

The History of Birding

Part I. 1968–1974

Note: For several years now, this column has had a strong—maybe even an obsessive—emphasis on current and future trends in birding. Well, we’re going to be reversing course for a little while now, as we take a look at our past. Our approach will be a simple one: We will examine back issues of Birding, starting with vol. 0 no. 0, way back in 1968, and winding up all the way in the present. Let’s not be bashful: There is no better record of the American birding experience than what has been chronicled on the pages of Birding.

Of course, there is a twist. It will be clear, pretty much from the outset, that much of the olden-day material in Birding has, in fact, anticipated the present and, indeed, points the way to the future. Perhaps we are not reversing course so much, then, as we are simply shifting gears. We do not wish to “run the risk of becoming tedious and ossified”, as Paul J. Baicich put it in one of his last editorials (“Some changes”, February 2002, p. 8). Our focus here is still on the future, even as we commence a yearlong journey back to the future.



The beginnings are murky. No date is indicated, but it had to be sometime back in 1968 that the quirkily numbered vol. 0 no. 0 of *The Birdwatcher’s Digest* was “published”. It would later be revealed (*Birding*, July/August 1973, p. 125) that the “print run”—if one might call it that—of this five-page newsletter had been 10 copies. The new publication of the “American Birdwatcher’s Association” billed itself as “a journal devoted to the hobby of birdwatching” and “a magazine strictly for bird-watchers”. Membership in the ABA was \$3.

Listing was the main thrust of vol. 0 no. 0, even though official list-keeping was in its infancy at the time. There were only nine entries in the Top 10 Life Lists, and the fifth-best AOU-area annual list for 1967 was a meager 233 species. Progress was anticipated in the listing arena, however, and it was promised in vol. 0 no. 0 that “[e]ach issue

of *The Birdwatcher’s Digest* will include the latest statistics on the various games that members are playing and how they rank on the overall basis.” It was decreed that Hawaii be excluded from the listing game, and it was proposed that Canada be treated as the fiftieth U. S. state.

With vol. 1 (1969), the publication took on the basic format that is still in place today: six issues per year, each one published every other month. The journal’s name was changed to *Birding*, and its total production cost was reported to be \$50 per issue (September/October, p. 1). An understandable emphasis of vol. 1—which ran to 81 pages in extent—was on definitions and ground rules. The competitive and sporting aspects of birding were right away identified as major foci for *Birding*. And just as quickly, the focus on listing was being criticized (March/April, p. 5). Other topics that were tackled early on included the following: “official” state lists (March/April, p. 10), heard-only species (May/June, p. 4), and exotics (May/June, pp. 13–14). It was proposed that the name of the ABA be changed to the American Birding Association (March/April, p. 2), and that Associate and Active memberships in the ABA be based on the size of one’s life list (March/April, p. 10).

By the end of 1969, there were 128 members of the ABA (November/December, p. 16), and *pro tem* officers of the ABA had been appointed (November/December, p. 3). The November/December issue included bird finding information on Swainson’s Warbler and European [sic] Tree Sparrow (inserts), “Notes” on four North American firsts from the Pribilofs and on a Dusky [sic] Redshank “collected somewhere in the Northeast recently” (p. 8), and Noel Pettingell’s “Ten Most Wanted Species” in North America (p. 14). Was there an overarching theme to this first full year of *Birding* and the ABA? According to Jim Tucker (September/October, p. 3), the publication and the organization were emerging as “a proving ground for new ideas, and a testing ground for old ones.”

The tone of vol. 2 (1970) was sometimes cantankerous. (Do periodical publications, like toddlers, go through the Terrible Twos?) The January/February issue opened with a "Forum" (p. 2) that included such verbiage as 'shudder', 'troubled', 'factions', 'polemics', and 'dissatisfied'. The editorial that followed (p. 3) advised against conservation coverage on the pages of *Birding*, which would be "subverting our reason for exist[ence]". Next came a plea from Dean Fisher (p. 5), with capital letters and an exclamation point, to LEAVE SCIENCE OUT! After that: an essay by George A. Hall (pp. 6–7), on the problems and pitfalls of the competitive aspect of birding. And so it continued throughout 1970: listing and egos (March/April, pp. 9–10), listing and integrity (March/April, p. 13), the pros and cons of collecting (May/June, pp. 5–9), membership qualifications (July/August, p. 2), and, of course, splitting and lumping (September/October, pp. 7–10).

Birding got a makeover in 1971. In years 0–2, it had been essentially a newsletter, both in appearance and in content. By 1971, however, *Birding* had taken on the look of a professional journal, with a masthead, instructions for contributors, and continuous pagination. There were the usual bird lists and (strongly expressed) opinion pieces, but the expanded content (258 pages in 1971, up from 96 in 1970) allowed for new exploration of such matters as bird finding and bird identification. The lead article in the September/October issue (pp. 155–156) captured the essence of American birding at the time: P. William Smith, writing about the 1971 summer shorebird bonanza at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey, concluded that, "We are only cognizant of the tip of the iceberg, and if this year's kind of coverage continues I suspect the excitement has only just begun."

The 1972 volume of *Birding* reported extensively on the interrelated matters of bird finding and bird listing. For example, there was Ted Parker's article (January/February, pp. 6–10) that began with the simple but shocking words, "In 1971 I observed 626 species of birds in the A.O.U.

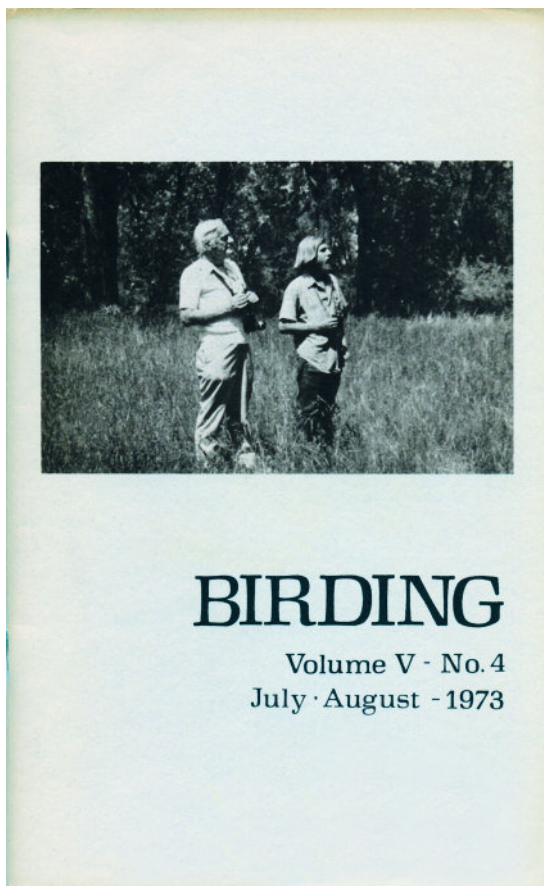
Check-list area." A few months later, Joe Taylor became the first member of the "700 Club", as reported with great fanfare in the May/June issue (pp. 114–116). There was pride in these accomplishments, but there was also a palpable sense that more was on the way: The pelagic frontier was opening (November/December, pp. 278 & 280), a national RBA was under discussion (November/December, p. 279), and the first ABA convention was in the planning stages (September/October, p. 201).

