

The History of *Birding*

Part IV. 1988–1993

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a time of tremendous growth for the American Birding Association. Membership increased by more than 100 percent during the six-year period covered in this installment of “The history of *Birding*”, and our journal expanded and improved too. Paul Lehman took over the *Birding* editorship in 1988 and right away got down to the business of the pursuit of excellence: The magazine increased in both content and coverage, publication crept back on schedule, and the finished product was more professional than ever before.

There was the temptation, no doubt, to get swept up in the immediacy of the ABA’s successes at the time, but there was likewise the imperative to keep an eye toward the future. What would the years ahead hold in store, both for the ABA and more generally for birding in North America? What important issues lay right around the corner, as well as farther down the road? What had we learned from more than two decades of institutional history, and how might we apply those lessons to the future? These and related questions provided an important subtext to the content and character of *Birding* as the close of the twentieth century drew near.



On p. 29 of the February 1988 issue of *Birding*, there appears a brief and superficially unremarkable announcement that just happens to call attention to the biggest headache facing the ABA in the late 1980s: “You have already seen the...new ABA Newsletter”. As it turns out, the first official issue of *Winging It* (vol. 1 no. 1) was dated January 1989. Take a closer look at those dates: *Birding* was dreadfully behind schedule by the late 1980s. Furthermore, the magazine had become “esoteric” and “impenetrable” according to one correspondent (February 1988, p. 6), and considerably more abstruse than *Finnegans Wake* according to another (April 1988, p. 60). Incoming Editor Paul

Lehman had his work cut out for him. In his inaugural editorial (October 1988, pp. 278–280), he identified two immediate objectives for *Birding*: to get back on schedule and to become easier to read. And in his second editorial (December 1988, pp. 339–342), he enumerated a dozen focal areas for the magazine’s content. The first four dealt squarely with the matter of identification; the remaining eight touched on everything from habitat outposts to journal reviews. Not a single entry in Lehman’s twelve-step program referred to listing.

The first issue of the 1989 volume of *Birding* was clearly different from any of its predecessors. It measured 7.5 × 10 inches, an increase in areal extent of 39%. It ran to an impressive 128 pages, but then again it was a combo issue (vol. 21, nos. 1 & 2)—reflecting the new editorial team’s preoccupation with getting caught up. And it was a beauty, with a fine new look and layout, and more than five dozen color photographs. Although there was a reflective quality to this combination issue (it was billed as a “twentieth anniversary issue”), the remainder of the 1989 volume pushed relentlessly forward. Claudia Wilds exhorted us to get serious about molt and plumage terminology (June, pp. 148–153), incoming ABA President Allan Keith called attention to organizational changes on the horizon (August, pp. 178–180), and Pete Dunne predicted that a little-known optics company (called Swarovski) was destined for greatness (October, pp. 254–255). Particularly intriguing was the announcement (December, pp. 302–304) of a new series called “The impossible identification zone”. Its goal of exploring the hardest of hardcore ID challenges was ambitious, too ambitious: The column has not been heard from since.

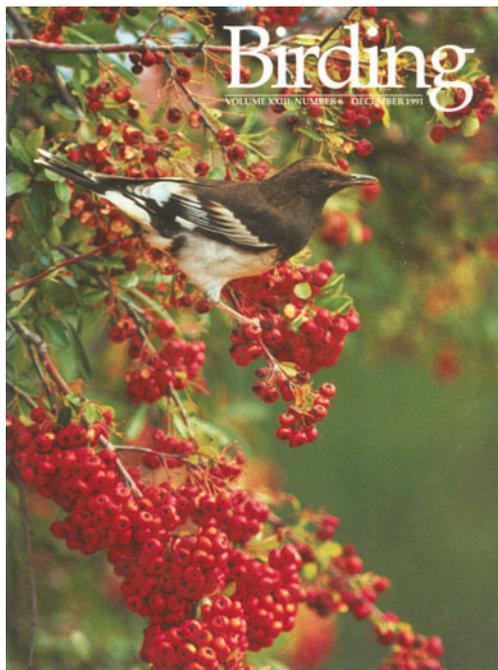
For sure, *Birding* in the early Lehman years was pointing the way toward the future, but the magazine was also—as it always had been—a mouthpiece for the real-time, real-live birding community of the day. Birders were still into personal listing milestones, as testimonials in the February 1990

