

## WHERE THE BIRDS ARE

JOHN OLIVER JONES. 1990. William Morrow & Co. Inc, New York. 400 pp., maps, no illustrations, cloth \$24.95; paper \$15.95 U.S.

This is a book that sets out to be a site guide to major birdwatching areas of North America. The cover description calls it "a guide to all fifty states and Canada," and the inevitable Roger Tory Peterson endorsement promises that "all the major hotspots are mapped." During the past fifteen years or so, the numbers of birdfinding guides published have even surpassed the numbers of bird-identification guides. Once Ken Kaufmann or Roger Tory has taught you how to identify a Pacific-slope Flycatcher, you need another book to tell you how and where to locate one.

There are guides covering an entire nation (*Birdfinding Guide to Canada*), half a nation (*Western Bird-watcher*), a province or state (*Bird-finding Guide to Ontario*), a corner of a province or state (*Birder's Guide to Southeastern Manitoba*), and a single city or municipality (*A Birdfinding Guide to the Regina Area*). The American Birding Association's book service lists over 60 birdfinding books for North America alone.

And so we now have available a host of specific and detailed guides to birding spots, both little known and famous, providing maps, seasonal bar graphs, information on accommodations, and step by step instructions: "When you cross the rope footbridge to the other side of the canyon, look back to the

southeast and watch for the swifts flying over the cliff-face at dusk." To a birder, this is compelling stuff! Reading the guides is half the fun. (Following them is another matter.)

I suspect that *Where the Birds Are*, despite its promotional material, was never meant to be a comprehensive birdfinding guide, something you would actually use with you on a birding trip. Perhaps its size is the first tip off. A book with the dimensions of a Sears winter catalogue does not make a handy carseat companion when you are travelling down dirt tracks looking for Sage Thrashers. And this book probably wouldn't show you exactly where the thrashers are usually seen anyway.

*Where the Birds Are* does tell where the birds are in the sense that it will say, for example, that several species of seabirds occur in Washington's San Juan Islands. But it does not tell you exactly when and where you have the best chance of seeing a Rhinoceros Auklet. A little book called *A Guide to Birdfinding in Washington*, on the other hand, tells you not only where and when to look for the auklets in the San Juans, but that you have a good chance of seeing Dall's Porpoise and Minke Whale from the same spot.

So, if this compendium can't afford the space to provide detailed instructions to hundreds of locations, how well does it work as a rough directory with limited information on birding localities throughout this continent—a place to look when you are trying to narrow down the possibilities for a birding vacation? Adequately, I suppose, but

there are problems.

First among shortcomings is that an inexperienced birder might be given the impression that this book is all inclusive and sufficient in itself. The editor, John Oliver Jones, should have been more forthright in his description of the book's scope and purpose, telling readers clearly what the book is and what it *is not*, and then providing suggestions for further reading, so that they could easily move on to the real birdfinding information they need, once they have decided where to go.

The second problem with *Where the Birds Are* is in its selection of "hotspots". By focussing primarily on national wildlife refuges, Nature Conservancy preserves, and U.S. national parks, Jones has made more than a few odd choices, excluding some very good birding spots in favour of some mediocre or remote ones. In the Arizona section, for example, Madera Canyon and Mount Lemmon, two popular and accessible birding locales, are left out, while obscure and inaccessible wildlife refuges such as Cabeza Prieta are included. To be sure, Cabeza offers the possibility of Mexican vagrants from just across the border, but permission is required to enter the area (it is completely surrounded by an air force gunnery range!), and the roads are only passable in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Another example of how site selection problems have limited the effectiveness of this book will become obvious when anyone tries looking through its pages for information on pelagic birding opportunities. *Where the Birds Are* does not even mention the possibility of boat trips to see off-shore species, unless they happen to be on an island refuge like Farrallon in California. The reader is left to assume that pelagic birding areas were over-

looked because there are no wildlife refuges or preserves on the open ocean.

I should mention that half this book is taken up by a lengthy chart, compiling seasonal abundance data from 210 checklists for selected U.S. locations. It is well-designed and easy to use, but suffers from the same limitations as the rest of the book. For instance, if you look in these lists for Whiskered Screech Owl or Magnificent Hummingbird—two birds you have heard can be seen in Arizona—you won't find them, because the five Arizona locations for which Jones provides lists are nowhere near the legendary corner of that state where these, and so many other fascinating birds, can be seen.