A standout in the 1973 volume of *Birding* was the July/August issue. It was the first issue of *Birding* to feature photography—including a black-and-white cover photograph of Roger Tory Peterson and Kenn Kaufman out birding. In addition to a thorough report on the first ABA convention in Kenmare, North Dakota (pp. 128–138), the July/August issue contained such features as the first ABA Checklist report (p. 139), an enumeration of the first slate of elected directors for the ABA (p. 140), and the publication of the newly ratified by-laws of the ABA (pp. 162–166). Incoming president G. Stuart Keith, in his review of the growth of the ABA (p. 127), put it this way: "You've come a long way, Baby!"

Yes, *Birding* and the ABA had come a long way, but additional growth and expansion were in the offing. The 1974 volume of *Birding*

was the biggest yet (332 pages), and the ABA membership had grown to 1,872 by year's end. Continuing an emphasis from the early 1970s, vol. 6 carried frequent coverage of the matter of international birding, with feature articles on a wide variety of foreign destinations, plus Stuart Keith's epic "Birding Planet Earth: A World Overview" (July/August, pp. 203–216). If Keith's article reflected the prevailing currents of the day, then Maggie Bowman's short letter to the editor in the September/October issue (pp. 232–233) laid the groundwork for the future. "My main interest in *Birding*", she said, "is the hope that you will publish articles on the fine, fine points of field identification".

— Ted Floyd



The first issue of *Birding* to have a cover photograph (Roger Tory Peterson, left; Kenn Kaufman, right) was the July/August 1973 (vol. 5, no. 4) issue.

The History of *Birding* Part II. 1975–1980

In the preface to *Kingbird Highway*, Kenn Kaufman states that “There was one brief period when birding went through revolutionary changes. ... Birding for the 1990s—indeed, birding for the twenty-first century—was born in the brief period from 1970 to 1975.” That brief period coincided, of course, with the earliest years of *Birding* and the ABA, which we examined in the January/February 2006 issue (pp. 20–21).

Now, we move beyond those revolutionary years and into an era of comparative calm. It wasn’t yet time for reflection, though, and the dust hadn’t yet settled. It was a period in which several major currents in birding and field ornithology were consolidated. During the years 1975–1980, the North American birding community expanded steadily; we got better at identifying birds; we still kept lists, although with less enthusiasm than in the infancy of the ABA; and we started to ask questions about bird conservation and birder ethics.



There is something of a transitional quality about the 1975 volume of *Birding*. It was the final year of Kaufman’s revolution, and one senses on the pages of *Birding* from that time the shift to a post-revolutionary outlook. Each issue of vol. 7 dealt, to some degree, with the business of listing—so much so as to give the impression that the matter had been very nearly exhausted. That is to say, listing had been established as a permanent and problematic feature on the American birding landscape, and it is probably the case that no subsequent volume of *Birding* would devote as much coverage to the topic of listing. Meanwhile, other features on the birding landscape were taking shape. Sam W. Sinderson’s article on “Making your own parabolic reflector” (January/February, pp. 1–3) pointed the way to the magazine’s increasing emphasis on “Tools of the trade” for the birder. Bird identification articles popped up from time to time in 1975, with coverage of such topics

as jaegers (March/April, pp. 106–110) and scaups (July/August, pp. 232–236). And there were early indications of an important future direction for the ABA: ethical conduct in the field. In letters to the editor, J. B. Tatum (May/June, p. 131) and James Gibson (July/August, p. 222) specifically called for a “Code for the Birdwatcher”, a document that would, in time, become one of the most significant legacies of the ABA.

The 1976 volume of *Birding* was the first to top the 400-page threshold. Coverage of listing was somewhat diminished in 1976, and attention to identification continued to build. Perhaps the most significant addition to *Birding* in 1976 was a column that started out in the January/February issue (pp. 56–58) as “Dr. D’s auk-word ornithology”, with the subtitle “Gleanings from the technical literature”. By the time of the May/June issue (pp. 152–156), Paul DeBenedictis’s column would be known simply as “Gleanings from the technical literature”, and it would go on to become one of the most popular and long-running columns in the history of *Birding*. Continuing in the vein of long-running, it was in the January/February issue that Hugh Willoughby made his debut as copy editor for *Birding*. Willoughby, still going strong as copy editor, has had the longest tenure of anybody associated with *Birding*. In 1976, the ABA welcomed its second president, Arnold Small, by that time already a legend in the organization. Small’s inaugural address (July/August, pp. 219–222) provided a characteristically insightful, provocative, and above all wry “Glimpse into the future of ABA”.

In the early years, the cover of *Birding* wasn’t exactly the publication’s strongest suit. But that changed in 1977, with one beautiful or memorable cover after another. Now one oughtn’t judge a book (or magazine) by its cover, but it is certainly the case that the vol. 9 covers of *Birding* provide a snapshot of birding in the mid-1970s. Let’s work backwards: a color painting of a pair of Bachman’s

Warblers (December), a species then still thought findable, and atop every birder's wish list in the 1970s; a black-and-white photograph of a soaring Yellow-nosed Albatross (October), emblematic of the thrill of East Coast pelagic birding at the time; a black-and-white photograph of a Kirtland's Warbler (August), one of the highest-profile conservation concerns of the era; a scratchboard rendering of four juvenile "screech owls" (June), before the split into Eastern vs. Western; and black-and-white portraiture of Golden (April) and Bald (February) Eagles, iconic favorites for any age. As if to accommodate the new emphasis on striking cover art and photography, the 1977 volume of *Birding*, beginning with the February issue, measured 6 x 9 inches, an increase in areal extent of nearly 20% from previous volumes.

