

***Birding Maine: Over 90 Prime Birding Sites at 40 Locations* (2008), by Tom Seymour.** Falcon Guides–Globe Pequot Press. Black-and-white photographs, state and regional maps, and appendices. viii+136 pages. Softcover: \$18.95 (U.S.), \$20.95 (Canada).

North America's first Variegated Flycatcher?—Texas, right? Nope: Maine. Steller's Eider, Willow Ptarmigan, Clark's Grebe, Red-billed Tropicbird, Lesser Frigatebird, Corn Crake, Northern Lapwing, Pacific Golden-Plover, White-winged Tern, Calliope Hummingbird, Virginia's Warbler, Cassin's Sparrow, Common Chaffinch, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch? Yep: All on the Maine list.

The hardwood forests in the southwestern corner of the state harbor the northern breeding limits of species such as Yellow-throated Vireo and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, while many boreal species, such as Cape May Warbler, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and Gray Jay, reach the southeastern limits of their range in the northern and western portions of the state. From the sandy southern coast, with its Piping Plovers, Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows (side by side), and the northernmost breeding colonies on the Eastern Seaboard of Little Blue Herons and Great and Snowy Egrets, all the way to

the krummholtz and alpine meadow at the peak of Mount Katahdin, with its Bicknell's Thrushes and breeding American Pipits, Maine's rich and diverse habitats offer refuge for a plethora of species. And no synopsis of Maine's birding can be complete without the mention of Atlantic Puffins.

In the past two years, Burrowing Owl and Western Reef-Heron have been added to the state list, bringing the total to 425 species. While that doesn't compare to the likes of California, Texas, or Florida, it is an impressive total given the state's latitude and longitude. Many in Maine wonder what that list would look like if every peninsula, island, and interesting nook and cranny were covered even occasionally, let alone regularly. With a small human population, and therefore a relatively small number of birders, much of the Pine Tree State has rarely, if ever, been viewed through a pair of binoculars by a keen-eyed birder. Whether you are a lifelong resident, a transplant, or a short-term visitor, you would be hard pressed to find everything on a want list without a little guidance. Hence, the book reviewed here.

For more than ten years, *A Birder's Guide to Maine* by Elizabeth C. Pierson, Jan Erik Pierson, and Peter D. Vickery has been the definitive reference for resident and visiting birders alike. Unfortunately, some of its information is a bit dated (although not nearly as dated as some guides for more rapidly developing and changing states), and the book is now out of print.

Although I believe that *A Birder's Guide to Maine* remains a valuable resource, the publishers decided not to reprint it. The result was inevitable: The book is now almost impossible to find, even in used bookstores. Thus, when I learned that the *Falcon Guides* series was about to begin shipping a new "Maine Birdfinding Guide," I was ecstatic.

