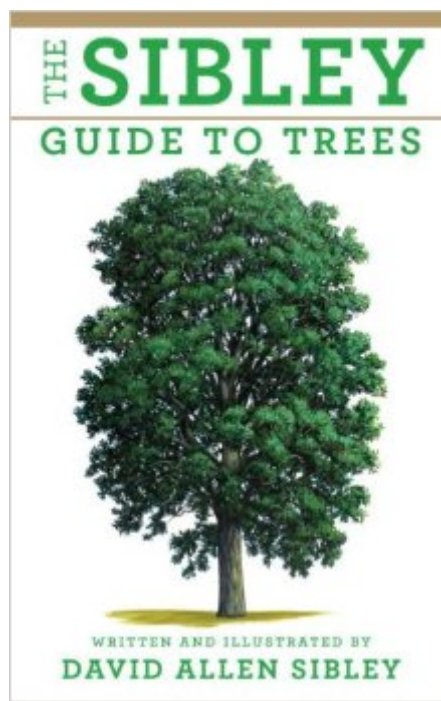


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The Sibley Guide To Trees



Synopsis

The Sibley Guide To Trees, David Allen Sibley, Publisher - Random House

Book Information

Flexibound: 426 pages

Publisher: Knopf (September 15, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 037541519X

ISBN-13: 978-0375415197

Product Dimensions: 6.3 x 1.1 x 9.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (97 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

As someone who spends much of my free time poking about in the natural environment, has been an avid birder for over 35 years, and has a graduate degree in botany (ecology and systematics), I have used most of the major field guides and many of the more technical floras for North America. My hope was that this guide would be equivalent in importance to Sibley's bird guides. The first things I do with a new plant guide is test it against a flora I'm familiar with and see what sort of identification keys are used. I didn't notice any errors or exclusions for the trees of Michigan, but using a common ID problem for this area, looked at the comparison between white and red/green ash. Sibley notes that red/green ash may have hairy twigs, but doesn't make clear that they may also have smooth twigs, as does white ash. He also doesn't point out that growth habit is often a good clue for distinguishing red/green from white ash, nor does he mention that some authorities now split red/green into two species. This is the sort of thing that makes me doubt the book's usefulness if someone tries to use it in an unfamiliar flora. The biggest problem with this book, and I consider it to be significant, is the lack of identification keys. Although Sibley includes extensive illustrations of compound and lobed leaves in the beginning of the book, what does one do with an unfamiliar tree with a simple leaf? The only option is to start flipping through the pages, and that is a method that will lead to many misidentifications. Useful keying systems have been developed that don't require extensive knowledge of botanical terminology (e.g., Newcomb's system). Also, a

glossary, or given Sibley's artistic gift, an illustrated glossary would be very helpful. There are some good things about this book. It is the only book I'm aware of that includes all (or nearly all) the native and naturalized trees, and many or most of the commonly planted ornamentals found in North America. It also includes a number of shrub species that rarely take tree form (in fact, its inclusiveness of ornamentals and shrubs seems a bit far reaching and inconsistent). The art work is good, but I don't think Sibley's style is nearly as effective for trees as it is for birds. This is an attractive book that presents basically sound information, but it seems to fall somewhere between a useful identification guide and an aesthetic celebration of trees. With a little tweaking and some editorial review by some botanists with regional or taxonomic specialties, this could be an awesome book.

The artwork in this book puts me in mind of David More's work in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Trees* which covers trees grown in England and Europe. I remember wishing there was a book of that quality for North America. In August of this year (2009) I got my wish. Sibley's guide is more portable than the aforementioned work. It's larger than the typical field guide but will fit into a backpack or can be left in the car. What strikes me most about Sibley's guide is the illustrations of leaves and fruit. They are more lifelike than even photographs can be and they seem to jump off of the clear white paper. The text is brief but mentions fine points in identification that make it invaluable. The only fault I can find with the book is it should have more tree silhouettes. Even with that fault I find it the best overall guide with its clear and precise leaf and fruit illustrations.

I was very excited when I found Sibley's field guide for trees. I was secretly wishing that Sibley would produce a field guide for trees with the same level of detail as his guide to birds so I had been holding out for a long time to buy a field guide for trees. Sibley's field guide, unlike others, actually shows full color illustrations of each part (young/old bark, buds, flowers and most importantly, like he did with the bird guide, a full review of the different forms of a leaf of every tree). In just a few minutes of thumbing through the book I was able to ID a couple of trees that have been vexing me. Like Sibley did with birds, he has produced the definitive field guide to trees.

This guide seems designed to sell rather than to be useful; to be looked at rather than used. It lacks some things that it really should have. First, as pointed out by others, it needs some kind of key system for identification. Most importantly, this book needs more than two or three sentences per tree. The distinguishing features listed are in many cases wholly insufficient to accurately and

consistently identify the species. Sibley perhaps sees trees as being as simple to identify as birds; due to introgression, they are not. One or two features is not enough to go on. Often, very useful identification features are left out of his text. For example, in his description of rock elm, there is no mention of the growth form/tree shape, which is by far the most distinctive aspect of this tree, and the easiest way to identify it. Sibley is a bird guy, and perhaps it is too much to ask of someone to have the required in-depth knowledge necessary to do a work of this scope for both topics. Thus there are some inaccuracies that hint at his less extensive knowledge of trees, of the kind that would not be found in his bird books. For example, he says of white mulberry that the mature fruit is "whitish to red to occasionally blackish." This is very misleading; the fruit of white mulberry is almost always purple/black when ripe, and the color of the fruit should not be touted as an identifying feature. A field guide should clear up this confusion, not perpetuate it. Nothing in his descriptions hints at the substantial difference in leaf shape between the red and white mulberries either--all of this leads one to suspect that he doesn't really know these trees. The selection of trees included is very odd indeed. While he says that "any plant species that is commonly over 30 feet tall with a trunk more than one foot thick is included in this guide," this is simply not true. Peachleaf willow, for example, grows to be more than three feet in diameter and seventy feet in height, but is oddly not included. While many questionable "trees" such as glossy buckthorn are included, others that average larger in size, such as black haw, are not. The blue elder of the mountain west is not discussed, even though it commonly grows in tree form and may stand 30 or more feet tall. While he excuses this erratic inclusion in the introduction by saying that "one could quibble endlessly over the definition of a tree," this seems like a cop-out. Other guides, like the old Outdoor Life guide by T. Elias, do not have this problem. A tree guide should at least cover the common and widespread species that regularly reach tree size, even if they are usually smaller; if it chooses to cover only some, there should be some logic or consistency in how this is done. Some of the things that I have pointed out seem to have been left out to save space. This is probably the publisher's fault. I understand that many buyers want a small book, or a pocket guide. Less inclusive guides are made for them. People who want a thorough and inclusive tree guide need to realize that there are lots of trees and accept that such a guide will simply have to be physically large. The Sibley guide tries to be both small and thorough and simply fails. Another year of work and 150 more pages could make this book the best of its kind. All that said, it's a good book. I was disappointed only because I expected it to be great. It is certainly better than some of its main competitors in this niche. I'd recommend, along with this, getting a more thorough guide that is specific to your region.

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