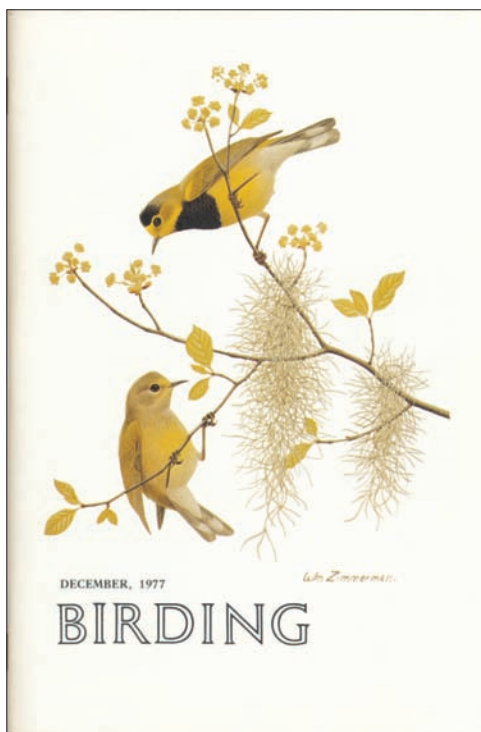
The latter half of the 1970s, as noted earlier, was a period of consolidation for the birder, a time in which many of the great ideas and exciting discoveries of the early 70s were actually written down and publicized. *Birding* soon became the central repository for all of this new information, and during the late 1970s the magazine published many reprints from regional journals and newsletters. Every issue of the 1978 volume of *Birding*, for example, contained one or more reprints, on such matters as: finding rarities at Point Reyes (February, pp. 9–12), reprinted from *The Gull*; Kirtland's Warbler biology (April, pp. 59–62), reprinted from *The Jack Pine Warbler*; birding in New Zealand (June, pp. 131–134), reprinted from *The 'Elepaio*; geographic variation in the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (August, pp. 142–149), reprinted from *The Western Tanager*; attracting screech-owls (October, pp. 255–257), reprinted from *The Redstart*; and bird feeding (December, pp. 323–326), reprinted from *The Delmarva Ornithologist*. True, the practice of publishing reprints in *Birding* would later come to be frowned upon, but it was sensible, even vital, in the late 1970s: There was no other venue for consolidating so much new information for the birder.

It was bound to surface eventually: explicit recognition of the existence of a particularly distinctive faction within the American birding community. Yes, the 1979 volume of *Birding* carried multiple allusions and references to The Cali-

fornian. For example, Bruce Barrett charged that the ABA's stances on exotic and heard-only species were determined by a "small group" with "strong voices" from California (February, p. 18). And Jim Berry, "as tired as any other Easterner of hearing the praises of California being sung", begrudgingly admired the Californians for their sophistication, broad outlook, and general excellence in the field, while noting that many Eastern Seaboard birders were stuck in the listing rut (October, p. 249). The real tribute to The Californian Way was conveyed in a note on p. 289 of the December issue, beginning with the promise that "In 1980 the emphasis of *Birding* will be on field-birding techniques". Although a Californian influence was not explicitly cited in the note, it was undeniably there—as it still is more than a quarter century later. (By the way, a spectacular photographic homage to 70s-style California birding can be found on p. 93 of the April issue.)

Sure enough, the 1980 volume of *Birding* carried a good bit of information on "field birding techniques", but it was more notable, really, as a distillation of the ornitho-sociological themes and trends of the time. James A. Tucker's essay "Birding in the 1980s" (February, pp. 4–6) started it off, with predictions of increased focus by birders on "locality birding", heightened enthusiasm for "big days", and continued improvement in the area of bird identification—with Californians (and the British), of course, leading the charge. Other topics that were explored in vol. 12 included the following: Jim Vardaman's record-shattering, instantly legendary, and still-problematic 1979 "big year" (February, pp. 36–40); birding ethics (three separate entries in the April issue alone); rare bird alerts (a whopping 26 of them, as reported on pp. 110–112 of the June issue); birding demographics (August, pp. 138–145); and behind-the-scenes intrigue at the ABA (October, pp. 156–157). In the end run, though, bird identification had, by 1980, itself become one of the themes and trends of the time, and Paul Lehman's classic article on Thayer's Gull (December, pp. 198–210) has come to be viewed less as a still-useful field treatise than as the emblem of an era.

— Ted Floyd



The cover of the December 1977 issue (vol. 9, no. 6) of *Birding* was the first to feature a color painting—of William Zimmerman's Bachman's Warblers.

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The History of *Birding*

Part III. 1981–1987

The first half of the 1980s heralded the renaissance of the American field guide, with one “instant classic” after another rolling off the presses. The new regional and continental guides were better than ever, and specialty guides catered to a younger generation of up-and-coming experts lusting after information and perspective on the identification of such taxa as tubenoses, raptors, shorebirds, and gulls. Birding was very much on the scene in those days, with extensive coverage of and commentary on the new crop of field guides. Also, *Birding* continued to emerge as a major venue for the publication of cutting-edge identification information, most notably in a massive, multi-year series on the genus *Empidonax*.

Yes, bird identification was the defining emphasis of *Birding* at the time, but the editors and contributors hadn’t lost touch with the grass-roots orientation of the American Birding Association. In various commentaries and editorials, and most of all in the letters to the editor, it was clear that we had not yet outgrown our rambunctious past. The ride was bumpy at times in the 1980s, but it was a good time to be a birder: We were in this thing together, learning and sharing as we went, all the while getting better at bird identification.



Few incidents in birding history received more press than the publication of the fourth edition (1980) of Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Birds*, and it was to be expected that *Birding* would devote considerable verbiage to the matter. At the time, the typical book review in *Birding* was less than one page long, yet the coverage in the August 1981 issue of Peterson’s *Field Guide* issue ran to 13 pages. Commentaries by Henry Armistead (pp. 116–118), Ron Naveen (pp. 118–119), Claudia Wilds (p. 119), Will Russell (pp. 120–121), and Larry Balch (pp. 121–124) were followed by a substantial response (pp. 125–128) from Peterson himself. Peterson’s commentary ended on a forward-looking note: We hadn’t heard the last from him. One sensed—from Peterson, from his fans and critics alike, from the ordinary birder in the field—that the fourth edition signaled the beginning of a new era. It is ironic, but it is also a tribute to Peterson’s legacy, that so definitive and magisterial a work should have inspired a generation of revision and rediscovery, of new visions and new discoveries.

