

## NORTH AMERICAN DUCKS, GEESE & SWANS: IDENTIFICATION GUIDE.

Frank S. Todd. 2018. Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. 203 pages. \$34.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-88839-093-6.

The *North American Duck, Geese & Swans: Identification Guide*, released in 2018, is the culmination of a lifetime of waterfowl photography by the late Frank Todd. Indeed, this book stands apart from other identification guides as being entirely photo-driven, with minimal introductory material, notations of field marks, or descriptions of the various waterfowl species. It is small enough to be carried in the field (6.5" × 9" × 0.5"), but most readers will find it less useful than a standard bird identification book (Sibley 2014), even for waterfowl. As the title suggests, the Todd guide focuses on North American species, but also includes an opportunistic sample of some vagrants. The sheer number of photographs is impressive (even overwhelming at times), and this guide would make a colorful addition to the libraries of amateur waterfowl enthusiasts across North America.

The book format is straightforward: each group of birds (e.g., dabbling ducks, sea ducks) begins with a conversational paragraph that provides an entry-level description of basic life history and behavior. Within taxonomic groupings, each species that follows is allotted 1–3 pages with a small range map, one line of morphological measurements, four bullet points of identification tips, and an estimated North American population size that sometimes includes worldwide estimates. The overwhelming majority of each species account is composed of 5–45 photos of the bird in question. Interestingly, the photos themselves have been clipped to silhouettes in photo-editing software, i.e., ducks are “floating” on a monochromatic page rather than swimming on the water or flying through the air as they were in the original photograph. This cropping method is similar to that used in the *Crossley ID Guide: Waterfowl*, but Crossley et al. (2017) set collages of clipped photographs into a realistic photo backdrop to highlight the habitat in which species are commonly observed.

Photo selection seems opportunistic in the Todd guide: readers should not expect a comprehensive presentation of every age and sex combination, and photos of hatching-year juveniles typically are limited to a photo or two of young (Class 1) birds. Other recent waterfowl guides such as those by Reeber (2015) and Crossley et al. (2017) are vastly more comprehensive in terms of photographs, plate drawings, and extensive text descriptions of waterfowl in various plumages (in addition to providing more in-depth waterfowl biology and ecology). In the Todd guide, photos are not clearly delineated into categories, which means that ages and sexes are interspersed on a given page. Critically, most photos are unlabeled (e.g., 0 out of 21 photos of the American Black

Duck [*Anas rubripes*] are labeled) which makes comparing age- and sex-specific field marks nigh impossible (especially for newcomers to waterfowl identification). For example, the page for Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*) potentially shows female birds and also males in eclipse plumage, but there are no labels on any of the 23 photographs, so the only identification the casual reader can make is that “these are Blue-winged Teal.” Some of the shortcomings in labeling perhaps make sense if the author was unable to make a positive identification from a distance in the field. But then again, there are some labels assigned as definitive identifications that seem highly questionable (for example, the “subadult male” Cinnamon Teal (*Spatula cyanoptera*) on page 85 with greater secondary coverts that show no dark spotting at the tips [Carney 1992]). The photographs as presented do an admirable job of showing birds—most commonly adult males in breeding plumage—in a variety of poses, but some readers may question whether more than 20 photos of male Canvasbacks (*Aythya valisineria*) are necessary for an identification guide. A further word of warning to the more technical reader: species are not presented in phylogenetic order, and do not follow the 2017 taxonomic revision by the American Ornithological Society (Chesser et al. 2017), so 11 species have incorrect scientific names.

One of the highlights of this guide is the diversity of pictures of rare vagrants from Europe, Asia, and South America. It can be challenging to find decent photographs of these species, let alone photos of ducks in eclipse and juvenal plumage (e.g., Falcated Duck [*Mareca falcata*]). The guide to urban waterfowl at the end of the book is also useful, and provides a photographic sampling of species observed in parks or farms that are commonly kept by amateur waterfowl fanciers. More technical readers also may appreciate the splitting of subspecies (e.g., Common Eider [*Somateria mollissima*], Canada Goose [*Branta canadensis*]), but regrettably, the layout of the book and lack of direct comparative text makes learning the differences between them difficult.

In general, amateur waterfowl enthusiasts may appreciate the diversity of photos in this guide, but many readers may be frustrated by the lack of organizational structure, photo labels, and descriptive text which have become the norm in bird identification guides. This book clearly does not seek to fit that same mold, and pursues a completely unique style of presentation. The *North American Ducks, Geese & Swans: Identification Guide* is, at its core, a celebration of the diversity of North American waterfowl in various postures and plumages as shown through an impressive collection of photographs painstakingly gathered by Frank Todd over an illustrious career.—Kevin M. Ringelman, Assistant Professor, School of Renewable Natural Resources, Louisiana State University AgCenter, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 70803, USA.

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