

Resenha

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Restall, R., C. Rodner, and M. Lentino (2006).
Birds of Northern South America: An Identification Guide. Volume 1. Species Accounts. Paperback 880 pages. Volume 2: Plates and Maps. Paperback 656 pages; 306 color plates and 2308 maps. Christopher Helm, UK and Yale University Press, USA.

Birds of Northern South America is a timely miracle. For many years, museum and field-based ornithologists inhabited different worlds, used different literature, and had a somewhat polite unawareness of the other world. This book represents one of the first attempts to bring together the worlds of those who hold a specimen in the hand and those that are in the field with a pair of binoculars and a tape-recorder. In other words, this work seems to represent the first book with a wide geographic coverage, dealing with the phenotypic variation of bird species, something that in the past could only be studied visiting ornithological collections.

This book deals with all bird species found in continental Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana, including illustrations, maps, and species accounts of 2,308 species, probably more than any other bird book in the Neotropics. The work is structured in two volumes: species accounts (vol. 1) and plates and distribution maps (vol. 2). Both volumes are intended to be complementary, but by repeating a short portion of the introduction they can be used independently.

Volume 1 includes what may be a too succinct chapter on climate, vegetation, and habitats, and small chapters on avian migration and conservation. Notably absent is a chapter on avian biogeography, which could have given details on the main distribution patterns of birds in northern South America, a matter with which the authors are familiar. On the other hand, the book includes, as a bonus, a very useful discography on northern South American bird voices. Species accounts start with an informal but well written introduction to each family. Each species' name is followed by a brief description of its plumage, habits, abundance status, habitat, and voice. The text is carefully written and probably helpful to identify species in the field when used in conjunction with the plates. Although the authors mention several times that their book was not meant to be a field guide, this part of the book necessarily transforms it into one. That virtually much of the region is covered by great local field guides (notably Hilty and Brown 1986 for Colombia, Fjeldsâ and Krabbe 1990 for the Andes, Ridgely and Greenberg 2001 for Ecuador, and Hilty 2003 for Venezuela) makes this part of the book less extraordinary.

In my view, the main value of this work is represented by including all subspecies present in the region, previously published by the same authors as a checklist (Rodner *et al.* 2000). Prior to this book, anyone interested in identifying a bird to the subspecies level would had to dig into several sources, most without illustrations and difficult to obtain, or visit several bird collections around the globe. The list of all taxa with a description of each geographic form is by itself a major step for Neotropical ornithology. But when we consider that an entire volume is devoted to depicting the vast majority of bird plumages that occur in northern South America, then this work becomes a monumental effort with a necessary large impact on the ornithological science. The identification of each taxon at the subspecies level will no longer be the sole responsibility of a few workers in only some scattered collections, but will be an endeavor that anyone with the interest can attempt. In many cases, the accurate identification of each geographic form will still be possible only by comparing a large series of specimens in museums, but this book is a useful first approach. Unfortunately, not all described subspecies are illustrated in the book, but all of them are at least mentioned in volume 1. An additional major contribution is the number of different plumages illustrated (females, immatures, juveniles, breeding, non-breeding, in flight, perched, etc., for a total of 6,400 illustrations), many of which are illustrated for the very first time.

Plates are well designed, not too full or too empty, with all birds drawn to scale within family. Unfortunately, only the English name (not the scientific one) is given next to the map, forcing those ornithologists or *observadores de aves* that are not familiar with them, to go back and forward to the next page, where both names are included. Paintings are generally good, showing birds in a comparative style. Although some readers may feel that this style is less gentle to the eye than a bird with a nice background, we need to bear in mind that the objective of the book is to serve as a tool to identify each taxon and plumage present in the region, and Restall's paintings clearly fulfill this objective.

Maps are generally accurate, showing political boundaries and major river systems. The authors decided to shade distributions based only on known records, avoiding including blanket ranges, and consequently leaving empty entire regions where the species probably occur. This is a tough decision to make, especially in poorly sampled areas, because we end up with maps of widespread species suggesting disjoint populations, which is probably not true. Also, in several cases, empty areas lie well within areas of known published records, and this seems to be more of a problem outside Venezuela. A

good way to deal with lack of sampling is to include locality points in the maps, as in Hilty's magnificent field guide to the birds of Venezuela (Hilty 2003), because this gives the reader the option of building its own distribution map in his head. A somewhat more complex issue is the distribution limits of each taxon. The distribution of each species as a whole is shaded in green, and the general location of each subspecies is indicated by a letter (a, b, c...). This system does not allow the reader to identify exactly the distribution limits of each taxon (especially when distributions are continuous, like in the Amazon), but the authors are not to blame for this, because anyone who has tried to map such limits will recognize how little we know of the distribution patterns of the different subspecies and their possible areas of contact. On the other hand, in some cases those limits are known and the location of the letters in the maps is sometimes confusing, even to show a general pattern. A real flaw, however, is that when a certain subspecies is not illustrated, it does not appear in the map, making the subspecific geographic limits even more confusing. Finally and probably due to space matters, the species in some genera are sometimes split in several non-consecutive plates, which can be misleading.

Concerning the geographical coverage of the book, I would have preferred if the authors would have center their book using a meaningful biogeographical region, for example selecting northern South America north of the Amazon River as their study area, rather than using political units such as countries. The effort of including all bird taxa north of the Amazon would have been minor compared to the greater scope that the book would have achieved, especially considering that Brazil is the only country in the region without a decent field guide. Fortunately, although they did not include taxa present exclusively in Brazil or Peru, they included those two countries in their maps south to the latitude of 5° South, avoiding cutting the maps in an unnatural way.

As expected in any such monumental work, quite a few mistakes could be pointed out, but the authors themselves are well aware of most of them and they are committed to make them public and available through a future website. The book is well referenced and broadly follows the taxonomy of the American Ornithologists' Union's South American Checklist

Committee (Remsen *et al.* 2006), probably the best thing they could have done in these days of constant taxonomic changes. For those who simply consider subspecies the same taxonomic rank as species, this book is even more useful because it will represent the only field guide with *all* (or most) bird taxa in the region, notably neglected in other field guides.

For the Brazilian reader interested in the Amazonian avifauna this book is essential, as well as for all those ornithologists and birdwatchers interested in the geographic variation of birds in South America. Restall, Rodner, and Lentino are to be thanked for their extremely careful work, which has already raised the bar on what we think a bird book should look like. Definitely a book to have on our shelves and one that will become a widely used reference for many years to come.

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