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Book Review - Prairie Birds: Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains

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REVIEWS

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North American Box Turtles A Natural History. C. Kenneth Dodd, Jr. 2001. The University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, Oklahoma. 231 pages. ISBN 0-8061-3294-9. \$59.95 cloth.

While I have only studied box turtles for four years, from the beginning, I was quickly impressed at the many studies and observations that had been published on North American box turtles. At the same time, I was also frustrated by the lack of syntheses of the material. For the beginning researcher or interested layperson, organizing the studies into a cohesive whole was daunting, and I attempted my own loose compilation that took me most of a summer. However, there is now a new book that provides the background and overview that I sought. C. Kenneth Dodd, a longtime researcher on box turtles in Florida, has produced an admirable and useful book that not only summarizes over 100 years of published reports, but also does so in a readable work.

While a synthesis on this large topic could be hundreds of pages of detailed reiteration of published works, Dodd wisely summarizes the overall information with just the right amount of factual detail. The chapters were subdivided into specialized subsets of the major theme, and it was easy to move from one topic to another while gleaned the essential information presented. Citations are provided in the text, and a reader who wished more detail could refer to the original publications. Of great value, each chapter ends with a section on "Future Directions" which suggests areas of future research needed to elucidate questions that still exist.

Topics covered include evolution, habitats, habitat requirements, movements and orientation, behavior and senses, courtship and reproduction, foraging, demography, predators, parasites, and disease. The final chapter also discusses factors important to conservation of box turtles along with threats to their future. Each chapter is carefully written, and Dodd's admiration and love of box turtles is frequently apparent.

The book has many illustrations, including 48 small, but clear color plates. At least according to the cover notes, the color plates illustrate all the species and subspecies of box turtles in the United States. However, given the wide range of individual and geographical variation, I would not like to rely on these photos as a field guide. The photo of the ornate box turtle female (Plate 28) has a color pattern only rarely seen in our studies, and the only other ornate box turtle plate is that of an adult male plastron.

The remaining black and white figures and maps are clear and useful summaries of material in the text; however, I did note two errors. Figure 8-1 depicts carapace lengths of the population of males, females, and juveniles of Florida box turtles on Egmont Key, Dodd's main study area. However, the bars for juveniles seemingly did not print in either the graph of the figure legend. In addition, Map 5, The Distribution of *Terrapene ornata ornata* and *T. o. luteola*, is highly inaccurate with regards to the distribution of *T. o. ornata*, at least in Iowa and Wisconsin. Indeed, within the text, Dodd states that "there are a few locations in Iowa" for ornate box turtles. While there are scattered populations of ornate box turtles throughout eastern Iowa, southern Iowa, and along the Loess Hills in western Iowa,

Dodd's map only shows a population near the junction of the Cedar and Iowa rivers, the Louisa County population, a population in extreme southwest Iowa, and a population somewhere near Dickinson County. If there is a record from the area of Dickinson County, there certainly are no populations in that area now, and, in my opinion, there probably never were. Wisconsin researchers also tell me that there are inaccuracies in the depicted Wisconsin distribution of *T. o. ornata*. It would seem that contacting researchers in the field might have produced more accurate range maps than relying on distributions published years ago, and accurate range maps are important details for a book that is the benchmark for box turtle research.

The book also contains several useful "appendices." There is an identification key to *Terrapene* species and subspecies that initially identifies what is not a box turtle or the superficially similar Blanding's turtle. There is also a species accounts section that contains the pertinent taxonomic and range details, but, as noted, the range for the ornate box turtle in Iowa is inaccurate. The glossary, literature cited, and index are well done and useful.

I greatly enjoyed reading *North American Box Turtles* and I know that I will be referring to it frequently. Despite the errors, I think this is a valuable and important work. While the price will be daunting to some, royalties from the sales of the book are donated to the Chelonian Research Foundation, a nonprofit foundation for the conservation of turtles. To anyone interested in turtles or the natural history of these interesting reptiles, this book will serve as a key resource for many years.—NEIL P. BERNSTEIN, *Department of Biology, Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402.*

Prairie Birds. Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains. Paul A. Johnsguard. 2001. University of Kansas Press. Lawrence, Kansas. XVII + 331 pages. ISBN 0-7006-1067-7. \$29.95, cloth.

Paul A. Johnsguard has established himself as one of the most prolific natural history writers in the recent past. Indeed, before I could finish reading *Prairie Birds*, the University of Kansas Press sent me *The Nature of Nebraska*, also by Johnsguard. These works follow closely after *This Fragile Land, A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills* (1995), which I favorably reviewed a few years ago, also about the Great Plains. It goes without saying, that there is a fair amount of overlap in these works, both in the subject matter and the illustrations. Rather than criticize the overlap among these books, I will focus on the *Prairie Birds* and assume that Johnsguard's intent is to provide a diversity of resources on Nebraska and the Great Plains that will appeal to a variety of individuals.

Among Johnsguard's many books on birds, he published *Birds of the Great Plains: Breeding Species and Their Distribution* in 1979. As he points out in the Preface to *Prairie Birds*, a great deal of information has accumulated since the 1979 work, and he chose a different, more readable, format to present the updated material. *Prairie Birds* is partially a more enjoyable read than Johnsguard's compilations. The first two chapters, "An Ancient Sea of Grass" and "The Biotic Communities of the Central Plains," are summaries of the natural history of the Great Plains, and they provide a good overview without technicalities.

