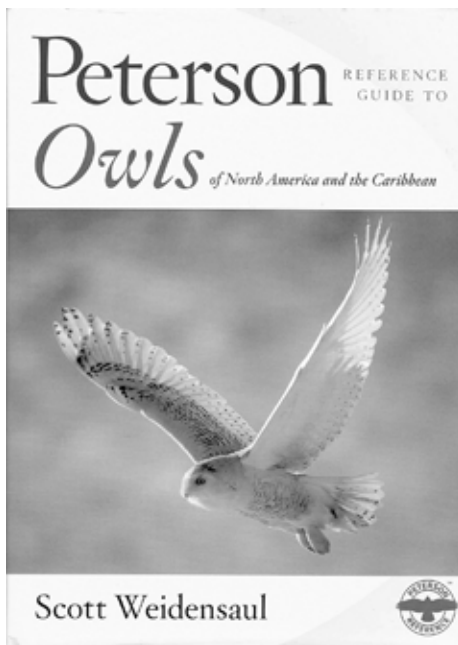


BOOK REVIEWS

Compiled and Reviewed by Chris Siddle

Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean by Scott Weidensaul. 2015. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY. 10003, (www.hmhc.com). 18.5 x 26 cms. 326 colour photographs. 333 pages. Hardcover. \$57.00 Can.



Scott Weidensaul, a widely known naturalist-writer and Pulitzer Prize finalist for his wonderful book on bird migration, *Living on the Wind*, has compiled an excellent reference to the 39 species of owls living in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean Islands north of Trinidad. Only Old World owls accidental to North America are excluded.

A 23-page introduction summarizes the various theories concerning the reversed sexual dimorphism that most owls exhibit, the current rapidly evolving state of owl systematics and taxonomy, owl topography, moult, aberrant plumages, hybridization,

and vocalizations.

The text comprises 39 species accounts divided into three artificial groups. These fall into three groups. Group one includes the relatively well-known species: Snowy Owl, Great Horned Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Great Gray Owl. Sections about measurements, longevity, range, taxonomy, subspecies, etymology, distribution, migration, identification, plumages, vocalizations, habitat and niche, reproduction, behaviour, and status occupy between 12 and 16 pages per species and are presented in a factual but readable form.

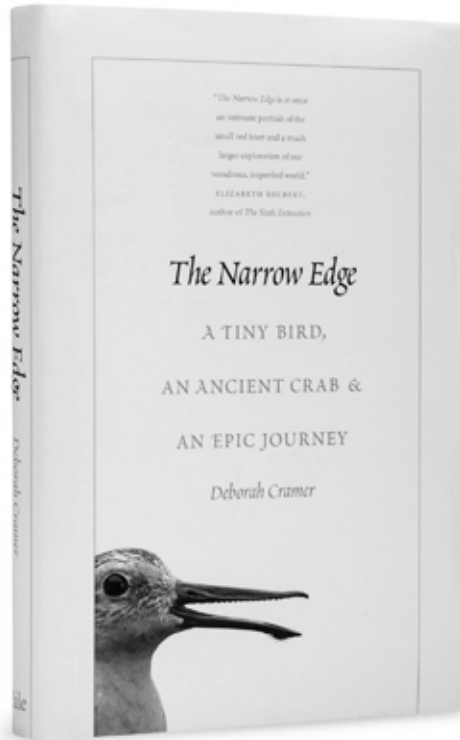
Group two includes 14 species of familiar but less well known owls: Northern Pygmy- Owl, Burrowing Owl, Boreal Owl, Long-eared Owl, Spotted Owl, Barred Owl, Western Screech- Owl, Barn Owl, Flammulated Owl, Short-eared Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, Elf Owl, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, and Whiskered Screech-Owl. These accounts run between seven and 10 pages each.

The final group includes 20 poorly known Neotropical owls including the spectacular Black-and-white Owl, Crested Owl, Stygian Owl, Striped Owl, Jamaican Owl, Bare-legged Owl, five species of Mexican screech-owls, and four species of pygmy-owl. These accounts occupy only two to five and a half pages each, more frequently the former than the latter.