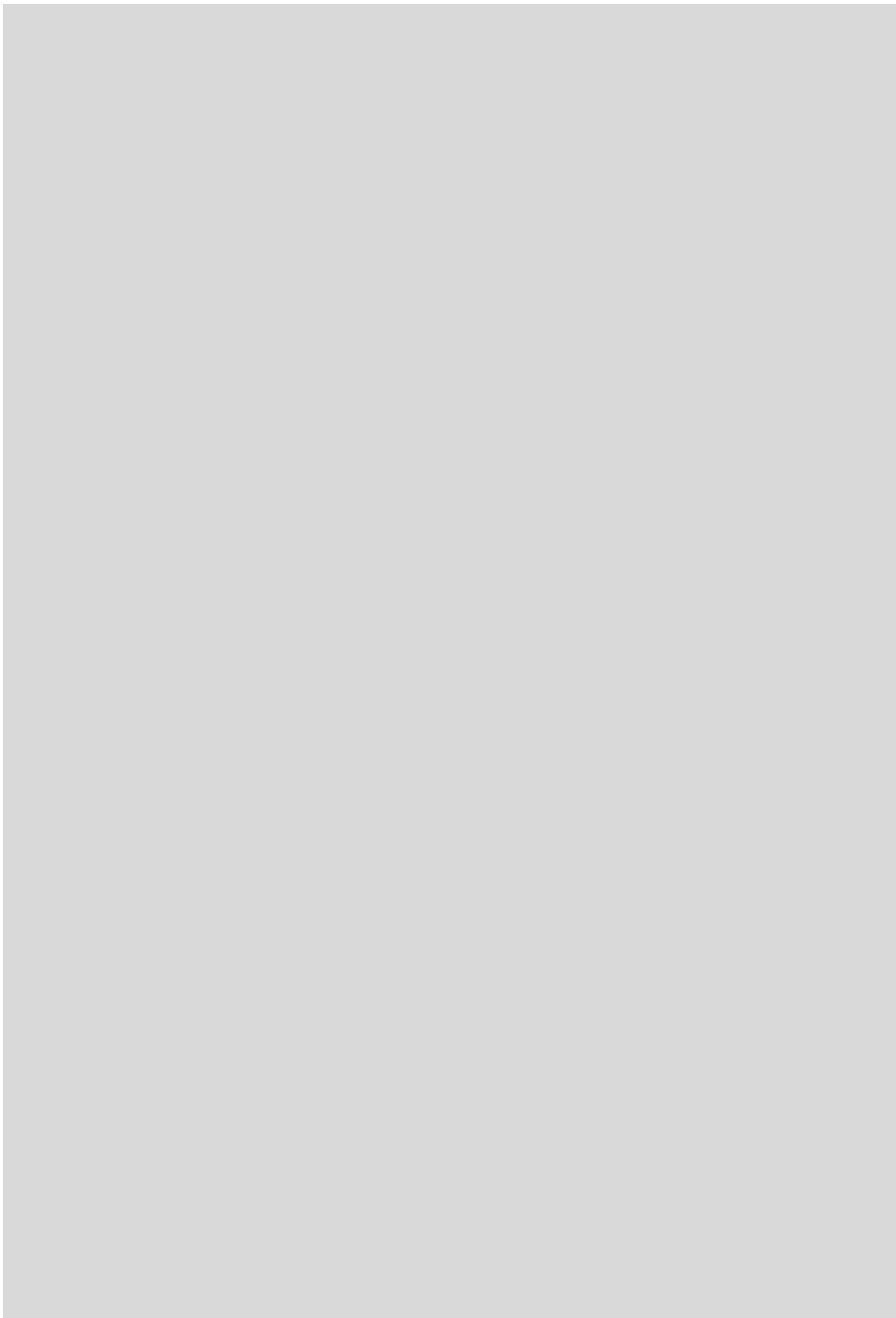
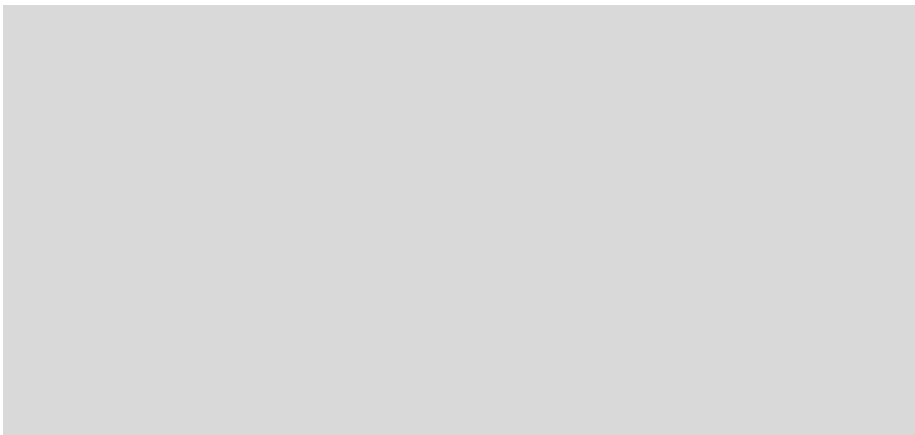
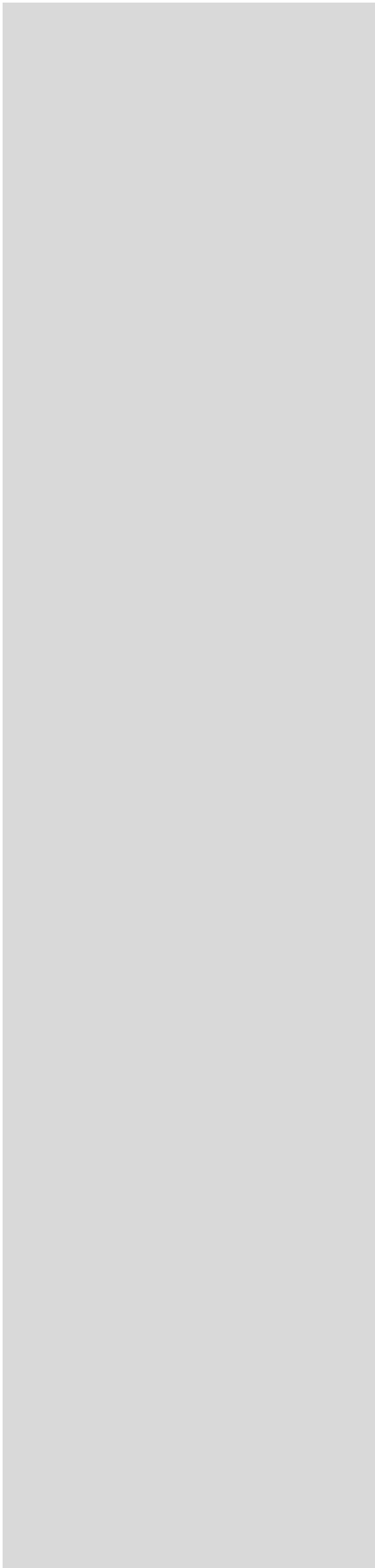
With excitement and anticipation, I finally picked up a copy and cracked open the book. Upon skimming the table of contents, excitement and anticipation soon turned to confusion and concern. What the heck is "Knight Pond?" Where were all of the places that I had come to love? How can we go birdfinding in Maine without visiting Evergreen Cemetery, Scarborough Marsh, Monhegan Island, or Baxter State Park? Now, I readily admit that I am a transplant, but I bird my butt off in the state.

