

The History of *Birding*

Part VI. 2001–2006

We come now to the sixth and final installment in our year-long reflection on the history of Birding. Have there been, through these nearly forty years, major themes, perhaps even a single overarching preoccupation, in the pages of this magazine? Something that has more dominated these pages than the heard-only rule? More than the holy grail of checklist stability? More even than Thayer's Gull identification? How about the following: the tension—a salutary and felicitous sort of tension, when you stop to think about it—between tradition and progress?

Here's the situation. On the one hand, we go birding to reconnect with something very basic, something very human. There is something deep-down and archetypal about the act of birding, whether amid rare tubenoses far offshore or in the company of chickadees at the kitchen window. Birding is an eminently successful trans-generational pastime, reflecting the undeniably traditionalist aspect of our subculture and community. On the other hand, birding unavoidably exposes us to current and emerging trends in technology, environmental ethics, and, especially, epistemology. It is intellectually exhilarating to be in the presence of modern birders—apt to discuss ARUs and deinterlacing one moment; conservation easements and community values the next; and then in the same breath, null hypotheses and falsifiability. And all that just in connection with one big woodpecker in Arkansas. One big woodpecker that might as well be the archetype of the human experience in the American wilderness.



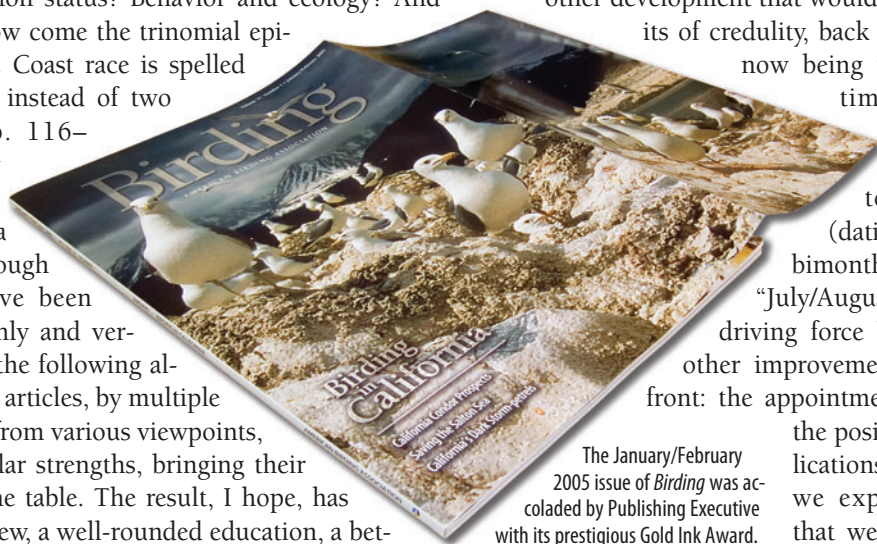
Editor Paul J. Baicich noted at the beginning of the February 2001 *Birding* (p. 7) that it was the first issue of the *real* millennium, and that “a few changes, but more of the same” could be expected. What was afoot? Well, a modest redesign for *Birding*, along with some new blood: a new Publications Chair, John Kricher, plus two new technical reviewers, Sheryl DeVore and Jim Dinsmore. And

something else: an intensifying emphasis on bird conservation. The topics covered in that 2001 volume were diverse and stimulating, among them the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (February, pp. 30–33), shade-grown coffee (February, pp. 38–40), pesticides (April, pp. 160–161), invasive plants (June, pp. 240–248), extinction and ecosystem function (August, pp. 302–305), integrated bird management (August, pp. 356–360), ecotourism and conservation (October, pp. 416–427), and the Shortgrass Prairie Bird Conservation Region (December, pp. 546–551). The agenda was clear: Birders, acting individually and corporately, can make a difference. Certainly, that was the point of the December editorial (pp. 504–505), wherein Baicich implored birders to support specialty birding operations such as ABA Sales.

The June 2002 issue was Baicich's last as editor. As was the case so often during the Baicich years, the June 2002 *Birding* commenced with a thought-provoking editorial (pp. 216–217), this one titled “Why the disconnect?” In this farewell address, Baicich cut to the chase. “The choice between conservation or birding,” he wrote, “is false”. On that note, Baicich moved on to assume the position of Director of Conservation and Public Policy for the ABA. The new editor was Ted Floyd—and, hey, what's up with the third-person self-reference? Yes, I need at this point to introduce an awkward, mid-stream change in voice—either that, or run the risk of sounding like a professional athlete at a press conference. I affirmed in my first editorial (“Change and continuity”, August 2002, pp. 312–313) my commitment to serious birding, and then proceeded to characterize serious birders as a diverse and colorful bunch. With a cupboard full of copy inherited from Baicich (I'm still grateful, Paul, after all these years), I noted that the next few issues would not differ greatly from what ABA members had grown accustomed to. But I also concluded with an assurance that longer-term changes lay ahead.