In the earliest days of *Birding* and the ABA, the typical bird identification entry was a short note or comment. A few years later came full-fledged feature articles on bird identification. And then in the early 1980s, the inevitable next step: multi-part articles, spanning multiple issues of *Birding*. Ron Naveen’s 14-page article on “Storm-petrels of the world” (December 1981, pp. 216–229) ended with the foreboding words: “To be continued in next issue.” As promised, the storm-petrel series picked up in the next issue (February 1982, pp. 10–15). And the next (April 1982, pp. 56–62). And the next (June/August 1982, pp. 140–147). We took a break from storm-petrels in the October 1982 issue, but it seemed certain that tubenoses would continue to get their due: Naveen’s name now appeared in the *Editor* slot of the magazine’s masthead. In his inaugural editorial (p. 166), Naveen clearly identified a major current of the era: continuing commitment to advances in field identification, but in a dialectical and communitarian spirit.

One of Naveen’s innovations for *Birding* was the long-running Point/Counterpoint series. He had identified the need for the series in his October 1982 editorial (p. 166), and the idea really took off in vol. 15 (1983). The first entry for 1983 (February, pp. 6–7) revisited an old idea: Louis Lopilato opined that the ABA *Checklist* ought to strive for “stability”, regardless of the continual taxonomic ebb and flow of the AOU *Check-list*. The April entry (pp. 91–94), penned by Kenneth C. Parkes, described the hard work of the AOU *Check-list* Com-

mittee and lamented the birding community's ingratitude in the matter. The June column started out in the uncontroversial (it's all relative...) realm of gull and tern identification (pp. 107–108), but then exploded into multiple commentaries (pp. 108–111) on *Checklists* and *Check-lists* (big difference). Opinions differed sharply, but deep down we knew it was all good clean fun. Elsewhere in the June issue (p. 102), Kenn Kaufman first put into print his now-famous dictum: "If you enjoy birding, you're a good birder. If you enjoy birding a lot, you are a *great* birder."

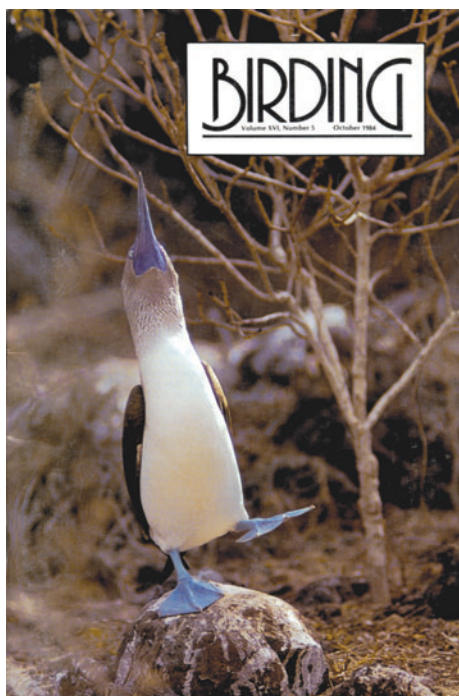
By the time of the 1984 volume of *Birding*, it was clearly the case that the field guide had become something of a publishing phenomenon. Henry Armistead noted in the June issue (pp. 117–118) that Peterson's *Field Guide* was the most successful natural history work ever published, and in fact one of the most popular books of all time, period. Meanwhile, other major players were coming onto the scene. The February issue carried Guy McCaskie's critique (pp. 25–32) of the first edition of the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (1983), which he called "the best guide currently available". The ambitious *Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* (1983), reviewed by Larry Balch in the August issue (pp. 167–173), was not as enthusiastically endorsed, however. And the second edition of the fabled *Golden Guide* (yet another 1983 offering) was frankly panned by Rich Stallcup (October, pp. 217–223).

Thus, there was still work to be done. The frontiers of bird identification had yet to be explored, and even some basic information on common species remained to be distilled. Accordingly, the 1985 volume of *Birding* provided material for the beginner and the expert alike. Jim Tucker's "Basic birding" column, which had started up in the December 1984 issue (pp. 243–244), was off and running in 1985, with treatment of such elementary techniques as—no kidding—pishing (February, p. 19), ululating (April/June, p. 83), and flushing (October, p. 215). There was plenty of material for the advanced birder, too, e.g., separation of Caribbean and American Coots (April/June, pp. 84–88) and identification of juvenile brown swallows (October, pp. 209–211). And the ultimate undertaking for

the 1980s: Bret Whitney and Kenn Kaufman's series on "The *Empidonax* challenge". Just the introduction to the genus (August, pp. 151–158) required a feature-length article, and the series would take literally years to complete.

From its inception, *Birding* has provided the American

birder with a no-holds-barred forum for discourse and dialog, and so it was in the 1986 volume. Paul Spear's letter in the February issue (p. 12) assailed the ongoing "*Empidonax* challenge" for being "essentially unusable", but Dan Gibson's letter in the same issue (pp. 12–13) praised the series for getting off to a fine start. Letters and commentaries (pertaining especially to conservation) streamed in throughout 1986, and Jim Tucker's year-end editorial (December, pp. 306–314) reflected on an analysis of a recent readers' survey. The survey results: We wanted more identification, we wanted less listing, and we couldn't agree on anything else. Meanwhile, "The *Empidonax* challenge" proceeded (June, pp. 153–159; December, pp. 315–327), the Eurasian Collared-Dove was reckoned a future addition to the ABA list (June, pp. 150–152), and the ABA membership continued to increase: We numbered 6,498 by the time of the



The 1980s were a spirited time for *Birding* and the ABA, as would seem to be attested by this capering and unsteady **Blue-footed Booby** on the cover of the October 1984 (vol. 16, no. 5) issue.

October issue (p. 284).