The list of sites covered in this book fell far short of my expectations. To make sure it wasn't just me, I asked 12 birders to send me lists of their top ten favorite birding locations in Maine. I did not say why, and I explained that the definition of "favorite" was left to their own interpretations. I tried to minimize geographic bias by asking people from different parts of the state. My list also included two birders who live out of state but bird here occasionally, two birders who have moved away, and two others who are new to the state.

My 12 respondents listed a total of 41 locations, only seven of which are in *Birding Maine*. None of the top eight sites or areas mentioned by my respondents is included in the guide. If the title of this book were *Casually Looking at Birds While Fishing in Lesser-known Maine Wildlife Management Areas*, I might be singing its praises. In fact, this is a book that bills itself as "a quintessential resource for anyone spending time in the Maine outdoors." But not—apparently—if you are birding.

Okay, the author of *Birding Maine* is a big fan of Wildlife Management Areas. But then why aren't Scarborough Marsh (nine votes in my poll) and Green Point (two votes) mentioned? And, okay, the book is biased toward

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the mid-coast region. But the best mid-coast locations, Reid and Popham Beach State Parks (two votes each in my poll) and Monhegan Island (a near-unanimous choice by my survey's respondents with 11 votes), do not rate a spot. The failure to mention 34 of the 41 best locations (based on the opinions of 12 qualified birders), including nine of the top ten responses, is disturbing.

