

Book Reviews

A Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America by Sheri L. Williamson. 2001. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. Softcover, \$22.00. ISBN0-618-02496-4.

Hummingbirds of North America; the Photographic Guide by Steve N. G. Howell. 2002. San Diego, CA: Academic Press. Softcover, \$29.95. ISBN0-12-356955-9.

After much anticipation, hummingbird enthusiasts have now been treated with not one but two fine field guides to help them understand and identify these small birds in North America. Given the similarity of these books and their almost simultaneous publication, a comparative review is appropriate.

Both authors are well qualified to write such a guide. Hummingbird aficionados will recognize Sheri Williamson as cofounder of the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory and contributor to many internet hummingbird-listservs. She is an active hummingbird bander who has banded several thousand individuals of 16 species. She leads birding and natural history tours and lectures on hummingbirds and other wildlife of the Southwest. Her articles have appeared in a variety of scientific and popular publications. Birders will recognize Steve N. G. Howell as a research associate at Point Reyes Bird Observatory in California, birding tour leader, and author of a number of popular birdfinding and field guides. He has published numerous scientific articles on bird taxonomy and identification, including several on hummingbirds of Mexico and Central America.

Williamson's book (hereafter, FGH) is part of the Peterson Field Guide series, and as such presents the photographic plates and species accounts in separate parts of the book. This hummingbird guide is 263 pages long and contains detailed information on all 24 species of hummingbirds recorded in North America. In addition, Williamson usefully includes accounts of seven more species considered possible or hypothetical — species such as Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, and Canivet's Emerald. Howell's book (hereafter, HNA), published as part of the Natural World Series by Academic Press, is much larger in size than is the FGH, and as such is more of a reference book than field guide. It is 219 pages long and like the FGH contains detailed information on all 24 species of hummingbirds recorded in North America. Over 200 photographs are interspersed throughout the book; color paintings by Sophie Webb are used where good photographs were unavailable.

Both guides begin nicely by introducing the natural history of the hummingbird family. Topics such as taxonomy and topography, plumage and molt, habitat and behavior are addressed. The FGH provides additional information on using plants and feeders to attract hummingbirds. It also discusses hotspots to watch hummingbirds in the U. S. The HNA focuses on

hummingbird topography and identification in the introduction, dedicating four pages to large pictures illustrating the parts of the hummingbird and several more pages of explanatory text; the FGH shows hummingbird topography on one page containing a handful of small pictures.

The FGH contains 62 pages of plates where photographs and explanatory text are on facing pages. The first 17 plates show adults and immatures of each sex for nearly all species covered in the guide. Plates 18-23 show close-up head photographs for various categories of hummingbirds: adult and immature *Selasphorus*, *Archilochus*, and *Calypte*, southwestern species, large hummingbirds, etc. Plates 24-29 show close-up spread tail photographs for the same categories. Plates 30-31 show hybrids, abnormal plumages (e. g., albinism), and even a few sphinx moths which novices often confuse with hummingbirds. Eight photographs are on each page, with the typical Peterson Guide arrows pointing to key field marks which are discussed in text on the facing page. The HNA provides a plethora of well-captioned photos in the species accounts in lieu of plates.

The last half of the FGH contains the species accounts, without photographs. The text is detailed, with measurements, descriptions, sounds, behavior, habitat, distribution, status and conservation, subspecies and taxonomic relationships, and plumage variation and molt information. References follow each species account. Exceptionally detailed range maps illustrate breeding and nonbreeding ranges in the United States, Mexico and Central America. Seasonal records of vagrants or out-of-range birds are also shown by symbols on these maps where appropriate. The locations of all records are illustrated for very rare species. For the more common migrants, separate maps use isochron lines to illustrate average arrival dates in 10-day increments.

The species accounts in the HNA are similar in content to those of the FGH. Footnotes within the text point to exact references at the end of each species account. Range maps are only included for eight common species, though the status and distribution for all species are described and footnoted in the text. The few range maps shown are typical of many basic field guides — broad strokes with assorted colors to give a general impression of breeding and nonbreeding ranges. Howell provides line drawings of tail patterns and wing shape for the more common hummingbirds. In addition to the expected bibliography and glossary in both guides, the last few pages of the HNA contain a list of nectar plants, hummingbird organizations and other resources that might be of interest to hummingbird enthusiasts.

It is clear that both authors are experts in their fields, and I have no problems with the accuracy of the species accounts. Whether or not you prefer a particular guide will likely come down to your personal opinion of a few key differences between the guides: range maps, photograph quality, species coverage, layout, and how the identification information is presented.