The February 1987 issue set the tone for the rest of that year—a year of turnover and tumult, yet of continuing success for the ABA. The February issue commenced with a candid report (pp. 2–4) from President Larry Balch, a retrospective (pp. 5–6) by outgoing editor Jim Tucker (who since August 1985 had been serving his second term as editor), and an inaugural message (pp. 8–9) from incoming editor Rick Blom. Next there followed six opinionated letters about conservation (p. 12) and a little while later news that book review editor Henry Armistead was retiring (p. 61). Through it all, the usual bedrock items for a typical issue of *Birding*: Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett on gnatcatcher identification (pp. 17–29), Robert Ridgely on *Birds of Colombia* (pp. 51–54), and department columns by such luminaries as Paul DeBenedictis and Kenn Kaufman. The upshot? According to the year-end report (December, p. 29), membership was up 14% from the 1986 level.

— Ted Floyd

The History of *Birding*

Part IV. 1988–1993

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a time of tremendous growth for the American Birding Association. Membership increased by more than 100 percent during the six-year period covered in this installment of “The history of Birding”, and our journal expanded and improved too. Paul Lehman took over the Birding editorship in 1988 and right away got down to the business of the pursuit of excellence: The magazine increased in both content and coverage, publication crept back on schedule, and the finished product was more professional than ever before.

There was the temptation, no doubt, to get swept up in the immediacy of the ABA’s successes at the time, but there was likewise the imperative to keep an eye toward the future. What would the years ahead hold in store, both for the ABA and more generally for birding in North America? What important issues lay right around the corner, as well as farther down the road? What had we learned from more than two decades of institutional history, and how might we apply those lessons to the future? These and related questions provided an important subtext to the content and character of Birding as the close of the twentieth century drew near.



On p. 29 of the February 1988 issue of *Birding*, there appears a brief and superficially unremarkable announcement that just happens to call attention to the biggest headache facing the ABA in the late 1980s: “You have already seen the...new ABA Newsletter”. As it turns out, the first official issue of *Winging It* (vol. 1 no. 1) was dated January 1989. Take a closer look at those dates: *Birding* was dreadfully behind schedule by the late 1980s. Furthermore, the magazine had become “esoteric” and “impenetrable” according to one correspondent (February 1988, p. 6), and considerably more abstruse than *Finnegans Wake* according to another (April 1988, p. 60). Incoming Editor Paul

Lehman had his work cut out for him. In his inaugural editorial (October 1988, pp. 278–280), he identified two immediate objectives for *Birding*: to get back on schedule and to become easier to read. And in his second editorial (December 1988, pp. 339–342), he enumerated a dozen focal areas for the magazine’s content. The first four dealt squarely with the matter of identification; the remaining eight touched on everything from habitat outposts to journal reviews. Not a single entry in Lehman’s twelve-step program referred to listing.

The first issue of the 1989 volume of *Birding* was clearly different from any of its predecessors. It measured 7.5 × 10 inches, an increase in areal extent of 39%. It ran to an impressive 128 pages, but then again it was a combo issue (vol. 21, nos. 1 & 2)—reflecting the new editorial team’s preoccupation with getting caught up. And it was a beauty, with a fine new look and layout, and more than five dozen color photographs. Although there was a reflective quality to this combination issue (it was billed as a “twentieth anniversary issue”), the remainder of the 1989 volume pushed relentlessly forward. Claudia Wilds exhorted us to get serious about molt and plumage terminology (June, pp. 148–153), incoming ABA President Allan Keith called attention to organizational changes on the horizon (August, pp. 178–180), and Pete Dunne predicted that a little-known optics company (called Swarovski) was destined for greatness (October, pp. 254–255). Particularly intriguing was the announcement (December, pp. 302–304) of a new series called “The impossible identification zone”. Its goal of exploring the hardest of hard-core ID challenges was ambitious, too ambitious: The column has not been heard from since.

For sure, *Birding* in the early Lehman years was pointing the way toward the future, but the magazine was also—as it always had been—a mouthpiece for the real-time, real-live birding community of the day. Birders were still into personal listing milestones, as testimonials in the February 1990

issue (by Phoebe Snetsinger, pp. 28–30; Ben King, pp. 31–33; Peter Kaestner, pp. 34–37; and Arnold Small, pp. 38–39) bore witness to. American birders still fretted over the pronunciation of bird (er, “bûrd”) names (April 1990, pp. 74–78), still sweated the nuances of countability vis-à-vis the ABA Listing Rules Committee (August 1990, pp. 163–164), and still hadn’t figured out what to make of Thayer’s Gull (August 1990, pp. 197–200). Bird Records Committees were proliferating (December 1990, pp. 276–285), and the ABA membership was up to 7,268 (December 1990, p. 271). So all was well and good? An increasing readership, still-relevant content, and a salutary focus on the future—right? Indeed, but Alan Contreras, in a letter to the editor (December 1990, p. 258), hinted at an important challenge for the 1990s and beyond: What might the ABA do to engage young birders?

An article by Ro Wauer (“Profile of an ABA birder”, pp. 146–154) in the June 1991 issue of *Birding* provided a solid quantitative angle on the question that Contreras had posed a few months earlier. Wauer’s analysis of a member questionnaire went beyond the obvious (namely, that membership in the ABA was increasing) and probed the question of how member demography was changing. In 1975, 16% of ABA members were under 30 years of age, and 46% were under 40. But in 1989, the numbers were a mere 3% for members under 30, and only 20% for members under 40. We were getting smarter and richer, too. Education: 43% of members had 12 or fewer years of education in 1975, but only 5% had 12 or fewer years of education in 1989. Income: 69% of ABA members made less than \$20,000 in 1975, but that number had dropped to 9% in 1989; at the upper end of the scale, 0% of ABA members made more than \$50,000 in 1975, but the figure was at 46% in 1989. What to make of those changes? That is a matter which would soon be taken up by several commentators.

The 1992 volume of *Birding* got underway with a short note (February, p. 2) from Allan Keith about the start of an “occasional President’s column”, devoted to announcements and short commentaries of general interest to ABA members. According to Keith, one of the ABA board’s key concerns at the time was to identify, attract, and encourage

young birders (April, p. 66). “We are getting older”, he acknowledged, and the ABA was about to embark upon a course of diverse incentives for young birders, among them reduced membership dues and sponsorship of youth camps. How serious was the aging of the ABA? In a thoughtful essay (“Profile of an aging birder”) in the February issue (pp. 54–55), Bill Principe called the situation “distressing” and “disturbing”, and warned that failure to reverse the aging of the ABA might well result in “calamity in the twenty-first century”. Meanwhile, the ABA’s membership rosters continued to balloon. In a brief report (“Five digits!”) in the October 1992 issue (p. 276), Development Director Lang Stevenson noted that the ABA was up to 10,200 active members. A major player in the organization’s successes: a grassroots, get-the-word-out campaign by the ABA’s state membership coordinators and other volunteers.

