

Young Birders Coming of Age

When you think of your local birding group, how many members are under the age of forty? Probably not many.

All in all, the birding world is one that is geared toward older adults. Even so, there is a small but growing group of extremely talented young people sprinkled throughout the United States (and the world, for that matter) who at age fourteen have learned more about birds than most people learn in a lifetime. They join adults on field trips, at meetings, and on listservers, all the while looking and wishing for other young people with whom they might share these experiences.

Opportunities for young birders are few and far between. True, various bird observatories, Audubon centers, and birding tour organizations offer a number of excellent opportunities, from summer camps to internships. And some adult birding groups have organized special youth groups—for example, Seattle Audubon has an excellent year-round program for young birders. But despite these outstanding programs, young birders are still constantly on the lookout for ways to meet and communicate with other young people who are as interested in birds as they are themselves.

Through programs such as scholarships that allow young birders to attend camps, conferences, and other events, the Young Birder of the Year contest, and *A Bird's-Eye View* (the ABA student newsletter), the ABA has long strived to inspire and involve young people in the world of birding. Although ABA conventions and conferences tend

to draw a very small youth contingency, these events are geared toward adults. Youth attendees of such events find themselves in a very familiar position: They are the only young birders around.

So here's a riddle for you: What do you get when you cross a group of enthusiastic young people with four expert leaders and some of the best birding spots in the United States? Answer: The ABA Young Birders' Conference.



In the summer of 2000, the ABA decided to try something a little different. With the generous support of Leica Sport Optics and WINGS, the ABA organized the first-ever Young Birders' Conference (YBC). Held in Fort Collins, Colorado, just prior to the ABA Annual Convention, the YBC brought together thirty-seven young birders from across the country, to discover the birds and habitats of the Colorado Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. With the guidance of noted field ornithologists Jon Dunn and Steve Howell, YBC participants spent four days of dawn-to-dusk birding and learning. Visits to Pawnee National Grassland and Rocky Mountain National Park gave participants views of Clark's Nutcracker, McCown's Longspur, and many other species. Workshops focused on topics such as improving sparrow identification skills and gaining a greater understanding of molt. Perhaps more importantly, this first YBC provided an opportunity for participants to meet in person other young people who shared similar interests and experiences. Many of these young birders knew each other "virtually"—that is, from online communication—and from reading each other's work in publications like *A Bird's-Eye View*. Despite corresponding—in some cases for years—

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ABOVE: The beautiful Pawnee National Grasslands—home to Ferruginous Hawks and Burrowing Owls, to Mountain Plovers and McCown’s Longspurs—was one of the field trip destinations at the inaugural Young Birders’ Conference in Fort Collins in 2000. © Christopher L. Wood.



RIGHT: The Young Birders’ Conference provides workshops on topics such as the identification of sparrows—such as this McCown’s Longspur, in a frustrating, but typical, pose. Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado; 29 April 2003. © Christopher L. Wood.

many of the conference participants had never met in person. The YBC provided an opportunity for these young people to come together, to learn from and interact with their expert leaders, and to enjoy the company of other young birders.

The response to this first YBC was so overwhelmingly positive that the ABA organized a second conference in the summer of 2002. Taking the recommendations of conference attendees into account, in 2002 we increased the length of the conference to five days. Nineteen young people joined Louise Zemaitis and Michael O’Brien, well-known to the world of young birders, along with YBC veterans Jon Dunn and Steve Howell, for the second YBC, held in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Exploring the Huachuca Mountains and the San Pedro River Valley, participants took part in workshops that improved their hummingbird,

flycatcher, and nocturnal flight-call identification skills and that helped them brush up on field sketching. Field trips yielded a diversity of species, including Mexican Spotted Owl, Elegant Trogon, and even Flame-colored Tanager, as well as many other southeastern Arizona specialties. As a special bonus, we also went owling with local guide Wezil Walraven.

The focus of the YBC is, of course, birds. All-day field trips, life birds, intriguing workshops, and friendly banter with leaders and other young birders typify the YBC experience. Conference participants take part in workshops that might focus on anything from improving identification skills to developing field-sketching techniques. Why is it important to keep accurate field notes? How do you keep accurate field notes? If you’re not an artist, how can you sketch birds? How do you record bird song in a field notebook? These are all topics that have been covered at YBCs. There is a photo quiz, of course, and the last evening of the conference is a panel discussion. YBC leaders and organizers are put on the spot, and conference participants can ask them pretty much anything they want to. “How old



“Does that guy have a salvage permit?” The ABA’s Young Birders’ Conference provides a forum for teenage birders to learn from one another and to ask all sorts of questions of their adult hosts, such as Steve Howell (with Common Nighthawk; center). *Young Birder’s Convention – Fort Collins, Colorado; June 2000.* © Jennie Duberstein.