Owls of North America and the Caribbean is well illustrated as are all the Peterson reference guides. Group one species have an average of about 15 images per account showing different ages and plumages, nests and young, hunting, and other behaviour. Group two averages 10 photos per species. Group three, the poorly known Neotropical species, average over three images each; the photos are often the highlights of the accounts because they have seldom been published.

There are several owl reference books on the market. *Owls of North America and the Caribbean* is probably the most detailed and most profusely illustrated, written by a man who clearly loves owls and one who, in his spare time, has spent decades banding them. Highly recommended.

The Narrow Edge: A Tiny Bird, An Ancient Crab and An Epic Journey by Deborah Cramer. 2015. Yale University Press (sales.press@yale.edu). 293 pages. Chapter notes. 31 page bibliography. Maps, figures and drawings. Hardcover. \$29.50 Can.



The bird of the subtitle is the Red Knot, *Calidris canutus*, a plump, medium-sized sandpiper. “Tiny” is a relative term, used here to reinforce the bird’s remarkable tenacity to survive some of the world’s worst weather and to travel extraordinary distances even for a migratory bird. The Red Knot is truly a superb migrant. The subspecies *C. c. rufu* breeds on the tundra in the Canadian archipelago in our highest Arctic, and winters 12,000 miles to the south at the bitter end of South America, on the mud flats of Bahia Lomas, and Tierra del Fuego. Its migration from nesting grounds to winter’s rest spans almost the entire western hemisphere.

However, a bird can be tough as nails and still

be in trouble when it runs out of places to live. Once plentiful, the knot’s population has been steadily dropping for over a century, as have those of several other shorebirds. The population of Ruddy Turnstones along the east coast of North America has plunged 75% since 1979. Semipalmated Sandpipers have declined 79% in their wintering grounds in South America’s Guianas. Also declining are Whimbrels, Lesser Yellowlegs and the familiar Killdeer. Where trends are known, about half the 50 million shorebirds that breed in the Arctic have disappeared in the last half-century.

Shorebirds, even super-migrants like the Bar-tailed Godwit that flies non-stop for 7,200 miles from Alaska to the South Pacific, must eventually alight to find high quality food for fueling their mega-flights. And high quality food like the eggs of the ancient Horseshoe Crab in the case of the Red Knot, are found only in a few favoured locations along the route. Overharvest the horseshoe crabs, drain wetlands, develop beach fronts, drown islands and you destroy the narrow edge between the land and water essential to hungry and tired shorebirds. The birds’ tenuous grip on the hem of life is further reduced. The fabric of the ecosystem in which the knot plays a role is fragile and our unwitting efforts to settle and make a living along the edge have begun what marine biologist and writer Carl Safina calls “the great unraveling that [we] are inflicting on this planet’s co-voyagers”. Resources like the great east coast fisheries that used to be taken for granted as boundless, have become so marginalized and fought over that no-harvesting laws even within national parks and reserves are being challenged in court. Park managers find themselves attempting to “prove” to a judge that the park or reserve in question is vital to the creatures that live within it.

In her controlled, superlative prose, science writer Deborah Cramer follows the knots north. She notes the deteriorating condition of their edge habitat, the shorelines of the Atlantic and the dwindling of the birds’ food supplies as the birds stop at locations, like Delaware Bay, where once Horseshoe Crabs came ashore to lay their eggs. Thousands of knots, turnstones and gulls used to feast on this rich food supply, but now biomedical companies scramble to harvest the last of the crabs for their blood, used in pharmaceutical testing. She describes other

