicating the figure represents a distinctive subspecies. To interpret this information, one needs to go to the text. This cumbersome system could have been made much less so by simply putting the letters on the species' map to inform users of where that taxon (or group of taxa) is expected.

The South American distribution of each species is shown on a correspondingly numbered map on pages opposite or near its illustration, sometimes requiring a little hunting although I got used to it. I really like these maps. Several levels of geographic zoom are used to show most of the highly restricted ranges more clearly. The contrast between colors chosen for ranges, including migrants, and also rivers and political boundaries

for most countries (to the state/department level in the tightest zooms), also works well. Without having looked at most of the maps critically, I think it's fair to say the level of accuracy is admirably high. I happened to notice that the maps for Black Antbird (*Cercomacra serva*) and Blackish Antbird (*C. nigrescens*) were switched (their names are bad enough!). Similarly, numbers labeling the maps and figures for Green Honeycreeper (*Chlorophanes spiza*) and Red-legged Honeycreeper (*Cyanerpes caeruleus*) are mixed up (numbers are correct on the maps and text, so switch the species' numbers on the plate of your copy to match). Problems on the level of not showing Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin (*Neopelma chrysocephalum*) in northern Peru; of showing Long-winged Antwren (*Myrmotherula longipennis*) extensively between the Rio Napo in Peru and the Negro in Brazil where it is largely or completely absent; of missing the interface between Squamate Antbird (*Myrmeciza squamosa*, shown extensively north into Rio de Janeiro) and White-bibbed Antbird (*M. loricata*, shown far too extensively through interior Bahia, and ranging well into northern coastal São Paulo); of White-breasted Antbird (*Rhegmatorhina hoffmannsi*) crossing (and extensively so) the Rio Jurueña into northern Mato Grosso; of Serra do Mar Tyrannulet (*Phylloscartes difficilis*) occurring all along the coast of southeast Brazil where known from only a few scattered points high in the mountains; and of showing the threatened Black-and-white Monjita (*Xolmis dominicanus*) over much too wide an area in Rio Grande do Sul (it was never known to be so amply distributed, even historically)—are somewhat more frequent. Maps for a few very poorly known birds are annoyingly problematic. For example, an undocumented, single-observer sight-record of the ultra-rare Kinglet Calyptura (*Calyptura cristata*, Plate 66, #6) in coastal northern São Paulo is mapped and cited in the text as if it were fact! This map should show only the single point of known occurrence (from late Oct 1996) just below Teresópolis, Rio de Janeiro with an arrow pointing to a red dot and at most a question mark anywhere else; the maximum zoom should have been provided here.

In a field guide, the species accounts should foster transformation of the painting on the plate to a living bird by infusing vital information on habitat and behavior while enabling even the most difficult field identifications. My overall impres-

sion is that over 90% of the species accounts in *Songbirds* are good to excellent; space limitations in the Journal precluded my elaboration of examples. Transcriptions of vocalizations of most species are offered, which is usually better than not having anything but not nearly as helpful as actually hearing the sounds. I highly recommend obtaining recordings (primary vocalizations of most species have been published or are available on the internet) ahead of travel to South America.

The taxonomy used in *Songbirds* closely parallels that of the standing South American Checklist Committee (SACC) of the American Ornithologists' Union. The SACC was obviously heavily referenced although it was not cited anywhere in a 16-page section toward the back of the book titled "Notes on Taxonomy and English Names." However, the authors "expressly note" (page 2) that they "adhere to the decisions on English names and taxonomy" that were recently published on behalf of the International Ornithological Congress (IOC; Gill et al. 2006–2009, *Birds of the World, Recommended English Names*, Princeton University Press). The first bird in the book, Campo Miner (*Geositta poeciloptera*), provides a poignant example of the taxonomic swirl that underlies *Songbirds*. It boils down to: (1) the IOC classification, which incorporated new information up to the end of 2004, maintaining the long-standing *Geobates* contrary to a 2003 publication suggesting it be merged into *Geositta*; (2) the SACC invoking primarily genetic data published in 2005 to merge *Geobates* into *Geositta*; and finally (3) *Songbirds* incontrovertibly following the SACC, not the IOC.

Ornithologists and birders frequently express their opinions that some taxa or populations of birds could or should be considered distinctive enough to merit species status. The unilateral splitting or lumping of species by authors of such works as *Songbirds* and other guide books in which no data or analyses of the case(s) are presented for peer-review or independent evaluation (now or a hundred years from now) reside in a bubble drifting around the perimeter of science, a "gray" subspecies of taxonomy. In *Songbirds*, Ridgely and Tudor are "gray" on ~25 taxa traditionally considered subspecies. All are interesting cases worthy of focused study, and the SACC and other taxonomic committees will soon consider not only all of them but also all of the equally or more interesting cases that, for one

reason or another (we have no data to judge), were not mentioned in *Songbirds*. For one example, the *Stigmatura* wagtail-tyrants go from two to four species absent any analysis at all but the well-supported (and accepted by the SACC) elevation to species status of *Schistocichla leucostigma saturata* (Roraiman Antbird, in the Spot-winged Antbird complex) published in 2005 was not recognized.