The third chapter, "Lessons in Survival," is a compact chapter covering a diversity of topics, all dealing with impacts on breeding birds. A small amount of space is allotted to discussing some of the natural impacts on breeding birds in the section "Long-term Survival Lessons: Climate, Fire, and Drought." However, more is devoted to

"Short-term Survival Lessons: Corn, Cows, and Cowbirds." In this latter section, Johnsguard discusses impacts of fragmentation, agriculture, and brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds, which he discusses as not being independent of each other. None of this information is new, but it might serve as an introduction to the novice. While I did not check the references extensively for accuracy, I did notice that Johnsguard incorrectly cites his own work on cowbirds (*The Avian Brood Parasites: Deception at the Nest*, 1997) as being published in 1998 on page 57.

The remainder of the book is mainly devoted to species accounts subdivided into "ecological" units. Two examples are "Dawn Dances on the Prairie" about prairie chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse and "Shorebird Sagas" about Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits, and Upland Sandpipers. While I enjoyed the personal anecdotes that precede the species accounts, much of this information is also not new. I found the species accounts and behavioral descriptions to be fairly dry reading, but they would serve as a good field guide to someone interested in observing the birds on their own.

The final chapter, "The Disappearing Prairie and Its Declining Avifauna," is a look to the future that points to trends in populations of grassland birds. Johnsguard provides background into the history of the demise of the North American grasslands along with compilations of data, however, there is not much more to this chapter.

What conclusions can be made about this book? There is clearly a need for synthesis works, and Johnsguard has produced many. However, at what point are the syntheses synthesizing each other? For an ornithologist specializing in grassland birds, there is little new that the book offers. For other scientists with an interest in grassland birds, this book is a convenient reference with its updated literature list and summary tables, however, most informed people would also find nothing new or earth shattering. However, in fairness, Johnsguard did not intend the book to be a definitive scientific treatise. For the interested layperson or the beginning student, the book will provide a good introduction to some of the more interesting prairie birds and their behaviors in a readable format at an attractive price, and we all can enjoy Johnsguard's pen and ink illustrations of birds in their habitats.—NEIL P. BERNSTEIN, *Department of Biology, Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402.*

The Guide to Iowa's State Preserves. Ruth Herzberg and John Pearson. 2001. The University of Iowa Press. Iowa City, Iowa. 196 pages. ISBN 0-87745-774-3. \$14.95, paper.

The Iowa State Preserves System gives the highest protection afforded by law to sites "dedicated for maintenance as nearly as possible in [their] natural condition." To date, ninety sites have been dedicated as biological, geological, archaeological, scenic, or historic pre-

serves, declaring that such use is the site's "highest, best, and most important use for the public benefit" (State Preserves Act of 1965). In a state as dramatically altered as Iowa, such remnants are of intense interest to professional and amateur naturalists of all inclinations, as well as to anyone who appreciates nature. Yet understanding the basic qualities of these preserve sites is not always easy. Even finding them has sometimes been difficult—at least it was until publication of *The Guide to Iowa's State Preserves*, released late in 2001 by the University of Iowa Press.

Now, for the first time, a guide to our preserves is commercially available and widely accessible. This 196-page guide includes detailed, clearly written, one-page descriptions of each preserve, based on thorough searches of published and unpublished studies of specific areas. Included are significant assets of the preserve—such as historic facts, noteworthy plants, and geological features. The book's authorship by Ruth Herzberg, an experienced naturalist, and Dr. John Pearson, an ecologist charged with carrying out the Preserves Board's mandates, ensures the book's accuracy.

Descriptions this comprehensive were not available in the preceding booklet on the preserve system, which was distributed on a more limited basis (upon request, by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources). Also new in this guide are full-page, GIS-based nested maps, showing each site's location in the state and in the county, and then detailing specific access routes and topographical features for each site. (Detailed written directions are also given.) E-mail addresses and web sites, as well as conventional addresses, are included for persons seeking more information.

In publishing a guidebook, one always runs the risk of stimulating visitation to the point of damaging a site's special features. However a broad base of public support is needed if natural areas are to be preserved and maintained—and this means encouraging visitation and sharing factual information about a site. This guidebook attempts to strike a balance between these conflicting needs by omitting maps of areas that should not be visited by the general public, either because of their fragility or because they are on private lands. Species that are endangered, commercially valuable, or highly sought by collectors have also been excluded from the plant lists in the descriptions.

The guide is sure to be well accepted by a broad range of readers. (All copies of the last preserves booklet, published in 1992, were snatched up in two years and have been unavailable ever since.) This book also is significant as a meaningful addition to Iowa's natural history literature—a growing body of easily accessible books that bring our state's natural history into the realm of common understanding. Hopefully the book will lead many to cherish our preserves, as well as natural features more generally, and thus to advocate for the natural snippets of our past that still remain.—CORNELIA F. MUTEL, *IHR—Hydrosciences & Engineering, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.*