

Book Review: Atlantic and Gulf Coasts

By William H. Amos and Stephen H. Amos. The Audubon Society Nature Guides. Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. 670 pp. Softcover, \$14.95.

by William L. Murphy

If you are new to the wonders of nature, having perhaps hidden in a closet until now, you might hope that this single book could bring you up to speed on the breadth of natural history of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. You would be disappointed, though some parts of the book are both informative and accurate.

Part I, to be read by all, includes "How to Use This Guide" and a detailed examination of seven major geographical zones ranging from rocky shores to coral reefs. Part II consists of 618 color plates, three per page, with 30 plates of habitats and 588 of organisms. Part III can be read selectively as one wishes. It consists of species descriptions of seashells, seashore creatures, mammals, fishes, reptiles and amphibians, plants, insects and spiders, and birds, all of which are illustrated in Part II. Part IV includes information on marine invertebrates, line drawings of plants, a glossary of 82 technical terms, a bibliography containing a mere 16 citations, the photo credits, and the index.

To be candid, I do not know to what audience this guide is directed. I found it too formidable and technical for light browsing, too nontechnical and error-filled for use by serious biologists, and too scientific to be very entertaining. If one intends to focus on a single area of natural history, then the books in this series will be sideliners at best.

Can a reviewer recommend only part of a book? That is what I would do. Part I is thoughtfully presented, comprehensive, and contains new information not previously available from any other single source of which I know. Part II contains some very attractive photographs and is aesthetically pleasing. But Parts III and IV seem to have been rushed into print and are flawed. Particularly in Part III I found errors and omissions that in my opinion render the guide unreliable for serious study. For my critical analysis I selected the section reviewed by Lorus and Margery Milne on insects, my profession. I was disappointed to find only 12 taxa treated. Granted, many naturalists ignore the entomological aspect of the coastal fauna except to slap at biting insects, but the inclusion in this work of so few of the hundreds of conspicuous insect species to be found along the coast seems unjustified. Common names have been coined arbitrarily in the guide in conflict with those in the official sourcebook,

known to all professional entomologists—the Entomological Society of America's *Common Names of Insects and Related Organisms* (ESA, Calvert Road, College Park, MD 20740). Some species are both misnamed and misspelled in the guide; for example, the guide's "golden saltmarsh mosquito," *Aedes sollicitans*, is officially known as the saltmarsh mosquito, and its scientific name is spelled with two "l's"—*sollicitans*. Ignored are seaweed and shore flies, tremendous numbers of which inhabit seaweed and other vegetation along the wrack line; dragonflies, which migrate along the coast; bees of many kinds, which frequent the abundant yellow composites and other attractive coastal flowers such as seaside goldenrod; predatory green lacewings and their relatives; and perhaps most conspicuous of all, monarch and other butterflies.

The section on birds also came under my scrutiny. Why, I wonder, are species not arranged in the accepted phylogenetic order? Why are species included that are seldom seen from shore (jaeger, skua, shearwaters, petrels) when regularly seen species are omitted (great cormorant, lesser black-backed gull)? Field marks provided for some species are less useful than they could be. For example, the male northern harrier is described as having "a pale gray back, head, and breast." What about the immaculate white underparts, visible at a great distance? Finally, how could the conservation-oriented National Audubon Society miss a chance to use the least tern as a perfect example of man's trampling of the fragile seaside environment? The guide simply states that, "because of its habit of nesting on low sandbars, whole colonies are sometimes destroyed by extra-high tides." The book contains no word about the tide of off-road vehicles that has decimated the species along our coastal beaches.

Some of my criticisms may apply only to the sections on insects and birds, but given the prominence of the sponsoring organizations and the extent of professional expertise and review capability that was available to the authors of this guide—potential that apparently was left untapped—I can only say that I was disappointed by the final product.

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