Between the two pages of the table of contents, there is a helpful state map showing all locations mentioned in the book. This is a tremendously useful feature, especially for newcomers; the lack of such a statewide map was one of my quibbles with the Pierson et al. predecessor. But then comes the preface, with such statements as: "Admittedly, some birders, anxious to add new conquests to their life lists, frequent waste-water treatment plants and other, less than pristine locations. It is not within the scope of this book to direct people to such sites."

Hm. Anyone else find this a tad insulting? "Conquests"? Hey, if some birders care only about the number on their lists, so what? To each his own. I know folks who don't visit the Sanford sewage facility for "conquests," or even life birds. Rather, the site is an amazing, accessible location offering a wide variety of migrant shorebirds, some of them rare in Maine. Besides the possibility of, say, a Stilt or a Baird's Sandpiper, the Sanford sewage facility affords a remarkable opportunity to study a wide range of common species up close. And although shorebirds are the highlight there, the waterfowl—common and uncommon—can be impressive; the sparrows often flock to the weedy dikes; and large concentrations of swallows congregate in the fall. There's more: In addition to being a great spot for any birder, this site is quite simply one of the best places in

the state for birders with limited mobility to see a lot of birds. Is that something to be disparaged?

Here's another problem. The introductory section on "Maine Specialties" lists exactly three: Gray Jay, Spruce Grouse, and Atlantic Puffin. But the list of boreal birds that might be found in Maine scarcely stops with the jay and the grouse. What about Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Philadelphia Vireo, and the 25 species of breeding warblers? Obviously Atlantic Puffin is one of the most sought-after species for birders visiting the state, and the listed contact information is helpful, but the lack of any reference to Machias Seal Island is baffling. Although managed by the Canadian Wildlife Service, the island is actually disputed territory between Canada and the U.S., and the boat trips to this unforgettable place originate from Maine. Furthermore, I don't understand why Bicknell's Thrush, Salt-marsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, Black Guillemot, and other species regularly sought by both resident and visiting birders outside the strictly boreal habitats are not considered specialties. It is worth noting that Pierson and coauthors list *fifty* species or groups of species in their "Birds of Special Interest" section.

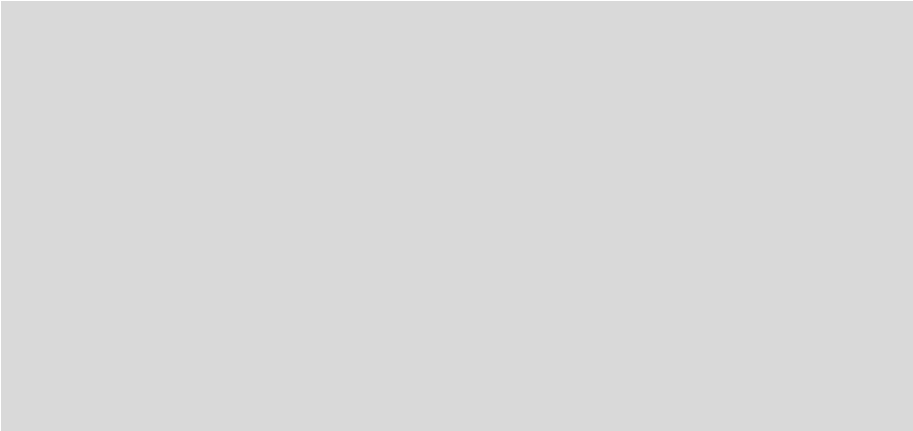
The next few sections, "Come Prepared," "Wildlife," and "Water," are brief, to the point, and adequate for outlining a few of the considerations for visiting birders. The "Endangered Species Listing" section is most welcome, but the birdfinding tips that follow are incomplete and often inadequate. The "Maine Owls" section is definitely of interest, even if it reads more like a news release; I am not sure, however, why it is included at this point in the book. The "Birders with Special Needs" section is one of those sections that I believe belongs in every

birding guide, but once again, I can think of a number of locations that should have been included. Next, there's the "Wildlife Management Areas" section that nicely outlines the fact that Maine's state-owned Wildlife Management Areas are woefully under-appreciated by the state's wildlife-watchers. Truth be told, this neglect is usually more about accessibility (most are "unimproved," as the author states) than disinterest from birders. Finally, there's a "How to Use This Guide" section, which is succinct and straightforward. And I am happy to see the ABA Code of Ethics included.

