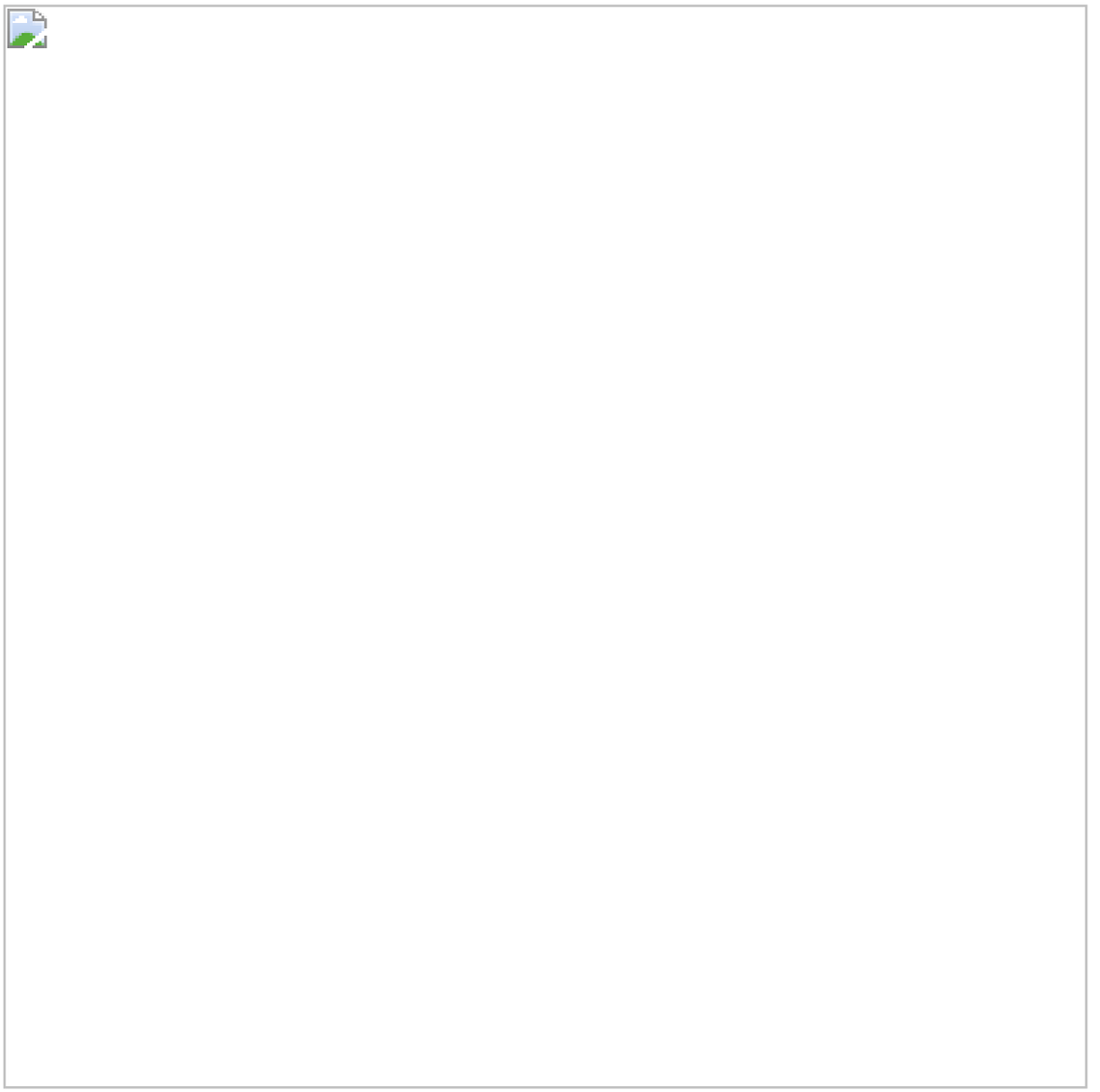

Spirits of the Air: Birds and American Indians in the South

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Book Reviews

EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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Spirits of the Air: Birds and American Indians in the South.—Shepard Krech III. 2009. University of Georgia Press, Athens. xvi + 264 pp., 149 color and 32 black-and-white illustrations, and photographs. ISBN: 978-0820328157. Hardcover, $44.95.—This book, characterized as "ethno-ornithology," is part of a series, "Environmental History of the South." As such, it was designed to persuade environmentalists to pay more attention to the South, and vice versa, and to focus on birds in the lives of indigenous people. Constructed to accomplish these goals, each chapter covers a specific subject such as subsistence, imagery, war and peace, spirituality, visible and invisible birds, and bird spirits. Examples of bird species used by the Indians are provided in the text and by the abundant illustrations, often taken from the works of Mark Catesby, Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon.

Various interactions between birds and American Indians have been known, documented, and discussed for many years (Johnston 2003). But here the author focuses on specific birds and Indians of the South, generally defined here as the huge area east of the Mississippi River and south of the Ohio. Thus, both Indians and birds were influenced by many different natural habitats, animal and plant associations, soil types, and weather conditions. Among non-utilitarian examples of bird use are the spirits associated with forest-dwelling, night-calling owls, the strength of an eagle imparted to braves, a bluebird controlling the wind, other birds determining the success in a ball game, and a yellow-bellied bird that caused a urinary-tract infection. Utilitarian examples include subsistence linked to the location of turkey flocks, eagle feathers featured prominently in ceremonial rites, and bird bones used as implements for eating and warfare.

I noted some errors: neither the "Arctic" nor the "South" is a biome or a natural area, and the inclusion of Catesby's Heath Hen (*Urogallus minor*) is unfortunate because there is no evidence that this species was "extirpated from the south." The author missed some important references, as follows. The first known report of bird masses was that of Ponce de Leon in 1513 when he described killing birds "amounted to five thousand" on the Tortugas, off the coast of Florida (Davis 1938). These were probably nesting Sooty Terns (*Onychoprion fuscatus*). And Cabeza de Vaca in 1528 preceded DeSoto (1538) in reporting "great numbers" of several different kinds of birds in Florida. Helen Rountree (1989) included many Powhatan Indian names for birds in her book. Catesby's illustration of a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) stealing fish from an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), though dramatic, was not the first account of this activity. Simon Gribelin, a French artist, in about 1705 showed three panels of this interaction, all copied onto the top of John White's painting of "Indians in a canoe with a fire in the middle" (Beverley 1947). Some Indians used movements of wild geese (cohunks) to distinguish different seasons and counting months (Beverley 1947).

The author's insightful research has cut across and included relevant elements of major disciplines—anthropology, archaeology, environmental science, history, and ornithology—to produce a well-documented, well-illustrated, highly readable survey of Southeastern Indian ethno-ornithology.—DAVID W. JOHNSTON, *5219 Concordia Street, Fairfax, Virginia 22032, USA. E-mail: fordeboids@verizon.net*

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