

BOOK REVIEW

A NEW KIND OF REFERENCE GUIDE FOR SPARROWS

BY HOMER HANSEN

Peterson Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America, by Rick Wright. 2019. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 448 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-5479731-6-6.

The *Peterson Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America* is not your typical field guide. I doubt anything like it could be written by anyone other than Rick Wright. Those who know the author personally would agree that this book is the essence of his being and conjoins two passions of his: sparrows and ornithological history.

Aptly named, this book is a reference guide, densely loaded with details, and is not designed for reading straight through. Rather, this is a resource you grab at the end of the evening to enhance your knowledge of a species you saw earlier in the day or pull out when the rain is too heavy to go birding.

In today's world there are a plethora of field guides, and although I appreciate the multitude of resources, at times I feel one may lose interest in information that becomes repetitive. I am a huge fan of Jim Rising and David Beadle's guides to sparrows, both the illustrated and photographic versions. Though dated, these are must-have guides for someone interested in sparrows. One reason I am appreciative of this latest guide to sparrows is the complementary nature of the information it provides. Some overlap is inevitable, but the Peterson reference guide works wonderfully side-by-side with its predecessors.

One uncommon addition found in the Peterson reference guide is the inclusion of sparrow species found in Mexico as far south as Veracruz. Even if one does not intend to travel into Mexico, this is a perfect opportunity to recognize and compare close cousins of many species found in the U.S. Appreciating the similarities between members of the same genus is a tremendous aid to identification, and this book offers the "complete" guide to North American sparrow genera. One of my favorite examples is *Aimophila*.

Reading most other field guides might lead you to believe that the Rufous-crowned Sparrow is the only member of this genus. With the Peterson reference guide, you learn about both Rufous-crowned and Rusty Sparrows – two species similar, yet visibly different when comparing photographs and reading the descriptive features of the respective species (Figure 1). With Rusty Sparrow potentially on the horizon for Arizona birders, recognizing the differences may lead to a significant discovery.

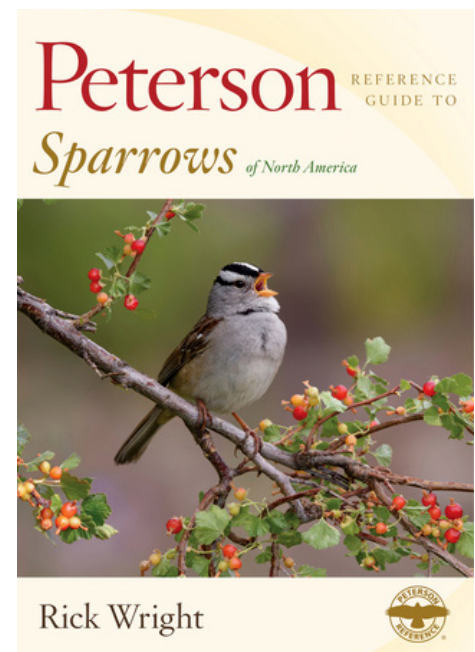


Figure 1. A Rufous-crowned Sparrow with relatively finer markings and an eye-ring usually only broken by the post-ocular stripe. Photo by Homer Hansen

Delving into the species descriptions, the Peterson reference guide nicely details the subspecies variation for each species, touching on the physical, historical, and geographical differences. Many subspecies details are subtle, but sometimes these traits are more notable, such as comparing *fallux*, Arizona's breeding subspecies of Song Sparrow, with the *montana* and *merrilli* winter migrants.

Reading the book's descriptions gives an appreciation of the differences yet aids in understanding why eBird offers *montana/merrilli* with a slash (Figure 2).

The Peterson reference guide is not illustrated except for a few historic illustrations of some species. However, there are numerous photographs throughout, and most species have more than one. The field identification is all written descriptions, some of these mentioned within the photograph captions, but otherwise one must visualize the colors, markings, and patterns. If one is new to a species, now is the time to pull out one of the Rising and Beadle guides to view alongside while reading this book. My preference is the illustrated version where the author's rich descriptions align with Beadle's detailed artistry.

A noticeable difference when cross-referencing a species from this book with other field guides is the taxonomy and nomenclature. Some authors will take license with taxonomy to some degree, sometimes hoping to anticipate future changes.

Within the Peterson reference guide, it quickly becomes obvious the author agreed with the 2018 proposal to the American Ornithological Society (formerly American Ornithologists' Union) checklist committee to drop the "possessive 's'" from bird names. At most a minor detail, this does not interfere with reading the species descriptions.

Similarly, some subspecies and/or variations are elevated to species not listed by the AOS. The Fox Sparrows are often discussed in this manner, but in this book subspecies of Savannah Sparrow, such as Belding Sparrow (Figure 3), and Brewer's Sparrow are afforded this treatment as well.

As a reference guide, this book superbly cites annotations for each species in the notes section at the back of the book. The index cites historical and modern ornithologists, as well as birds by name. For the sparrow enthusiast, the *Peterson Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America* is a complementary book, lush with information not easily or likely found in other resources. For an ornithological history buff, this book weaves tales of taxonomic discovery.



Figure 2. The numerous subspecies of Song Sparrow, including the breeding *fallux* of Arizona, are described in the book. Photo by Homer Hansen



Figure 3. The Belding Sparrow is promoted to full species status in the reference guide. Photo by Homer Hansen