

Contributed by *Angela Linell*

You may be just starting to get interested in birds. It is a fascinating hobby which can take you all over the world and even just out shopping in your local high street, you may see something interesting. But how do you find out what it is? Well the best way is to find a person who can help you identify birds. If you come on one of the London Bird Club walks [and there is one almost every weekend round London], you will have an expert guide who can help you.

But if you want to go out on your own, you will need a guidebook. I started birdwatching in the 1950s when the only bird book for beginners was the tiny Observer's Book of Birds. This had tiny illustrations, the colours were poor, and there was no illustration of female birds or immature birds. So you had to hazard a guess most of the time. But in 1969 I was given the Readers Digest Book of British Birds. It had beautiful illustrations on an A4 page but again it was usually limited to mature males and did not give you helpful tips on what differences to look out for when the birds looked similar.

However, publishers began to produce really helpful guides of a very high standard. The classic guide of the 1950s was A field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe by Roger Peterson, Guy Mountfort, P.A.D. Hollom. Collins, first published in 1954. This was remarkable for the fact that the illustrations had little pointers to the significant features of the birds, which would enable you to distinguish between for example a chiffchaff and a willow warbler. This made the process of identifying a new bird much simpler. I did not come across it until much later so I missed out.

This guide became the standard guide until the publication in 1972 of a rival, The birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East by Hermann Heinzel, R.S.R.Fitter and John Parslow. [Richard Fitter was a president of the London Natural History Society and published many works on natural history]. I still have this book as I like the illustrations.

Later came The Shell Guide to the Birds of Britain and Ireland by James Ferguson-Lees, Ian Willis and J T R Sharrock published in 1983, published by Michael Joseph. This I still have. Then came a series of bird guides from Collins, including one I still have which has not illustrations but colour photographs of 464 species. Critics have said that photographs, however good, are poor at illustrating the main features.

On 5th March 2016, David Allen the librarian of the London Natural History Society together with Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne, Chairman of the London Bird Club curated a Bird Books Day at the Angela Marmont Centre at the British Museum of Natural History. I have copied below an idiosyncratic list of books which they had put together for discussion.

For beginners, for use in the field they were of the view that the Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide to Britain and Europe by Peter Hayman was especially useful. The Collins Bird Guide by Lars Svensson and others is a bigger book but was also discussed as one of the most useful field guides currently on the market.

Field use

The Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide to Britain and Europe by Hayman, P. & Hume, R. Mitchell Beazley: London. 2008. 320 pages.

An expanded version of the previous edition which focused purely on Britain. One of the most useful guides for field use, compact and lightweight, filled with ID features.

Collins Bird Guide by Lars Svensson: HarperCollins, 387 p., 1999

Currently the standard text. 18 years in the making.

The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification by Alan Harris, Laurel Tucker and Keith Vinicombe: Macmillan (1989), Hardcover, 192 pages

Concentrates on species identification and pulls together into a field guide the essence of much of the cutting edge papers on field ID which have been published in the last few decades.

For the car

Collins BTO Guide to Rare British Birds by Paul Sterry (Author): William Collins (2015), 288 pages

The Helm Guide to Bird Identification by Keith Vinicombe, Alan Harris and Laurel Tucker: A&C Black (2014), Paperback, 400 pages

Successor to the Macmillan Guide, confusable species, but twice as fat as the earlier book!

Advanced bird ID guide: Western Palearctic: every plumage of all 1,300 species and subspecies recorded in Britain, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East by Nils van Duivendijk: London: New Holland, 2010. 304 pages

Not illustrated, but every ID feature listed. Invaluable for separating difficult species, but be sure to take you reading glasses. Take it with you if you have capacious pockets.

Waders of Europe, Asia and North America (Helm Field Guides) by Stephen Message: Christopher Helm Publishers Ltd (2005), Hardcover, 240 pages

Excellent ID charts matching plumage patterns for each of the waders, as well as illustrations of the birds standing and flying.

Frontiers of Bird Identification: A British Birds guide to some difficult species by J.T.R. Sharrock: Macmillan Journals Ltd. (1980), Hardcover, 272 pages

Cutting edge papers in bird identification which is now standard fare in modern field guides.

