

The Illiterate Birder

By [Rick Wright](#), on July 21, 2015



Yikes, that ain't English! And what on earth is that strange reptilian creature on the cover?

It's easy sometimes for us Americans to forget that there is a whole vast birding literature out there that is *not* published in the US or the UK. On those rare occasions when we are reminded, it's often by a book or article produced in Scandinavia or the Netherlands and thoughtfully published in what passes for today's *lingua franca*. But birders and ornithologists all around the world look at birds and write about birds, sometimes even in their own language!, and we miss out if we let mere linguistic comfort determine what we read.

Im fortunate enough to travel occasionally to places where I do not read the local language well or even at all. Still, as long as the written language uses the Roman alphabet, I always make a point of stopping in at at least one bookstore and figuring out where the bird books are. They're rarely hard to find: even if I haven't learned the word for "birds" yet, "nature" tends to start with the same five letters no matter where you are.

It's surprising what you can learn as a functional illiterate. It may seem counterintuitive, but the most challenging books on the bookstore shelves are picture books and children's books; again and again I find myself defeated by prose written for a four-year-old. And so for me, the more technical, the better. After all, regional lists and avifaunas at least include scientific names and, in the happiest of cases, maps and bar graphs; a few seconds' browsing usually begins to turn up date ranges and other numerical information.

The best discoveries of all are often titles that were never meant for the field observer. Banding manuals, intended to help identify, age, and sex birds in the hand, can be jam-packed with drawings, photographs, and diagrams illustrating characters just mentioned—or not mentioned—in the standard birding literature. Short of a day in the museum, there is no better way to learn how small-scale patterns translate into visible field marks or how slight differences in size and proportion create entirely distinctive impressions of the living bird.

One of my most recent finds is the ornithologist Laurent Demongin's fine handbook to the identification of the 250 species most frequently banded in France. Even birders who don't remember much from those long-ago semesters of Racine and Flaubert will find this guide's abundance of information accessible—and even those with no plans to visit western Europe will appreciate

the fact that more than a quarter of the species included here are also familiar North American birds, and many more are sought-after or hotly anticipated rarities.

Thanks to a very small typeface and an abundance of abbreviations, Demongin fits a tremendous amount of information into these 300 pages. The typical species entry, filling a single page, begins with a brief summary—captioned "Identification"—of the characters distinguishing other, similar birds, including possible confusion species from outside the area covered in the guide. This section of the Little Egret account, for example, offers measurements and plumage distinctions for six other white ardeids, all of them on the mental short lists of AB birders: the Squacco Heron, the Western Reef-Heron, and the Cattle, Snowy, Great, and Intermediate Egrets. The identification summaries are followed by a tabular set of mensural data ("Mensurations"), broken down where appropriate by sex ("M" and "F"). Geographic variation ("Variations") and instances of apparent hybridization ("Hybridation") are also mentioned.

The telegraphic descriptions of molt patterns and chronology ("Mue") are less immediately accessible to the non-Francophone, but even here, a little attention and a canny reliance on cognate terms can take us surprisingly far. We learn, for instance, that the molts of one, randomly selected species are characterized by "beaucoup de variations individuelles," and that second-calendar-year birds ("2A") exhibit a "complète prénuptiale" that can be "excentrique." For most passerines, there follows a brief note on skulling ("Pneumatisation"), indicating whether that aging technique is "utilisable" or not for a given species.

As these examples show, any birder who knows the English equivalents will have no difficulty with much of the terminology used here. In fact, the author has intentionally approximated certain English formulations in order to save space on the page: The verbs "sexer" and "âger" do not, or did not, exist in French, but they are used here because they are readily comprehensible and more concise than such formulas as "déterminer le sexe ou l'âge."

Matters grow more complex in the detailed discussions of aging and sexing. Here, for the first time, we encounter something approaching actual French prose—but dotted, to the English-speaker's relief, with easily worked-out phrases like "contraste de mue," "plumage nuptiale," and "longueur du gonys." Demongin breaks down the process of determining age and sex by season, beginning with the criteria used in autumn ("AUT") for each age and sex class, then adducing those applied in spring ("PRINT"). The guide consistently uses a calendar-year system for designating age, such that a bird aged 1A turns 2A turns 2A+ on January 1 of succeeding years; identical to the HY/SY/ASY, etc., scheme used by American banders, this is easily accommodated with just a little thought by birders otherwise used to the life-year or feather-generation terminologies now used in most field guides.

If puzzling out the words is too daunting a task, Demongin has also supplied the user of the guide with abundant pictorial material, much of it illustrating the fine feather patterns, bill lengths, and wing formulas that at a distance create the diagnostic impressions most of us use most of the time to identify most of our birds. The images accompanying the account of the Common Sandpiper are a good example of both the value of this material and the guide's occasional failure to present it in the clearest possible way: here, as useful as the comparative illustrations of the wing stripe, tail extension, and tertial and covert patterns of the Common and Spotted Sandpipers are, they would be that much more helpful were the two columns properly aligned, the figures consecutively numbered, and their labels less cramped. In some figures, the arrows point to the wrong region or the wrong feather, a graphical error sure to be corrected in subsequent printings.

A few of the author's usages will require some mental adjustment on the part of the American reader. Unlike the usual practice on this side of the Atlantic, Demongin numbers the primaries and their coverts ascendantly, from the outermost in, arguing that it is easier to find that feather than the innermost. This, of course, can lead to confusion in discussing those species that have a reduced or rudimentary outermost primary; indeed, the author at one point finds it necessary to expressly affirm that the eighth primary out is (his) P3 in passerines but P4 in most other birds, an explanation unnecessary if those feathers are numbered descendantly. As so frequently in European references, the wing measurements given are those of the flattened wing rather than the wing chord.

Most American birders, even those whose guide of daily choice is Pyle, are unlikely to reach for Demongin with any frequency. For those confronted with an odd-looking snipe, though, or hoping to sex the Northern Lapwings that have set down on the neighbor's snowy lawn, or simply wondering how to tell white-spotted from red-spotted Bluethroats, this guide will prove a helpful addition to the just-in-case bookcase.

Oh, and that cover bird in the "bander's grip"? It's a Eurasian Wryneck, a bird well worth learning more about before your next trip to Alaska or Indiana.

Demongin, Laurent. 2013. *Guide d'identification des oiseaux en main: Les 250 espèces les plus baguées en France*. Privately published: Mortsel, Belgium.

310 pages, € 28—softcover



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