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Does Birding Have a Future?

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[Editor's note: This was an address given at the NOU Fall Field Days in Halsey on Sept. 25, 2004.]

Does birding have a future?

Now this might seem an odd question, even an absurd question, to pose to an audience like this, and the answer might seem obvious. How could birding not have a future when we, all of us, are birders who bird, and when survey after recent survey assures us that our numbers are growing, our diversity increasing, and our economic and ethical contributions to American society ever more conspicuous. Does birding have a future? The simple answer is yes.

That's the simple answer. The more interesting answer is yes—yes, but. Yes, birding has a future, but that future is, I believe, not likely to look much like the sport's present. In some ways, it will resemble elements and phases of our past; in other ways, ways that we cannot foresee, it will be unlike anything we have known.

These general statements could apply to the development of just about anything human, of course. What is unique and I think greatly to our advantage, though, is that as birders at the beginning of the twenty-first century we actually have some choices about which elements of the past we wish to carry along with us into the future. And if we make those choices wisely, in full awareness of what present-day birding is, how it became what it is, and why it is facing—must face—the necessity of change—if we are aware of all these factors, we can make thoughtful choices, I believe, that will not only insure the sport's persistence into the next hundred years, but make birding a more attractive pastime for newcomers, a more valuable contribution to what we call science, and a more influential force in the negotiation of environmental policy in this country and around the world.

Just what constitutes modern-day birding has become a strangely controversial question in the last few years. As readers of the birding press have certainly noticed, an academic cottage industry has sprung up among the social scientists, and the definition of our pastime, our hobby, our sport, our passion, has become a question with high stakes. The most liberal definitions seem to be prevailing nowadays, with the label of "birder" applied to anyone who can name 10 birds, or anyone who has bought birdseed in the past year, or anyone who has ever traveled more than a mile to see birds. The bar really was set this absurdly low in several of the most infamous surveys to have appeared in the last few years, surveys that have come up with such outlandish numbers as 40, 50, even 70 million "birders" in America. Never mind that you'd have to be deaf, blind, and three days buried to be unable to name 10 birds, never mind that your birdseed goes straight to feed the pigeons and Muscovy ducks in the park, never mind that the latest bird you traveled over a mile to see required hourly basting while the pumpkin pies were baking—these surveys will account you a birder. That is how they come up with numbers that make every fifth person on the street "one of us," a conclusion that is, let me use the word again, absurd.

Only birders know what birding is, and only birders know another birder when they see one. Let me try this definition—or better, this description. Birding in America in the early twenty-first century involves looking for birds with the purpose of identifying them. I've been told that this definition is oversimplified, but I like to think of it as elegant. Note that I said "looking for," not "looking at"; this excludes the fisherman who, quite rightly, admires the Osprey that is having better luck than he is, and it excludes the kitchen-window watcher smiling at the goldfinches on the thistle feeder. Note too that I said "identifying," not "observing"; this excludes the graduate student painstakingly following every move of a pintail—but painfully unaware that the bird in the background is a Baikal Teal. And note finally that I said "for the purpose of identifying". This excludes the many hunters with highly developed field skills, it excludes most scientific investigators, it excludes early morning park walkers no matter how much they enjoy the dawn chorus.

Birding: looking for birds with the purpose of identifying them. An elegant definition, a narrow definition—but I believe an accurate one to describe the state of birding in modern America. Birding involves a conscious effort to seek out birds; it involves a conscious effort to identify the birds found; and that effort at identification is the goal and purpose of the effort to find them. If you're not looking for birds, identifying birds, and finding your principal satisfaction in making that identification, you're not birding.

I hope that this seems obvious to most of us. But as obvious as it may be, it is not inevitable. Those of you who read *Birding* will recall the manifesto with which I inaugurated "Sources." In introducing that series to our readers, I wrote that no cultural phenomenon is inevitable or natural, that every human activity arises from human choices, whether consciously made or not. To my mind, this makes birding even more interesting than if it were simply unfiltered observation, more interesting to do, and much more rewarding to think about. Birding, in other words, did not have to develop the way that it has, and there is nothing natural or predestined about what our activity looks like now in the year 2004. But neither is it accidental that birders have followed this among all the other potential parallel paths.

Theoretically, any one of numerous aspects could have taken center stage to become the defining principle of modern birding; the focus on identification, which to my mind distinguishes the sport from all other bird- or nature-related activities, is the product of some very specific situations and pressures. Other historical or cultural circumstances might have given us a very different form of birding from what we enjoy today.

At the turn of the twentieth century, as those of you who have read Ray Korpi, Jr.'s fine dissertation know, birding, birdwatching, bird study, whatever the label, was a constantly shifting landscape, full of alternative approaches to appreciating the birds around us: there was a bit of museum science in Frank Chapman's guides, a fledgling sort of ecology in Florence Merriam's books, wildlife economics in the great *Birds of America* edited by Gilbert Pearson, adventure in Seton, identification in Reed, and so on, a riotous mix of ways to learn about the birds.