And now to get into the meat of the book.

The state is divided into five regions, each introduced by a very brief and borderline-worthless paragraph. For example, the introduction to southern Maine hardly does justice to one of the most diverse regions of the state. It simply says, "Southern Maine, the state's most populous region, is also the warmest. Migrating birds arrive here first. The region also has the most sandy beaches—a scarce commodity in Maine. Shorebirds and others that nest on sand dunes are more common here than in other parts of the state." In reality, of the eight species of shorebirds that breed in Maine, only one of them—the endangered Piping Plover—actually nests on "sand dunes," and the species is easier to find in the mid-coast region. And yes, in the Northern Hemisphere, the farther south you get, the warmer it usually is. I might further add that none of the sandy beaches are otherwise mentioned in the book.

In the section on southern Maine, the most populated region of the state with the most habitats, birds, birders, and birding opportunities, a total of four locations are mentioned. The four locations listed—all certainly deserving



of listing in a birding guide—barely scratch the surface. Since I live in southern Maine and know the area well, I will treat these four locations as case studies.

Each entry includes a listing of habitats, best times to bird, nearest facilities, services, and accommodations, nearest camping (a very nice feature), and contact information. These are necessarily brief, and for the most part complete, although now and again I find the “best times to bird” section to be oversimplified. The “About This Site,” and “Nearby (Birding) Opportunities” sections are short and often useful, although in many cases incomplete.

Directions to the location are provided, but rather than a detailed site map there is a regional map. The lack of site and trail maps, as well as other pertinent details, is a significant shortcoming. Directions to two of the four locations (Marginal Way and Bradbury Mountain) are unnecessarily complex. The nearest gas, food, and lodging to Bradbury Mountain are said to be in Freeport, five miles away, but there is a gas station with a convenience store only a half-mile from the park entrance. The directions provided to the site are from Falmouth, four towns and about ten miles out of the way to the south. And the nearest camping for this park is actually in the park itself and not 15 minutes away at Wolfe’s Neck Woods State Park, as stated in the book. And Wolfe’s Neck Woods State Park—wait for it—doesn’t even offer camping.

Not surprisingly, there is a section for each site entitled “The Birds.” One might assume that this would be the most important part and therefore the most detailed. On the contrary, it is the most incomplete, in some instances misleading, and in others just plain wrong. The Kennebunk Plains entry

fails to mention some very local—and much sought-after species—including Vesper Sparrow, Whip-poor-will, Indigo Bunting, and Prairie Warbler. Impressively, Clay-colored Sparrows have been found breeding here, but *Birding Maine* is silent on that point. All of those species are much more worthy of note than the ubiquitous re-introduced Wild Turkeys that can be seen almost anywhere in the state. And many Maine birders would disagree that the best way to bird this area is by road. I hope the author is not recommending that folks bird the heavily traveled and dangerous shoulder-free paved highway that bisects the plain. Perhaps he recommends driving the sometimes soft, sandy roads of the plain itself. Not only is this a great way to kill the endangered black racer snakes that live here, but it is also the best way to miss a good portion of the birds. Even a very short and easy walk will be far more rewarding than driving the roads at Kennebunk Plains.

For the Marginal Way entry, Gadwall is listed alongside abundant birds like American Black Duck and Common Eider in the winter season. Yes, Gadwall has been seen here in winter—once. Meanwhile, the two reliable places to find Gadwall in the state, Scarborough Marsh and Merrymeeting Bay, are not covered. By the way, Fish Crows are not found along Marginal Way with regularity, contrary to what is stated in the guide, and certainly not in winter when it is recommended that folks visit this site. And there is no mention that Marginal Way is one of the best locales in the state to look for Dovekies after strong winter storms.

The Brownfield Bog entry fails to mention some of the most sought-after species that birders look for here, and the “nearby opportunities” are limited to a zoo that is almost an hour away.

