

A New Frontier

When did birding get started in North America? The easy answer, of course, is 1934, with the publication of the most important birding book of all time, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, by Roger Tory Peterson.

Nowadays, it is fashionable to look back upon Peterson's *Field Guide* as a sort of ornithological Big Bang—a bolt out of the blue, without precedent or preamble. But birders were active in the generation that preceded Peterson, just as birders have continued to flourish in the generation that has followed him. Peterson remains the pivotal figure in American birding history, however, and it is appropriate to view our past with reference to the emergence, influence, and legacy of what is still universally recognized as the “Peterson system”. And as we shall see, it is convenient to divide the history of birding in North America into three epochs of almost exactly equivalent duration.

Our story really starts, I think, on Christmas Day of 1900, when Frank M. Chapman and a handful of colleagues set out on the first Christmas Bird Count and ushered in the pre-Peterson era. Those were the years of the first bird counts, the first birding books, the first bird clubs—for a smallish audience of well-pedigreed Brahmins and Yankees. Thirty-four years later came the publication of Peterson's brilliant *Field Guide*, which owed much of its early success to the author's East Coast upper crust benefactors, but which also revealed to millions of Peterson-era birders the recondite methods of bird identification. Thirty-five years after that, in 1969, the American Birding Association was founded, an event that signaled the beginning of a post-Peterson era of feather birding, vagrant chasing, and list keeping. And now, thirty-five years later, in 2004, where do we find ourselves?

To answer that question, one might reflect upon the disorderly history of a particular wing of the broader birding movement.



The history of pelagic birding cannot be divided into three tidy epochs of equal time span. It has not had—

nor does it currently have—a peculiarly “American” component. Its major players have not always marched in step with the dominant birding culture. Even today, the whys and wherefores of pelagic birding do not really reflect the prevailing philosophies and methodologies of the birding mainstream.

Yet the pelagic birding experience offers a tantalizing peek at what the future of birding may hold.

Let's begin with a little bit of (untidy) history. There is no instantly recognizable “singularity” or “flash point” in the pelagic birding saga—no CBC or *Field Guide*, not even an ABA. There was, however, a splendid false start, way back in 1928. It was W.B. Alexander's *Birds of the Ocean*, the first printing of which has the look and feel, the size and shape, of a pocket bible. Astonishingly, *Birds of the Ocean* treated the pelagic avifauna of the entire planet. Some of its photos are grand, and a few of the plates remain useful today. But try finding an entry for Audubon's Shearwater; and if you succeed in so doing, try to find anything of actual relevance to the field-based birder.

For more than half a century, the pelagic enthusiast was basically adrift. Joseph J. Hickey's *Guide to Birdwatching* (1943) pretty much evades the topic of seabirds, giving as much attention (and not much at that) to trans-Atlantic crossings of Ruddy Shelducks and European Greenfinches as to the status and distribution of commoners such as Wilson's Storm-Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters. In *How to Know the Birds* (1949), Peterson devotes a mere two paragraphs to “The Ocean”, by which he really means watching from shore. Of shearwaters, jaegers, and phalaropes he writes unhelpfully: “These are the birds the average bird watcher knows the least.” One gets the impression on reading Kenn Kaufman's *Kingbird Highway* (which describes the events of 1973) that an awful lot of truly basic information was not yet known to the pelagic birders of just 31 years ago. And Pete Dunne recounts in *Tales of a Low-rent Birder* (1986) the thrill of finding a rare Audubon's Shearwater on a pelagic trip in the late 1970s or early 1980s. “Audubon's Shearwaters are not stock items for New Jersey birders,” Dunne knowingly counsels us. Actually, they are annual in late summer, as we have since discovered. But how could anyone have known it at the time? Alexander's

guide had been long forgotten, and even the fourth edition (1980) of the Peterson *Field Guide* provided no range map and only the scantiest of descriptions.

Everything changed in 1983, with the publication of Peter Harrison's *Seabirds*. Lauded by Ron Naveen as "an unparalleled achievement ... arguably the best bird guide of any kind or any generation", this book was the second coming of *Birds of the Ocean*. Here one could find extensive discussion of the plumage(s), "jizz", and distribution of, say, Audubon's Shearwater. The illustrations were large and often lavish, and there was copious treatment of geographic variation. There were range maps, too, and literature citations.

At the same time, Harrison's take-home message was that our knowledge of seabird dispersal, biology, and even identification was—and still is—in its infancy. Many of the maps contain question marks, and a fair bit of the taxonomy is conjectural. Adjectives like "tentative" and "confusing"—even "indistinguishable" and "impossible"—are strewn throughout the species accounts.



In the 21 years since the publication of *Seabirds*, we have added incrementally to our understanding of the offshore avifauna. But it is still the case, as Harrison cautioned, that "[p]resent-day research has barely scratched the surface" and that "[w]e know practically nothing of the pelagic dispersal, biology, or even breeding areas" of certain species. And at the level of the individual birder, many of us (myself very much included), remain ignorant of the even-more-fundamental matters of identification, vocalizations, and behavior.

Quick!—What does Audubon's Shearwater sound like? When does it molt? When does it arrive in ABA-area waters? I'll be honest with you, I had to look up the answers to those questions. If you asked me to indicate on a map where I had my first encounter with the species, I'd be lucky to get to within 25 miles of the correct location. "Somewhere in the ABA Area off the coast of New Jersey" is about the best I'd come up with. Conversely, I can get to within a few feet—even without the assistance of a GPS unit—for many of my terrestrial lifers.

I've never had a "conclusive" experience, a sense of closure, at sea. There are always the unanswered questions, the problematic identifications, the longing to return. There is the sense that there will be a next time, another chance, a better view. There is the assurance of a future of new knowledge, of additional learning, of undiscovered delights.

At sea, the future is *now*. And it's a future that will soon be exported to the terrestrial realm, I believe. Even as we close the book on the last of the Petersonian conundrums (e.g., the genera *Accipiter*, *Calidris*, *Empidonax*), we are faced with

whole new volumes of challenges: recognizing hybrids, understanding molt, identifying juveniles, monitoring exotics, learning flight calls, documenting range expansions, and a host of others. All of a sudden, seemingly familiar species such as Black-capped Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Lincoln's Sparrow, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Plumbeous Vireo, and Red-bellied Woodpecker present a daunting new front, a new frontier, of mystery and exploration.

At long last, we have come to recognize that bird identification is not an end unto itself, but rather a point of departure. Knowledge must precede learning—a point that has escaped many a contemporary educational theorist. And learning, paradoxically, leads us back to our starting point: a sense of wonder.



Audubon's Shearwater. Off Hatteras, North Carolina; 13 August 1994. © Mike Danzenbaker.

It is a paradox that is captured well in Robert Cushman Murphy's *Logbook for Grace* (1947). Writing to his new bride on the occasion of seeing his first Wandering Albatross, Murphy proclaims:

I now belong to a higher cult of mortals, for I have seen the albatross! Long before I had dared hope, up here on the 23d [sic] parallel, I have been watching the wonderful gliding of the grandest of birds during much of the day.

I wasn't on that boat with Murphy, of course, but I get a sense for what it must have been like to have been there with the old master—equal parts learned and naïve, all parts joy. It is an outlook that will distinguish the birder of the future.

— TED FLOYD