The matter of young birders continued to play out on the pages of *Birding* in 1993. In the February issue Allan Keith announced the Joe Taylor Youth Education Fund (p. 4),

and various persons (among them Bill Whan, Matt Pelikan, and Paul Lehman) contributed to a forum on “Birding, beginners, and the young” (pp. 61–70). Questions remained to be answered, but one sensed that the ABA was up to the challenge—in the arena of outreach to young birders, and on other fronts as well. The question of collecting vagrants was hopelessly unresolved, of course (April, pp. 129–132). The status and “ethics” of the North American Rare Bird Alert (NARBA) continued to be problematic (August, pp. 220–222). The nocturnal flight calls of thrushes and other passerines remained a wide-open field of inquiry (October, p. 349). And the so-called Canary-winged Parakeet—easy to tick, easy to forget about—was evidently much more complicated than we had realized (December, pp. 426–431). Was there an overall quality or character to the birding scene in the early 1990s? Yes, as recorded on the pages of *Birding*: There was a continuing dynamism, an ongoing premium on discovering and discovery, in most everything we did.

— Ted Floyd



Birding in the late 1980s and early 1990s got smarter and more sophisticated—and even caught up! December 1991 cover photograph of an adult male *Aztec Thrush* on a *Pyracantha* bush.

The History of *Birding*

Part V. 1994–2000

The latter years of the 1990s were a transitional time for Birding and the ABA—not our first such episode and presumably not our last. The particular juncture that concerns us here is one of a transition to institutional middle age. The ABA staff expanded during this period, and the organization began to get serious about the implementation of programs and initiatives proposed a few years earlier.

The driving force at this time was the undeniable fact that birding in the United States and Canada was in the midst of continuing—indeed accelerating—growth. Formal demographic surveys confirmed the trend, and so did the old-fashioned walk in the woods. More North Americans were wearing binoculars, buying bird books, and observing birds than ever before. But the newcomers to birding didn't necessarily embrace old paradigms or accept conventional wisdom. Hence, the challenge for the editorial team at Birding: to meet the needs of a rapidly growing birding community but also to build on the proven successes of our forebears.



The 1994 volume of *Birding* got under way on a festive note: It was the occasion of our twenty-fifth anniversary. The February issue commenced with a dramatic cover painting by David Sibley of a Red-billed Tropicbird being chased down by a South Polar Skua. Did the painting contain a coded message? Was the ABA (represented by its long-time logo, the tropicbird) about to be engulfed by the vexing identification and taxonomic problems of the day (aptly symbolized by the skua)? The take-home message of this silver anniversary issue was that we were ready for the challenge. Of special note in this regard was an essay by Rick Blom ("North American birding: The next twenty-five years", pp. 26–30). In something of a surprise, Blom predicted that future changes would play out along just two major axes. First, there was the technological axis. Most of the tech-

nological advances that Blom envisaged have indeed come to be realized—or in many instances flat out surpassed. The other axis was attitudinal. Blom projected a more sensitive and holistic sort of birder—more ethical, more environmentalist, more interested in avian inventory and monitoring. The jury is still out on that one.

In 1995 *Birding* underwent yet another one of its periodic enlargements. The February issue measured 8.125 × 10.875 inches—up 18% in areal extent from the previous issue, and an increase of 96% since the early 1970s. The February issue also featured ABA President Dan Williams' clearly articulated vision of the future (pp. 4–5). It was a future with conservation clearly in sight. Speaking of the future, the August issue contained an article (pp. 317–318) that at the time must have seemed futuristic but that now seems preciously quaint. The objective of the article, by Bill Principe, was to "tell you all about the internet, what it means to birders, and how to get on it." Principe concluded his article with the admonition not to "forget to go outside once in a while and look at birds." To look at birds such as Lesser Black-backed Gull (August, pp. 282–290; October, pp. 370–381), Bicknell's Thrush (October, pp. 358–366), and Red Crossbill (December, pp. 494–501)—all of which, it turns out, continue to present significant challenges for the birder more than a decade later.

ABA members have always been aware—to some degree or another—of biological variation, and we have seen in several recent installments of "The history of *Birding*" how birders have devised ingenious methods and rationales for sidestepping the inconvenient truth of natural differences among populations. In the 1996 issue of *Birding*, however, it was as though birders had finally caved into ornithological reality. The year started off with a two-part primer on "Mitochondrial madness" (February, pp. 57–63; April, pp. 141–145), and proceeded to look in depth at numerous taxa with no easy answers: the Sharp-tailed Sparrow complex (June, pp.

196–208), Bicknell's Thrush (August, pp. 275–276), Fox Sparrow (August, pp. 327–330), *Spizella* sparrows (October, pp. 374–387), the Solitary Vireo complex (December, pp. 458–471), and others. Along the way, there was the inevitable backsliding—for example, a proposal to establish an official list of “Identifiable Morphologic Units” or “IMUs” (June, pp. 239–240). And the inevitable response of the ABA Checklist Committee: No thank you (June, pp. 241–243).

Paul Lehman's long and distinguished tenure as editor came to an end with the December 1997 issue of *Birding*. The Lehman years, as we have seen, were characterized by increasingly sophisticated articles on a wide variety of taxa; and so it was in Paul's last issue as editor. Coverage included such matters as variation in the call note of Willow Flycatcher (pp. 505–507); the distribution, identification, and taxonomy of Long-billed Murrelet (pp. 460–475); the evolution, ecology, and behavior of Island Scrub-Jay (pp. 476–485); and the population status and life history of Spectacled Eider (pp. 491–495). Lehman put it this way in his valedictory editorial: “It has always been my firm belief that *Birding* should first and foremost educate the birder. But learning should be fun, and detailed treatises covering tertial fringes and mitochondrial DNA analysis can be balanced with humor and tales of birding adventures.” Fittingly, the December 1997 issue closed with a charming whimsy (pp. 531–533) on “Acting your age in birding's golden years”.