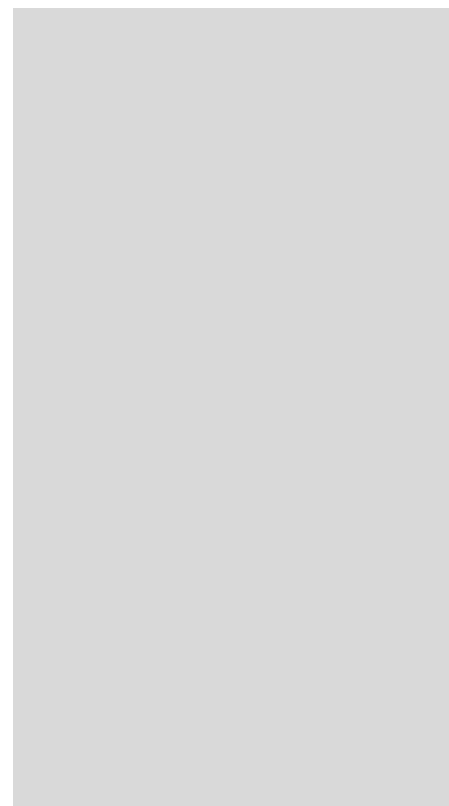
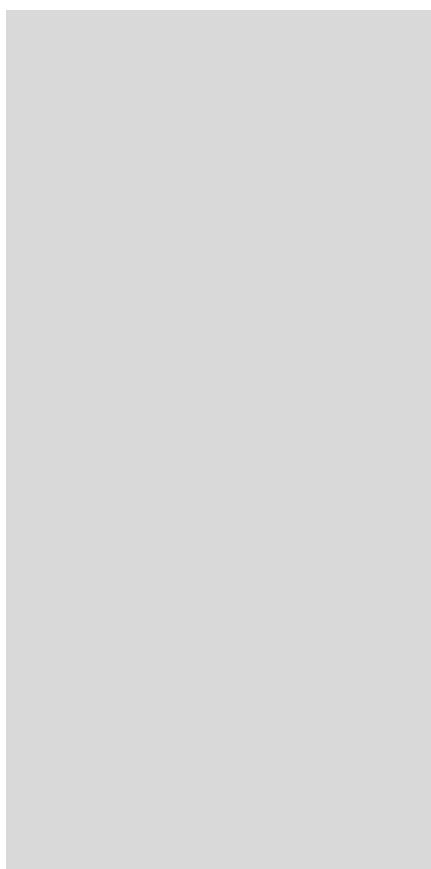
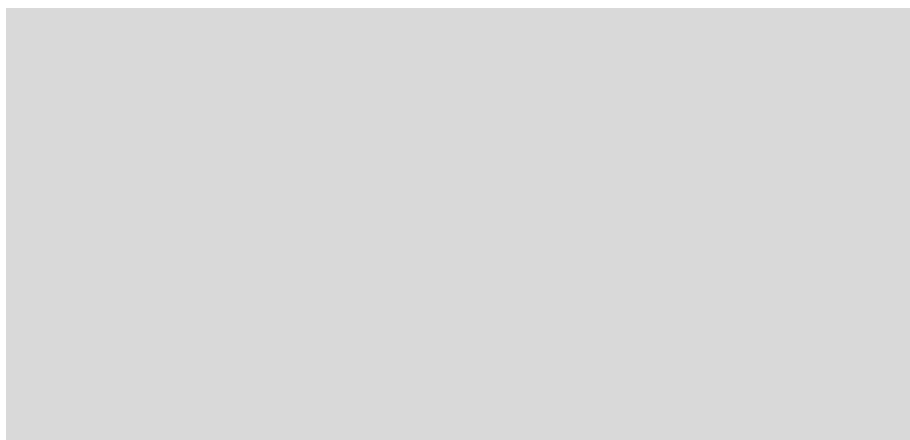
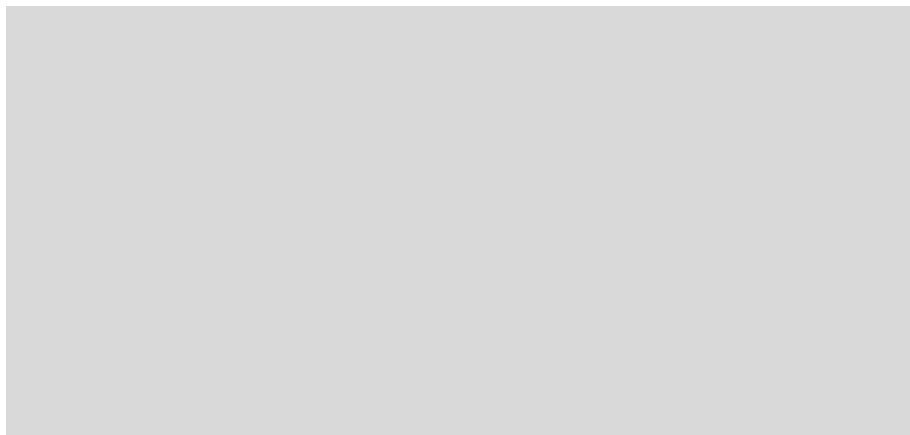
And don’t get me started about the

