

CULTIVATING OUR ROOTS – GROWING AUTHENTIC PRAIRIE WILDFLOWERS AND GRASSES

NORA STEWART. 2009. Nora Stewart, Arcola, SK. ISBN 978-0-9811442-0-7. Paperback, coil-bound, 155 pages, 28 × 21.5 cm, \$29.95 CAN

It was with great delight that I heard the news – “Nora Stewart is writing a book!” As a biologist trying to accomplish the re-creation of native prairie grassland, I have consulted many times with Nora. Her expertise in finding, harvesting, cleaning, storing, and selling native prairie seeds has already been generously shared with many people on a one-to-one basis. Now, this expertise is written down in comprehensive form for posterity, the first example of such a book that I know of. This book will be most useful as a guide for people who are growing native grass and wildflower seeds for sale, and will also be a great resource for those involved in reclamation, remediation, conservation, and xeriscaping.

What do you get?

Cultivating Our Roots is a relatively large, ring-bound, soft-cover book, containing 155 pages of information about native plants and how to work with them. This book is meant to be used as a reference guide and a field guide – and has been laid out as such. The technical information is presented in coherent, everyday language. The book itself is salted liberally with very specific illustrations, all of which are beautiful photos taken by the author and her husband.

This book has three major sections: “Concepts and Methods”, “Grass and

Forb (Wildflower) Descriptions”, and “Additional Material”.

Concepts and Methods

This 39-page section begins with an explanation of what native plants are, including a gentle introduction to terminology such as “forb”, “weed”, and “native prairie”. It progresses to evaluating methods for acquiring seeds, and a description of the various tests that are available to assess seed quality. Thankfully, there is a relatively extensive section on weeds and the issues they cause, which can easily spell failure. There is also mention of other pesky things like mammals, birds, insects, plant diseases, and (wait for it!) the weather. Nora delves into the specifics of nursery propagation like site design, planning, and preparation, and then gets in to the meat of growing seedlings, whether indoors or out. Harvest is the next topic: timing, methods, and how to handle the seeds once they are off the plants and in your possession. Seed cleaning and proper storage are very important, as they maintain your investment of time and money. The section is rounded off with a short discussion of business considerations.

One of the most interesting and useful aspects of this book is the continual reference to equipment, including how to modify conventional farm equipment

to work for native seeds, and what unconventional equipment works well (Dustbuster, anyone?).

Grass and Forb (Wildflower) Descriptions

This 94-page section describes 22 species of grass and 65 species of forb. The description includes defining characteristics of the plant and its flowering parts, appropriate timing for harvest, germination quirks, and tips for propagating it most effectively. Four photos accompany each species: flowering stage, seed stage, seedling, and scale photo of the seeds themselves. This is one of few books with seedling photos, and the only book I know of with photos of the seeds themselves – on graph paper for scale, no less! This is a great help to people working with seedlings and seeds.

Useful References

The last 16 pages of the book are included for serious plant growers. The best of the written references for this topic are listed, and all of these books and papers are pertinent to the Canadian Prairies. A quick summary of plant family characteristics is presented for ease of species identification. Delightfully, there are more scale seed photographs, and a guide to forbs by flower colour. As a nod to most of us who still work in imperial measurements, Nora has included a Metric/US conversion table. Appendix E lists the most local sources for equipment, information, and services, many of which are Saskatchewan businesses. The glossary is useful to help with necessary technical terms when working with plants. The book index contains both Latin and common names, making it relatively easy to find your chosen species when your mind simply won't supply one version.

The author and publisher also maintains a consistent message by including an Environmental Benefits Statement on the title page, stating the savings from using chlorine free paper and 10% post-consumer waste. This is a nice touch for a book with an environmentally aware topic.

All in all, *Cultivating Our Roots* is a primer on native plants, a technical guide to their propagation, and a rich resource for contacts both in the business world and for more information. This book is the culmination of Nora's hard-won knowledge over 15 years in this business. I wish that more people could summarize their work so usefully! The author has managed to maintain her unique voice in the text, which makes for some wry moments and entertaining observations.