English names are not bound by scientific principles, and their usage for South American birds became particularly unstable after the mid-1980s, when *BOSA* introduced changes to names of long standing. In *Songbirds*, the 2006 IOC classification is followed, even in cases where a novel name of Ridgely's from *BOSA* (e.g., Noble Antthrush for *Chamaeza nobilis*) was rejected in favor of the traditional name (Striated Antthrush). But this has set up some conflicts. For example, a nomenclatural note on page 691 reads, "We rename *Mitrephanes phaeocercus* the Northern (rather than the Common) Tufted Flycatcher, preferring to restrict the use of the name "Common" to species that truly are so." This flycatcher was described from Mexico and most of its range lies in Middle America. Ridgely and Gwynne (1989, *A Guide to the Birds of Panama*, Princeton University Press) introduced the modifier "Common," and described its status in Panama as "Common." Pointless self-reversal like this does not inspire confidence and promotes instability of names. True to form, Ridgely has not resisted unveiling a few English names that almost seem designed to shake things up. My vote for the standout is ... "Shrike-like Tanager" (in place of the entrenched White-banded Tanager, *Neothraupis fasciata*), not to be confused with *Lanio* Shrike-Tanagers. In sum, there is a great deal of arbitrariness displayed throughout the taxonomy and English naming used in *Songbirds*.

The new Ridgely and Tudor *Field Guide to the Songbirds of South America* should become a standard in the libraries of all birders, ornithologists, and conservationists interested in neotropical birds, and it is sure to make birds more accessible to more people, which is at the grassroots level of effective bird conservation. If you ever dream of birding in South America, buy and thoroughly enjoy this book. Take it to South America with you and use it to ably identify the vast majority of passerine birds you will see.—BRET WHITNEY, Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science, 119 Foster

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PALEOGENE BIRDS. By Gerald Mayr. Springer-Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg, Germany. 2009: 262 pages and 64 figures. ISBN: 978-3-540-89627-2 (\$189.00 USD, cloth; ~\$25 per chapter in electronic form).—The Paleogene Period, from ~65 to 23 million years ago, witnessed profound shifts in the earth system including the origin of permanent ice sheets in Antarctica. Global cooling from peak “greenhouse Earth” conditions is linked to a retreat of Eocene paratropical forests previously extending to the poles and the development of the “icehouse” conditions of the present. Across the same time period, shifts in the ecology, diversity, and distribution of nearly every part of the biota are inferred. New insights into every part of these Paleogene shifts have been rapidly accruing in recent years. The record of sea-surface temperatures and global climates has been significantly refined, and vertebrate paleontologists continue to further inform our knowledge of changing faunas.

The rapid pace of new discoveries of fossil bird species in recent years belies the general idea of their impossibly fragmentary record. The early history of extant crown clade avian diversity, species of which are parts of the major bird lineages alive today, has been partially tracked in several short review articles eager to summarize the rush of new data recovered in recent years. Because relevant paleo-ornithological discoveries are moving forward at an arguably unprecedented pace, any summaries must be proximate, abbreviate, and soon out of date. However, the last book-length review focusing on an overlapping time period and set of taxa is the 1999 Second Edition of A. Feduccia’s “*The Origin and Evolution of Birds*” (Yale University Press). With a few exceptions, including updating several chapters presenting the author’s views on the dinosaurian affinities of birds, most of its content is from the 1996 First Edition. It is into this context that Gerald Mayr, Curator of Ornithology at the Senckenberg Institute, offers a significant contribution, a detailed new guide to fossil avian diversity from the first part of the Cenozoic. In ~250 dense small-format pages, “*Paleogene Birds*” neatly presents insights into ~40 million years of the early evolution of extant bird lineages. The book is largely organized taxonomically but also includes a brief overview of

principal fossil localities, a review of debates concerning the relationships among major clades, and conclusions regarding the historical patterns of avian diversity in the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

Mayr, who recognizes in his preface that any review in the present intellectual context will quickly need updating as new discoveries are made, quite thoroughly summarizes the earlier literature but focuses on key recent discoveries, a great many of which he has made. The community would profit from this book even if it were merely a synthesis of Mayr’s own work. A prolific author, he has published over 150 papers since 1995, more than any other paleo-ornithologist over the same time period.

Ornithologists of all kinds will be intrigued by the bizarre turns that avian evolution took in the first part of the Cenozoic. The book presents exceptional fossils that record novel ecologies and distributions for well known groups: e.g., Old World hummingbird relatives, giant flightless divers, and sea birds with bony pseudo-teeth. However, at ~\$189 USD for a new copy of this slim volume, many non-specialists may elect to visit their local libraries or hope for a lower-price soft cover edition. The intended primary readership of the book is the paleo-ornithological community. However, it will also serve as an important reference for other ornithologists and paleontologists seeking access to specific parts of the literature. The book seems organized for, and best approached by, skipping from section to section, rather than reading from cover to cover. Illustration print quality is excellent, although the specialist might wish for an oversized volume with color illustrations and larger photographs.

One is well served by the detailed presentation of Mayr’s perspective as that perspective is often thought-provoking. Much of the data presented is fascinating, and comments made as small asides could be expanded into journal articles of considerable interest. Some of the more controversial ideas forwarded by Mayr and summarized in the book concern phylogenetic relationships among major lineages of birds; e.g., regarding the affinities of penguins with parts of former “Pelecaniformes.” While not all readers will agree with these hypotheses, all are supported by clearly presented evidence that is well positioned to inform new research questions.

We still have much to learn about patterns and