I do not know if it was somehow necessary to choose among these various

approaches, but choose we did. Of all the challenges presented in the various subfields of early twentieth-century birding, those posed by identification, with their straightforward "x-or-not-x" structure, were perhaps those most amenable to easy solution. Thus, while fields such as taxonomy, ecology, and wildlife management, with their broad questions and leisurely modes of investigation, became literally more and more academic over the years, by the 1920s and 1930s field identification was widely recognized as the sexy aspect of birding, where the most progress was being made the most visibly—after all, identification problems could be solved quickly and definitively with the simple application of better glass or some well-directed lead. Recall the well-known and poorly attested Legend of St. Ludlow, when Griscom, while birding Central Park, called a female *Dendroica*, which his doubting field companion then dropped from the tree—only to find that the Great Identifier had been right.

Ludlow Griscom, Peterson, and the others of that time became stars not only because of their undeniable identification skills, but because they recognized that those skills—far more easily and far more effectively than the arcana of science—could be communicated and learned. At first, identification information was passed around informally, orally, from birder to birder; but then the young Peterson conceived of his field guide "on a new plan," and literally within weeks, publishers too were convinced that here at last was a type of birding that they could sell. Nature study, ecology, aesthetic appreciation were all fine and good, but such "birdcraft" (to borrow the charming term coined by my namesake Mabel Osgood Wright) was inconveniently holistic for the publishing houses, intellectually too ill-defined and physically too unwieldy for a pocketbook.

Birding in the sense of bird identification might have turned out nothing more than one more of the fads of the 1930s and 1940s, but its new prominence coincided with the rise of the automobile in most Americans' lives. Access to transportation, whether to a woodlot across town or to a saltmarsh across the continent, made possible the first part of my definition of modern birding, the search for birds to identify. The authors and publishers of bird books responded eagerly. The best example is the advance of the Peterson juggernaut, with the original *Field Guide to the Birds* followed over the years by volumes devoted to western birds, European birds, Texas birds, Mexican birds, and West Indian birds; note that in the titles in the Peterson series, "the birds" means eastern birds, all other avifaunas being treated as the exotic targets of traveling birders from east—usually far east—of the notorious meridian not that many miles from Halsey.

Modern birding looks the way it does because bird identification, however challenging it may be, is at least clear cut and easily communicated, and because the easy mobility afforded us by cheap and convenient transportation ensures a good supply of new identification challenges, keeping the activity fresh. Tired of fall warblers? The first geese are in the Rainwater Basin. Up to here with juvenile sparrows? McConaughy is probably dry enough for some good shorebirds.

Particularly in the last twenty years, birding-as-identification has also been greatly bolstered by the publishing industry. Fifty years ago, Roger Tory Peterson remarked with some incredulity that Great Britain published something like a bird book every two weeks; nowadays, in Britain, Holland, Scandinavia, and the US, it's more like two a day, and by far the most successful are the identification guides, ranging from general guides with a regional scope to detailed identification

monographs on difficult species groups. These are what sell, and their print runs are accordingly large. Conversely, books treating broader topics in the natural history or ecology of birds appear in very small editions, and their marketing ranges from the subdued to the nonexistent. A good example is the work done by Steve Hilty over the last 25 years in South America. His field guides to Colombia and now to Venezuela have sold like hotcakes, as they should; in contrast, I'm not sure that his fine introduction to the behavior, breeding, and natural history of those same birds lasted a week on the shelves before it hit the remainder tables.

Now this is not the beginning of a critique of "mere" identification, and it is not the start of a tirade against listing. Like most birders, I still find the challenge of identification the most satisfying part of our hobby, and I confess that on any given day I can tell you my Arizona year list to three significant figures. But birding-as-identification has, I think, led to two serious problems in birding culture, and they are the reasons that birding must change.

These two problems are almost diametrically different, even though they arise from the same causes. The first is a sort of atomization in what was once an intensely social hobby based on the oral transmission of natural historical knowledge. If asked about the most important and most memorable source of our early birding information, most of us of my generation and the generations before will talk about a mentor, a guiding spirit who introduced us to birds and to birding; some of mine are sitting in this very room, and they must know how unbounded my gratitude is.

The increasing mobility and the increasing focus on identification in modern birding, though, has created a new kind of birder, one that I am frankly uncomfortable with. Convinced that everything they need to know is in a couple of books and an airline ticket, these birders—attracted to the sport because it is fashionable, because they heard Peter Cashwell talk about it on NPR—these birders trot out to buy the latest Austrian glass and field guide, and learn the birds on their own. Their initiative is laudable, I suppose, and some of them even become reasonably good identifiers. Such autodidacts show up regularly on my trips and tours, and I often enjoy them as field companions.