The FGH excels in providing well-researched range maps based on published information. This alone is worth the price of the book for those who thrive on status and distribution information. While some may quibble about

the detailed accuracy of these maps, the attempt to illustrate *every* species' occurrence in as much detail as possible given the available information should be applauded. Williamson's attempt to show arrival dates for common migrant species is useful as well. The range maps in the HNA are very little improved over those in standard field guides and as such make no real contribution to the guide.

Williamson also provides excellent in-hand photographs of head and tails for many of the species likely to be encountered by hummingbird banders, making the FGH valuable to that group of researchers or those lucky enough to get great looks at such features in the wild. The line drawings of tail features in the HNA are good, but in this case photographs seem to do more justice to the features than pen and ink. The HNA's strength lies in the 200+ larger photographs and detailed captions. By allowing no more than three photographs to a page, Howell is able to use larger photos, which in turn show greater detail and still leave ample room for excellent captions. Usually two or three photographs of the same age/sex are shown. Even without captions on the same page, the eight photographs per the smaller page of the FGH fall short of providing the amount of discernable detail required in many cases. Usually one or two photographs of the same age/sex are shown, not counting the head and tail shots. In addition to pointing out key field marks and comparisons between species in the captions, The HNA also includes the name of the photographer, the location, and the date each photograph was taken. The value of these latter two items will not be lost on anyone interested in comparing plumage characteristics, including molt patterns, between places or dates.

In keeping with the Peterson Field Guide format, the FGH provides standard descriptions with thorough detail in the text accompanying the plates. Howell writes in more conversational tones and tends to focus more on field marks separating similar species. Consider these adult female Black-chinned Hummingbird photo captions:

FGH (p. 62): "Dull green to golden green above, *forecrown dull gray to grayish tan*, blending to dull green in hindcrown. Pale gray below, sides washed gray-green, often with tawny to cinnamon patch on lower flank. Cheek dull gray, lores dusky. Throat unmarked or with variable dusky streaking or spotting at center of gorget. Tail square to slightly notched or double-rounded, extends slightly beyond wingtips. Central tail feathers (R₁) green, with or without diffuse dark band at tip. R₂ gray-green tipped black; R₃ like R₂ but narrowly tipped white; R₄, R₅ pointed, broadly tipped white. *Bill long, slightly to moderately decurved.*"

HNA (p. 143): [one of three photos with captions showing this age and sex] "The grayness of face and underparts, and even some dark on the throat, suggest Anna's Hummingbird but note the relatively long bill, small head, and, especially, the relatively narrow inner primaries (with P7 strikingly broader) which identify this as an *Archilochus*. The long bill and blunt P10 (plus the overall relatively broad and truncate primaries, lacking a notch on the inners) indicate Black-chinned. William E. Grenfell, Placer Co., California. June 1995."

There is no shortage of valuable information in the FGH species accounts, yet I find the physical layout of the HNA text to be more reader friendly. Subheadings within the species accounts are blue in the HNA, black accompanied by a small descriptive icon in the FGH. Species names at the beginning of each species account are very large and bold in the HNA with ample white space before and after. They are only slightly larger than the subheadings and bold in the FGH, with virtually no white space before and after. The result is that the beginning of each species account and subsequent subheadings tend to jump out at the reader in the HNA. Readers almost need to search for information in the FGH, which seems cramped by comparison.

The footnotes within the text, the emphasis on separating similar species in the photograph captions, and the lack of general hummingbird attracting information in the introduction lead to a more scholarly tone in Howell's guide. Williamson's guide, on the other hand, seems written for a broader audience given her coverage of general hummingbird topics, such as hummingbird-watching organizations, hotspots, flowers, and feeders. Layout shortcomings of the FGH almost certainly stem from constraints placed on the author by the publishing company in keeping with the Peterson Field Guide format.

Whatever your interest in hummingbirds, you'll probably find yourself wishing you had both guides at some point. I highly recommend both, but Howell's may be most attractive if I had to choose just one guide for those interested in identifying California's hummingbirds at their feeders. On the other hand, if I lived in the southeastern USA where an increasing number of hummingbirds spend the winter, or in the desert southwest or Florida where a few first North American records are possible, the FGH range maps and treatment of potential vagrants would sway me that way. Since I live in Idaho . . . I bought both!

Stacy Jon Peterson

Corrigenda

In the Spring 2002 issue of the *CVBC Bulletin*, the "Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area" was consistently, but incorrectly, referred to as the "Yolo Basin Wildlife Area." This state-owned wildlife area, in Yolo County between Sacramento and Davis, is also known as the "Vic Fazio Wildlife Area."