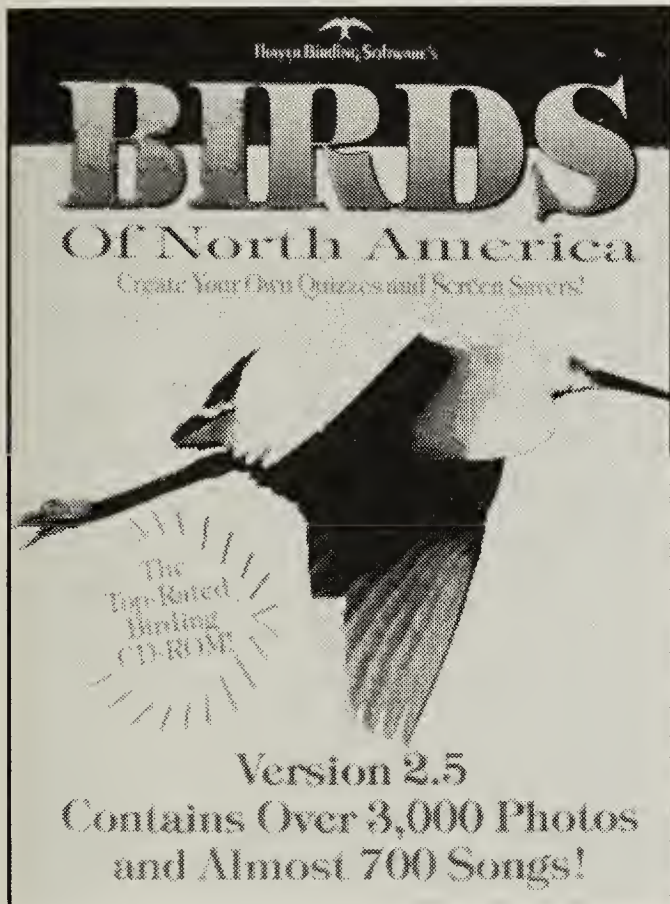


BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA CD-ROM VERSION 2.5

PETER W. THAYER and J. DAVID DIEHL. 1998. Thayer Birding Software, Naples, FL. CD-ROM. \$79.95. ISBN 1-887148-13-2. Available from the Nature Saskatchewan Bookshop.



With the continuing improvements in computer technology, it is now practical and inexpensive for birders to use computer software as part of their 'toolbox'. Currently, there are two kinds of birding software: listing and instructional. Listing software allows birders to store their observations in a database and easily generate lists and reports of their observations. In contrast, instructional software allows the birder to select illustrations, vocalizations, range maps, video clips and other details about species of interest.

The Birds of North America CD-ROM Version 2.5 is a complete instructional birding software package. The main

instructional section is called Birds of North America (BNA). It provides information on all 925 species found in North America. (In spite of the similarity in name, it is unrelated to the monograph series, *The Birds of North America* edited by Poole and Gill.²) There are five other sections: Bird Quizzes, Avian Jukebox, Birds of the World Sampler, The Birder's Handbook and Joy of Birding. The CD-ROM also includes a helpful guided tour of the program that can be printed out for easy reference.

The Birds of North America (BNA) section has multiple photographs, range maps, maps of summer and winter abundance, song or call clips and sonograms for most North American bird species. There are more than 3,000 photos in this collection. For many species, photos of adults, fledglings, immatures, different sexes, morphs or subspecies are included. The magnifying glass icon allows you to zoom in for a better look at photographs. Most are good to outstanding, however, a few lack clarity. According to Thayer Birding Software, the loss of clarity is due to the change in the monitor display standard from VGA to SVGA, and this problem will be fixed with next version of the software. There are also over 1200 songs, call and chip notes from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology for 698 species in this program. The sound quality is superb. Short video clips are

included for 121 species. More video clips would have further enhanced BNA.

A number of BNA features are extremely useful. One can click on the order name and family names to learn about the taxonomic groups to which a species belongs. The duck and ruler icon and the duck on nest icon both lead to field guide information about the species. The duck and song note icon will play the bird's song or calls. The BH book icon brings up the species account in the Birder's Handbook. Best of all, it allows you to listen to songs or calls while looking at the photographs.

