

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 × 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.

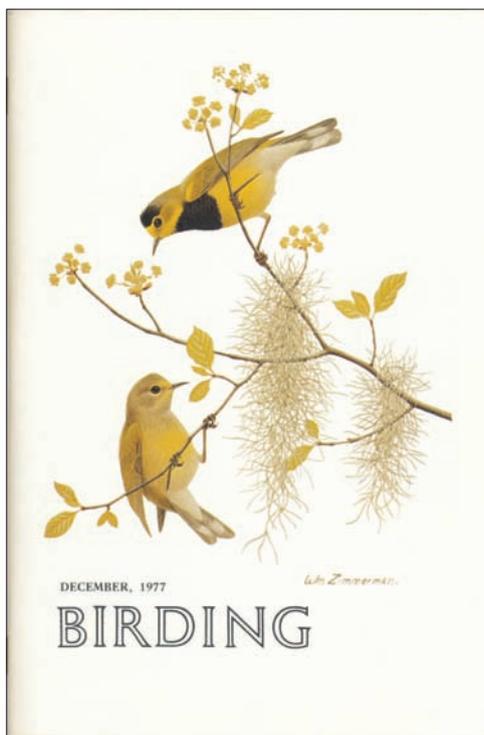
It was bound to surface eventually: explicit recognition of the existence of a particularly distinctive faction within the American birding community. Yes, the 1979 volume of *Birding* carried multiple allusions and references to The Cali-

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) start-

ed 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.