Young Birder of the Year Contest

Field Notebook Module

Entries from the Notebooks of:

ELISE M. S. BECKER • NEIL GILBERT • TOM JOHNSON • LUKE SEITZ • NOAH STRYCKER • LAUREN THEAD

The ABA, in its vital aim to foster young people’s interest in birding, has been conducting the Young Birder of the Year contest for some time now. The contest consists of four separate modules, each judged separately. I had the good fortune to be a judge for the Field Notebook Module, and I was frankly amazed. There are some incredibly skilled and superbly motivated young birders out there. The notebooks ranged from diaries about birding and birds to comprehensive notes on individual sightings with gorgeous illustrations and superb detail on even obscure field marks. Hey, I was taking notes from these young birders’ field notes! I am so glad that you are able to sample here from these notebooks: As you will see, the pages are just filled with the love of birds, in a raw, intense, and youthful way.

The dedication and time, not to mention observational skill, that it took to put these notebooks together are inspiring. Indeed, I felt privileged to have been given permission to look at them. Part of the great learning for me was to sometimes see myself, and my own early birding experiences, in these books. I thank the participants for allowing me to re-live those earlier days of birding. I even pulled out my own early notes in a fit of nostalgia. As we become more experienced as birders, we forget what it was like to be starting out, as a new or young birder. We tend to think that we follow a linear progression wherein each day we become more experienced, perhaps better. Seeing these books allowed me to understand that we actually change as birders while we change as people. We have a lot to learn from the young birders, from their dedication to learn, from their full-blown zest for birding, and from the time and effort to take down notes in the field. It is something we should all be doing.

How many of us can remember 10, 20, 30, or more years back when we were starting out and that “Christmas morning” feeling every time we were in the field seeing lifer after lifer? I know we influence the young birders, and many notebooks have sightings structured much like rare bird reports that may be submitted to a rarities committee. But the point I want to make here is this: Let these young birders influence you, with their note-taking skills, artwork, and passion for our hobby. Let them take you back to a time in your birding when nothing was run of the mill, when everything was new and interesting.

This contest is part of a process in which we, the older birders, seek to encourage the young contestants and help to develop their skills so that they may achieve greater experience and acuity in the pursuit of birding. But after seeing the notebooks, it is clear that they are quintessential birders already, devoted and hungry to learn, every day, about birds. We older birders should be more like them. Maybe we should be the contestants and the young birders the judges? Thanks for the journey, contestants. It is a joy to have your observational skills and your passion in our birding community.

— Alvaro Jaramillo
Half Moon Bay, California
From the field notebook of
© Elise M. S. Becker, age 12.

From the field notebook of
© Neil Gilbert, age 11.
From the field notebook of © Tom Johnson, age 16.

From the field notebook of © Luke Seitz, age 11.
From the field notebook of © Noah Strycker, age 18.