Make a Difference – Adopt a Young Birder

A Bird's-Eye View (BEV) is the ABA's bimonthly student newsletter, written by and for the ABA's younger members. *BEV* began as a four-page insert in the August 1993 issue of *Winging It*, with Matt Pelikan as editor. The newsletter soon became an eight-page, quarterly publication, with teenager Chris Sloan as assistant editor. In 1997 Jenny Brumfield replaced Chris as assistant editor, and the newsletter became bimonthly. Nick Barber came on board in 1998, and he and Jenny became editors, with Matt Pelikan filling the role of editorial advisor. In 1999 Jennie Duberstein replaced Matt as editorial advisor, and since then Evan Obercian, Jessie Barry, and Ben Winger have all filled the role of editor for varying lengths of time. Currently, *BEV*'s two volunteer youth editors are seventeen-year-old Michael Harvey and sixteen-year-old Matt Hoberg. They work closely with the editorial advisor to plan each issue of *BEV* and to solicit and edit materials for the newsletter, including identification articles, birding pieces, and artwork.

As you can see in the accompanying article, the adult birding world has a lot to offer to young birders. One way you can encourage a young birder is with a gift subscription to *A Bird's-Eye View*. For just \$10/year, you can send a young person six issues of *BEV*, each full of articles and artwork created by young birders from around the world. For the more adventurous among you, consider giving the gift of a student membership to the ABA. For only \$25/year you can give a young birder the full range of ABA membership benefits, including subscriptions to *A Bird's-Eye View*, *Birding*, *Winging It*, and access to other ABA resources and programs. All subscription fees for *BEV* and a portion of student membership fees directly support the newsletter and other young birder programs at the ABA.

To learn more about *A Bird's-Eye View*, please contact the editors at <beview@aba.org>. For subscription information, please contact <member@aba.org>.

were you when you first became interested in birds?" "Where did you go to college?" "What are your recommendations for young people who are interested in working professionally in bird conservation?" These are just a few of the questions posed to panelists. In addition to conference leaders and organizers, local biologists, birders, and educators also participate in the panel, giving conference participants a wide range of expertise and experience. At the end of the evening, panel members turn the tables and get the opportunity to ask young birders questions: "Why are so few of you girls?" "How old were you when you first became interested in birds?" "What can we do to get more young people interested in birding?" The YBC is a learning

experience for all participants, adult and young birders alike.

The last evening of the YBC is a lot like the last day of school. Everyone runs around getting the other participants to write down their email addresses and phone numbers, and promises are made to get together and do some birding during the rest of the year. Numbers of lifers seen are compared, species lists are compiled, and everyone goes home—tired, to be sure, but definitely richer for the experience. As an adult participant, I come away from each YBC inspired to do several things. First, after spending five days being blown away (and right out of the water) by the skills of these young whippersnappers, I resolve to study my field guides and bird song CDs and to go birding more often. Second, I have seen how much this experience has meant to everyone involved, but especially to the young birders, and I resolve to make sure that this opportunity continues to be available to young people in the future.

What do young birders have to say about what it's like to be a young birder? I posted a message on Teen BirdChat, the listserv for young birders, asking just that. The responses I got were varied, but there were two general themes. The first is summarized well in the words of fifteen-year-old Courtney Denning, who says,

"Well, a bad thing about being a young birder in my town is that I'm basically the only one. So when I go on birding walks, it's all adults and nobody my own age." Fifteen-year-old Andrew Sigerson sums up the other theme when he says, "Being a young birder is like having a special world of my own. I go to school and I see all the kids there concerned about things such as sports and video games, and I realize how lucky I am to have an avocation that is different, and so much more interesting, in my mind, than average, everyday hobbies."

When I ask young birders how they first became interested in birds, one theme keeps coming up: Nearly every young birder had, at some point, an adult mentor. Some

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New Subscribers to *A Bird's-Eye View*

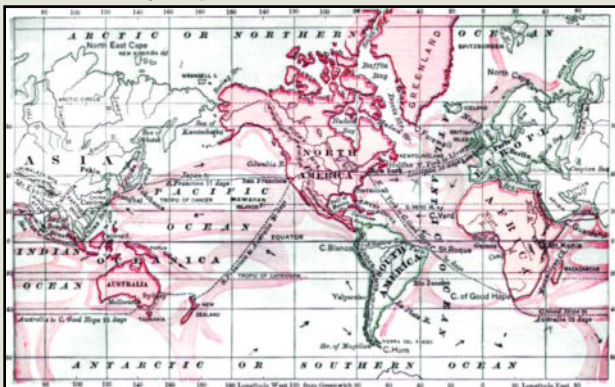
Common Name: *A Bird's-Eye View* Subscriber

Scientific Name: *Leyendicus maximus*

NABBA Four-letter Banding Code: BEVS

A Bird's-Eye View (BEV) is the American Birding Association's bimonthly student newsletter. It is written by and for the ABA's youth members. Each issue is full of a variety of articles for readers of all age and experience levels, from the beginning birder to the seasoned expert. And although many subscribers to *A Bird's-Eye View* are young people, we have a large number of adult subscribers, as well. To view samples of newsletter content, visit us on the web at <www.americanbirding.org/publications/bevgen.htm>. We are in hot pursuit of the elusive BEVS ... Have you seen one?

