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The Birds of Ecuador: Status, Taxonomy, and Distribution. Volume I. The Birds of Ecuador: Field Guide. Volume II

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The Birds of Ecuador: Status, Taxonomy, and Distribution. Volume I. Robert S. Ridgely and Paul J. Greenfield (with the collaboration of Mark B. Robbins and Paul J. Greenfield). Ithaca: Cornell University Press (Comstock), 2001. xvii + 848 pp., foreword, bibliography, indexes. \$70.00 (paper). ISBN 0-8014-8720-X. [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu]

The Birds of Ecuador: Field Guide. Volume II. Robert S. Ridgely and Paul J. Greenfield (with the collaboration of Paul Coopmans, and in association with The Academy of Natural Sciences). Ithaca: Cornell University Press (Comstock), 2001. xvii + 740 pp., foreword, bibliography, indexes, color plates. \$50.00 (paper). ISBN 0-8014-8721-8. [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu]

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Finding and identifying birds in the tropics has long been substantially different from the same pursuit in North America. Here in Anglo America, the progression of field guides since Roger Tory Peterson's ground-breaking *A Field Guide to the Birds* in the 1930s has steadily led to the development of a science and art of field identification in which all the regularly occurring species, both native and vagrant, can be readily handled by legions of observers. Many birders in each state and province now spend most field outings without even consulting a field guide, which has become to them a supplementary resource to be stuck inside a travel bag or glove compartment just in case a truly unexpected species appears. An array of ancillary identification aids has accumulated alongside the traditional guides, including CDs providing representative vocalizations of all the species likely to be encountered. In addition, there is abundant material on which species are most regularly to be found in each habitat or even each individual birding site, an invaluable aid to identification since it allows ruling out the unlikely based on probability alone. Against this familiar experience of expertise, skill, and detailed information, the experience of even the most seasoned North American bird enthusiasts in the tropics can often be chaotic and frustrating, even while it is extremely exciting. Years of training north of the border do not prepare one adequately for the tremendous variety of species in the tropics, let alone the presence of completely unfamiliar families and the lack of refined identification aids. While the shock is largely due to the transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar avifauna, and partly caused by the sheer number of species to be dealt with,

much is also produced by the poorly developed state of knowledge on how to identify the birds of Latin America, along with the associated lack of refined field guides and other supplementary materials.

Happily, this state of affairs is rapidly changing, and the two volumes of *The Birds of Ecuador* make a highly significant contribution in this regard. The pioneering field guide effort in tropical Latin America, Peterson's *Field Guide to Mexican Birds*, was gradually built upon over decades by the addition of guides by various authors and publishers covering Panama, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia. The yawning gap has always been in Peru, Ecuador, and Amazonian Brazil, the former two countries being especially attractive destinations for birders visiting South America because the tropical Andean countries are the most species rich in the world. A field guide to Peruvian birds has only been produced in the last few years, and although a guide has been available for Colombia since 1986, this has been bittersweet since travel there has been a risky business. *The Birds of Ecuador* can at least hold its own with any of the existing Latin American guides, and indeed is in some important ways a step forward for the genre.

The most obvious difference between *The Birds of Ecuador* and the other Latin American guides is that it is composed of two near equally sized books, one focused on identification and designed to be carried into the field, and the other basically a desktop volume of Ecuadorian bird distribution, taxonomy, ecology, and conservation. Thus, its content coordinates the subject matter that would usually be found in two entirely separate works on a region, typically written under separate authorship. It covers both bases well. The field guide volume is small enough to be tucked beneath a belt or in a large pocket, a necessity in the tropics where, for most birders, having a guide book at hand in the field is a necessity because too many birds will be seen too quickly for taking notes and then consulting books later at home. The field guide also contains a shortened version of the bird name index, useful for quickly looking up species in the text. The illustrations are beautiful, and well keyed to the text, where notations beside each species' entry not only indicate the plate number on which its illustration occurs, but also its position on the plate, for speedy access. Another plus is that no species have their illustrations confined to black and white depictions hidden away amongst the pages of text, as is the case in many similar guide books. Rather, this guide follows the much preferable practice of having all of the illustrations together on the plates. One of the few complaints that can be made about the book is that the illustrations, while delicious to the eye, do not capture the personality of the species as perfectly as the best North American guides do their species. However, this is perhaps more an observation about the state of development of Latin American ornithology as a whole. Familiarity with Ecuadorian birds is not yet as developed as in the United States and Canada, and so it is not surprising that their artistic representations do not yet as perfectly capture the gestalt of each species. At any rate, the plates are still feasts for the eye.

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The desktop volume of the pair is likewise excellent. There is substantial overlap of information between the two books, but this is a wise practice—the information of interest is present in both places, so that the reader will have it at hand when needed, whether they are reading the desktop or field volume. The desktop volume gives a good sense of the history and human element of ornithological work in Ecuador, and provides interesting reading—a window into the process of ornithological exploration of a nation. The basic categories of bird habitat in Ecuador are also described in a useful nine-page section, which is a source of good general natural history information useful even outside the context of birds. A gazetteer of important bird sites is included, and might be useful for traveling birders. Finally, the conservation chapter of this volume gives valuable advice, and is often quite specific in its recommendations.

I am compelled as a reviewer to point out whatever flaws I can find in these volumes, although I hope this will sound inconsequential in light of my overall strong endorsement. Perhaps the most significant drawback is that the authors have chosen not to cover the Galápagos Islands. However, there are already other publications available covering the Galápagos. In the field guide, the introductory paintings diagramming bird body parts have labels for some body features that are confusingly placed. A section meant to introduce the beginner to bird groups via depiction of their silhouettes has so many similar silhouettes of small land birds that this may actually confuse and discourage the budding bird enthusiast. The map found in both volumes, on which important sites are marked by numbers, could be enhanced by providing a listing of locations in sequence of their reference numbers. In addition, the current listing of mapped sites by alphabetical order could benefit by the addition of an (x,y) geographical grid system to simplify finding the sites on the map. The introduction to boreal migrants in the “Bird Migration in Ecuador” chapter of the desktop volume is a bit confusing. Finally, as might be expected in a first edition of a work of this sort, there are a variety of typos scattered throughout the pages.

In conclusion, this work is a “must-buy” for anyone traveling to Ecuador who is interested in birds. Anyone interested in the natural history of the tropics or Latin America might also want to own these books. *The Birds of Ecuador* is both pleasing to browse through, and very useful for field identification and library research. Overall, the authors have produced a terrific pair of volumes that make an important contribution to the ornithological literature.