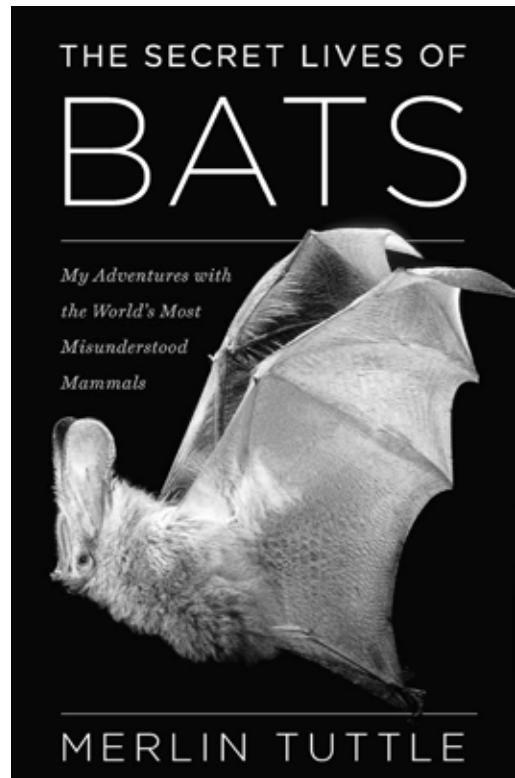
grave problems facing knots and other shorebirds including rising sea levels, neonicotinoid pesticide contamination and human disturbance of shorebirds on beaches. Finally, ever alert for curious and hungry Polar Bears she treads the high arctic, searching for the gravel depressions where the knots have laid their eggs on open tundra or stony ridges.

Read *The Narrow Edge*... and I guarantee that you will gain new respect for the endangered Red Knot and its threatened shorebird kin that span the globe in their ancient migrations. The cost to you will be emotional, a disturbing sadness that even as we learn that we share the planet with amazing creatures like the Red Knot and the Horseshoe Crab, we realize these fragile, magnificent birds of the wind are being forced by our activities to inhabit the narrowest of edges and one day soon may slip off into oblivion. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in the environment and a love of exemplary writing.

The Secret Lives of Bats: My Adventures with the World's Most Understood Mammals by Merlin Tuttle. 2015. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10016. 14.5 x 21.5. 57 small colour photographs. 271 pages including 11 pages of references. Index. Hardcover. \$34.00 Can.

Combining accounts of his life-long career as a biologist working with the world's bats with a very strong conservation message that bats are essential to healthy environments despite many people's fearful aversion to them, Tuttle has written a compelling book, part science, part adventure narrative, the subtitle of which says it all.

Written in a plain but entertaining style *The Secret Lives of Bats*... begins with Tuttle as a teenager exploring a cave with his father near Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1959. They discover several thousand Gray Myotis, a small poorly known bat that Tuttle was to study for the next decade and a half. During the course of his investigations he was to run afoul of moonshiners who used the same Tennessee caves as bases for their stills. In what seems to be typical for this charismatic man, Tuttle was able to turn one moonshiner, a potential enemy, into a good friend who invited him to dinner and to sleep over at his wooden shack. Tuttle accepted the invitation but



later realized that when he was given a bed at the impoverished hillbilly home, the eight children who usually occupied the bed had to sleep on the floor!

After graduate school Tuttle investigated the Common Vampire Bat of Mexico and Venezuela. He found that the species was only common where people had introduced cattle on which the bats fed, silently creeping upon the animals' necks to nick a vein and lap up the resulting blood flow. Unfortunately for all the other bat species in the area, local residents considered all bat species vampires and regularly burned out every cave they could find, destroying innocent and beneficial bats that help spread forest seeds and pollinate some of the farmers' most valued plants.

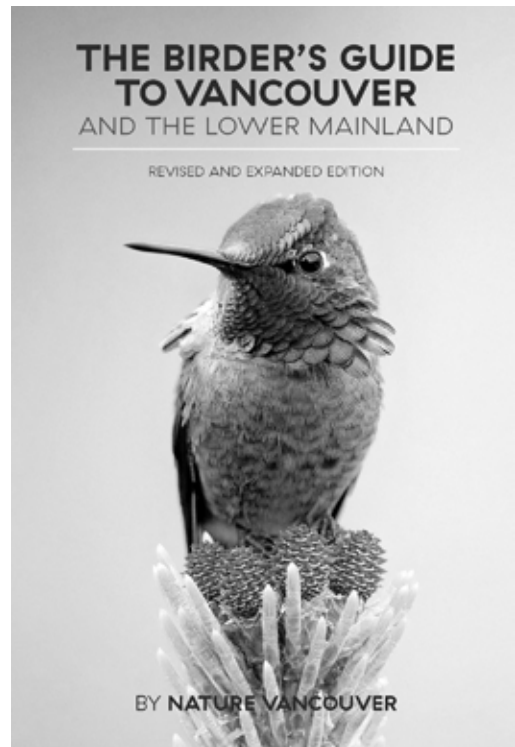
The balance of *The Secret Lives of Bats*... follows a similar course with Tuttle arriving to find the local citizens considering bats to be loathsome and dangerous creatures and destroying them whenever