The 'Identify' button on the menu bar is really helpful if you cannot identify a bird seen in the field. One enters colours, size, location (state or province), type of bird and habitat type. The identification function works best with precise information. The comparison button allows the birder to see or hear two birds side-by-side. The comparison function is great for comparing similar-looking or similar-sounding species or sexes.

The view button allows the playing of songs and calls and the displaying of their sonograms. In addition, sound mnemonics will be displayed in a dialog box. If you have a computer compatible microphone, you can record sounds and generate and play the sonograms of your recorded sounds.

Clicking on the observation button will reveal a dialog box for recording field observations (maximum 255 characters per record). To store more complex observations, additional software such as Thayer's companion listing software, Birder's Diary is needed.

As a regular user of Windows based programs, I found the overall arrangement of icons and submenus

logical and relatively easy to use in BNA. However, I found scrolling the long list of species a bit awkward for a species search. The list feature will generate short lists of species. These lists can be used in species searches instead of using the entire 925 species list. One can change the ordering of birds in the list by choosing common or scientific name in alphabetical or taxonomical order. In addition, these lists can be used to generate custom quizzes, audio wallpaper and neat audiovisual screensavers.

One of the best parts of the Birds of North America CD-ROM Version 2.5 program is the bird quiz component. There are over 250 quizzes of varying difficulty. One can select from a variety of predefined quizzes or customize quizzes by selecting one of geographical areas, bird families or self-generated lists. Birder's Diary (not included in this CD-ROM) is needed to use the custom checklist and species not on the life list for the Observer functions. One can decide which items to include in the quiz: photos (random or best), sounds, range maps and/or alternate media (which allows use of multiple photos, maps and video clips). There are three test types to choose from: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank and flash card, and one can set the timer between 0 and 60 seconds before the answer is given for each question.

The third section of the CD-ROM, the Avian Jukebox, will play bird songs all day if desired. The choices are identical to those for bird quizzes. This screen can be minimized to create audio wallpaper while you work on other computer programs. The sound quality is outstanding.

The Birds of the World sampler is a photo collection of 400 unusual and colourful birds from other continents.

Bird songs are included for five species. This section is organized in the same way as BNA and the quality of photos is the same. I suspect this section was added as a bonus to fill leftover space on the disk. Basic field guide information and more songs for these species would have greatly enhanced the utility of the sampler.

The Birder's Handbook is a classic reference work by Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye.¹ You can reach this section from the main menu or from the BH book icon in the Birds of North America section. One uses hyperlinks to go to different topics in this electronic version of Birder's Handbook. This version is organized as a Windows help document. The electronic version contains information for 689 species and 249 essays about bird behaviour, natural history and ornithological pioneers. However, references are not included because of space limitations.

The Joy of Birding is the link to articles and websites relating to getting started in birding, checklists, bird identification, backyard birding, birding around the country (United States and Canada), birding around the world, birding tools, scientific classification, birding organizations and the commercial Birder's Mall. I found the bird identification section, the backyard birding section and the article on Sibley's classification of birds by Salzman very interesting.³ The list of local and regional 'bird clubs' appears to be thorough for Alberta but skimpy for Manitoba and Saskatchewan. For the Prairie Provinces, the Bird Alert numbers include Regina, Calgary and Edmonton.

This software is designed to run smoothly with Windows versions 95, 98, 2000, ME and NT. Mac users will need Windows emulation software such as Virtual PC or Softwindows. The

minimum system requirements are modest for this complex and large program: a Pentium 90 processor or equivalent, 16 MB of RAM, SVGA display, high colour video drivers, 4X CD-ROM drive, MPC compatible sound card (e.g., SoundBlaster) and 29 MB of hard drive space. Like other programs, this software will run more quickly with a faster processor, faster CD-ROM drive and more RAM. If one has a large hard drive, one can store a copy of the program there to enhance program speed and reduce wear on the CD-ROM disk.

I have not had a serious problem with this CD-ROM in a Windows 98 environment. Help is available electronically and is very user friendly. The Thayer Birding Software website has an excellent section on common software questions and answers. Technical support is available by e-mail or through their toll-free number.