Birds: ID Insights: Identifying the More Difficult Birds of Britain & North-West Europe by Dominic Couzens, illustrated by David Nurney: New Holland Publishers Ltd (2013), Hardcover,

272 pages

A useful reference for the difficult groups like the gulls, raptors, warblers and wagtails.

For the personal library

The Birds of the Western Palearctic concise edition: 1 Non-passerines by David Snow: Oxford University Press, xxxii, 1008 pages

The Birds of the western Palearctic concise edition: 2 Passerines by David Snow, Christopher M. Perrins & Robert Gillmor

Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

The basic reference work, boiled down from the 9 volume original. This was produced in two interactive editions for computer use which are now no longer available. Very full information on each species, including breeding and moult calendars.

Handbook of British birds by H. F. Witherby, F. C. R. Jourdain, N. F. Ticehurst & Bernard W. Tucker: London: Witherby, 1941. 5 volumes.

For nearly twenty years the standard work on British birds. Still full of excellent information.

Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic (Helm Identification Guides) by Mark Beaman et al.: A&C Black (1998), Hardcover, 872 pages

Focusses on identification, but also covers distribution.

Bird Atlas 2007-11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland by Dawn Balmer, Simon Gillings, Brian Caffrey, Bob Swann, Iain Downie & Rob Fuller: British Trust for Ornithology (2013), Hardcover, 640 pages

A distribution guide for the British Isles

The Sound Approach to Birding: A Guide to Understanding Bird Sound by Mark Constantine and The Sound Approach: The Sound Approach (2006), Hardcover, 192 pages. With two CDs

A scientific approach to bird sound, using sonagrams to represent the sounds.

Local Avifaunas

The breeding birds of the London area: The distribution and changing status of London's breeding birds in the closing years of the 20th century by Jan Hewlett: London Natural History Society (2002), 294 pages

The London Bird Report. London Natural History Society: London

A fine example of a local avifauna. This is a full length book published annually and includes a commentary by species on abundance, trends and rarity records. It also includes papers.

The birds of the London area. London Natural History Society: London: Hart-Davis, 1964. 332 pages

London's Birds by Richard Fitter. Collins, 1949. 256 pages.

Atlas of breeding birds of the London area by David J. Montier: London: Batsford, 1977. 272 pages.

The birds of London by Andrew Self: London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 432 pages

Birds of Hertfordshire by Ken W. Smith, Chris W. Dee, Jack D. Fearnside and Mike Ilett: Hertfordshire Natural History Society, 2015. 293 pages.

Another quite outstanding production from the HNHS

Birds of Kent: Review of Their Status and Distribution by D.W. Taylor, D. L. Davenport, and J. J. M. Flegg: Kent Ornithological Society (1981), Hardcover, 446 pages

Birds of Essex (Helm County Avifauna) by Simon Wood: Christopher Helm Ornithology (2007), Paperback, 680 pages

Birds of Surrey by Jeffery J. Wheatley: Surrey Bird Club (2007), Hardcover, 700 pages

Specialist Groups

Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America by Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson: London: Christopher Helm, 2003. (Corrected edition) 608 p.

Shore Birds: Identification Guide to Waders of the World by Peter Hayman: Christopher Helm Publishers Ltd (1986), 416 pages

General, Ornithological and Bedside Reading

Birds Britannica by Mark Cocker: Random House UK (2005), Edition: 1st Edition, Hardcover, 484 pages

An excellently written encyclopaedic treasury of bird information, some basic, some arcane.

Sibley's Birding Basics by David Allen Sibley: Knopf (2002), Paperback, 168 pages

Although it deals with North American birds it is a real treasury of accessible information on the

ornithological basics. Moults, plumage patterns, behaviour are all discussed in useful detail.

Birders: Tales of a Tribe by Mark Cocker: Jonathan Cape, 2003. 230 pages

More inside insights from Mark Cocker.

Literary

Crow Country by Mark Cocker: London: Vintage, 2008. 216 pages

What it takes to be an ornithologist.

Corvus: a life with birds by Esther Woolfson: London: Granta, 2009. 337 pages.

Essay writing of a high standard, together with real insights into bird behaviour from rescued and pet birds.

The Snow Geese by William Fiennes. Picador; New Edition. Paperback 256 pages.

A literary classic of an Englishman travelling across North America tracking migrant snow geese with vivid accounts of people and places.