issue (by Phoebe Snetsinger, pp. 28–30; Ben King, pp. 31–33; Peter Kaestner, pp. 34–37; and Arnold Small, pp. 38–39) bore witness to. American birders still fretted over the pronunciation of bird (er, “bürd”) names (April 1990, pp. 74–78), still sweated the nuances of countability vis-à-vis the ABA Listing Rules Committee (August 1990, pp. 163–164), and *still* hadn’t figured out what to make of Thayer’s Gull (August 1990, pp. 197–200). Bird Records Committees were proliferating (December 1990, pp. 276–285), and the ABA membership was up to 7,268 (December 1990, p. 271). So all was well and good? An increasing readership, still-relevant content, and a salutary focus on the future—right? Indeed, but Alan Contreras, in a letter to the editor (December 1990, p. 258), hinted at an important challenge for the 1990s and beyond: What might the ABA do to engage young birders?

An article by Ro Wauer (“Profile of an ABA birder”, pp. 146–154) in the June 1991 issue of *Birding* provided a solid quantitative angle on the question that Contreras had posed a few months earlier. Wauer’s analysis of a member questionnaire went beyond the obvious (namely, that membership in the ABA was increasing) and probed the question of how member demography was changing. In 1975, 16% of ABA members were under 30 years of age, and 46% were under 40. But in 1989, the numbers were a mere 3% for members under 30, and only 20% for members under 40. We were getting smarter and richer, too. Education: 43% of members had 12 or fewer years of education in 1975, but only 5% had 12 or fewer years of education in 1989. Income: 69% of ABA members made less than \$20,000 in 1975, but that number had dropped to 9% in 1989; at the upper end of the scale, 0% of ABA members made more than \$50,000 in 1975, but the figure was at 46% in 1989. What to make of those changes? That is a matter which would soon be taken up by several commentators.

The 1992 volume of *Birding* got underway with a short note (February, p. 2) from Allan Keith about the start of an “occasional President’s column”, devoted to announcements and short commentaries of general interest to ABA members. According to Keith, one of the ABA board’s key concerns at the time was to identify, attract, and encourage

young birders (April, p. 66). “We are getting older”, he acknowledged, and the ABA was about to embark upon a course of diverse incentives for young birders, among them reduced membership dues and sponsorship of youth camps. How serious was the aging of the ABA? In a thoughtful essay (“Profile of an aging birder”) in the February issue (pp. 54–55), Bill Principe called the situation “distressing” and “disturbing”, and warned that failure to reverse the aging of the ABA might well result in “calamity in the twenty-first century”. Meanwhile, the ABA’s membership rosters continued to balloon. In a brief report (“Five digits!”) in the October 1992 issue (p. 276), Development Director Lang Stevenson noted that the ABA was up to 10,200 active members. A major player in the organization’s successes: a grassroots, get-the-word-out campaign by the ABA’s state membership coordinators and other volunteers.



Birding in the late 1980s and early 1990s got smarter and more sophisticated—and even caught up! December 1991 cover photograph of an adult male **Aztec Thrush** on a *Pyracantha* bush.

The matter of young birders continued to play out on the pages of *Birding* in 1993. In the February issue Allan Keith announced the Joe Taylor Youth Education Fund (p. 4), and various persons (among them Bill Whan, Matt Pelikan, and Paul Lehman) contributed to a forum on “Birding, beginners, and the young” (pp. 61–70). Questions remained to be answered, but one sensed that the ABA was up to the challenge—in the arena of outreach to young birders, and on other fronts as well. The question of collecting vagrants was hopelessly unresolved, of course (April, pp. 129–132). The status and “ethics” of the North American Rare Bird Alert (NARBA) continued to be problematic (August, pp. 220–222). The nocturnal flight calls of thrushes and other passerines remained a wide-open field of inquiry (October, p. 349). And the so-called Canary-winged Parakeet—easy to tick, easy to forget about—was evidently much more complicated than we had realized (December, pp. 426–431). Was there an overall quality or character to the birding scene in the early 1990s? Yes, as recorded on the pages of *Birding*: There was a continuing dynamism, an ongoing premium on discovering and discovery, in most everything we did.

— Ted Floyd