BOOK REVIEWS

A Field Guide to Butterflies of Texas
Raymond W. Neck
Gulf Publishing, Houston, TX, 1996
323 pp., $21.95 (paperback)

Before you say to yourself "Oh, no, not another 'The Butterflies of . . .,'" you should ask yourself the following question. How do we entice nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts (e.g., bird watchers, back-packers, and members of native plant societies) into becoming interested in entomology? The answer is by making available to these potential bug-lovers regional field guides with beautiful color photographs of attractive, easy-to-recognize, "flag-ship" groups of insects. A Field Guide to Butterflies of Texas does exactly that.

More and more, members of local Audubon groups are aiming their binoculars toward butterflies, providing the entomological community with an opportunity for converts or, at a minimum, public education. And what these potential converts need are well illustrated field guides that will allow them to identify the species they see.

Despite the plethora of regional butterfly books and checklists (and they are many), there is always a need, albeit local, for field guides to specific geographic or political areas (even state parks or nature reserves). The smaller the area, the fewer the species; the fewer the species, the greater the ease in recognizing and learning them.

A Field Guide to Butterflies of Texas is not a research tool (there is no literature cited, and the authors of scientific names are not included); it is not a compendium of butterfly life histories (although it summarizes the known data for each species); it is not a biogeographic analysis although a brief discussion of zoogeography is included. It is a field guide directed toward those who know little or nothing about insects, but would like to identify the 446 species of butterflies that have been documented from Texas and learn something about their natural history. Its audience is local as is the audience of the other fine Texas Monthly Field Guides published by Gulf Publishing Company.

The book includes an introductory section on the Biology of Butterflies. This section contains an appropriately pedestrian discussion on how to distinguish between Butterflies and Moths. I can't count the number of times that I've been asked "How can you tell a butterfly from a moth?" I always take advantage of the opportunity to describe how artificial these categories are, elaborate on how diverse the order Lepidoptera really is, and describe some interesting morphological features such as wing coupling (which is the best way to distinguish the two groups). Neck opts to provide a more superficial and simplistic answer, which actually may be better (given the audience) than the more elaborate answer I typically concoct.

The bulk of the book (258 of 323 pages) is dedicated to species accounts. Each account includes 5 headings: description, food plants, life history, range, and comments. Accompanying each account is a small map of Texas illustrating the distribution of the species. The species accounts include relevant natural history information in an easy-to-understand style. In the middle of the book are 64 pages (plates) of color photographs of butterflies, along with eggs, larvae, and pupae of select species. One of the shortcomings of the guide is that not all of the species treated are illustrated (only 200 of the 446 species documented from Texas), which will leave many butterfly watchers with a nagging uncertainty as to whether or not they have correctly identified the object of their attention. Nonetheless, the illustrations included (most of which are by Geyata Ajilvsgi) are of high quality and beautifully reproduced.

As a younger growing up in southern California, the only widely available butterfly field guide was Klots' revered Field Guide to the Butterflies of North America, East of the Great Plains. I would have given anything for a western butterfly book. Kids growing up in Texas now have a field guide of their own.

This book is not for everyone; but if you live in or around Texas and enjoy the outdoors, you should own a copy. It will slide easily into your back-pack. It should be on the shelf of every library in the state along with other natural history guides. But Texans are not the only people who are likely to want a copy of this book. Many butterfly collectors are also collectors of butterfly books, and these folks should own a copy of this book as well.

No one knows more about Texas butterflies than Raymond Neck and Roy Kendall (to whom the book is dedicated). And the combined knowledge of these two individuals on the butterflies of Texas is found in this attractive, moderately priced field guide.

John W. Brown
Entomology Department
San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego, CA