Birding with the First American Field Guides to Birds

Birding on my lunch break, I come upon some Canada Geese, a few coots, a Pied-billed Grebe—and then, walking through a grove of cottonwoods, I look up and watch as a team of kinglets works the underside of the leaves. I haven’t seen kinglets in a while, and I focus my binoculars now on an eye-ring, now on some wing-bars, now on a hint of yellow—or was it reddish orange? I find my mind racing to remember the features that distinguish the Ruby-crowned Kinglet from the Golden-crowned, features I’ve memorized many times before and each time forgotten.

I reach for my field guide. Paging quickly to the kinglets, I read this description:

Do you know these dainty little birds that visit us twice a year? Some bright September morning you wake up and find them flitting about the apple-trees, and know that fall has come. But they tell you the fact in such a breezy, cheery way that you remember only how glad you are to see them. In April they are back just long enough to sing out “How do you do?” and then are off for the north so that summer shalln’t catch them.

Needless to say, this is not the Sibley Guide to Birds, or the National Geographic Society’s Birds of North America, or any of the other popular identification guides on the market today. Today, I’m out birding with the first field guide to North American birds, Birds Through an Opera-Glass, written by Florence Merriam and published in 1889.

Our modern field guides correspond to a time when birding and field identification are established, popular pastimes. These days, endangered species are protected by law, and only a small number of North America’s native bird species are legally hunted (and only in season, by licensed hunters). Furthermore, today’s field guides respond to a specific publishing context that defines field guides generically as a combination of color images and terse textual descriptions. These books are the heirs of Roger Tory Peterson’s first guide in 1934, a slim volume that stripped away “needless” information to focus exclusively on facilitating accurate field identifications.

Fifty years before that, though, when the first American field guides to birds began to appear...
those books had to respond to very different social and publishing concerns. In the 1880s and 1890s, North America's birds were still being slaughtered by the millions. Countless songbirds and shorebirds were killed to provide feathers and entire carcasses to adorn the hats of fashionable middle- and upper-class women. The Passenger Pigeon, the continent's most abundant bird, was driven to extinction. Even the newfound discipline of scientific ornithology, with its early fixation on classification and collecting, was implicated in the large-scale killing of birds.

The first American field guides must be viewed as responding to this social context, in which bird conservation as we know it had not yet taken hold. These early guides were intended as weapons in the arsenal of a new campaign to eliminate the senseless destruction of birds and other animals by making the killing seem simply wrong. As early as the 1860s, such notables as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott directed short stories at the young boys deemed most likely to commit such malfeasance. In Stowe's story "Aunt Esther's Rules" from 1865, children learn rules that many now would take for granted, including "never to frighten an animal for sport and not to give young children animals as playthings" (Tarris 2003). In the battle to end cruelty to animals, sympathy with and for animals was the emotional leverage in the fight. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), founded in England in 1824 to stop the abuse of carriage horses, became established in North America in 1866, where it soon launched a broader critique against cruelty to animals. The first field guides were part of this broader movement, with authors evoking sympathy for birds in order to provide an alternative to the destructive practice of "birding" by collecting. The first field guides to birds aimed to popularize a new kind of harmless, aesthetic field identification by sight and by sound.

Guides from the 1880s and 1890s must also be seen as part of a historical publishing context in which coated papers and multi-color chromolithography, both requisite for high-quality color images, were costly. Thus, to make their books affordable, the authors of the first American field guides had to rely on extensive passages of text accompanied by very few images, only in this way could they be certain of introducing a broad readership to their new kind of birding, birding "through an opera-glass".

At the turn of the last century, there was a clear demand for field guides, but what those field guides would look like was entirely up for grabs. Sentimental guides, many of them personifying birds and privileging certain species over others, vie[d] for control of the market with more scientifically--oriented guides that represented each bird "equally" and with facts. Today, the conventional genealogy of the modern field guide is told from the side of this second set of guides, the "begats" including such familiar male authors as Coues', Ridgway, and Chapman, all of whom published an array of identification guides long before Peterson. But it was the field guides by their female contemporaries—Florence Merriam, Neltje Blanchan, Olive Thwaites Millicent, and Mabel Osgood Wright— that were initially more popular and that first carved out a space for the genre of the modern field guide. Strikingly dissimilar to our modern guides, these works blend popular nineteenth-century forms of writing—drawing on traditions of children's literature, sentimentalism, and natural history—to place birds, birding, and birders in contexts more emotional and more domestic than the strictly scientific objectivity pretended to by Peterson and his successors.

I've tried birding with guides by Merriam and Blanchan, and it's provided me with quite a shock.

Florence Merriam's Birds Through an Opera-Glass is arguably the first modern American field guide to birds. The book describes some seventy species common on the East Coast, devoting to each several pages of text interspersed with the occasional image. The preponderance of text over image makes this not a book to flip through quickly: it is a book to read.
About kinglets, Merriam writes:

**How do they look?**
Well, they are fluffy little things with grayish olive coats and whitish vests that protect them as they flit about the leaves as perfectly as the vireo's suit.