they could. Tuttle and colleagues become good will ambassadors for bats, educating locals while photographing bats for publications like National Geographic, a magazine with which Tuttle has had a long association. His work for Bat Conservation International takes him to places like Cuba, Ecuador, Kenya, Samoa, and Australia and his research reveals that almost all bats are of great benefit to humanity through insect control, and pollination of valuable plants, and nary a one goes out of its way to attack people, with the exception of the Common Vampire Bat, which will take blood from humans sleeping without protective nets. Tuttle finds bats easy to tame, friendly and possessing remarkable memories while displaying a host of amazing adaptations to the niches they fill in nature and in his book shares his enthusiasm for bats with his readers. *The Secret Lives of Bats...* is a fascinating book, entertaining and informative.

As the founder of Bat Conservation International, Tuttle forges a long-lasting relationship with National Geographic magazine that enables him to popularize bats, educate a wide audience to bats' fascinating "secret lives" and to dispel the fearsome myths that still attend so many species. As a narrative of the difference that one person can make in the lives of the creatures that he shares the nights with, and as a primer of bat biology, *The Secret Lives of Bats...* would be hard to beat. Highly recommended.

The Birder's Guide to Vancouver and the Lower Mainland (Revised and Expanded Edition) by Nature Vancouver. 2016. Harbour Publishing, PO Box 219, Madeira Park, BC. V0N 2H0. 15 x 23 cms. 275 pages. 225 colour photographs. Several appendices including a seasonal checklist of all birds of the Greater Vancouver area. Index. Softcover. About \$22.

This may be the best bird-finding guide I have ever seen for any place. Twice the length of its predecessor, *A Bird Watching Guide to the Vancouver Area, British Columbia* (1993) by the Vancouver Natural History Society, *The Birder's Guide...* contains significantly more sites for Greater Vancouver and the Lower Mainland (33 sites versus 24 in the previous edition), from the Tsawwassen ferry causeway in the west to Golden Ears Provincial Park in the east, and provides



much more detail than the previous publication. The new book is much more attractive, from the stunning front cover portrait of a male Anna's Hummingbird by Michelle Lamberson to the final crystal images, a flying Whimbrel by John Gordon and a Pacific Golden-Plover by Liron Gertsman.

Each site is illustrated with one to two photos of the area, good for giving first-time visitors an idea of the kind of ground they will be covering, and a colour map, showing scale, road names and trails, and everything else a person would find useful.

Each site is divided into an introduction suggesting prime visiting times, a general idea of habitat, if the area has wheel-chair accessibility, and washrooms. Often a brief history is given to enrich the visitor's sense of place. This is followed by a section of detailed directions to the site. For those more map than text oriented, the maps in general are very good. Important streets and physical features are clearly named. The most frequently used route to the site is

shown in special white highlighting.

The birds one might see at the site are described according to season, habitat and location, so that a description of Blackie Spit, for example, begins with the common birds one would encounter in mid-summer around the parking lot, the importance of tidal levels in this location, and birds to expect at low and high tides in general. The remainder of the text explains what birds are possible on mudflats, on the salt water, around the estuary, on the sheltered side of the spit, and in the shrubbery along the paths. Special attention is given to the seasonality of shorebirds, the major reason a birders go to Blackie Spit to begin with. Rarities that have occurred at each site are named but text is not wasted on details which would be better presented in an annotated checklist.