This CD-ROM cannot replace field guides or bird song tapes or CDs that can be taken into the field but it is a fun and extremely useful educational tool. It has truly helped me to improve my birding skills. The \$80 cost seems expensive but it is really a bargain because of the number of items included. Therefore, I rank this well-designed product 8.5 out of 10 and I highly recommend it for all birders as part of their birding toolbox.

1. Ehrlich, Paul R., David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye. 1988. *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. Simon and Schuster Inc., New York, NY.

2. Poole, A. and F. Gill (eds.). 1992-in progress. *The Birds of North America*. The Academy of Sciences, Philadelphia PA; American Ornithologists Union, Washington, DC.

3. Salzman, Eric. 1993. Sibley's Classification of Birds. *Birding*. December Issue.

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WILDFLOWERS OF ALBERTA : A GUIDE TO COMMON WILDFLOWERS AND OTHER HERBACEOUS PLANTS.

KATHLEEN WILKINSON. 1999. University of Alberta Press, Edmonton. xix+364 pp. Soft cover \$26.95 ISBN 0-88864-298-9. Available from the Nature Saskatchewan Bookshop.

The format of this field guide is useful for educators, naturalists and life-long learners. This book is the standard guidebook size, with excellent colour photographs (some very artistically back lit) and includes line drawings. Appendices include keys to the major families, comparisons of new and old taxonomy, selected references and an alphabetized species index arranged by flower colour as well as an alphabetical index to species. There is also a glossary that refers to species and diagrams by page number – essential for encouraging learning of botany. The rounded corners help the book maintain its shape even when repeatedly pulled out of a pack in the field.

The intent of the book is not merely to identify Alberta wildflowers but to encourage readers to further their self-education. Greek or Latin name derivations help anchor the descriptive meaning of plant names, or relate to the plant's anatomy, growth habits and habitat. I like the regular use of two photos per species – a close-up to show details and a more distant one to show growth habit. The line drawings help

illustrate plant anatomy, although there are some empty spaces where more and/or larger line drawings, especially of seeds, could have been included. Highlighting and bolding of text draws the eye to important or distinguishing characteristics, a helpful feature when one is in a hurry. Especially useful in making the text interesting is the inclusion of examples of the many uses Indigenous people have made of these plants and reference to, and description of, the six Alberta habitat types. The larger families are introduced with a descriptive paragraph. This often provides information such as the function of mycorrhizal fungus in orchids and thus why such plants must not be transplanted.

Suggestions for the next reprint would be to enlarge the font, which is small for aging eyesight or poor light - such as campfire. The line drawings could include a scale. The colour on some of the purple flowers, including Purple Prairie-clover and Purple Loosestrife, is too red. The photograph of the Dotted Blazingstar also shows an atypical growth habit. Some of the photos are

too small to be useful; the photographs of White Sweet-clover, Skeletonweed, coralroot and Green False Hellebore would all be improved by being larger.

These criticisms of a fine and very reasonably priced book are small. I would highly recommend it to Albertans, anyone Alberta-bound and other prairie dwellers who share the aspen parkland, boreal forest and prairie with Alberta.

Acknowledgments:

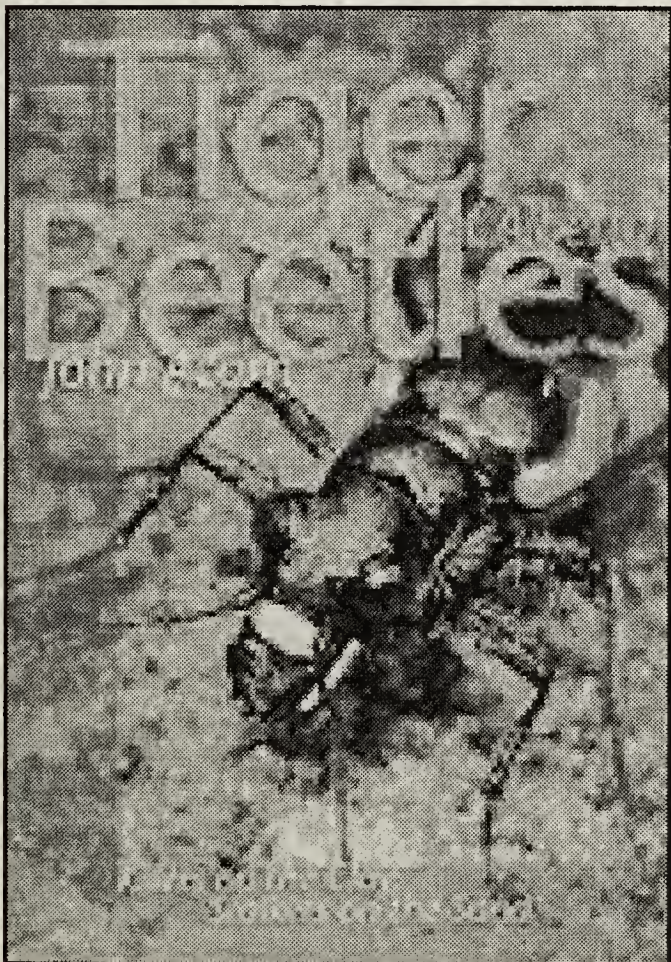
Thanks to the University of Nebraska Lincoln, Great Plains Research, Center for Great Plains Studies for supplying me with the book. Thanks to Peter Jonker for editing advice.

