

Who Needs Field Marks? Three Books That Should Be in *Your* Library!

Back in 1984 I had only been birding for about 3 years. I was a solitary birder and so the learning curve was steep indeed as I struggled with half-seen birds and little brown jobs flying away from me. It was a time when new field guides were few and far between (we were still two years away from the first National Geographic Guide) and so, when anything novel turned up on bird identification, I snapped it up. A slender 76-page booklet--looking as if it had been self-published-- appeared that year: **Hawk Watch: A Guide for Beginners**. The book discussed primarily the rationale for and mystique surrounding Fall hawk watches in the Eastern U.S. About 75% of the book focused on technical material, including selecting optics, filling out complicated reporting forms, and knowing where and when to best observe migrating diurnal raptors. What was really revolutionary about this book by Pete Dunne, Debbie Keller, and Rene Kochenberger though was a 19-page section entitled "Hawk Identification" and accompanied by the simplistic, almost childlike pen-and-ink drawings of hawks in flight by a guy named David Sibley. I bought the book as soon as I saw it and almost immediately it defeated me. I hadn't yet been able to accumulate enough hours in the field to know that those dark spots against the clouds were hawks, let alone what species. I simply wasn't ready yet for this radical new idea.

In 1988, Pete Dunne, David Sibley, and Clay Sutton published **Hawks in Flight**, a much-improved guide to raptor flight identification. Pete's identification text was far more developed, David's drawings of flying hawks were significantly improved, and Clay's photographs of migrating hawks over Cape May Point gave one the feel of being there. This book meant a lot more to me and was bedside reading material for quite awhile as the 1980s spun to a close.

Finally, in October of 1992, Fran and I attended the Institute for Field Ornithology's seminar on Migrating Fall Raptors, held in Cape May and taught by the irrepressible Clay Sutton. We still remember the 9 full slide trays--Clay's opus that filled the lecture portion of each of three consecutive days. By this time the idea of identifying flying birds by an accumulation of small but significant behavioral factors exhibited as the birds roared by at great altitudes not only made sense but began slowly, ever so slowly, to become implanted in our consciousness.

So why am I spending so much time talking about all of this ancient history? Well, I recently have acquired and, for the most part read, three new books that speak to the notion of flight identification, of identification by "jizz" (I really don't like that term--it has always sounded vaguely obscene to me--I suppose that speaks to my upbringing), of identification by an accumulation of factors embedded in one's mind by hours and hours of time in the field. One of these books is not, to my knowledge, readily available in the U.S., so stand ready to learn about something new!



How to Be a (Bad) Birdwatcher, by Simon Barnes, Pantheon Books, New York, 2004, 221 pgs., \$17.95 list.

I found it almost impossible to put down this lovely little book by British birder and sports writer Simon Barnes. He makes fun of the listing fraternity while at the same time admitting that he's a full-time member. He talks about the day-to-day realities of field birding in ways that left me smiling and nodding and saying "Yes, yes, *that's* the way it is!" to myself over and over again.

Barnes's principles of birdwatching are quite simple: "Look out the window. See a bird. Enjoy it. Congratulations. You are a bad birdwatcher." He has a relaxed approach to birding that is yet quite thorough and, ultimately, quite knowledgeable. He has a chapter for beginners, demonstrating just how much they already know about birds before they have opened even one field guide or picked up their first pair of binoculars. He talks about why we watch birds and not, say, mammals. "John Keats wrote that on hearing a nightingale, it was 'as though of hemlock I had drunk...'" Keats would not have written the same poem after smelling a pile of dog turds," says Barnes.

He talks about watching birds at feeders, about how birdwatching drew him closer to his father, and how to wend one's way through the piles and piles of field guides now available. He talks about how satisfying it is for us humans to put names to things, the satisfaction and joy we often feel at discovering in real life something we have only seen before in books. He talks about twitchers and listers and all the other variant neuroses exhibited by any roomful of birders, and about the incomparable value of mentors. His advice to new birders is outstanding: "You put one foot after another, and when you see a bird you stop, and put your binoculars to your eyes, and say 'What the bloody hell's *that*?'...The rest is only refinement."

To get back to the central theme of these reviews, Barnes has a chapter on birding by jizz that explains the concept better than I have ever seen anywhere else--he uses the analogy of watching and reporting on a soccer game. He notes that he can cover England better than any other team because he knows the players so well, the ways they move, how they interact with their team mates and against the opposing team. "If I see someone with a fancy haircut playing a fifty-yard ball from somewhere out on the right-hand side of a pitch, I know it is David Beckham. I don't have to see his number." The author goes on to develop this theme, first in terms of the common birds we see every day, and then branching out to some of the areas of birding where it is often the only approach available, such as watching seabird and hawk migrations.

You have to get this book and read it! When you're finished, pass it along to a new birder or to the neighborhood skeptic--you might just recruit someone else to be a bad birdwatcher. I was unable to find the book listed on the American Birding Association site or on Buteo Books. For heaven's sake, why not? You should be able to find it on www.barnesandnoble.com and for sure on www.amazon.co.uk.



Hawks From Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors in Flight, by Jerry Liguori, Princeton University Press, 2005, 132 pgs., paperback version: \$19.95, hardback version: \$55, both list prices.