But what these birders "on a new plan" too often seem to lack is a sense of integration into a community. They too often fail to grasp the significance of the birds' integration into ecological settings, and of their integration into a cultural context. They have the gear, they have the books, they sometimes have the skills, but their sources are literally impersonal, commercial and material substitutes for the chain of oral tradition and teaching that has somehow been broken in these recent decades. These birders of this new type, welcome as they are when we meet them in the field, are not likely to contribute to the development and preservation of a birding culture. More ominously, they are less likely to view critical environmental issues through a birder's lens, and they are unlikely to think of themselves as part of a community that has clout to exercise. These can be delightful and charming people, but birding for them is abstract, remote, unconnected to the greater issues of the society they live in, and I think that's a shame, sometimes even a danger, for the birds, for the birding community, and for these birders themselves.

If the one of these problems is atomization, birding in a cultural and historical vacuum, the other, paradoxically, is an excessive sociability, or the

appearance of sociability—clump-birding, I like to call it. Given that I now make much of what passes for my living by encouraging mass birding tourism, it may seem disingenuous, and it may be self-defeating, for me to criticize this phenomenon. But I have noticed increasingly that the ease of transportation and the ready availability of "definitive" identification information, the same factors that energize the NPR birder, offer others an excuse for a strange passivity. Because birding is identification, all these birders have to do is carry the books—the information is in there. Because birding is identification, all they have to do is be present when the bird is called. I will not descend into anecdote, but these are the birders who follow their local guides at five feet's distance, ticking in the indexes of their Stokes guides the names of birds they haven't bothered to look at. These are the birders who at the Grand Canyon peer out from under the brim of their Explorer's Lodge baseball caps to ask what the big black-and-white birds are eating peanuts from their hand. The right guide or leader can turn many of these birders from their passivity, exciting them into a greater engagement in their hobby; but others remain part of the clump, and ultimately, despite their Victor Emanuel luggage tags, just as far outside of birding culture as the NPR types.

Recent discussions about the future of birding have generally focused on recruiting non-birders to the cause; the idea is that if we can turn "young people" away from their rather shady pursuit of hip hop music and video games, we older folks will have reinforcements behind us, and the future of birding will be secure. That's crazy, of course, as anyone who has ever set out on the heartbreaking path of turning a non-birder into one of us knows. I hope you have all read Pete Dunne's little essay in *Golden Wings*, where, with his usual wryness, he concludes that there will always be model airplane enthusiasts, there will always be collectors of salt-and-pepper shakers, and there will always be birders—until we start to force these pursuits on our children. The pathway to conversion is a dead end, and non-birders, I regret to say it, will always remain non-birders, tolerant if we are lucky, simply uncomprehending if we are not.

Let's forget about recruitment, then, and concentrate not on non-birders but on potential birders. And there is a large pool, in precisely the two "new-fashioned" types of birder I have described. After all, it is only historical accident, the commodification of knowledge and the coincidence of cheap gasoline and good roads, that has led to the dominance of these types, the atomized and the passive; they are otherwise out there, ripe for the picking, as it were, already interested in birds and birding, requiring not conversion but simply a revised catechism.

How do we do this? How can we integrate into a birding culture people who may not even be aware of its existence? The question is particularly important for organizations like the NOU and many other state groups, which recently have been having more and more difficulty making themselves known to these "outsider" birders, and then convincing them that what they have to offer is of value.

First, I think, it would be a mistake to deny the central position that identification issues occupy in modern-day birding. Instead, we should work to make explicit the connections between id characteristics and life histories; last week's Ruff in Arizona, for example, was occasion for a minor and short-lived controversy about the bird's age, but that controversy led some of us to some very interesting speculation on the possible signaling function of the barred tertials retained by some adults in basic plumage. I found the discussion fascinating, and

hope that perhaps it inspired some less engaged birders, loners or passive tourists, to go beyond the field guides and to appreciate more clearly the importance of regular exchange with other birders. At this point, I had meant to urge you to pay careful attention to taking advantage of such opportunities on NOU field trips, but after my experiences on Dave Heidt's excursion today, I can say that this is a lesson your trip leaders have already learned and learned well.

The promotion of good old-fashioned mentoring is another area where I am afraid the birding community is less active than it could be. Obviously, such relationships cannot be imposed on anyone, on new birders or their seniors, but there are informal "match-making" services available within some organizations; these can work wonders in establishing connections that are not exclusively electronic. A birder, young or old, whose beginnings are based in a human relationship rather than solely in the identification literature is far more likely to become a "good birding citizen," it seems to me, supporting the organizations and causes that at times suffer for lack of interest now.

The loss of organizations like the NOU to declines in membership would be more than regrettable, from a social, historical, and even scientific standpoint. But the environmental and political stakes are even higher. Birders of the new type, birders who are not integrated into a solid birding community, are much less likely to vote with their hobby foremost in their minds; they will make civic choices on criteria that may disregard the well-being of their natural surroundings, and those choices, it seems to me, are often wrong, or only coincidentally right. The stakes are high, this year of all years, and our ability to bring new-style birders into an open and welcoming fold is vital for the survival of our organizations, our culture, and our environment.