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Book Review - Birds in Iowa

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REVIEWS

Reviews and critiques represent the opinions of individual evaluators that are presented for the interest of the readers. These subjective assessments do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the Iowa Academy of Science.

The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas. Laura Spess Jackson, Carol A. Thompson, and James J. Dinsmore. with Bruce L. Ehresman, John Fleckenstein, Robert Cecil, Lisa M. Hemesath, and Stephen J. Dinsmore. 1996. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, IA. XVI + 484 pages. ISBN 0-87745-572-4. $47.95 hdbd., $24.95 pbk.

The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas is the first comprehensive statewide survey of Iowa's breeding birds. Through the efforts of over 500 people, every county in the state was sampled to provide a record of the composition and distribution of the bird life in Iowa. The project entailed dividing the state into 861 atlas blocks; 83% received at least some coverage and 71% were completed. Information known through 1995 is included in the text, although the atlas project ended in 1990.

The introductory chapters include the methods used to collect data, an overview of Iowa's physical environment, highlights of the results, and a discussion of factors affecting the distribution of birds in the state. The atlas then provides individual accounts for 185 bird species, 158 of which were confirmed breeding in the state. The individual species accounts include a summary of the atlas data, life history information, and a discussion of factors affecting the species' distribution. The numbers of sightings of individual species are presented for both priority and standard atlas blocks for each level of breeding confirmation. Priority blocks were selected non-randomly and contained more natural habitat than did most standard blocks; standard blocks were selected systematically and tended to be dominated by agricultural lands.

Categories of breeding confirmation included: observed, possible, probable, or confirmed. The map accompanying each account illustrates the distribution of the species and shows those blocks with each category of breeding confirmation The text for each account generally includes a brief description of the species, followed by a discussion of the historical and present distribution of the species and its legal status in Iowa. The life history section for each species includes information about nesting chronology, type of nest, number of eggs, development of the young, survival, home range size, food habits, the species' behavior, and other pertinent details. The section on factors affecting distribution presents knowledgeable speculation about factors that may influence the species' future. Sometimes general management recommendations also are included.

The references cited provide sources for those interested in obtaining more information about Iowa's birds. This landmark volume should appeal to both novice and seasoned bird-watchers. It will be a valuable reference and should provide much-needed baseline data with which to compare future changes in Iowa's bird life.—LOUIS B. BEST, *Department of Animal Ecology, Iowa State University, Ames, IA. 50011.*

Birds in Iowa. Thomas H. Kent and James J. Dinsmore. 1996. Self published. VII + 391 pages. ISBN 0-87414-106-0. $30 hdbd. plus 3.50 s & h, c/o Dr. Thomas Kent, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City, IA. 52246.

Here is a book that those who are interested in birds and their distribution in Iowa will absolutely have to possess. This volume is the successor to the book *Iowa Birds,* which was written by the above authors together with three others and published in 1984. It brings our understanding to the number of species of birds and their relative abundance in Iowa up-to-date. Although only twelve years elapsed between the publication of the previous volume and this one, the activity of those interested in identifying birds increased enormously during those years. In addition, their ability to identify and find rare or unusual species increased as well. One obvious result of this is that the official state list of bird species seen in the state increased in those twelve years from 362 to 398, an increase of approximately 10%! So it was clearly time for a significant update of the earlier volume *Iowa Birds. Birds in Iowa* does a fine job in bringing our understanding of bird distribution in Iowa up-to-date.

The changes in the number of species on the state list cited above, although impressive, does not sufficiently reflect the increase in our understanding of the frequency of bird species abundance across the state. For instance, the Red-throated Loon, a species as "casual", had only three accepted records when the earlier volume was published; in this one, there are 16. Or, for another example, there were 19 records of Prairie Falcons in Iowa from 1960 through 1983; there have been 56 from 1984 through 1995. We now have a much better idea of when and where Prairie Falcons are likely to occur in the state than we did 15 years ago. It is these kinds of updates that make this book so useful.

The authors have developed some extremely useful ways of showing when and where a species might be expected. First, for the more common species they use a bar graph extending through each month which varies in width as the abundance of the species changes during the year. For the rarer species, they also show the number seen in each year, from 1960 on, and the number seen in each county in the state. For species which migrate into and out of Iowa each year, they also show the three earliest dates of appearance and the three latest dates for both spring and fall migrations very clearly. Finally, there is a fascinating section near the front of the book in which the species thought likely to be added to the state list in future years are identified and their distribution thoroughly discussed. These are divided into "most likely" (17), somewhat less likely because of a "weak" vagrancy pattern, but which have been recorded in states next to Iowa (9) and others which fit other patterns but which might be found in the state at some time in the future. It will be fun to see how well the authors' predictions actually work out.

All in all, *Birds in Iowa* is a delight to read and is an indispensable book for anyone seriously interested in the varieties and relative abundance of different bird species in Iowa as we enter the 21st century.—PETER WICKHAM, *Department of Chemistry, Coe College, Cedar Rapids, IA. 52402.*