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*Nebraska Ornithologists' Union*

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BOOK REVIEW

Nebraska Birds: Breeding Status and Distribution, by James E. Ducey, maps by Remote Sensing Applications Laboratory, University of Nebraska at Omaha, illustrated by Paul A. Johnsgard, xiii + 148 pp., 8½ x 11, Simmons-Boardman Books, Omaha, 1988, soft cover \$19.95.

James E. Ducey's recently published book seeks to cover nearly 200 years of ornithological investigation in the state. The 114 pages of species accounts are preceded by four short introductory chapters: a short discussion of habitat changes over the last two centuries; an outline of the history of ornithology in Nebraska, from Lewis and Clark to the Breeding Bird Atlas; a presentation of the state's breeding species, by categories; and a list of the major sources for the breeding records cited in the species accounts. In the last Mr. Ducey has been remarkably and laudably thorough, drawing reports from not only the better-known national and local publications, but also many now defunct oological journals and the unpublished notes of early Nebraska ornithologists. There are nonetheless a few surprising omissions here and in the uniquely extensive bibliography: nowhere, for example, do I find Spencer Baird's summary of the ornithological results of the Hayden expedition, and Aughey's 1877 report, with its many *unica* is never directly cited. While these omissions were likely oversights, the deliberate exclusion (p. 9) of Johnsgard's *Breeding Birds* and Bray, Padelford, and Silcock's *Birds of Nebraska* diminishes the very considerable value of the bibliography and misleads the casual reader by concealing the fact that other conclusions have been reached about certain reports. These small misjudgements do not detract from the general worth of these chapters; much of the material they present is new or not otherwise easily available.

In the species accounts Ducey divides ornithological activity in Nebraska into three periods: the "historical", for all records before 1920; the "recent", for records from 1921 to 1960; and the "current", for records after 1960. With a few exceptions these divisions are carefully maintained. Within these periods, a species' status - based exclusively on specific nesting records - can be "regular", "occasional", "accidental", "extirpated", "extinct", "introduced", or "hypothetical". The chief uncertainties in this traditional system as used by Ducey are the distinction between the occasional and the accidental categories, both based on a maximum of two records. They are not quantitatively different, but are distinguished rather by some notion *a priori* of what constitutes a species' "normal" range (p. 16). Such a distinction must be inadmissible in any work seeking to establish breeding ranges on objective evidence. The word "hypothetical" is used here carelessly to classify records of two radically different types: those clearly incorrect on the one hand, and those for which there is insufficient but suggestive evidence on the other. Thus Ducey lists as hypothetical not only American Tree Sparrow, the citation an obvious *lapsus* on the part of an observer not known for his consistent reliability, but also Clark's Nutcracker, a species for which an eminently credible reporter has recorded dependent young in suitable habitat. Although the status labels are in general applied with praiseworthy consistency, a number of species are placed into a category without the requisite number of acceptable reports. Among them is Common Snipe, listed as regular for all periods even though the one report of breeding from the recent era can justify only occasional status; neither should Northern Saw-whet Owl be considered regular in the historic period based on only two records, one of them from Iowa. The strongly telegraphic style of the status determinations leaves some entries confusing; Scarlet Tanager, for instance, is listed for all periods as a "regular nester - few occasional records".

Following the determination of status, every breeding record for a species is listed, conveniently arranged by county within each of the three periods.

These lists make it easy to review at a glance the distribution and apparent status of any species, and are far the most valuable part of the book. The range of each species is also illustrated by as many as three maps. It is regrettable, as Ducey himself notes (p. 16), that the ranges as mapped seem to include whole counties; the range of Marsh Wren, for example, is much more restricted in Sioux Co. than the map indicates. Ducey's treatment of unusual records is generally uncritical, and opinions are likely to differ on many of the reports included. Species listed as "breeding" in lists published before 1933 are accepted as a matter of course (see p. 16); many of these, such as Aughey's reports of Prairie Warbler, could be treated with greater circumspection. Several more modern records are equally unconvincing; Ducey's reasons for retaining these reports, some of them rejected by other authors, should have been laid out in the appropriate species accounts. It is not made clear either how rigorously records based on extant egg sets were verified, or an area where most readers will be utterly dependent on Ducey's expertise.

Dr. Johnsgard's illustrations range from very fine to less successful. Thirteen full-page ones are unpaginated and are blank on the back. Despite its high price and occasional errors, this book is, *faute de mieux*, of clear value to Nebraska birders. The frequency and general distribution of all nesting records for a species are immediately accessible, and even with a few gaps the bibliography is a useful tool for further investigations.

(The Astorian Party was in 1811, not 1911 (Ruffed Grouse), and the bibliography should cite Wright, R., not Wright, W.)

--- Rick Wright, 401 Kountze Drive, Bellevue, Neb. 68006