Merriam's affection for birds is evident in her language, and she makes no effort to suppress sentiment. Remember: Merriam is trying to win readers over to her way of thinking, and her most effective mode of persuasion is to pull at the emotional heartstrings of her readers. Describing a kinglet that she was able to observe particularly closely, Merriam writes:

And what a queer gnome he was! A fat ball of feathers, stilted up on long, wiry legs, with eyes that, though set oddly far back from his bill, were yet so near together they seemed to prevent his seeing straight ahead... He and his friends were here by themselves about two weeks, working industriously all the while—dear little brownies—to clear our mountain ashes and apple-trees of insects before leaving us.

It can be revealing to compare a modern field guide to these old texts. David Sibley (2000), for instance, describes the Ruby-crowned Kinglet this way: "Tiny and drab with small bill; overall a bit larger and more elongated than Golden-crowned." The bird itself has not changed, but the language used to describe it certainly has. Whereas Sibley and all the post-Peterson cohort have become masters of the terse description emphasizing how to tell one bird from the next, Merriam spends several pages describing not just how to identify a bird, but what that identification is worth. The kinglet, for Merriam's readers in 1889, is not yet taken for granted as valuable in and of itself. It is constructed as an asset by standing in for basic human values: industry, amiability, communal life with "friends".

Florence Merriam and other authors of field guides around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries knew that converting adults to the new conservationist agenda would be difficult. Children, on the other hand, were a receptive and worthwhile audience, so many books were written directly with young people in mind. Neltje Blanchan's *Birds Every Child Should Know* (1913), as its title suggests, targets just that younger, more malleable audience.

About the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blanchan has this to say in the pages of *Birds Every Child Should Know*:

Count that a red-letter day on your calendar when first you see either this tiny, dainty sprite, or his next of kin, the golden-crowned kinglet, fluttering, twinkling about the evergreens. In republicana America we don't often have the chance to meet two crowned heads.

Several agendas are at work in even this short piece of text from Blanchan's field guide. The act of seeing this bird is rendered important (a "red-letter day" marks a special occasion on an ecclesiastical calendar). Blanchan also in-
fuses this small, otherwise common bird with maximum importance and an almost magical character—it is a "dainty sprite" seen "fluttering, twinkling". In addition, Blanchan's description contains a short lesson on democratic citizenship ("republican America"). This is no small point. Blanchan is not merely reminding her young readers that they do not live in a monarchy. She is insisting that we can learn and know about ourselves and our culture through birds, and this way of seeing is meant to add to the value of birds and, thus, the need to preserve them.

Though sometimes veiled, modern field guides have agendas, too. Jack L. Griggs's *All the Birds of North America* (1997) is ardently environmentalist. Griggs opens his field guide with seven digitally manipulated images of extinct North American birds, morphing these lost species into specimens that haunt the entire landscape of the guide. Whereas the images in most twentieth-century field guides feature birds in their "natural habitat"—swimming past a mountainside, or perched on a decontextualized bough—many of the images in *All the Birds* show birds in the midst of such very human landscapes as farms, docks, and cities. The Horned Lark scavenges along the barren edge of a runway; the Glorious and Iceland Gulls forage for scraps at the landfill. These images make radical statements about habitat depletion and the impact we have had on the birds we adore.

Less eloquent than the artists' renderings in *All the Birds*, Griggs's text for the *Golden-crowned Kinglet* comprises this short passage:

*Abundant. Habitat and habits like Ruby-crowned Kinglet's. Like Ruby-crowned, but orange (male) or yellow (female) crown patch bordered by black and white stripes.*

Even in Griggs's field guide, with its environmentalist agenda, the text is short and to the point. Blanchan's instructions, lessons, and value judgments have fallen away, replaced by a nearly exclusive focus on correct identification. Whereas many of the paintings in *All the Birds* challenge a reader's assumptions about the benign separation between humans and nature, the texts in this guide still give us birders what we want (or think we want): "objective", value-free tools to make quick and effective identifications in the field. The illustrations in *All the Birds* may hark back to an earlier, more overtly political, era of the field guide, one where having an agenda did not undermine the purpose of a field guide, but Grigg's text is stuck in our modern era of definitive identification.

Of course, when I saw my own little team of ringlets, correct field identification was precisely what I turned to my guide for. The moment I saw the ringlet working the canopy of the cottonwood, the first thing I wanted to know was which of the two species I was looking at. Was it a Golden-crowned or Ruby-crowned? Upon opening my copy of *Birds Through an Opera-Glass* and reading what Florence Merriam had to say about these birds, my modern sensibility was directly confronted.

Using *Birds Through an Opera-Glass* in the field, I wondered if my entire view of birds might change, if I might come to see the ringlet differently, perhaps even stop worrying so much about whether it was a Ruby-crowned or Golden-crowned "flitting about" at the other end of my 8x40 binocular. But this hasn't happened. I'm still a product of the Peterson era and a consumer of the many modern guides in print today. Birding with the first American field guides to birds, I find myself rethinking but still hanging on to my impulsion to identify each species of bird correctly and quickly. I'm no nineteenth-century birder, and I don't think I could become one. What using Merriam's first field guide can allow one to realize, however, is that birding is a pastime with a history, and that history has in part been made by the texts that we use.

**Literature Cited**