Year-Round Range Map of the BEVS:



Subspecies: The two subspecies of *Leyendicus maximus* (BEV Subscriber) are *L. m. minor* (young birders) and *L. m. major* (adult birders). Whether the distinction between these two subspecies is valid is a hotly-debated topic, as *L. m. minor* appears to molt into *L. m. major* with time, encouragement, and experience.

Range: This species is most commonly seen throughout the United States, although it is common to uncommon elsewhere throughout the world. It is generally found only in areas with human habitation, although some subspecies have been found living far from any development.

Habitat requirements: The BEVS is found in nearly all habitats, although preferences have been noted for areas with a high diversity of birds.

Voice: The voice of this species has an almost limitless range of possibilities, from extremely low to a variety of higher pitches. Local dialects are extremely common.

Food: The list of items used as food by the BEVS is virtually interminable. Favorite foods, particularly for *L. m. minor*, include mushroom pizza, mint chocolate chip ice cream, and GORP. Additionally, the BEVS drinks a wide range of liquids, including but not limited to lemonade, orange juice, and, occasionally, prune juice.

Identification: The BEVS can have blond, brown, red, or black hair; there are occasional records for variants with gray locks, and some have no hair at all. Sometimes a BEVS will show green or purple hair, but this plumage is usually held only briefly. Males and females of this species can be indistinguishable based on hair length and choice of clothing. Although oftentimes otherwise indistinguishable from the widespread species *Homo sapiens*, the BEVS may be recognized by its binoculars and field guide in hand. Spotting scopes and tripods may also be visible.

Do you fit this description?

If so, *A Bird's-Eye View* wants YOU!

**A one-year subscription to
A Bird's-Eye View is only \$10/year.**

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

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*We don't want the BEVS to become
an endangered species!*

started birding with grandparents, parents, or other family members. Others latched onto the next-door-neighbor and never looked back. A few just started on their own. But the overwhelming majority had an adult who helped introduce them to the world of birding. So what can the adult birding world do to make sure that we encourage and nurture young birders? Take the time to talk to the one young birder who is always tagging along on your field trips. Organize opportunities specifically geared toward young people. Ask the young people who are already involved in birding how they became interested in birds and what opportunities they would like to see in the future. Listen to them when they talk to you. Then do your best to provide birding experiences for them. Most importantly, become a mentor. We may not know exactly why there are so few young birders, but we do know that adult mentors play a large role in encouraging young people to take up birding and in providing support to keep them interested once they begin.

So what are you doing next June? If you're a young birder between the ages of 13 and 18, we hope you'll be joining us for the Third Young Birders' Conference, to be held 26–30 June 2004 in the Kern River Valley and Sierra Nevada mountains of southern California. Again sponsored by Leica Sport Optic and WINGS, this YBC promises to be a stellar event. Field trip destinations will include Giant Sequoia National Monument, the Kern River Preserve, the Kern Plateau, and much more. Join Jon, Steve, Louise, and



Participants in the 2000 Young Birders' Conference got to visit Rocky Mountain National Park, where everybody got great looks at the confiding and inquisitive Clark's Nutcracker. *Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado; 7 October 2001.*
© Christopher L. Wood.

Michael to learn about field sketching, hummingbird and shorebird identification, and the importance of the Sierra Nevada mountains to bird diversity. Birds we may see include California and Mountain Quails, Clark's Grebe, Prairie Falcon, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, White-headed Woodpecker, Oak Titmouse, Canyon Wren, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and many more. You can learn more by reading Bob Barnes and Bob Steele's fun article, "Find it Here! The Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada of California" (*Birding*, April 2003, pp. 156–166).

For additional information about the 2004 YBC, including how to register, contact Young Birders' Conference organizer Jennie Duberstein <beview@aba.org> or ABA Education Coordinator Lori Fujimoto <lfujimoto@aba.org>.



The Young Birders' Conference is a great forum for fun, friendship, learning—and, of course, lots of birding. *Fort Collins, Colorado; June 2000.* © Jennie Duberstein.