Starting with the 2003 volume, *Birding* embarked on a multi-year course (still going strong) of exploring in each issue some particular theme or topic in depth. I can't help myself: I tend to see merit in both (or all) sides of a debate, I'm always curious about what's on the other side of the coin. (Which is probably why I find modern American political discourse to be so stultifying.) Show me a Sage Sparrow, and I want to know: Which subspecies? Age and plumage? Population status? Behavior and ecology? And while I'm at it: How come the trinomial epithet of the Pacific Coast race is spelled *belli*, with one *-i* instead of two (April 2003, pp. 116–117)? You really can't cover all of those things in a single article (although some authors have been known to try, vainly and verbosely so). Thus, the following alternative: multiple articles, by multiple authors—writing from various viewpoints, relying on particular strengths, bringing their own outlook to the table. The result, I hope, has been a balanced view, a well-rounded education, a better birder. The math is simple: in-depth coverage = more knowledge.

By 2004, all sorts of changes had taken place. Paul Hess's "News and Notes" column—at this writing firmly ensconced as a staple at *Birding*—had come on board with the February 2003 issue. Jonathan Alderfer signed on as Associate Editor beginning with the April 2003 issue, and right away delivered excellence in the magazine's technical accuracy and visual appeal. Graphic designer Ed Rother joined the team in time for the June 2003 issue—the first of many highly distinctive issues produced on his watch. Other important additions in 2003: Bill Pranty (Technical Reviewer), Chris Wood (Photo Quiz Editor), and Rick Wright (Sources Department Editor). New personnel in 2004 included graphic designer Jim Harris, who joined forces with Ed Rother starting with the June issue, and cartographer Kei Sochi, who replaced outgoing *Birding* stalwart Virginia Maynard beginning with the December issue. Throughout 2004, we continued our in-depth exploration of a variety of topics. We tackled conventional fare (in-flight identification in the June issue, raptor ID in October, seabirds in December), we didn't shy away from the avant-garde (population monitoring in April, trash birds in August), and we even made room for listing (February).



The January/February 2005 issue of *Birding* was accoladed by Publishing Executive with its prestigious Gold Ink Award.

Two additions in 2005 to the *Birding* team highlighted once again the healthy tug-of-war between traditionalist and modernizing forces within the ABA. In the traditionalist camp, Paul Baicich's new column, entitled—wait for it—“Traditions”, debuted in the November/December issue. Earlier in the year, David Hartley had moved into the role of ABA webmaster—a position that few could have envisaged back in the days of Joe Taylor and Claudia Wilds. Another development that would have stretched the limits of credulity, back in the day: *Birding* was now being produced not only on time, but in fact so far ahead of schedule that we had to revert to the ancient system (dating from the 1970s) of bimonthly nomenclature, e.g., “July/August”, for each issue. The driving force behind that and many other improvements on the production front: the appointment of Bryan Patrick to the position of Director of Publications. As to 2005 content, we explored several themes that were fairly “safe”, for example ducks (March/April) and Alaska (November/December). But the topic of California (January/February) is always something of a risk, and the matter of hybrids (May/June)—if birders ever get serious about it—is likely to turn birding upside-down.

Where do things stand now in 2006, 38 years after Vol. Zero No. Zero?—which was a full five pages long, in all its mimeographed glory, and boasted a print run of ten. It is fair to say, I think, that supporting online material for an article on *Procellaria* petrels (see p. 52 of the current issue) was not on the minds of Jim Tucker & Co. back in 1968. And a pull-out gatefold cover of specially commissioned full-color artwork must have been only a distant dream, back in those earliest days of *Birding*. Indeed, our cover artist, Jennifer Brumfield, was still more than a decade away from being born. Which brings me to the point I would like to close with. Although it has been little remarked on, the current team at *Birding* is decidedly young. I won't name names, but I will say that six of the past seven additions to the *Birding* crew have been of persons who are younger than the ABA. There is energy at *Birding*. New ideas abound. Uncharted territory lies waiting to be explored. It is 1968 again.

— Ted Floyd