What about the Canadian section? It is six pages long, two of which are taken up by a roadless map of Canada with little red marks showing rough locations for migratory bird sanctuaries, Ramsar sites, and national wildlife areas. In this set-up, at first glance, Saskatchewan fares well because it has so many "duck factory" sanctuaries. It even rates an inset on the map to show its fifty birding locations. However, of these fifty, very few are actually locations where anyone spends any time birding. Meanwhile the province's best birding spots—Cypress Hills, Prince Albert National Park, Grasslands area, Qu'Appelle Valley, and many others—are not mentioned, presumably because they are not CWS sanctuaries or Ramsar sites. The other four pages in the Canadian section merely give the names of the mapped CWS properties with no directions or descriptions whatsoever. For each province, Jones includes birding hotline numbers, and addresses for the provincial Canadian Nature Federation affiliate, the regional CWS office, the Fish and Wildlife Branch, and Tourism office.

For all practical purposes, then, the potential buyer would do best to assume that there is no information on Canadian birding locations in this book. If you only bird in Canada, don't buy this book—it is virtually useless in its coverage north of the 49th. If you do some birding in the States, you like reading 200-page checklists, and you plan to do most of your birding at national wildlife refuges, Nature Conservancy sites and the like, you may find this book useful in choosing a general area to focus on. But once you have decided on your destination, you would still be better off getting a local bird-finding guide with detailed site descriptions.

If you are the frustrated beginner Jones addresses in his introduction, stick to the old tried and true formula for increasing your birding skill: focus first on the birds around you, learn their seasons, distribution, and habitats; get to know other more experienced birders who you can learn from; and above all, go birding whenever you can, and, when you can't, read everything about birds you can get your hands on. Reviewed by *Trevor Herriot*, 3027 Whitmore Avenue, Regina, Saskatchewan. S4S 1B7

## **GRASSLANDS: THE PRIVATE HEARINGS.**

THELMA POIRIER. 1990. Coteau Books, Regina, Saskatchewan. 80 + 12 pp. Paper, \$8.00

This is a collection of 54 short poems by a self-styled "grasslander" who ranches near Fir Mountain, Saskatchewan. The poems celebrate the barren, beautiful grasslands that stretch

from the Canadian prairies into the Dakotas and Montana; there is no political border for Poirier any more than for the coyotes, antelope and rattlesnakes that cross at will because "the land is theirs". She also recognizes the presence in historical time of Cree, Sioux and Assiniboine, and the cart-drivers and missionary priests who preceded the coming of "cowboys and ranchers" and "squatters and homesteaders."

Grant MacEwen introduces the collection as a brief in support of the preservation of grasslands. MacEwen was the chairman of the Public Hearings Board set up following the signing on 27 March 1975 of a memorandum of intention for a Grasslands National Park, which has since been established in southern Saskatchewan. At the first hearings, held at Val Marie 11 May 1976, Thelma Poirier presented a brief opposing the park. Entitled simply "Grasslands", it was charged with emotion and poetry:

I am the grassland, out of the abyss of a million years. I have been the sea and the tropical jungles, the home of the coral and the dinosaurs. I have been a sleeping giant under the masses of glacier ice and I have awakened.... Today, I am the prairie green and gold, silvery grey, freckled with the flowers of my seasons.... I have known the kit fox and the prairie dog, the predator and the prey, coyote and antelope, falcon and hare, each in their quest for survival are the inhabitants of my domain.

Implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, the poems of this collection again raise the question of the park. They constitute "the private hearings." The ambivalence of many grasslanders regarding the park is frankly expressed in the poem of that title:

## park

wanting a park  
when I see the antelope run  
its hind leg dragging

when someone leaves a broken bottle  
grass begins smouldering

when strangers pass through a gate  
leave it open

not wanting a park  
when I ride all morning  
no one else on my trail

when coyote pauses on the ridge  
watches my passing

when I dream the hills  
the contours I know as well as my body

not wanting a park

Poirier's strongest statements, however, are the poems that evoke simply the rancher's way of life, in which women are now as much involved as men, poems like "at the branding," or the eight lines of "her story":