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TIGER BEETLES OF ALBERTA - KILLERS ON THE CLAY, STALKERS ON THE SAND

JOHN ACORN. 2001. University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, Alberta. 120 pages. Soft cover \$19.95 Can. ISBN 0-88864-354-4



There is a great new book for naturalists : *Tiger Beetles of Alberta - Killers on the Clay, Stalkers on the Sand*. With this book you can easily identify the tiger beetles and learn about these fascinating creatures. The great thing about the book is that it identifies the beetles by field marks and not dissected body parts, as many insect identification books are prone to do. Its many photos and drawings allow the reader to really learn what the beetles looks like so they can be quickly identified in the field.

The book has colour photos and colour line drawings of each species, subspecies and morph as well as detailed maps of the Alberta and North American range of each beetle. There are a couple of pages devoted to each species in which the author gives

detailed clues for field identification, explains the derivation of the name, and discusses the races and colour morphs you might find. He gives detailed descriptions of the habitat of each beetle and includes photos illustrating where each is found. He also describes their life history and lists the best places to find them in Alberta. Dispersed throughout the book are interesting facts about Tiger Beetles and anecdotes by the author which are a pleasure to read.

Although it covers only Alberta's tiger beetles, it is useful in Saskatchewan since there is only one Saskatchewan tiger beetle that doesn't occur in Alberta, *Cicindela terricola*, and it is discussed with the Grass-runner Tiger Beetle, *C. cinctipennis*. There are also two Saskatchewan subspecies of the Beautiful Tiger Beetle, *Cicindela formosa*, that do not occur in Alberta: *C. f. generosa*, and *C. f. gibsoni*. The latter is discussed in the book, but not *C. f. generosa* although it is still identifiable, since it looks like a brownish *C. f. formosa*.

There is a chapter that extols the joys of tiger-beetling and one that explains why these beetles should be protected. The author also pays tribute to those who have been collecting, classifying and studying these creatures over the years. The book even contains detailed photos showing how to hold tiger beetles and illustrates how to set up a "simple elegant tiger beetle terrarium", which the author claims is "an understated item which will harmonize with any decor".

This book appeals to a wide audience. Our 7-year-old grandson, Calvin, loves it, has spent hours reading it, and says it's "cool". Felix Sperling, an entomology

professor at the University of Alberta is also enthusiastic about the book and described it this way on the albertanaturalist and albertabugs mailing lists: "This book is a work of art in the truest and nicest sense of the phrase. John's text ranges from poetic to erudite to wonderfully goofy. The photos and drawings are extraordinarily evocative as well as useful. The book is structured in a way that 'works', both to draw people in and to keep them interested."

One word of warning, people reading this book are in danger of becoming Tiger Beetle Nerds. Even if you are not particularly interested in tiger beetles when you pick it up, you will be when you put it down.

The only thing lacking in the book is an index; however, the book is well enough organized that it is quite easy to find things without it. The set of drawings on the last 5 pages of the book give the page numbers where the species are discussed.

The worst thing about the book is that now when we are out on serious butterfly counts or bird surveys our attention is going to be drawn from the job at hand to these fascinating beetles. The best thing about this book is that there will be others in the series. Books on dragonflies, damselflies, ladybugs and larger moths are in the works.

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