

A close look at two birding guides to southeastern Arizona

Tucson Audubon Society's Finding Birds in Southeast Arizona, edited by Clark Blake. Revised 2004. Tucson Audubon Society. Tucson. 329 pages. \$24.95 (spiral-bound paperback)

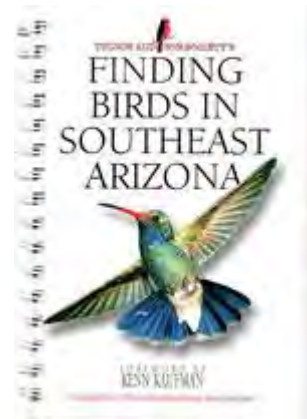
A Birder's Guide to Southeastern Arizona (ABA/Lane Birdfinding Guide), by Richard Cachor Taylor. Revised 2005. American Birding Association. Colorado Springs, CO. 384 pages. \$24.95. (paperback)

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Many birders have an interest in our local avifauna that goes well beyond checking off species on a life list (although the urge to tick off new species often remains to varying degrees). If we spend much time in the field, we inevitably want to learn more about the habitat preferences, migratory behavior, distribution patterns, population dynamics, detailed field characteristics, and other aspects of the natural history of the birds we observe. Discovering a species in an odd habitat or on an unusual date can often excite as much interest as spotting an area rarity, and it leads us to look for reference materials that can help explain what we are seeing.

Although both guides are designed to help newer and out-of-state birders find birds in the area, they also offer the experienced Arizona birder comprehensive information on the distribution and habitat preferences of birds in the area.

The recently published *Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas*, edited by Troy E. Corman and Cathryn Wise-Gervais, for example, offers an excellent tool to the Arizona birder with an interest in such issues. In addition, there are two publications, recently updated, that focus on southeastern



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Arizona. Although both the Tucson Audubon Society (TAS) and the American Birding Association (ABA) guides are designed to help newer and out-of-state birders find birds in the area, they also offer the experienced Arizona birder comprehensive information on the distribution and habitat preferences of birds in the area, including outside the breeding season. They contain annotated lists of species and bar graphs that show where each species may be found and the relative abundance of each species throughout the southeastern part of the state. This review focuses on those species accounts and bar graphs and will not provide an in-depth analysis of the excellent birding area descriptions contained in each guide. In general, the TAS Guide reviews more individual locations and treats each location individually whereas the ABA/Lane Guide provides greater detail and recommends half-day or day-long trip itineraries for some of the more popular southeastern Arizona birding locales.

I recently learned how useful these reference books can be when I found a juvenile Gray Hawk along the Santa Cruz River south of the Ina Road bridge in the Tucson area. I knew that this species is a summer resident in southeastern Arizona, but I also recollected that it was unusual in the Tucson area. I couldn't recall any reports from the Santa Cruz River around Tucson, although they breed further upstream south of Green Valley. To find out whether this occurrence was unusual, I checked the TAS and ABA/Lane guides. Both showed that the hawk is still present in its favored habitat through September and into October. However, the TAS guide also describes the Gray Hawk as "casual away from breeding areas during migration, such as at Pinal Air Park Pecan Grove" (further downstream along the Santa Cruz from the Ina Road bridge area). This information helped confirm that my sighting was unusual, but not unprecedented. The ABA/Lane guide did not note the hawk's migratory behavior but did explain that they are "very rare in winter, usually in the Santa Cruz River Valley." I was glad that I had both books, because each helped me in different ways. The recent updating of both books, which have been available in different editions for many years, makes them especially useful.

Although the layout of the annotated species information and bar graphs in the guides are similar in many respects, there are important differences. For example, the annotated

list in the TAS guide, compiled by David Stejskal and Gary Rosenberg, describes every species recorded in southeast Arizona, whereas the ABA/Lane guide focuses on southeastern Arizona specialties. The species descriptions for the ABA/Lane guide's more limited list is typically more detailed and contains more information than the descriptions in the TAS guide. The different approaches help make the guides work well together.

The TAS guide accounts for accidental species usually contain only location and date information, but most descriptions for casual and more common species show likely habitat and abundance at different times of year. The list also notes species that occur irregularly, and temporal population changes are usually noted for species with increasing or declining populations in the area. For example, the TAS guide states that for the Belted Kingfisher "recent observations suggest that this species may breed in the Safford area" and that nesting was recently confirmed for the American Dipper in the Pinaleño Mountains. The TAS guide's species list also includes symbols indicating whether a species sighting should be formally documented for the Arizona Bird Committee.

