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Sibley's New Twins: Book Review

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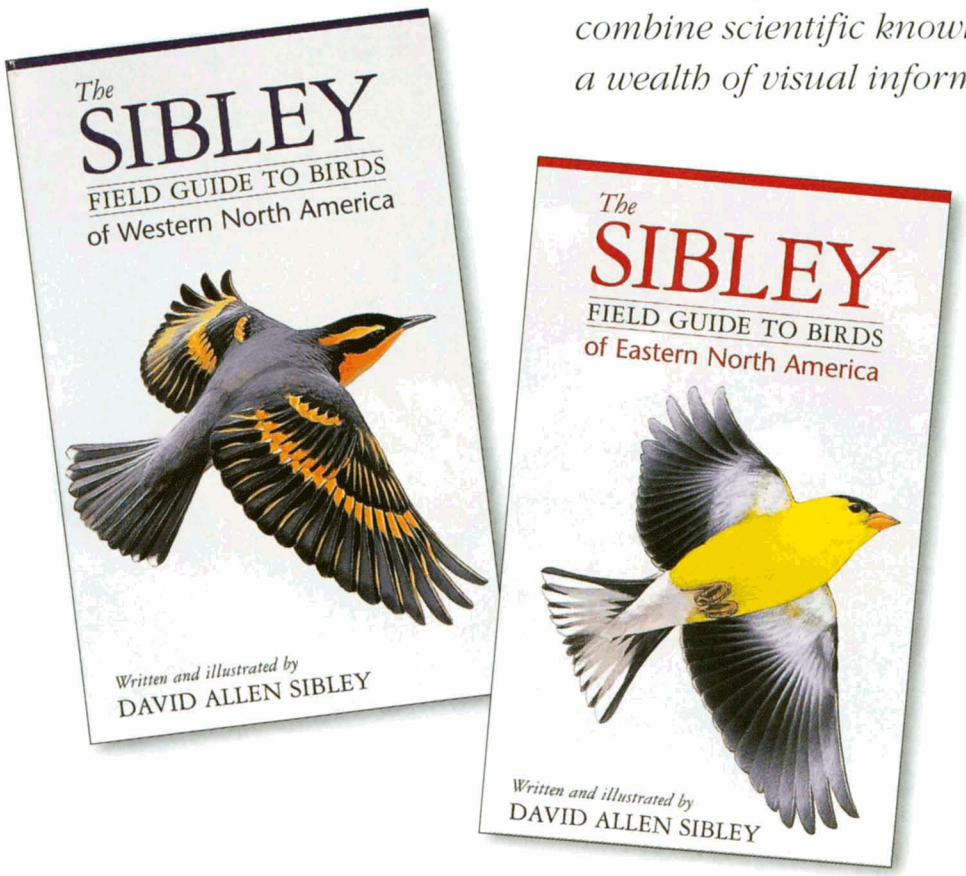
Book Review: by Paul A. Johnsgard

Sibley's New Twins

David Sibley's new field guides combine scientific knowledge with a wealth of visual information



A Varied Thrush adorns the cover of Sibley's field guide for western North America. An American Goldfinch appears on the eastern guide.

Field guides are a unique breed of books. These days, new titles seem to appear like magic. On my office bookshelf I now have just over 100 books that qualify as field guides by size, non-technical approach, and an emphasis on outdoor species identification. One of my earliest is a 1921 edition of Frank M. Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*. The most recent are *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* and *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America* by David Allen Sibley (Knopf, 2003, $19.95 each).

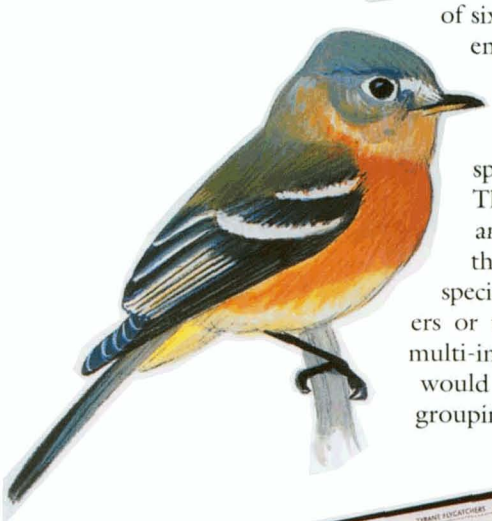
Interestingly, each of the Sibley guides is very nearly the same size and weight as the Chapman guide. The Chapman guide has considerably more pages (530), including several color plates by the ornithological painter Louis Agassiz Fuertes that in both quality and layout would be at home in any modern field guide, but most of the book consists of text and black-and-white illustrations. In many ways, field guides have evolved slowly during the past century, progressively deleting detailed plumage descriptions and data on migration, nests, and eggs, and ruthlessly eliminating all the sorts of basic information on bird biology that occupied the initial fifth of Chapman's book.