Cultivating Our Roots: Growing Authentic Prairie Wildflowers and Grasses can be purchased through the Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan (<www.npss.sk.ca>), at some local bookstores such as Book and Brier Patch in Regina, or directly from Nora, if you are lucky enough to know her.

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EDITORS' NOTE: More information, sample pages, and purchasing information on *Cultivating Our Roots: Growing Authentic Prairie Wildflowers and Grasses* is available via the Internet at: <<http://cultivatingourroots.com>>.

THAYER BIRDING SOFTWARE'S BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA FOR WINDOWS GOLD EDITION DVD

Thayer Birding Software. 2008. Thayer Birding Software, Naples, FL. DVD. \$165 US. ISBN 1-934573-00-0

I previously reviewed Thayer's Birds of North America CD-ROM Version 3 in the June 2002 issue of *Blue Jay*.¹ Here, I evaluate the recently released (December 2008) Birds of North America Gold Edition DVD, which is Version 5 of the birding software. Thayer Birding Software has continued to revamp their instructional birding software products in order to keep up with continuing improvements in computer technology.

eField Guide View

The layout for the main instructional section called eField Guide View has remained essentially the same with a few enhancements. This part of the program has a major advantage over printed field guides and CDs by combining text, photos, audio, and video into single integrated package and is more up to date than the Birds of North America online. It provides information on all 957 bird species recorded in North America, including 32 new species on the 2008 American Birding Association Checklist. For most species, it has multiple photographs, improved range maps, maps of summer and winter abundance, 1200 outstanding song or call clips and sonograms (for 707 species). There are 2860 photos in this collection. Short video clips of varying quality are included for 551 species instead of the 121 video clips found in Version 3.

The species account information is organized in a field guide format, with scientific and common names (in English, French, German, and Spanish),

AOU 4-letter band codes, order, family, abundance category, size, identification tips (in point form), habitat and behaviour (short paragraph), photos, range and abundance maps, and the sound mnemonic placed together on a single electronic page. A handy zoom-in feature is available for photos and abundance maps. There are quick-jump links to alternate photos, sound recordings and sonograms, abundance maps, and the Birder's Handbook (unchanged in Version 5) and an Internet online guide.

There are a number of new and improved features in eField Guide View that include pronunciation help, birding tips, and a limited repertoire of cheesy bird jokes from Petey the Parrot. There is an Internet online guide for each species, similar species view, and family plate. In Version 5, one can view up to six species at time in the similar species view. The family plate is an enhanced feature where you can view all members of a taxonomic family at a time. From the similar species view and family plate, one can zoom in to enlarge displayed photos, play sound recordings of displayed species or jump to specific species accounts in eField Guide View. In the family plate, one can link to similar or identical family description information on the DVD found in the Internet online guide.

In the latest version, range maps for 695 species have been improved to include political boundaries, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America and are

broken down into breeding, wintering, and year-round ranges.

With Version 5, you can now import your comments, photos, songs, and videos, and they will seamlessly integrate into the eField Guide View. This feature appears to be aimed at more experienced birders and photographers. I have tried it for photos: it took a couple of tries before I got this to work properly, but when I got the import function to work, it was very easy to use.

ID Wizard

The ID Wizard is a very handy tool for all birders attempting to identify mysterious birds seen or heard in the field. A number of major and minor changes have been made to the ID wizard. Options for location (state/province), relative size, colour, habitat, field marks (crest/tufts, eye rings, white outer tail feathers, wing bars) have been carried to Version 5 from the previous version of the program. A major improvement was made to the ID wizard with the return of bird sounds. The bird sound options include 12 song/call types and four song pattern types. In this version, one can use taxonomic group (order, family, genus) as an identifying factor as well. In Version 5, one can generate useful custom lists and quizzes from the ID wizard in addition to the photo gallery displaying photos of all species in the final list with the selected identification characteristics. From the photo gallery, one can play sound recordings, zoom in on the displayed photo, choose primary or secondary photos, or jump to specific species accounts in the eField Guide View. Primary photos show males in breeding plumage and secondary photos show the females, juveniles, or birds in flight.

