

BOOK REVIEW

A BIRDWATCHING GUIDE TO BERMUDA.—Andrew Dobson. 2002. Arlequin Press, Essex, United Kingdom. ISBN 1900159716. 176 pp. Maps and color photographs. £13.95. Paper.

How many bird-finding guides offer specifications for building nest-igloos for White-tailed Tropicbirds?

The uniqueness of Andrew Dobson's new book, *A birdwatching guide to Bermuda*, is intimated in its title: a *birdwatching* guide. This book, perhaps the most comprehensive text covering a geographic area of its scope (some 55 km² — a few well-watched "patches" in England excepted), orients the naturalist not just toward bird-finding but to all aspects of *bird-watching*; that is, the prolonged observation, study, and appreciation of birds. The care in preparation of this text is evident on every page, and its distinctiveness within its genre (the tropicbird igloo is merely the tip of the iceberg) and fidelity to the charming archipelago that forms its subject will please even the armchair traveler with no plans to visit Bermuda.

Dobson has left the critic precious little opportunity to find fault with his work, which covers in minute detail virtually every aspect of Bermudian birdlife that the visiting or resident naturalist could find of interest: local bird conservation; plantings and nest-boxes for birds; travel by air, land, and sea; lodgings for birders; wheelchair-accessible birding sites; geography and climate; relevant web-sites; hints for novices, tour guides, and groups; and much more. As would any true naturalist, Dobson cannot resist compiling and including complete lists of Bermuda's mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, damselflies, and dragonflies.

For a non-resident in particular, having all this information together in a single (very handsomely laid out) text is manna from heaven. In the past, one had to surf the World Wide Web endlessly to locate even a small part of this material; and a decade or so ago, the visiting birder could turn only to David Wingate's brief but pioneering *A checklist and guide to the birds of Bermuda* (1973), now out of print, and to correspondence with local naturalists. Dobson has answered virtually every potential question about Bermudian travel and logistics in his introductory material.

The remainder of the book treats the location by habitat, site, and season of Bermuda's birds. As with Eric J. R. Amos's 1991 book, *A guide to the birds of Bermuda*, also now out of print, Dobson wisely separates treatments of the breeding from the

nonbreeding species, offers commentary on the four seasons' birding potential, and discusses the habitats and birding sites of each parish in easy-to-follow sections arranged naturally, in the order in which they might be birded. Where Amos's book used original artwork to illustrate habitats and species, Dobson's employs color photographs, mostly by the author. Both books are gems, but Dobson's is the more exhaustive and up-to-date of the two, and his maps are nonpareil for a birding guide.

There are aspects of this book both useful and informative that deserve special mention. The maps make a fine example. If one turns, for instance, to the map for Spittal Pond, a lovely freshwater body that holds a good diversity of waterfowl and waders over the course of a year, one finds the numbers one through 16 on the map. These numbers are keyed to a legend that points the birder toward a key sea-watching site, a permanent population of monarch butterflies, and a small patch known for wintering wood-warblers, among many other tips. This level of detail will be appreciated by even a casual observer, and it is rather remarkable for a nine-acre pond!

Bermuda has a healthy population of wintering American wood-warblers, often over 25 species, and these will be seen in numbers by birders, especially in autumn visits but also in winter. But how common are the various species? Under the section "Wintering warblers in Bermuda," all 38 species known from Bermuda are classed by their estimated wintering populations, whether 300+ (Yellow-rumped Warbler and Ovenbird only), 100–299, 50–99, 10–49, or the rarest of the rare, some 16 species that number from one to nine per year, such as Golden-winged, Connecticut, and Swainson's warblers. With this table, birders can quickly assess the relative abundance of the warblers they discover, can decide whether extensive notes, sketches, and photographs are needed—and finally whether local birders should be contacted (contact information is provided at the end of the guide). Very few site guides provide this nuanced sort of ranking, much less a numerical guide borne of decades of record-keeping and good communication among the island's birders.

Another advantage for visiting birders is the concluding section entitled "Where to find non-resident sought-after birds," which treats difficult groups such as gulls and tubenoses. Here Dobson offers the insider's micro-strategies for finding birds both regular and rare, saving the visitor the pain of trial-and-error birding in unfamiliar terrain. (For these, as

well as for other seabirds, shorebirds, and wading birds, a spotting scope is clearly essential for the visiting birder, not to mention for the Snow Buntings, Whimbrel, and American Golden-Plovers that might turn up beyond the closed fences of the International Airport!)

What more could one hope for? The list is short. As with Cornelius Hazevoet's *The birds of the Cape Verde Islands* (British Ornithologists' Union, 1995), here too one searches in vain for an image of the island's star endemic petrel, which is in Dobson's book represented only by a fluffy nestling Bermuda Petrel, or "Cahow," as Bermuda's residents have named their bird. Now that this species is documented annually off the coast of North America (specifically, off North Carolina), good photographs of birds in flight are available, and this guide would be an ideal venue for such an image, inasmuch as standard field guides such as David Sibley's *Sibley guide to North American birds* (Knopf, 2000) do not even mention the Cahow, and good photographs have been published only in a few American magazines and journals. Thankfully, Dobson offers the visiting birder several potentially successful strategies for seeing this famous, attractive, and critically endangered seabird, either from an afternoon seawatch or a short pelagic trip—the first birding guide to do so.

Another area of the text in which one hankers for more is the section entitled "Rare bird sightings since 1990." It is only comparatively recently that Bermudian bird records have been collectively compiled; older records are scattered among observers' notes dating back a half-century or more. Though rarities are not the focus of this or any other bird-finding guide, it would be marvelous to see such a

section expanded to an annotated checklist containing *all* records of extralimital or vagrant species (the book's checklist sometimes provides a year or decade for pre-1990 vagrants, but the curious birder will thirst for greater detail). Even with all available published information on Bermuda's birds (including David Wingate's *Checklist and guide*) at hand, it is not possible to get a full picture of the status and distribution of the 365 species documented to have appeared on the island. Wingate's and Amos's texts attempted to qualify and quantify this information graphically, with bar graphs of several sorts for regular species (a popular way to represent seasonal relative abundance in American guides). Dobson, in his guide's checklist, offers columns for overall status and abundance by the four seasons, which can be more difficult to interpret. This lacuna in the ornithological literature on Bermuda will hopefully be remedied by a monograph on the island's birds in the future, a project worthy of such a well-studied and idyllic place.

A glance at Dobson's efforts in his admirable book can be dangerous—birding Bermuda can become addictive, and the House Wren or Red-tailed Hawk that scarcely occasions a raised binocular on the mainland can become the occasion for a raised pint in one of St. George's popular pubs! (And who knows what sort of celebration visitors to Bermuda such as Booted Eagle, Siberian Flycatcher, Ferruginous Duck, Large-billed Tern, Gyrfalcon, Bohemian Waxwing, Corn Crake, or Common House-Martin might have occasioned?) The reader peruses the book and its tempting topics at peril!—EDWARD S. BRINKLEY, Editor, *North American Birds*, 9 Randolph Avenue, Cape Charles, VA 23310, USA.