A Birder's Guide to Vancouver and the Lower Mainland contains a separate section of notes on locating 88 species of special interest. These include: 1) widespread western birds such as Western Tanager and Townsend's Solitaire, of particular interest for visitors from central and eastern Canada and the United States as well as birders from overseas; 2) species restricted in Canada to southwestern BC such as Anna's Hummingbird, Bushitit and Black-throated Gray Warbler; 3) ocean birds of the west coast like Rhinoceros Auklet; 4) northern birds that winter in the area but are infrequent farther south such as Snowy Owl; and 5) rare shorebirds such as Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Ruff that occur annually or almost so around the Greater Vancouver area. What sets this section apart from all other bird finding guides with which that I am familiar is the large photo that accompanies each species. These photos and the 100 or so larger images of various species around the Lower Mainland make browsing the guide pleasurable.

The successful collaborative nature of the guide is evident in the careful writing, revising and reviewing of details. Indeed, at the end of each site, the authors, revisers, and reviewers are listed with dates when the text was completed.

Birders like to quibble and nitpick so I am sure some who have purchased the new guide will point out that the sturdy glue binding of the Harbour's soft cover prevents the book from staying flat like the coil bound 1993 edition did. However, the new

edition, with twice as many pages, would probably not have stayed bound for long if plastic coils had been used. Sturdy binding is a small sacrifice for such an accurate, up to date and attractive bird finding guide. Highly recommended.

Into the Nest: Intimate Views of the Courting, Parenting, and Family Lives of Familiar Birds by Laura Erickson and Marie Read. 2015. Storey Publishing, 210 MASS MoCa Way, North Adams, MA 01247. (www.storey.com) 354 colour photographs, 3 colour drawings, 49 range maps, a glossary of reproductive terms and index. 207 pages \$21.95 Can.

Into the Nest... is a beginner's guide to the reproductive behaviour of North American birds. This book is so simply yet elegantly written that anyone from an intelligent elementary student onwards will have no difficulty with its content, especially since most key points are illustrated with outstanding colour photographs selected from the work of some of the best bird photographers in the United States. Erickson and Read, both veteran writers of popular bird articles, describe in lively detail the mating, nest-building, egg-laying, hatching, and fledging of 49 key familiar birds, including 39 species breeding in at least some sections of British Columbia. These include passerines such as American Crow, Yellow Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, House Wren, Red-winged Blackbird, Western Tanager, and American Goldfinch; raptors such as Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Turkey Vulture, Great Horned Owl, and Peregrine Falcon; and waterbirds like the Great Blue Heron, Mallard, Herring Gull, and Killdeer, as well as representative hummingbirds, pigeons, and woodpeckers.

Each account is only between 650 and 715 words long, plus captions. Occasional sidebars with catchy titles like "Family Secrets" concern such matters as extra-pair copulation or young birds' excretory habits.

A preview of the Red-winged Blackbird chapters will serve to indicate the level of detail a reader can expect from *Into the Nest...* The chapter opens with a brief description about the breakup of the all-male winter flocks, the arrival and constructing of nests by females, egg-laying, incubation, and hatching. The

INTO THE NEST

INTIMATE VIEWS OF THE COURTING, PARENTING, AND
FAMILY LIVES OF FAMILIAR BIRDS



LAURA ERICKSON
& MARIE READ

roles that the sexes play with parental care of nestlings and fledglings are described. The account ends with the re-establishment of non-breeding flocks.

The Red-winged Blackbird account contains three photos of a male in display, one of a female displaying, a female carrying nest material, a nest with eggs, a female incubating, a nest with newly hatched chicks, a female feeding nestlings, and a female feeding a recently fledged chick. Since the text explains that a chick leaves the nest between 11 and 16 days of age and shows examples of chicks before and after fledging, it's possible for the photos to serve as a rough guide whereby the observer may reasonably guesstimate the age of the young birds

being observed in the field.

Breeding bird terminology such as “polygyny” and “obligate brood parasitism” appear in bold print and are explained as they arise within the text. A glossary at the end of the book acts as a reminder of the concepts to which the reader has been exposed to.

Although terrific at identifying the winged creatures around them, many birders simply don't find nests very often. *Into the Nest...* offers all birders a delightful opportunity to learn about the intense but often “hidden” reproductive activity among the birds living in the environment around us. Highly recommended.