BOOK REVIEW

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The Raptor Almanac. By Scott Weidensaul. 2000. The Lyons Press, New York, NY. ix + 382 pp., numerous color photographs, figures, and tables. ISBN 1-58574-170-1. Cloth, $40.00.—Scott Weidensaul has assembled an impressive compendium of facts about raptors in this attractive and comprehensive volume. Designed "for the birder or naturalist who wants to go beyond the fundamentals," the almanac includes information about evolution, behavior, migration, conservation, and just about every other topic related to raptors. The book is packed with amusing anecdotes and interesting trivia that one would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in a single volume. The well-written text is accompanied by numerous charts, graphs, and an excellent collection of stunning photographs taken by several well-known wildlife photographers. I found that the book had answers to almost all the questions that nonbiologists typically ask about diurnal raptors: How big is a Bald Eagle? How long does an Osprey live? How fast does a Peregrine Falcon fly? How can I build a kestrel nest box?

The title, "Raptor Almanac," is somewhat misleading, however, because Weidensaul does not discuss owls (raptors by anyone's definition), but he does discuss New World vultures (now classed as ciconiiforms). The subtitle on the cover more accurately describes the book as "A Comprehensive Guide to Eagles, Hawks, Falcons, and Vultures." I am puzzled as to why the author chose to include New World vultures as "raptors" now that they have been reclassified. Weidensaul actually presents the latest DNA evidence that they are not raptors, but he then proceeds to treat them as if they were. The book seems to devote a disproportionate amount of space to the New World vultures; a high percentage of text and figures is about them, often because they are exceptions to so many "rules" about "true raptors." Although worldwide in scope, the book had a decided emphasis on taxa from North America and Europe. Raptors from Africa, Asia, and Australia were mentioned throughout the text but were noticeably underrepresented in the charts and tables. The North American bias was reflected by the fact that some (not all) measurements were given in English rather than metric units.

The book is divided into four main sections. The introductory section basically defines raptors and describes anatomical and physiological features that make them unique. The section on ecology and natural history comprises the heart of the volume (>120 pages) and covers behavior, social structure, courtship, nesting, diet, migration, longevity, and mortality. A chapter on conservation includes case histories of several endangered raptors and a review of effective management techniques. A final chapter on raptor-human relationships presents a unique collection of information about how human religious and economic perceptions about raptors have changed over time; this last section has an interesting list of biblical references to raptors as well as a number of suggestions on how people can help raptors. Appendix I has nine tables with interesting etymological information about raptors, and Appendix II provides a comprehensive reference for English and scientific names as well as general breeding distribution of all 310 species of diurnal "raptors."

The layout of the book is pleasing, with attractive headings. Many handy (but unnumbered) charts, maps, and tables break up the text. It would have been helpful to have a list of tables and figures for easy reference. Several of the illustrations were prepared by the multitalented author, himself; others were adapted from other sources. Some of these "adaptations" did not go smoothly, as seen by the unfortunate whiteout smudge in the drawing on page 66. An error like this stands out against the highly professional quality of the other figures and the outstanding quality of the color photographs. I spotted only one typographical error (in the chart on p. 109) and one grammatical error (bottom of p. 153).

It is usually easy to find fault with an account designed for a popular audience, but I found almost no exaggerations or erroneous statements in *The Raptor Almanac.* Weidensaul avoids restating popular myths. For example, his section on mate

fidelity is accurate and balanced and makes it clear that raptors do not always "mate for life." In fact, most of what Weidensaul says is on target.

As a scientist, my biggest disappointment with *The Raptor Almanac* was that Weidensaul did not provide references for the statements he makes. I realize that this practice makes it easier for a nonscientist to read the text, but it is very frustrating for the serious biologist who wants to verify statements or to get more information about a specific topic. Weidensaul provides only a very incomplete "Selected Bibliography" at the end of the book. A more effective compromise would have been to include a list of references after each chapter. Some of the material in the charts and tables is referenced; these references suggest that Weidensaul relied heavily on the secondary literature (e.g., Brown and Amadon 1968, Palmer 1988, Johnsgard 1990) for facts. This practice works well 95% of the time, but doing so exclusively means missing out on some of the more recent and important studies. Unfortunately, it also can perpetuate unsubstantiated information. For example, Weidensaul mentions the notion that the sex of Golden Eagles can be determined by tail bands, even though more recent work has shown this technique to be invalid.

Readers may be disappointed to learn that the almanac, with a publication date of 2000, does not include the most up-to-date information on many topics. Data on California Condor chick production, number of occupied Bald Eagle territories, and number of Peregrine Falcon nesting pairs have not been updated since the early to mid-1990s. Information on the legal status of some species, like the Bald Eagle and the Peregrine Falcon, is no longer accurate. When Weidensaul stated (p. 242) that experimental reintroductions of Golden Eagles had been unsuccessful, he apparently was unaware of recent successful nesting by released birds in Georgia and Tennessee. Weidensaul relies on very old sources for several important topics. For example, he features Craighead and Craighead 1956 in his discussions of diet and home range, and uses Bent 1937 for his data on chronology.

Despite these shortcomings, Weidensaul's book will serve as a useful reference for anyone who wants or needs to know about raptors. Weidensaul deserves credit for taking on and successfully completing an enormous job. I would recommend *The Raptor Almanac* as a textbook for introductory courses about raptor biology. The beautiful photographs, by themselves, would make this book welcome on any coffee table.—**Karen Steenhof, USGS Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center, Snake River Field Station, 970 Lusk Street, Boise, ID 83706 U.S.A.**