Sunday is the day  
we dehorn  
dehouse  
tag  
brand  
vaccinate  
and castrate the calves  
Sunday

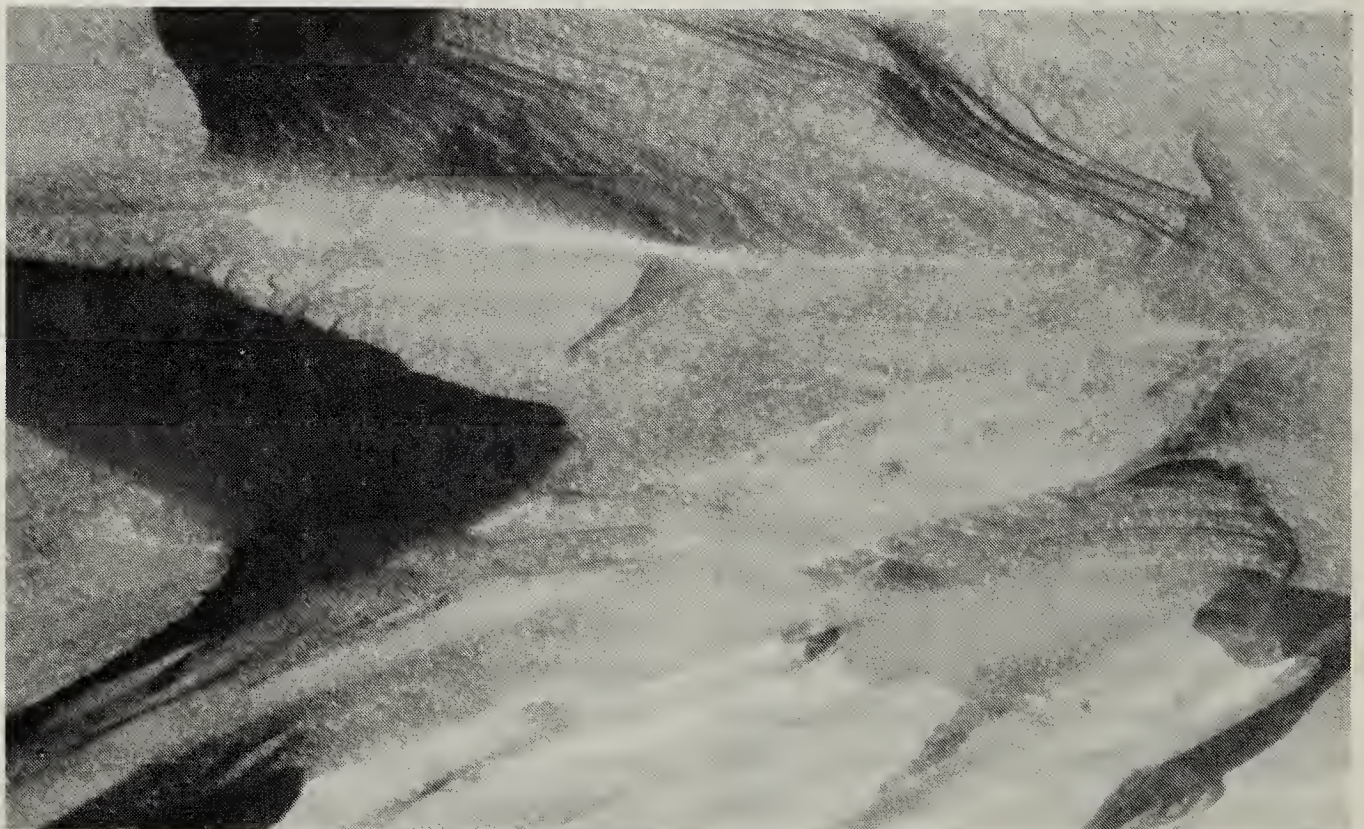
Poirier shows the reader how difficult it is for the rancher to give up this lifestyle. When she says

some of us have had a lease so  
long  
we think the land is ours

she speaks for every grasslander, and for all of us—for the "lease" becomes a metaphor for life itself:

time is the antelope grazing  
the measure of grass  
a long term lease.

Reviewed by *Margaret Belcher*,  
Box 7, Dilke, Saskatchewan. S0G  
1C0



*Snow curves*

*J. Bernard Gollop*