



REVIEW: Thomas R. Dunlap. *In the Field, Among the Feathered: A history of birders & their guides*

Author(s): Melissa Charenko

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EDITORIAL OFFICES

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology
Room 316 Victoria College, 91 Charles Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7
hapsat.society@utoronto.ca

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REVIEWS

Thomas R. Dunlap. *In the Field, Among the Feathered: A history of birders & their guides*. x + 241 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.*

Melissa Charenko[†]

On the opening page of *In the Field, Among the Feathered*, Thomas R. Dunlap claims that his history of the field guide “tells us much about how Americans have used science to understand the world around them and how commercial realities have both enabled and restrained the passage of knowledge from small groups of scientists and enthusiasts to the general public” (p. 3). For historians of science interested in the dissemination of scientific knowledge, this statement seems promising. Disappointingly for those interested in these topics, Dunlap only superficially engages with the history of science or economic history in his chronology of field guides: he leaves the connections between scientific and economic conditions and the dissemination of knowledge under-examined and weakly supported. What Dunlap does instead is provide numerous fascinating details about birdwatching and field guides throughout his highly readable and straightforward history of American bird guides from the Victorian era to the present.

To illustrate the changes in bird guides, Dunlap divides his chronology of bird guides into three parts. The first, the “pioneer phase,” begins with the publication of Florence Merriam’s *Birds through an Opera-Glass* in 1889, which Dunlap argues is the first true “field” guide. It, and the other guides that were published until about 1920, all lacked a well-defined vision of what people would use them for, reflecting, Dunlap argues, “the confused state of the hobby” (p. 18). Bird guide authors experimented heavily with their approaches during this phase, mixing moral sentiments with aesthetic reactions to birds, or combining scientific information with personal observations. By the 1920s, a more “mature guide” had emerged to support the now-popular hobby. These later guides, Dunlap suggests, found practical ways of allowing users to reliably identify species. They included images with aids such as arrows to point out a species’ distinguishing features; or distinctive silhouettes of groups of species, such as a member of the hawk

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[†] Melissa Charenko is a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

family in flight, or the heron family wading. Even with the increased costs of printing images, the guides remained relatively inexpensive, something that the guides' authors and publishers have always needed to balance. As the mature guide developed, affordable guides were especially important as an ever-growing middle class with leisure time, personal vehicles, and a strong desire to make contact with "the wild" increasingly wanted to participate in birding, and they needed guides to do so. By the 1960s, Dunlap argues that a third phase, "environmental birding," had begun. He suggests that this final stage assimilated information from ecology and environmentalism, highlighting, for example, how guides emphasized and illustrated birds in their natural habitats. In studying these more "environmental guides," Dunlap brings his story up to the present with some information on the use of new media, such as handheld devices that allow birders to hear birds' calls (an ever-difficult trait to represent in paper volumes).

Dunlap tries to connect this evolution of bird guides to broader social movements, such as the woman's movement or the nature-study movement, but only does so in very limited ways. Particularly tenuous are the connections with the wider social context in the section on environmental birding. Dunlap begins this section by describing the influence of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* on the banning of DDT and in changing views about the environment (the subject of Dunlap's work over the last 35 years). Even though Carson clearly had an effect on the environmental movement, this section is an overlong aside seeing as *Silent Spring* was not a field guide and the connections between Carson, the environmental movement, birding, and field guides remain weak at best. Instead, Dunlap provides a good history of the changes within field guides, but more work is needed to explain how these changes connect to social, economic, scientific, and technological developments.

Equally effective as his work on the changes within field guides is Dunlap's use and analysis of images in these guides, many of which are printed in colour plates. Each image includes bullet points that describe the main features of a given bird guide, offering a quick visual overview of the changes within field guides across different volumes, editions, and texts. Unfortunately, some of the images are poorly scanned, the layout of the captions and bullet highlights are at times inconsistently placed (and even harder to use if you're looking at the ebook), and the images are sadly not indexed (something that most birders expect in their guides)!

Despite these drawbacks, Dunlap does a good job explaining how bird guides have changed over time. For birders, even those not usually inclined to history, he offers numerous very readable anecdotes about those who have flocked to the field that might remind you of days spent with checklists and binoculars in hand. More broadly, Dunlap is also effective in reminding

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historians of science that field guides and their visual evidence could be important sources for future historical studies, and there is likely much potential for further developing this kind of work.

MELISSA CHARENKO
Department of the History of Science
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Room 210, Bradley Memorial Building
1225 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706-1528 USA
charenko@wisc.edu