



***Birds of the West Indies*, by Norman Arlott (2010).** Princeton University Press. Eighty color plates by the author, range maps, further reading, and index. 240 pages. \$24.95—softcover.

The West Indies offer birders a wide variety of species. Foremost among these are a treasure trove of endemics—152 species, according to *The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*. Also of note are island-restricted species, regional endemics, and an increasing number of introduced birds (“exotics”) from around the world.

For many years, the only relevant literature was *A Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* by James Bond. Bond published his first edition in 1936 and kept it up to date by issuing periodic supplements. It is now published as part of the Peterson field guide series, renamed *Birds of the Caribbean*. In 1990 Macmillan published Peter Evans’ photographic guide, *Birds of the Eastern Caribbean*, which, while covering 300+ species, was limited to representing just the island chain from the Virgin Islands to Grenada. Cover-

age improved dramatically in 1998 with the publication of *A Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* by Herbert A. Raffaele and coauthors. This work quickly became the field guide of choice for the region. More recently, specialized field guides have appeared for single islands or island groups, including (1) The Bahamas / Turks and Caicos, (2) Cuba, (3) Hispaniola, (4) Jamaica, and (5) Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

New off the press comes *Birds of the West Indies* by Norman Arlott, a visually attractive book and part of the Princeton Illustrated Checklists series <[tinyurl.com/3rwvdpn](http://tinyurl.com/3rwvdpn)>. According to the publisher, these books provide succinct text, thumbnail maps, and illustrations of all species to be encountered in a specific region, and can be used in conjunction with a more traditional field guide or as a valuable stand-in if no such guide exists.

Being familiar with its predecessors, I wondered what Arlott’s book offered that the others do not. It is a conveniently pocket-sized book that depicts all of the region’s birds without going into great detail. Indeed, Arlott writes in the introduction that he did not intend it to be “an ultimate field guide.” He illustrates and very briefly describes each of the 550+ species of birds living in, breeding on, or migrating through The Bahamas, Greater and Lesser Antilles, and several islands off Middle America. He wastes no space pointing out field marks that can easily be seen in his excellent paintings, but pays significant attention to subspecies, races, vocalizations, and behaviors that are island specific. He describes each species’ distribution thoroughly, often giving local details as to where on an island

a species can be found. Size is given in metric units only; inclusion of English equivalents would have been helpful, as most potential users of the book will likely be from the U.S. or from U.S.-influenced Caribbean nations that have not yet adopted the metric system.

Norman Arlott is a well-known and respected British bird artist who already has illustrated field guides to the birds of China, Europe, Japan, and Russia. His paintings, presented on 80 full-color plates opposite the text, are consistent in both quality and style, presented on a white background with minimal scenery. One or more plumages are shown for most species, generally breeding and non-breeding male/female pairs. A big plus is that most species are shown as they are likely to be viewed. Thus we have in-flight images of pelagic and aerial coastal species, raptors and vultures, jaegers and gulls, swifts, swallows, and martins, with the remainder mostly skulking, swimming, or perched. Illustrations are numbered, which is essential because the species layout differs from their order in the text.

My criticisms of the layout and design are few. It would have been helpful to include arrows on the images pointing to key identification features. The plates are a little cluttered, and more space between images would have been preferable; that way it would be easier to relate the number to the image. I would have preferred to see “in-flight” images instead of, or in addition to, those of the goatsuckers and the parrots. In several cases I could detect no meaningful difference between images of similar species—for example, Bridled and Sooty terns. The dubious assumption seems to be that one must separate these confus-

ing species by behavior and voice. In his defense, Arlott states in the introduction, "Obviously the use of more in-depth tomes will be required for some of the trickier species..." Lastly, in my review copy, the color registration for orange was exaggerated. This gave some species—among them dowitchers and godwits, Eastern Bluebird, and Lincoln's Sparrow—a rather gaudy look.

As in the Peterson series, the range maps appear at the back of the book, a layout that allows more birds to be depicted per plate but which is awkward to use in the field. The text fails to reference page numbers for the maps, a fairly glaring omission. Then again, since Arlott is precise in describing distribution in the text, one might never need to refer to the range maps and one must wonder if the maps, which occupy 63 of the book's 240 pages, or about 25% of the book's contents, could have been omitted. On a positive note, map users will appreciate Arlott's generous use of arrows to pinpoint the location of minor islands.

Call me a nomenclatural stiff-neck, but I am a stickler for the correct use of bird names, both common and scientific. Arlott notes, "I have headlined the English names that I believe are those used by most birders in the field, which means I have, in many cases, reverted to 'old school' names rather than some of the more modern interpretations (most of these 'new' names, along with other well-used names, are included in parentheses)." This is a slippery slope, since many species have different local names on different islands. It would be far better to use names formally approved by the two American Ornithologists' Union

(AOU) "Check-list" committees, with other names placed in parentheses. The Check-list committees exist to create a standard classification and nomenclature, a truly worthy goal. I also chafe at the application of Anglicized spellings such as "grey" and "tricoloured" to traditional, AOU-approved names such as Gray Catbird and Tricolored Heron.

As Arlott notes, serious birders will want to refer to additional birding references. To this end he includes a "Further Reading" list. Sadly, it is terribly out of date, with only one citation more recent than 2004.

In summary, I think Arlott accomplished his goal to produce a pocket-sized bird book that covers the entire West Indies region. It should serve as a very useful reference in the field. Birders who require additional information on the avifauna of a certain island or island group would do well to carry *A Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* by Raffaele and coauthors, one of the guides for specific islands or island groups, a guide to bird families of interest, or a combination of the above.

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