

**BOOK REVIEW 2003 – #5**

Robinson, W. Douglas. *Southern Illinois Birds: An Annotated List and Site Guide*. 1996. lii + 436 pp; 24 black and white species photographs; 16 maps; references; index of common names; index of scientific names. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois. Hardcover. ISBN 0-8093-2032-0. Price: US \$39.95. Available from Southern Illinois University Press, P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62902-3697.

Having traveled throughout most of Illinois many times, I wholeheartedly concur with W.D. Robinson as he states, in the Introduction of *Southern Illinois Birds: An Annotated List and Site Guide*, that “Southern Illinois is a unique and wonderful place to find birds....” Southern Illinois, especially the Shawnee Hills and southward, seems to have a palpable sense of place. For this reason, with scientific considerations aside, it is entirely appropriate for such a widely recognized and distinct geographical area of the state to have its own book of ornithological information. On the other hand, somewhat comparable coverages of southern Illinois are included in Bohlen (1989) and De Vore (2000).

In writing this book, the author’s primary goal was to “document the current knowledge” of southern Illinois birds. Additionally, he wished to provide a reference document, usable indoors and in the field, that would highlight the wealth of information currently available, emphasize gaps in knowledge and help observers assess the importance of their observations. Robinson includes a section in his Introduction called “A History of Southern Illinois Bird Study” in which he laments observers who have not published their data. He further states that “everyday bird observations...are useful contributions...,” and he encourages birders to accurately record their observations in a systematic manner that will be useful in scientific analyses. The list of 167 individual observers whose data were drawn upon to compile this book supports this view. In addition, this book is well documented with references to the ornithological literature. Considering this, it is curious that Robinson does not cite works by Stephen A. Forbes and Alfred O. Gross of the Illinois Natural History Survey (Forbes 1913, Forbes and Gross 1922, 1923). Yet, he attributes the beginning of scientific bird surveys in southern Illinois to Richard R. Graber and Jean W. Graber, also of the Illinois Natural History Survey, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Robinson includes the 17 southernmost counties of Illinois plus part of St. Clair County in his definition of “Southern Illinois.” Within this area, he recognizes three distinct physiographic areas based upon the Natural Divisions of Illinois: the Shawnee Hills; the Floodplains of the Ohio, Wabash and Mississippi Rivers; and the Till Plain in the northern ten counties of the coverage area. The next logical step is for the reader to begin thinking about types of habitats found within the physiographic areas and habitat requirements for specific birds (species). Robinson especially emphasizes the habitat needs of forest songbirds that are sensitive to the effects of forest fragmentation. He often shows a strong conservation ethic in his writing, and he offers five management recommendations for improving forest habitats for songbirds. Many other types of habitats are mentioned, but not similarly highlighted, although much certainly could have been written about each. These types of habitats include grasslands, shrublands, wetlands, mudflats, large reservoirs, large rivers and small streams.

About three-quarters of *Southern Illinois Birds* is composed of the first of two main parts of the book entitled "Species Accounts: The Past and Present Status of Birds in Southern Illinois." Species are arranged phylogenetically and grouped by order and family. Each account for the 361 species includes: information on the status and abundance of the species (i.e., migrant, resident or rarity); the habitat(s) where the species may typically be found; records for the species by season (dates and numbers); and documentary evidence supporting species identifications (e.g., collected specimens and photographs). Lastly, the accounts include page numbers where the reader can find more information in three popular birding field guides. In addition, each account for migratory birds begins with dates between which the species is most likely to be observed (e.g., late March to early May).

While it could become tedious to read the species accounts one after the other, even for the most serious birder, remarks included with most accounts can be interesting and even entertaining. For example, consider Robinson's description of banding a Northern Saw-whet Owl: "As an illustration of the tameness of this species, after the Ozark owl was banded, it was placed on a tree limb and photographed; it remained motionless, except for blinking its eyes, for nearly an hour." Robinson's remarks typically include information on nesting, migration, behavior and sometimes conservation issues.

Part Two of *Southern Illinois Birds* consists of a guide to 26 of what Robinson calls "the traditionally best birding spots in southern Illinois." About half of the site descriptions also include simple maps. Other than the book's Introduction, these site descriptions are the most readable portion of *Southern Illinois Birds*. Directions to the sites were obviously drawn from first-hand experience, because they contain information that one would most likely know only from having been there. For example, when describing Alexander County, Robinson mentions "...a small trail [that] will take you down the other side [of a levee] into some woods and out onto the shores of the Mississippi River." It remains to be seen, though, whether one could actually find such a small unmarked trail.

Site descriptions typically describe some of the habitats as well as some of the birds to be expected. Here it would make little sense to list the same common species that could be seen at almost every site (e.g., American Robins) while emphasizing rarities (e.g., Pacific Loon) or one-of-a-kind sightings (e.g., Rock Wren at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge [NWR]) that would be unlikely to happen again. Robinson generally strikes a fair balance in naming common to rare species. He rightly emphasizes fairly reliable southern Illinois specialties, such as Least Terns along the Mississippi River or Black Vultures at Heron Pond-Little Black Slough Nature Preserve along the Cache River. Readability of site descriptions is enhanced by comments on conservation issues. For instance, for Baldwin Lake, Robinson writes that "Summer is virtually worthless [for birding]. Dozens of fishing boats cruise around the lake...." Robinson also occasionally mentions unusual aspects of visiting certain sites, such as the description of Crab Orchard NWR, where he warns that the "turnaround at the end of the road is also the meeting place of undesirable sorts of company...."

*Southern Illinois Birds* succeeds very well as a reference book, field guide and an inspiration for birders to become adventurous as well as systematic and accurate in recording their observations. Although a book such as this soon becomes dated, it will always serve

as a record of information at the time of publication and may hopefully generate an endless series of revised editions.

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### LITERATURE CITED

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