

Gotcha

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

One of the most delightful books to cross my desk in recent weeks is Julie Zickefoose's new *Letters from Eden*, a thoughtful exploration of the natural and the human world on 80 acres in Ohio. It would have been easy for this talented artist to let her charming paintings "carry" the book, but *Letters from Eden* is more than just a collection of pictures; Zickefoose's short essays, read carefully, make up an important meditation on the relationship between observation and intervention, caring and control.

Still, on a first reading, I found myself lingering over the pictures. Zickefoose draws and paints with flair and wit, and viewers of her paintings will find themselves smiling in immediate recognition of the birds and the scene they so delightfully inhabit. It is difficult to fix on a favorite, but the Evening Grosbeaks, plump as the apples they perch beside, are the perfect embodiments of a midwestern snowstorm; every bit as evocative, Yellow-breasted Chats dance in front of an unseen plum thicket, and European Starlings join noisy battle in the grass. And her Sanderlings trip along the beach.... Wait a minute. As everybody from Aristotle to Sibley, from Linné to *BNA*, knows, Sanderlings, uniquely and distinctively, lack a hind toe. And the birds in *Eden*? Four-toed, every one of them. Gotcha.



Sanderlings. Courtesy of Julie Zickefoose and Houghton Mifflin.

Or maybe not. Sometimes, it seems, the wisdom of the ages just isn't all that wise. Julie responded not with protestations but with evidence: photographs of indisputable Sanderlings with unmistakable hind toes intact, including the specimens she had consulted in preparing her painting. What, as they say, gives?

As early as 1904, Francis H. Allen published a record of a Sanderling with four toes shot in Massachusetts; Allen described his bird as "a case of reversion, as the ancestors of the Sanderling were doubtless four-toed sandpipers." A half century later, Jean Delacour considered the Sanderling's missing hallux "an obviously recent and unimportant character," implying at least the potential for variation. And yet birders and their books continue to proclaim the essential tri-toed state of the surf snipe. I have to confess that I haven't actually looked at a Sanderling's toes for years, content to lean on the magisterial pronouncements of the handbooks and the field guides: "Hind toe absent." It's in print, after all.

Gotcha? Got *me*. Got me to learn more and to look harder—and that, after all, is what birding is all about.

RBA Update: Massachusetts

The new phone number for Massachusetts Audubon's Voice of Audubon is 781/259-8805. All four Massachusetts reports are available at this number, with transcripts at www.massaudubon.org/voa. The toll-free number is no longer in service. Established in 1954, the Voice of Audubon is the oldest phone-based RBA in the USA.

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