

## REVIEW

### Shorebirds of North America. The photographic guide.

Dennis Paulson

Christopher Helm, London. 2005  
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Dennis Paulson is well known for his book *Shorebirds of the Pacific Northwest* which, unfortunately for New Zealanders, dealt with the Pacific coast of North America rather than the coasts of Russia and Asia. His new book, *Shorebirds of North America. The photographic guide*, deals with all 94 shorebird species recorded in North America. Fortunately, many of these are vagrants from Asia that have been, or could be, recorded in New Zealand, and some of the rest are North American species that have been recorded or claimed in New Zealand. In fact, almost 50 of the species in the book are of interest to New Zealand birders.

*Shorebirds of North America* is a lavishly illustrated guide, with 534 photographs (selected from over 5000 the author viewed). It is a visual treat, with stunning portraits of almost all species (we can forgive the Eskimo curlew photo from 1962, the penultimate verified record, being slightly off-colour). But more than being a stunningly-illustrated book, its value is in documenting the main plumages of almost all species. Adults in breeding and non-breeding plumage, sexes if different, juveniles, subspecies, fresh breeding plumage versus worn breeding plumage – they're all here.

The book starts with the standard breakdown of plumage topography, only this time illustrated with photographs rather than the generalised drawings in most books. I found this most effective. The text then discusses factors affecting the plumages of shorebirds – seasonal variation, sex, age, geographic and individual variation, feather wear and fading, unusual plumages (e.g. leucistic birds) and hybridisation – with photos of some of the unusual cases (leucistic least sandpiper, several hybrid *Calidris* sandpipers). After a bit more basic biology, all clearly angled towards those factors relevant to identification, the individual species accounts begin. This is

where the strengths (and weaknesses) of the book lie. As mentioned, the photographs are mostly of superlative quality. Grey plovers are depicted holding a wing up to show the black axillaries, in flight from above, in a flock showing the underwings; a bar-tailed godwit from New Zealand holding its wing up is shown above a similar pose from a Scandinavian bird; eleven photos of semipalmated sandpiper show all plumages and varying bill lengths. I could go on. While a criticism of photographic guides has been that photos can only capture a single bird in a single pose, whereas an illustration can 'combine' the typical characters, the detail in these photographs, and the sheer variety, provides a wealth of detail that I have not seen in shorebird books before. The captions point out the key features of each picture, and very quickly the reader will find themselves studying plumages and feathers with a detail they never have before. This is an important habit to have, as the first step towards identifying many species is to age them correctly; this can only be done through knowing plumages, feathers, and moults. This book should certainly stimulate interest in ageing shorebirds.

The texts themselves do not provide the key identification points in as much detail, or as clearly, as I would like. A single paragraph discusses the plumages, followed by another on identification. This does not make for quick or easy reference, and there are no illustrations of, for instance, relative bill sizes, or comparisons of measurements to help us bolster our Unusual Bird Reports. Structural differences are hardly touched on, and the jizz of different species seems to have been intentionally avoided. But the subtitle of this book is, after all, *The photographic guide*, not "*The Identification Guide*", and there are other sources available with more detailed identification information (listed in the back). There are, however, places where newly-documented ID pointers are only indirectly discussed, and it is unclear whether the author was aware of them. For instance, the bills of greater and lesser sand-plover are pointed out as large and small in the photos. This is true, but an equally important and arguably more quantifiable feature is the angle and size of the 'tip' of the bill; it would not have been hard to mention this.

There are a few quirks, such as the word "plumage" being left out of captions to save space. Hence you get a "breeding surfbird" photographed

in California rather than Alaska! There are no range maps, as these are covered well in most field guides, or are unnecessary for vagrants that could turn up anywhere. You can find the odd error, such as a bar-tailed godwit in The Netherlands in May being referred to as the subspecies *lapponica* from Scandinavia, when it is probably *taymyrensis* en route to central Siberia. But these hardly detract from the positive points. An excellent feature is that the inside flap of the front cover has the species list and page numbers for quick reference, as long as you know the rough taxonomic order.

So how useful is this book to New Zealanders? Because vagrants to North America come from either Asia or Europe, only subspecies from these areas are discussed. For bar-tailed godwits, this means the Alaska *baueri*, which we get in New Zealand, and *lapponica*. There is no mention of other subspecies, such as *menzbieri* in Siberia, which could occasionally reach New Zealand. But this is a small complaint, and is unfair about a book on North American

birds. The worth of the book is in the well-informed choice of photographs that covers a large part of the New Zealand (potential) shorebird list. Bristle-thighed curlew, Baird's sandpiper, stilt sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, least sandpiper, greater yellowlegs. Anyone suspecting a North American vagrant would do well to consult this book. And anyone visiting Canada or USA would certainly benefit from having this book, especially when discovering dowitchers or western/semipalmated sandpipers for the first time. It's not the ultimate identification guide, nor does it attempt to be, but is a valuable supplement to specialised identification books or species accounts. A reasonably compact 360 pages, it could be carried into the field or left in the car. One thing is for sure – it won't get left on the shelf! Highly recommended.

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