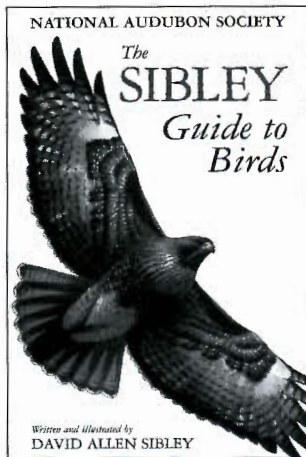


by Dan Williams



The Sibley Guide to Birds. David Allen Sibley. 2000. National Audubon Society/Alfred A. Knopf 544 pp.

Birds of North America: A New Focus on the Field. Kenn Kaufman. 2000. Houghton Mifflin. 384 pp.

To be successful, the author of a field guide must anticipate the expectations of the guide's targeted readership. Meeting those expectations is, however, only part of the equation. The publisher and author must also be certain

to avoid creating unrealistic expectations in the minds of the audience by crisply defining the author's mission. I am happy to report that both authors and their publishers have hit their marks in all respects. As a result, the odd occurrence of their near-simultaneous release, which almost certainly would have invited comparison, was essentially avoided (although there have been a few attempts to compare the two), making both books able to be appreciated without competitive sniping from the camps of their enthusiasts. Sibley and Kaufman, widely regarded as the two current leading field bird authorities, aimed at entirely different audiences. Each brings to bear their considerable repository of knowledge and skill. They tried new, and different, methods of writing a field guide, and they struck their marks.

David Sibley aimed for advanced birders, and wrote to impart to that audience many of the detailed field tips he has gleaned from his years in the field. He starts with the assumption the readership was already very knowledgeable about the basics of each species. Consequently, his book is very lean on text and very long on the illustrations, which are superbly crafted to show field marks. Each species warrants a minimum of one-half page, set up vertically, although species with a wide array of plumage (buteos, gulls) merit the broader coverage of one or two pages. The text is mostly at the bottom of the page, with a range map (more on those later). Many of the illustrations are refined field sketches, with brief, but instructive, notations of critical, but sometimes inscrutable, marks which need to be noted. These impart many of the keys used by advanced birders for years, but which aren't necessarily highlighted in prior guides (i.e. the buffy streak at the under-tail coverts of female and juvenile Green-winged Teal).

Illustrations

Each family is pictured in a series of small illustrations at the beginning of that section of the book, and then broken down into the genera, and text gives a very brief overview of the characteristics of the family. Sibley is a master birder and habitual field artist and note-taker, and his sketch details are impressive. The empids are particularly good, and provide an excellent set of illustrations and tips for identifying that often troublesome genus. Some of the marks illustrated get pretty

complex (i.e. the differences in wing shape between Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds on p. 299).

The vertical arrangement allowed Sibley to present many illustrations (an amazing 6,600 in all) of each species, covering juvenile, adult, and seasonal plumages as well as flight poses and front views of perched birds. He also offers silhouettes of most species of raptors (and some passerines) for comparison of flight shapes and wing-beat

His illustrations of passerines in flight, both dorsal and ventral views, has not really been tried in a major field guide before, and they offer a refreshing new feature to the genre. While the flight illustrations are often small, they are effective, and allow detail of relative length of wings or tail to be used in comparison to similar species, or to show the tail pattern.

A significant portion of Sibley's text is devoted to sound, including flight calls. Phonics, as applied to bird vocalizations, is difficult, and there is not necessarily consensus regarding the phonetic accuracy. Sibley acknowledges as much in the introduction, when he writes "words at best provide a very feeble sound impression." So, why spend valuable text space on sound? I regard such extensive discussion as having limited value. It would have been better to include a CD-ROM supplement, even at extra cost, to present the sounds. With the recent emphasis on flight calls and call notes, Sibley had an opportunity to make an even greater contribution to field birders through such a supplement.

Range Maps

The major flaw in this guide is the scheme for range maps. They aren't very good. Each small map depicts all of North America without focusing on a particular region, where appropriate, resulting in a number of inaccuracies, and making many maps difficult to read. While range maps are not necessarily as misleading to an advanced birder, addressing the guide to that audience invites their criticism when they find errors, and these maps have plenty, certainly as they apply to Illinois.

One commentator wrote that he had discovered at least 58 errors in the range maps for Illinois alone, with up to 28 major errors, including five species listed there that are not even on the state list (Anna's Hummingbird, Lewis's Woodpecker, Western Wood-Pewee, Virginia's Warbler, and Hermit Warbler)! Nine species on the Illinois list are not reflected on the maps at all. As a further detraction, the distributions are often inaccurate for our state. In the map key, Sibley notes the green dots represent locations of rare occurrence (may be a single record or up to a few records a year). The dots are included to show broad patterns of occurrence, not necessarily precise details of rare records. The problem is that, having made that disclaimer, he ignores it, and tries to sharp-shoot the locations of rare species. Often, they are wrong, both in location and in distribution frequency. Active birders in Illinois know that Greater White-fronted Goose and American White Pelican are much more common than a green dot connotes. And, what about Short-billed Dowitcher? Accurate range maps are useful and informative, but, to be so, they require a lot of research. These maps did not receive the attention they deserved.

Plumage Sequence

One of the really helpful features of the guide is Sibley's inclusion of an array of the major regional forms for various