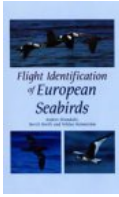
Jerry Liguori has been watching hawks for a long time now. He has been active at Hawk Mountain, at Cape May Point, at the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, and probably at a number of other hawk watches I was unable to find out about. Jerry is the author of **The Hawks of Whitefish Point** and he has worked with the New Jersey Bald Eagle Management Project in 1996 and with the Avian Power Line Interaction Committee, a group in Colorado working to minimize raptor and crane collisions with power lines. There is no questions of his background and years of experience on the hawkwatch platforms across the United States.

As David Sibley notes in his foreword, "this book is the first of its kind that deals with the real-world problems of identifying flying raptors from different angles: head-on, wing-on (from the side), tail-on (from behind), as well as the traditional 'from below'."

The author describes 3 accipiters, Northern Harrier, 6 buteos, 4 falcons (plus the similar species Gyrfalcon and Mississippi Kite), as well as both vultures, Zone-tailed Hawk, Osprey, and the 2 eagles--a total of 22 species. He makes use of many color photographs taken, as noted by Sibley, from a number of different orientations. Additionally he uses black-and-white photos with lots of arrows and text to point out critical differences from hard-to-separate species. Within each raptor grouping Liguori includes a section on other species which can mimic the shapes and behavior of the hawks.

His textual descriptions accompanying each species includes an overview of what to look for, material on size and structure, on migration patterns, on variations in plumage by age and gender, and on pitfalls which can confuse the neophyte hawkwatcher. He finishes up with a section on flight style, wing beat patterns, and further pitfalls to jizz identification. In addition to the species statements, Liguori leads off with an introduction, a glossary and photo-exposition of raptor anatomy, and a discussion of how flight positions, lighting, molt, and aberrant plumages can affect the way a hawk looks to distant ground observers. He discusses migration patterns, the impacts of weather and geophysical characteristics on that migration, where to go to watch hawks, and answers questions on optics and photographic equipment suitable for hawkwatchers.

This book should be valuable to beginning and expert hawkwatchers alike. Liguori's expertise is obvious on every page and the extensive collection of photos taken at odd angles are probably worth a skim before every trip to your local hawkwatch platform. It isn't necessarily the best bedside reading material but the more you combine the wisdom included here with the hours and hours in the field required to learn this approach to birding, the more it will repay the investment.



Flight Identification of European Seabirds, by Bertil Breife, Niklas Holmstrom, Anders Blomdahl, Christopher Helm Publishers, 2003, 320 pgs., roughly \$50 depending on the exchange rate for the British pound.

There have been times during my life when I have been struck by the notion of how similar certain other types of birding are to the flight identification of hawks. These epiphanies have usually come while standing on a heaving deck under ugly gray skies looking for tiny gray-and-white dots against an equally gray and ugly ocean, or while standing braced against a howling wind and blowing spray while scanning the Ocean City inlet and jetties for sea ducks and (hopefully) for uncommon winter alcids.

I was pleased then to hear about this book from someone else who shares the agonies of winter inlet birding and the love-hate relationship most of us have with pelagic birding trips. I bought the book a year ago and have been enormously pleased with it since, as we all know so well, almost all of the "European Seabirds" are also "North American Seabirds" (albeit with slightly different common names at times).

For some unknown reason (again, I have no idea why) this book, published in 2003, isn't available for sale in the U.S. Or rather, I was unable to locate it at any of my usual birding book sources. Nonetheless, it is readily available from www.amazon.co.uk for 28 quid.

The book begins with an excellent section on the basics of field identification from the perspective of a birder at a seawatch (apparently a much more common phenomenon in Europe than in the U.S.) or on pelagic trips (relatively uncommon in Europe) or on ferry crossings. Field marks under these conditions are often unusable and one must turn to the shape of the bird, speed of wing-beats, relative size, and general behavioral characteristics--in short, the overall impression or 'jizz' of the often distant and swiftly passing bird. Species accounts are then provided for each of the following bird groups: Loons, Grebes, Tubenoses, Cormorants, Swans, Geese, Dabbling Ducks, Diving Ducks, Jaegers and Skuas, Gulls, Terns, and Alcids.

Each species account includes sections on general description and range, silhouette, flight and flocking, plumage and bare parts, and subspecies, if warranted. Each statement is also accompanied by a good selection of photographs that mesh well with the text and which are all accompanied by useful captions. It is true that there are a few species never seen in the U.S. but a little broadening never hurt anyone. Make sure you check the scientific names against your North American field guides when you run across an unfamiliar common name, just to make sure it isn't masquerading under another name, such as Common Scoter, Velvet Scoter, Bewick's Swan, Brent Goose, Common Gull, etc.

If you do any pelagic birding or jetty watching at all, I highly recommend this book. It will help you make sense of the more common birds and may just let you begin to pick out the less common species as they pass at enormous distances.

All three of these books deal in greater or lesser degree with what we all begin to do naturally (at least with the common birds around us) after spending some requisite number of hours in the field--identifying those birds with only a glimpse, often with no rational understanding of why other than it "just is." If you are a new birder, put in the time--it's worthwhile to wake up one day and realize that you are now a bad birdwatcher in the best of all senses. These books may help minimize the amount of time you have to invest to get to that enviable plateau.

Norm Saunders