

The Mental Map

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

Historians of the future may well label our day the “age of mobility.” Mobility, of course, takes different forms. In vast areas of the world today, people are displaced by war, disease, famine, and poverty; in most of the developed west, in contrast, our movements tend to be voluntary, undertaken, as the phrase has it, for business or for pleasure. The result of all this motion and commotion is the same, whatever its motivation: most people most of the time don’t know where they are.

Not so birders. Mention Monomy or Merseyside, Bentsen or Borneo, and even if we might not be able to put our finger on exactly the right spot on the map, we are likely to have little trouble coming up with a list of 10 or 20 or 100 birds we dream of seeing there, someday. Contrast the average birder’s cosmopolitan outlook with the “geographic illiteracy” decried in the doomsday headlines, and birders may yet be the salvation of American culture (some of us are even good at math and science, too).

But the birder’s heightened sense of place is not limited to exotic destinations and fancy birds. Those of us whose travels are limited for the most part to familiar haunts and habitats still wander a world more richly detailed and more clearly differentiated than the non-birder can imagine. Three hundred miles of desert is anything but featureless when you’re looking for Le Conte’s Thrasher; six hours of monotonous cropland springs to life when a Henslow’s Sparrow sings from a postage-stamp prairie. The daily commute seems a bit less deadening if there is a different chickadee species at each end of it. And even the uniform drabness of big-city airports brightens when through the ubiquitous screen of Rock Pigeons we glimpse a Black Kite, a Red-shouldered Hawk, a Gyrfalcon. As birders,



Roseate Spoonbill, Louisiana. Photo © US Fish & Wildlife Service.

we are always somewhere—and we always know it.

This spring, many of my “somewheres” will be in the southeastern US, from Texas to Georgia. I’m most looking forward to the end of April, when I will get to see many of you—again or for the first time—at the ABA Convention in Lafayette, Louisiana. I’ve never been to the promisingly named Pelican State, and I am eager to put my eye for landscape to the test. Will I appreciate the differences, and be able to take advantage of the similarities, to related habitats in other parts of the southeast?

Come help me find out. See you in April!

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Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published bimonthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste 200., Colorado Springs, CO 80919. Periodicals postage paid at Lebanon Junction, KY, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Winging It*, 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste. 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919. (Individual membership: \$45 per year; includes \$12 for *Winging It* and \$33 for *Birding* magazine.) Return postage guaranteed: Send undeliverable copies and POD Forms 3579 to 4945 N. 30th Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919-3151. For Canadian returns mail to WDS, Station A, P. O. Box 54, Windsor ON N9A 6J5. GST Registration No. R135943454. Canadian Publications Agreement No. 40033104.

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