Custom Lists

With Version 5, one can easily create very useful custom lists. Several custom lists are included with the software. With available and self-generated custom lists,

you can use the filter to select a custom list and use it to study specific birds, make singing screensavers, easily export songs and images to an iPod, iPhone, or MP3 player (a really useful function!), build your own quizzes, export custom lists, and use the photo gallery to view all birds on the custom list. Custom lists can be downloaded from Thayer Birding Software's Share Custom Lists Forum, they can be created by adding a single species at a time, or they can be created with the ID Wizard.

Bird Quizzes

The Bird Quizzes function is much improved with the addition of hundreds of additional quizzes including ones on Christmas Bird Counts in Calgary, Banff, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert National Park, Winnipeg, Riding Mountain National Park, and Churchill. The combinations you can set up are almost endless, with many flexible options. There are now about 700 predefined quizzes with the software, with thousands of variations. The incredibly easy to use Quiz Wizard guides you through the steps to prepare a quiz. In addition to the predefined options, quizzes can be created from custom lists or by selecting a state or province or taxonomic group. My Quizzes is a new feature wherein you create your own quiz on any topic using your photos, songs, and video. There are four types of quizzes: Multiple Choice: Fill-in-the-Blank, Flash Cards, and Pick One. One can adjust the level of difficulty, use common or scientific names or band code as answers, select any photo, sound or video, map, randomize the questions, or play flash cards in a loop. Bird Quizzes is a fun and effective way to improve birding skills, especially for novice and developing birders and children. It has become the central feature and strength of the software.

Sighting Recording

A 'lite' version of the listing program,

Birder's Diary, is included in Version 5. This section of the program is designed for experienced birders who like to maintain sighting records. This simple listing feature contains pull-down dialog boxes for species name, location (state/province), date, and observer and a comment field. This feature allows easy editing, addition, and deletion of sightings. It also allows electronic saving of your sighting data and the ability to sort by combinations of location, date, species name (taxonomic or common), and comments for generating life lists and sighting reports by taxonomic group and dates. This listing program accepts one observer name and does not allow you to export lists or sightings to other programs, although you can export custom lists. In Version 5, you can use your sightings to create custom lists. In order to have full listing program capabilities, you will need to purchase the compatible North America or World type of Birder's Diary.

System Requirements and Troubleshooting Help

I have not had a serious problem with this 2-DVD set in a Windows XP environment with a Pentium 4 processor PC. It is designed to work with these Windows operating systems: XP, Vista, 64-bit, and Version 7. However, it does not work on a Mac. Loading the full program onto my computer was surprisingly quick and easy. Although there is no handy helpful guided tour of the program that can be printed out for easy reference, there are online video tutorials and an electronic help menu. The Thayer Birding Software website continues to have an excellent section on common software questions and answers to complement the enhanced electronic help. This site already contains an update for this DVD.

The Bottom Line

The DVD (Version 5) has numerous improvements over Version 3: better photos, improved range maps, enhanced

similar species views, family plates, allowance of easy importation of photos, songs, and videos into the program, many more quizzes, improved bird sighting recording system, better list management, and improved online help. Although the price tag appears steep at US\$165, you do get a lot of useful tools and information in this impressive and adaptable program. It has more useful and integrated features such as the ID wizard, My Quizzes, custom lists, sighting records, and more updated information than Birds of North America online, and you do not need to worry about renewing subscriptions. Therefore, I highly recommend this DVD set for all birders looking to improve their skills as part of their birding toolbox and personal library.

1. THAYER, P. W., and J. D. DIEHL. 2002. Birds of North America CD-ROM 3. Thayer Birding Software. Naples, FL. Reviewed by Robert Warnock. *Blue Jay* 60:120-121.

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