

## **A Field Guide to Hawks of North America**

By William S. Clark, Illustrations by Brian K. Wheeler.  
The Peterson Field Guide Series. Houghton Mifflin  
Company, 1987. 198 pp. Hardcover, \$19.95; softcover  
\$, 13.95.

**By William L. Murphy**



**T**ens of thousands of dedicated hawkwatchers spend countless hours every year scanning the skies of North America, seeking to identify as many individuals from as many species of diurnal raptors as possible. There are 33 regular and six accidental species known from America north of Mexico. For many seasoned hawkwatchers, experience allows them to identify instantly the species and often the gender of almost any raptor they spot. The need emerges after a time for new challenges such as learning to identify species with unusual or tricky plumages or to differentiate among geographical races or subspecies.

Until recently, the scope of North American birding guides was restricted to identification of full species, generally the lowest meaningful hierarchical level, the one most important to birders, especially "listers." William Clark's book is unusual in that, besides allowing identification of full species, sufficient detail is provided to enable the hawkwatcher authoritatively to identify subspecies, races, and color morphs, recognition of which sometimes conclusively pins down the geographic origin of a bird under scrutiny. From the abundant details provided on occurrences of individuals of some species, it is apparent that Clark has reviewed and integrated into the text relevant data from virtually every book and article published on North American raptors. Plugging away for half a decade on his Apple II at disparate locations ranging from Cape May to Elat, Israel, with this book Clark has

significantly pushed back the frontiers of raptor identification and set a new standard for similar works on other groups of birds.

Wheeler, as well, contributed far more than the plates; he also contributed his vast expertise as an experienced hawkwatcher, offering cogent suggestions on field marks, behavior, and the finer points of raptorology.

In the introduction Clark provides an overview of hawkwatching followed by a particularly valuable section on the topography of a hawk including illustrations and a list of terms to bring the reader up to speed on raptor vernacular. In the body of the text Clark provides a thorough description of each species as an entity before elaborating with exhaustive details on morphs and races of adults and immatures. Also included is information on similar species, flight, behavior, status and distribution, "fine points", unusual plumages, subspecies, etymology, and measurements given in both metric and English. Some of the photographs provide visual "ges-talt" that would have been difficult to convey in words. An esoteric inclusion is that of an extensive reference section, wherein books and articles of a general nature are listed first, followed by those on more specific topics. A species-oriented index to the literature follows. For example, a reader seeking knowledge about Swainson's hawk will find reference to the most comprehensive and current articles or books on the species' natural history, behavior, distribution, plumage, identification, migration, and albinism.

All plates are grouped together conveniently in the middle of the book. Photographs are grouped near the back, and distribution maps are integrated at appropriate locations throughout the main text. Running heads help orient the reader and speed the process of locating text on the major groups.

Comparison of a random sampling of a dozen species' descriptions from Clark's guide with those in other major guides verified that Clark's publication provides more information than any other does and is thus most nearly a complete compendium in terms of North American raptors.

In any first edition, typographical and other errors are unavoidable and are corrected in subsequent editions. Only three errors have surfaced in Clark's book, however, a remarkably low number and a tribute to the editors. On page 4, "27 plates" should read "26 plates"; on page 113, "Gyr's wingtips do not near tail" should read, "Gyr's wingtips do not reach tail"; and on the inside endplates the silhouettes of vultures and harrier have been transposed.

Artwork is of paramount importance in a field guide. Whereas Clark's text merits abundant praise, I was disappointed with many of Wheeler's plates. A hawkwatcher has only seconds to interpret corresponding illustrations before raptors in passage vanish, so illustrations must closely resemble real birds. Peterson himself is a master of such realism; many birders measure the works of other artists against Peterson's prowess. Wheeler's renditions portray wingshape and certain key characters more accurately than have previous works, but his birds appear wooden and lack shading that would convey three-dimensionality. Many appear tubular, especially the accipiters, as if drawn from poorly prepared museum skins. The buteos have understated chest musculature. Most lateral views of raptors in flight are unconvincing because of a combination of incorrect perspective and lack of shading. The feet of most soaring birds emerge directly from the body rather than forming an integral part of the powerful "drumsticks" so characteristic of raptors. Finally, in my softcover review copy, four of the color plates are badly out of register.

Also a form of artwork, many photographs could stand improvement. Produced from color slides, the photographs were reproduced in black and white, which cost dearly in heightened density. About 45 of them are now too dark to show the details for which they were chosen. Part of the problem may lie with dot gain resulting from the matte finish of the paper, a printing problem.

The undertaking of an endeavor such as the production of this highly specialized guide is experimental, entrepreneurial, and eminently worthy of admiration, especially when one considers the hawkwatching time sacrificed in its production. Like other hawkwatchers, I have often wished for a book like this, one with which I could hone my hawk identification skills, especially at hawkwatches during the occasional long lulls between sightings. With a first print run of 20,000 softcover and 2,500 hardcover copies and a dramatic, eye-catching cover, Clark's guide surely will serve to attract large numbers of naturalists to this most enjoyable pastime. Despite serious artistic shortcomings, Clark's guide offers such a wealth of new, well-organized data that is exactly the sort of text raptor enthusiasts and other birders will wish to add to their libraries.

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