chapter on Bradbury Mountain State Park. This park is 5.1 miles off the interstate, six miles from downtown Freeport, and a mere 30 minutes from Portland, Maine's largest city; it is hardly "off the beaten path." The hordes of visitors that overflow this park's parking lot on weekends from spring through fall would probably agree.

Entry after entry, the same criticisms crop up. I found errors, inaccuracies, or incomplete information in just about every account. Ruddy Turnstones do not occur in Weskeag Marsh, and this is the only site listed for Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Ironically, the species is not easy to find there. The whole issue of what is common and what is unexpected is confused. No offense to Song Sparrows, but are they really "highlights" of Petit Manan Point? Eastern Bluebirds would not be an "unexpected treat" at Beech Hill Preserve; the habitat is perfect, and the birds nest in the boxes put out for them. If I saw a Long-billed Dowitcher in Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge—mentioned in the same breath as Spotted Sandpiper—I would call the state Rare Bird Alert.

There's more. Neither crows nor snipe are "Common" anymore, and there is no such thing as a "Pie-billed" Grebe. Minor quibbles such as these would not, on their own, cause anyone but the most persnickety of folks to be truly bothered, but improper bird names and outdated taxonomy are symptoms of a much larger problem.

This book offers zero locations in the productive Western Maine Mountains (for example, Rangeley and Grafton Notch state parks are not included), and there is very little for the northern third; there is not even mention of legendary Baxter State Park. And just about every one of the most important birding locations in every region is missing. The book offers almost no



mention, and certainly no likely locations, for Bicknell's Thrush and Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, three of the most sought-after species in the state.

Birding Maine concludes with two appendices, "Maine Birding Information" and the "Official Checklist of Maine Birds." I am happy to see the official list produced in its entirety, but the "Maine Birding Information" section is inadequate. Maine has fewer birding resources than many other states, admittedly, but it is sad that only two such resources are mentioned. And in this day and age, the lack of a listing of online resources is inexplicable.

If you live in the central or mid-coast regions of the state and are looking to supplement your birdfinding knowledge with a few new patches to explore, then some of this may help, although you could find just as much information on the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife's website. Everyone else will have to keep waiting for the replacement of Pierson et al. *Birding Maine* doesn't just fall short, it falls flat on its face. It largely ignores the wealth of avian riches in Maine, and it provides a disservice to Maine birders of all skills and interests.

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With his wife Jeannette, **DL** owns and operates Freeport Wild Bird Supply in Freeport, Maine. He leads trips around the state, from local Saturday morning bird walks to deep-sea pelagic excursions to overnight backcountry camping trips. Lovitch is also the "Tools of the Trade" Department Editor for *Birding*.