Paul J. Baicich assumed the *Birding* editorship with the February 1998 issue, and he quickly embarked upon a course of diversification of the magazine's content. At the same time, the ABA itself was continuing to diversify. Which brings us to a distinctive feature of the Baicich years: a concerted effort to present *Birding* not just as a journal of bird study, but also as a members' magazine. In the 1998 volume, we learned of new undertakings for the ABA, among them the following: acquisition from the National Audubon Society of the journal *North American Birds*, or *Field Notes* as it was known then (February, pp. 8–9); partnering with Birders' Exchange, at the time co-sponsored by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences (April, pp. 143–145); and engagement of birding festivals and other venues for what

was starting to be known as “avitourism” (August, pp. 276–277). New directions for *Birding* included the introduction of the “Possible anywhere” column (June, pp. 212–219) and the inaugural offering in a multi-year series on “The next new ABA birds” (December, pp. 484–491).

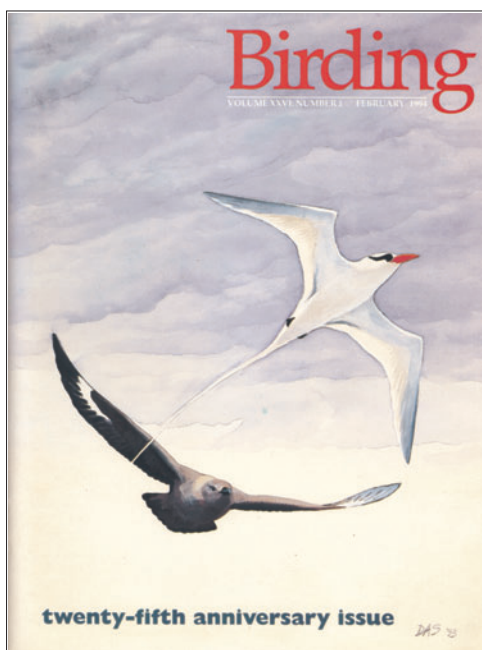
It was time for another anniversary in 1999, this one the

ABA's thirtieth. Eric Salzman celebrated the “Bird books of the golden age” in the February issue (pp. 38–55), Ken Cordell and colleagues cheered on “The growing popularity of birding in the United States” in the April issue (pp. 168–176), and George Hall paid tribute to *North American Birds* and its bewildering array of antecedents (August, pp. 328–337). Throughout 1999 the series on future additions to the ABA Checklist continued, with expert panels weighing in on Texas (April, pp. 158–166), Florida (June, pp. 245–252), and the Pacific pelagic zone (December, pp. 552–560). By the way, there were a few party poopers during the anniversary year of 1999: Margaret van de Pitte excoriated field guide illustrators for their ingrained ornitho-sexism (August, pp. 366–374), and Ted Eubanks lam-

basted birding listservers for their potential to degrade the human condition (December, pp. 581–582).

Was 2000 the last year of the old millennium, or the first of the new? The purists and pedants are no doubt still debating that matter. Our view? The 2000 volume of *Birding* was characteristically dualistic, affirming our age-old passion for birds while probing cutting-edge questions about identification, population status, and natural history. A selective accounting from 2000: spot-breasted thrushes (April, pp. 120–135; June, pp. 242–254; August, pp. 318–331), White-winged Tern (June, pp. 216–230; December, pp. 540–541), Zone-tailed Hawk (June, pp. 234–241), the sage-grouse complex (August, pp. 306–316), Black Rosy-Finch (October, pp. 402–408), accipiters (October, pp. 428–433), and many others. Finally, in the December issue, there was a review (pp. 563–565) by birding legend Guy McCaskie of a new field guide that distilled a century's worth of knowledge and charted an exhilarating course for the future. “I stand in awe,” wrote McCaskie of *The Sibley Guide*. “I have nothing but praise.”

— Ted Floyd



The twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Birding* (February 1994) featured cover art by David Sibley of a Great Skua in pursuit of a Red-billed Tropicbird.

The History of *Birding*

Part VI. 2001–2006

We come now to the sixth and final installment in our year-long reflection on the history of Birding. Have there been, through these nearly forty years, major themes, perhaps even a single overarching preoccupation, in the pages of this magazine? Something that has more dominated these pages than the heard-only rule? More than the holy grail of checklist stability? More even than Thayer's Gull identification? How about the following: the tension—a salutary and felicitous sort of tension, when you stop to think about it—between tradition and progress?

Here's the situation. On the one hand, we go birding to reconnect with something very basic, something very human. There is something deep-down and archetypal about the act of birding, whether amid rare tubenoses far offshore or in the company of chickadees at the kitchen window. Birding is an eminently successful trans-generational pastime, reflecting the undeniably traditionalist aspect of our subculture and community. On the other hand, birding unavoidably exposes us to current and emerging trends in technology, environmental ethics, and, especially, epistemology. It is intellectually exhilarating to be in the presence of modern birders—apt to discuss ARUs and deinterlacing one moment; conservation easements and community values the next; and then in the same breath, null hypotheses and falsifiability. And all that just in connection with one big woodpecker in Arkansas. One big woodpecker that might as well be the archetype of the human experience in the American wilderness.



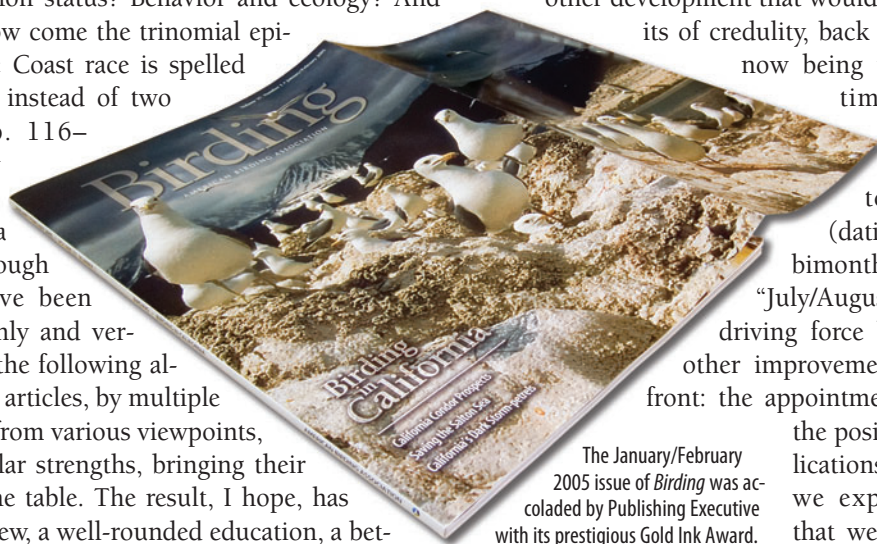
Editor Paul J. Baicich noted at the beginning of the February 2001 *Birding* (p. 7) that it was the first issue of the *real* millennium, and that “a few changes, but more of the same” could be expected. What was afoot? Well, a modest redesign for *Birding*, along with some new blood: a new Publications Chair, John Kricher, plus two new technical reviewers, Sheryl DeVore and Jim Dinsmore. And

