Young Birder of the Year Contest

Field Illustration Module

Art by
CLAIRE CURRY • ADAM NISBETT • DAVIE ROLNICK • LUKE SEITZ • NOAH STRYCKER • ANNA WIKER

Something that we at the Education Department of the ABA eagerly look forward to each year is the arrival of the ABA/Leica Young Birder of the Year contest materials. The packages come in without fanfare each October, but they are undoubtedly the most welcome of diversions to our regular workday. It is a privilege to see the focus and dedication of our young birders, in their extensive field notes, fresh writing, superb photography, and splendid illustrations, and I feel fortunate to be a witness.

The Young Birder of the Year (YBY) contest was begun in 1997 as an ABA Education Program effort to encourage more young birders to get out into the field and improve their birding proficiency and enjoyment. Leica stepped up as the principal sponsor of this exciting new competition, and ABA Sales, along with several other generous businesses, donated wonderful prizes for incentives, among them books, field equipment, and software. The YBY contest has evolved from that first venture, now consisting of four modules: field notebook, writing, photography, and illustration. To qualify for overall YBY, a participant must complete the field notebook module and at least two of the others. Each individual module promotes a different aspect of birding, and all stimulate and build skills that the participants will cultivate throughout their lives.

Although all of the YBY submissions are engrossing, I find the work in the illustration module to be particularly delightful. It is awe-inspiring to see the degree of sophistication and charm in the accomplished artwork of our young birders. Indeed, some of the illustrations and paintings by these young birders would reside comfortably in a professional artist’s portfolio. From the delicate tracery of Claire Curry’s penciled lines to Adam Nisbett’s confident brush strokes, the artwork, from simple field sketches to finished studio pieces, is an illustration in itself of these young birders’ devotion to the complementary crafts of birding and art.

The illustration module strengthens each participant’s competence as a birder as well as his or her artistry. As the young birders distinguish the subtle colors of field marks, correct primary extension lengths, and adjust overall bird proportions, they are also bolstering their birding and field identification skills. And as they tackle the challenges of capturing life and movement in their artwork, they are also learning about the way birds move when they sing, forage, and go about their daily lives. Portraying a bird’s particular attitude and beauty along with the successful handling of a particular medium is a charge that these young birders have met with aplomb.

The act of putting pencil to paper has become an expression of these young birders’ love and enthusiasm for their subjects. And the artwork of these students from across the continent shows me how birding is being pursued with a passion and is being taken to levels that any birder, young or old, would be proud to acknowledge. Now that all of the entries from 2004 have been returned to their owners and the young birders are wrapping up the 2005 YBY contest, I once again begin looking forward to October’s new arrivals.

— Lori L. Fujimoto
Education Manager, American Birding Association
“His Eye is on the Sparrow”
Acrylic on illustration board
by © Adam Nisbett, Age 17.
“Morning Watch”  
Acrylic on illustration board  
by © Adam Nisbett, Age 17.

“Grasshopper Sparrow”  
Colored pencil on paper  
by © Claire Curry, Age 16.
“American Redstart”  
Watercolor on paper by  
© Noah Strycker, Age 18.

“Northern Hawk Owl”  
Pen-and-ink on paper by  
© Noah Strycker, Age 18.
"Bobolink"
Colored pencil from sketchbook
“Eastern Bluebird”
Colored pencil on paper
by © Davie Rolnick, Age 13.

“Common Yellowthroat”
Graphite on paper
by © Adam Nisbett, Age 17.
"House or 'English' Sparrow"
Graphite and colored pencil on paper
by © Anna Wiker, Age 12.

"Northern Wheatear"
Graphite and colored pencil on paper