What has been added in modern field guides are wonderful range maps, better descriptions of behavior, and multiple color illustrations, showing every species at rest and in flight and documenting how plumages vary with sex, age, and race. Thus, "handbooks" like Chapman's have morphed gradually into modern field guides. These innovations have facilitated rapid field identification for personal pleasure rather than as part of a specific biological research project, and a vast market has emerged for

identification guides that can be used easily by people who are not formally trained in biology.

Popular ornithology has thereby gradually been transformed from generalized 19th-century natural history activities such as egg- or nest-collecting, through traditional "bird-watching," which often involved long-term personal studies of one or a few species, to present-day "birding," where the emphasis is on rapid, long-distance species identification of every bird within view or hearing range. A modern field guide must, in my view, meet several criteria to attain these demanding needs: It must be compact, comparative, convenient, colorful, contemporary, and even consilient.

Unlike David Sibley's earlier *Guide to Birds* (Knopf, 2000), his two new books are compact enough to fit in a large pocket. There is no need for persons birding in the western Great Plains to carry both in order to make sure that any strays from either coast are covered. His eastern guide covers 650 species, and the western guide covers 750 out of about 800 total North American species, producing a broad species overlap in coverage. I noticed, for example, that all of eight western species that visit western Nebraska very rarely and are absent from Roger Tory Peterson's eastern guide are present in Sibley's eastern guide, and four out of six eastern forest species that barely enter eastern Nebraska are also present in his western guide.



David Sibley's painting below, of a first winter Buff-breasted Flycatcher, is one of 19 illustrations of birds on page 284-85 of the western guide.

Like David Sibley's earlier and much larger guide, the two-species-per-page rule still applies. The arrangement makes for a neat and consistent layout, but when there are four or five look-alike species (such as the *Empidonax* flycatchers or the small *Calidris* sandpipers), a multi-image comparison on a single page would be invaluable. Sibley's collective groupings of miniature images of related genera and species that precede his species descriptions are often too small to assist much in sorting out such similar species. Yet Sibley provides a plethora of visual information. His eastern guide has 37 images of seven *Empidonax* species, and the western one has 49 images of 12 species. By comparison, the National Geographic guide has 30 entire-bird images of 11 species, and Peterson's eastern guide has one image apiece of six species. It is hard to quibble when confronted with such visual wealth.

Additionally, there is a wonderful array of colored images of intraspecific plumage variations of each species, with every bird looking as if it has been painted from life rather than from study skins. Sibley has some of the mystical touch with watercolors that Fuertes had, simplifying and reducing feather patterns to their essence, but keeping the overall image wholly believable. Sibley doesn't waste valuable page space painting in branches or environmental backgrounds. One simply cannot fault Sibley's use of color and form, both critical elements of any field guide.

The range maps in the Sibley guides, like those in his larger comprehensive one, are excellent. A simple test is to check the indicated ranges of some currently expanding species, such as the Great-tailed Grackle and Eurasian Collared-Dove. And the latest AOU name changes are present. High marks here for being contemporary.

My application of the term *consilient* is somewhat based on that of E. O. Wilson's usage: namely, suggesting a unity and synthesis of present-day scientific knowledge. David Sibley's books are of course not scientific monographs, but they are good markers of the current highly developed state of field identification of birds, now aided greatly by improved optics, auditory aids, and computerized databases. Sibley has taken up the mantle of Roger Tory Peterson, who gave birth to the modern avian field guide in the 1930s and guided its development for more than half a century. I think that Roger would be pleased with the direction that David Sibley is taking it.

One final test on my field guides is whether I value them enough to be willing to spend the time needed to make my own notes on their pages. I thus can not only personalize them but also make them even more useful for rapid use, such as by color-marking page edges for locating certain sections easily. I suspect I will do that with my copies of Sibley. Edge guides have been under-exploited in bird field guides (but were used effectively in the American Bird Conservancy's guide *All the Birds of North America)* and should be considered for some future edition of these guides. The Sibley guides are so good that further editions are a dead certainty. As with the Peterson guides, I will likely buy every edition, whether or not I need it.

Paul A. Johnsgard is Foundation Professor of the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the author of more than 40 books, including This Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills *(University of Nebraska Press, 1995) and* Prairie Birds: Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains *(University Press of Kansas, 2001).*