something else: an intensifying emphasis on bird conservation. The topics covered in that 2001 volume were diverse and stimulating, among them the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (February, pp. 30–33), shade-grown coffee (February, pp. 38–40), pesticides (April, pp. 160–161), invasive plants (June, pp. 240–248), extinction and ecosystem function (August, pp. 302–305), integrated bird management (August, pp. 356–360), ecotourism and conservation (October, pp. 416–427), and the Shortgrass Prairie Bird Conservation Region (December, pp. 546–551). The agenda was clear: Birders, acting individually and corporately, can make a difference. Certainly, that was the point of the December editorial (pp. 504–505), wherein Baicich implored birders to support specialty birding operations such as ABA Sales.

The June 2002 issue was Baicich's last as editor. As was the case so often during the Baicich years, the June 2002 *Birding* commenced with a thought-provoking editorial (pp. 216–217), this one titled “Why the disconnect?” In this farewell address, Baicich cut to the chase. “The choice between conservation or birding,” he wrote, “is false”. On that note, Baicich moved on to assume the position of Director of Conservation and Public Policy for the ABA. The new editor was Ted Floyd—and, hey, what's up with the third-person self-reference? Yes, I need at this point to introduce an awkward, mid-stream change in voice—either that, or run the risk of sounding like a professional athlete at a press conference. I affirmed in my first editorial (“Change and continuity”, August 2002, pp. 312–313) my commitment to serious birding, and then proceeded to characterize serious birders as a diverse and colorful bunch. With a cupboard full of copy inherited from Baicich (I'm still grateful, Paul, after all these years), I noted that the next few issues would not differ greatly from what ABA members had grown accustomed to. But I also concluded with an assurance that longer-term changes lay ahead.

Starting with the 2003 volume, *Birding* embarked on a multi-year course (still going strong) of exploring in each issue some particular theme or topic in depth. I can't help myself: I tend to see merit in both (or all) sides of a debate, I'm always curious about what's on the other side of the coin. (Which is probably why I find modern American political discourse to be so stultifying.) Show me a Sage Sparrow, and I want to know: Which subspecies? Age and plumage? Population status? Behavior and ecology? And while I'm at it: How come the trinomial epithet of the Pacific Coast race is spelled *belli*, with one *-i* instead of two (April 2003, pp. 116–117)? You really can't cover all of those things in a single article (although some authors have been known to try, vainly and verbosely so). Thus, the following alternative: multiple articles, by multiple authors—writing from various viewpoints, relying on particular strengths, bringing their own outlook to the table. The result, I hope, has been a balanced view, a well-rounded education, a better birder. The math is simple: in-depth coverage = more knowledge.

By 2004, all sorts of changes had taken place. Paul Hess's "News and Notes" column—at this writing firmly ensconced as a staple at *Birding*—had come on board with the February 2003 issue. Jonathan Alderfer signed on as Associate Editor beginning with the April 2003 issue, and right away delivered excellence in the magazine's technical accuracy and visual appeal. Graphic designer Ed Rother joined the team in time for the June 2003 issue—the first of many highly distinctive issues produced on his watch. Other important additions in 2003: Bill Pranty (Technical Reviewer), Chris Wood (Photo Quiz Editor), and Rick Wright (Sources Department Editor). New personnel in 2004 included graphic designer Jim Harris, who joined forces with Ed Rother starting with the June issue, and cartographer Kei Sochi, who replaced outgoing *Birding* stalwart Virginia Maynard beginning with the December issue. Throughout 2004, we continued our in-depth exploration of a variety of topics. We tackled conventional fare (in-flight identification in the June issue, raptor ID in October, seabirds in December), we didn't shy away from the avant-garde (population monitoring in April, trash birds in August), and we even made room for listing (February).



The January/February 2005 issue of *Birding* was accoladed by Publishing Executive with its prestigious Gold Ink Award.

Two additions in 2005 to the *Birding* team highlighted once again the healthy tug-of-war between traditionalist and modernizing forces within the ABA. In the traditionalist camp, Paul Baicich's new column, entitled—wait for it—“Traditions”, debuted in the November/December issue. Earlier in the year, David Hartley had moved into the role of ABA webmaster—a position that few could have envisaged back in the days of Joe Taylor and Claudia Wilds. Another development that would have stretched the limits

of credulity, back in the day: *Birding* was now being produced not only on time, but in fact so far ahead of schedule that we had to revert to the ancient system (dating from the 1970s) of bimonthly nomenclature, e.g., “July/August”, for each issue. The driving force behind that and many other improvements on the production front: the appointment of Bryan Patrick to

the position of Director of Publications. As to 2005 content, we explored several themes that were fairly “safe”, for example ducks (March/April) and

Alaska (November/December). But the topic of California (January/February) is always something of a risk, and the matter of hybrids (May/June)—if birders ever get serious about it—is likely to turn birding upside-down.

Where do things stand now in 2006, 38 years after Vol. Zero No. Zero?—which was a full five pages long, in all its mimeographed glory, and boasted a print run of ten. It is fair to say, I think, that supporting online material for an article on *Procellaria* petrels (see p. 52 of the current issue) was not on the minds of Jim Tucker & Co. back in 1968. And a pull-out gatefold cover of specially commissioned full-color artwork must have been only a distant dream, back in those earliest days of *Birding*. Indeed, our cover artist, Jennifer Brumfield, was still more than a decade away from being born. Which brings me to the point I would like to close with. Although it has been little remarked on, the current team at *Birding* is decidedly young. I won't name names, but I will say that six of the past seven additions to the *Birding* crew have been of persons who are younger than the ABA. There is energy at *Birding*. New ideas abound. Uncharted territory lies waiting to be explored. It is 1968 again.

— Ted Floyd