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Review of *Appreciating Your Feathered Neighbors*, by Dana Gardner and Nancy Overcott

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APPRECIATING YOUR FEATHERED NEIGHBORS

Fifty Common Birds of the Upper Midwest. Watercolors by Dana Gardner; text by Nancy Overcott. 2006. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa. 106 pages. \$34.95 (cloth).

What's the best way to interest a friend in bird watching? Buy them a field guide, a CD of bird songs, or take them out bird watching? All of these ideas might work, but another approach is to tell personal stories and draw pictures of common birds in yards, parks, and natural areas where they live; help them "get to know their neighbors with feathers." That's exactly what Dana Gardner and Nancy Overcott did in their recent book about common birds of the Upper Midwestern United States. The authors' decision to focus on common birds will be appealing to people who feed or watch birds casually; they will likely be familiar with some of these birds. The book is a self-described set of stories and paintings about birds; the authors express their hope in the introduction that these stories will "inspire interest in habitat preservation."

The Upper Midwest contains many habitats; picking 50 birds from the more than 300 birds that are "common" here surely was a difficult task. The authors devote about half of the introduction to describing this dilemma and how they arrived at the 50 common birds portrayed in the book. In short, they selected a few common species from each of the major groups of birds inhabiting yards, grasslands, and forests in the region, beginning with the wood duck (*Aix sponsa*) and ending with the American goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*). I was especially interested in this book because it is based in the region where I spent my childhood and where I have conducted most of my research. The illustrator and author lived and worked in Lanesboro, Minnesota, less than 50 miles from where I grew up in southeastern Minnesota. This region is very rich biologically because it hosts a mixture of forest, grasslands, and agriculture, and the book reflects that diversity.

The book reads like a cross between a journal and a field guide. Personal anecdotes and observations of the focal species intermingle with descriptions of habitat, life history, behavior, and conservation issues. The format lends itself to display; each species account is two pages with the color plate on the left page and the text on the right. The plates are beautiful; each species is portrayed in a pose and background setting typical of the species. The illustrator had more artistic freedom than usual because he was not attempting to illustrate all of the field markings that distinguish one species from another, as in a field guide.

If you are looking for a gift for someone with an interest in birds, but who is not currently an avid bird-watcher, this would be an excellent choice. The personal anecdotes and pleasing illustrations are more interesting to peruse than the typical field guide. It would also make good bedtime reading material for children in grades 1-5.

A parent could take the opportunity to remind the child if they have seen the focal species somewhere in their neighborhood or on a field trip. The illustrations might keep a younger child interested while an older child will be interested in the lively descriptions and personal experiences. Avid bird-watchers will be mildly disappointed with the focus on common birds, although some of the personal anecdotes, historical references, and conservation notes will be enough to keep them interested. The scientist might enjoy all of the above, although there are no notes explaining the sources of the behavioral and life history information and there is little "new" information presented. There are recommended readings and a list of field guides at the end of the book; presumably these were the sources of the factual information. From a conservation perspective, we need books that will interest the general public in birds and their habitats; this book serves that role well.—*Melinda G. Knutson, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2630 Fanta Reed Road, La Crosse, WI 54603.*