

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."

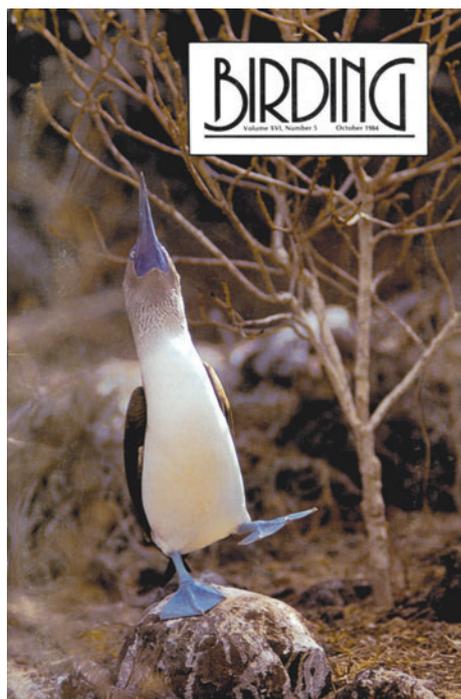
By the time of the 1984 volume of *Birding*, it was clearly the case that the field guide had become something of a publishing phenomenon. Henry Armistead noted in the June issue (pp. 117–118) that Peterson's *Field Guide* was the most successful natural history work ever published, and in fact one of 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