On the other hand, the ABA/Lane guide has the advantage that its descriptions for each specialty species often contain more information than those in the TAS guide and invariably contain more information on likely locations to observe these species. The ABA/Lane guide also tends to include more comprehensive information regarding past and current population trends and more useful data for identifying similar species. Under Aztec Thrush, for example, it notes that "inexperienced birders may confuse a black-and-white juvenile Spotted Towhee for an Aztec Thrush, but the bill shape should be diagnostic." Such information can be very important; particularly as few field guides depict or adequately describe juvenile plumage. Another useful feature of the ABA/Lane guide is the very detailed and lengthy accounts for several of the more sought-after Arizona species including Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Aztec Thrush, and Flame-colored Tanager.

The bar graphs in each book are also presented differently. The ABA/Lane guide includes bar graphs in a separate section with a four-part pie chart indicating the season a species can be found in a particular habitat. Unlike the

species accounts, the bar graphs include information for all species recorded in southeastern Arizona and indicate which species have nested in the area. As a more practical measure, the TAS guide includes the bar graphs on the same page as the species information, making cross-referencing the species accounts with the graph much easier. Also the horizontal layout of the bar graphs and the spiral binding make it easy to use. For these reasons, I prefer the TAS guide in the field. However, I also find the ABA/Lane guide's temporal habitat information a useful reference when a species appears in an odd habitat at a certain time of year. This is especially helpful for species that occur in southeastern Arizona year-round but winter and breed in different habitats and locations. The TAS guide includes information on where many species can be found during migration but does not do as well in depicting the migratory periods of these species or the various habitat types where they can be seen during migration. The ABA/Lane Guide includes additional sightings of some species not accepted by the Arizona Bird Committee, such as Nutting's Flycatcher, and also includes hypothetical sightings such as Sinaloa Wren and Black-capped Vireo, and species of suspect origin, such as Blue Grouse and Elegant Quail.

The new editions of both guides contain a significant amount of updated material. In addition to providing a wealth of new information, the species information and bar graphs in the new editions of each guide may potentially provide valuable information about the population trends of dynamic species populations in the area when compared with corresponding data in the older versions of each guide.

Owning both new editions of these guides will broaden and update your knowledge of the region's bird species and enhance your birding experience in southeastern Arizona.

The previous edition of the TAS guide was released in 1999. The format of the new sixth edition remains essentially the same with additional information about Important Birding Areas and a new foreword by Kenn Kaufman. The birding location section also contains a few new locations and updated information concerning access and directions to existing sites. The format of the annotated list of species and bar graphs remains the same other than a revised taxonomic order consistent with the recent

American Ornithologists' Union Checklist revisions. The look is slightly different with solid gray bars for uncommon status replacing the three lines of the previous edition. This change improves the appearance of the graphs and makes them easier to interpret. The bar graphs have also been updated to reflect recent occurrences of casual and accidental species and the increased presence or the extended stay of a few individuals of some species in recent years such as Least Grebe, Short-tailed Hawk, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Rufous-capped Warbler, and the wintering status of Black-necked Stilt, among others. The updated bar graphs include species recently seen in the area for the first time such as Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Snow Bunting. The annotated species list in the TAS guide also reflects recent sightings of casual and accidental species, and new locations for species, such as the recent discovery of Buff-breasted Flycatcher in the Rincon Mountains. Regular updates are available on the internet for the TAS guide at <http://www.tucsonaudubon.org/birding/updates.htm>.

The new fifth edition of the ABA/Lane guide covers a slightly larger time gap as the previous edition was released in 1995. The birding locations, bar graphs, and annotated species information are revised in much the same way as the TAS guide with new sightings and updated temporal and status information. The species' descriptions section in the 2005 edition contains a significant amount of new information for many species, lengthening this section from 43 to 51 pages. The new edition also includes descriptions for a few more species, including Cinnamon Teal, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Black Swift, and others. The bar graphs have increased in length owing to inclusion of all casual and accidental species, which had been consigned to a separate "seldom seen" section in the 1995 edition. The one-year difference in publication dates for each guide is evident in a couple of minor examples. The ABA/Lane guide includes the 2004-2005 Le Conte's Sparrow sighting in Marana and the Cackling Goose in its bar graphs. The new edition of the ABA/Lane guide has also added representative photographs of the habitat types depicted in the bar graphs to accompany the habitat descriptions.

In addition to being indispensable to birders who are visiting or new to the region, these two birdfinding guides provide valuable and interesting information about the

distribution and behavior of local species for resident birders more familiar with the area and its avifauna. The latest editions of each guide are very useful for assessing the significance of any apparently unusual sightings you may discover at some of our more famous locations or closer to home on your own local patch. Owning both new editions of these guides will broaden and update your knowledge of the region's bird species and enhance your birding experience in southeastern Arizona.

Updated Wednesday, March
29, 2006