

A Birding Interview with Kenn Kaufman

With this issue of *Birding*, we begin a year-long series of interviews with luminaries in the American birding community. The idea is for each interviewee to tell it like it is, to “editorialize”—not necessarily on behalf of the ABA, not necessarily on behalf of any particular interest or agenda. We have been drawn to interviewees who are notable for their influence, their worldview, their capacity to challenge and surprise us. We will be hearing from folks who are *not*, for the most part, representative of the birding mainstream. Rather, they are the movers and shakers, the folks who are five or ten years ahead of the current scene.

There is one sense, though, in which our distinguished guests are very much like the rest of us. Like so many American birders, the people interviewed here are refreshingly frank and open-minded. They’re willing to go out on a limb, to risk some degree of provocation. Pay attention to them. But do not feel compelled to agree with them. And let us know what you think—we’d love to publish your letters in response to this series of *Birding* interviews.

A word about how the interviews have been conducted. I, personally, have taken a back-seat role in the process. The major driving force in this new series has instead been Noah K. Strycker, Associate Editor of *Birding*. Many of you have already gotten to know Noah—on the pages of *Birding*, at ABA conventions, and

in other venues. If I had to sum up the entirety of Noah’s legacy in one sentence (and that’s not a very brilliant idea, I realize), it would be the following: Noah is the guy who produced the notorious iPod article (*Birding*, November/December 2005, pp. 666–668) and a 210-page monograph entitled *Early Twentieth Century Ornithology in Malheur County, Oregon*. Noah is at the vanguard of cutting-edge

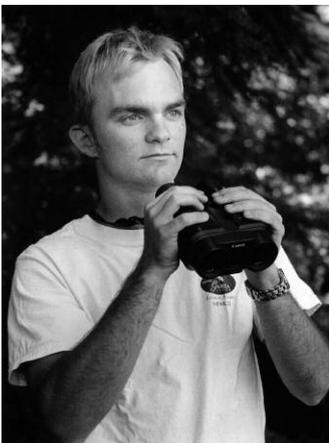
birding (his iPod article has generated more reader feedback than anything else in my tenure here at *Birding*), and he has a solid grasp of the historical influences and foundational ideas that have gotten us to where we are today. I have to say, I am reminded of something that one of Kenn Kaufman’s friends said, upon learning that Kenn was writing an article on the past twenty-five years of birding history (see *Birding*, February 1994, p. 13): “But you’re not even forty yet.” Noah wasn’t yet twenty when he produced the iPod article and *Early Twentieth Century Ornithology*.

Back to Kenn Kaufman. It is a cliché to say that he requires no introduction, that he is one of the best-known and most-influential birders of all time. But I can’t resist letting you in on the following sneak preview: You’re not going to read much about the “good ole days” in Kenn’s responses to Noah’s questions. True, many of us still picture Kenn as an early-1970s Young Turk. But he has moved on. He’s not one to pine away for some bygone, gilded age; rather, he’s still a revolutionary, after all these years. But I should stop now, lest I steal anybody’s thunder, and turn the proceedings over to Kenn and Noah.

— Ted Floyd

***Birding*:** You’ve been busy! What have you been up to lately? What do you consider to be your most important accomplishments?

Kenn Kaufman: Yes, “busy” is a good description. Since 2001 I’ve been heavily involved with writing guides to butterflies, mammals, and general insects, focusing less on birds. But in 2005 I moved to Ohio, ten minutes away from the great migrant trap of Magee Marsh and Crane Creek, so I’m getting to know eastern birds better than ever. My wife Kim is a very experienced bander in this area, so now I have a lot of opportunity to look at birds from that perspective as well. And with trying to learn all the plants, amphibians, etc., around my new home, I’m having a great time.



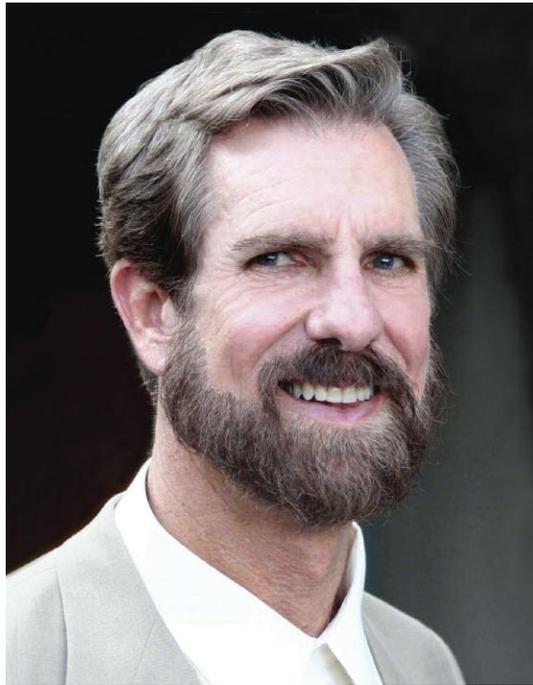
Noah K. Strycker.

As for accomplishments, is that for me to judge? I thought it was a big deal that I invented a totally new way of illustrating field guides, but no one else seemed to notice, maybe because most people didn't understand the whole digital concept at the time. Then again, I think my *Field Guide to Advanced Birding* had a worthwhile impact when it was published, and I'm genuinely proud of having produced the first Spanish-language guide to North American birds.

Birding: For your Spanish-language bird guide, published in 2005, you paid for the translation yourself and willingly lost a lot of money on the project. Why was this so important to you?

KK: After I started doing a lot of public speaking to birding groups, I was alarmed to see that the birding community doesn't "look like America", as the saying goes. There'd be an audience of 200 or more, and every face would be the same shade of white. That is a problem which should concern all of us, but figuring out what to do about it is challenging.

A few people—such as John Robinson and Dudley Edmondson—are actively recruiting birders from within the African-American community. As a white male, I don't have an inside track with any minority community, but it occurred to me that there would be an easy way to reach one sizeable minority group: the 28 million U. S. citizens who are more comfortable with Spanish than with English. My bird field guide was designed to be useful for beginning birders, so I figured all I had to do was to get it translated and then get the Spanish version published. The latter turned out to be a challenge, as my publisher was understandably apprehensive about such an untested project. The publisher wanted to know the following: Which other North American bird guides had been published in Spanish, and how well had they sold? Of course there weren't any others, and that was the whole point. Eventually it was published, but I had to pay for the translation and I am receiving no royalties on sales. So it cost me a lot to do this. But if it sparks more interest in birds among Spanish speakers in the U. S. and northern Mexico, I'll feel richly rewarded.



Kenn Kaufman.

Birding: You made a pretty big switch in your birding life, from being a serious chaser and lister as a younger birder to advocating a more basic connection to nature and the environment as you matured. What triggered this change?

KK: I don't see it as a switch—just a natural evolution. Listing isn't ever just about the number, at least not for a thoughtful person. It's partly about comparing our own personal experiences against what is theoretically possible. If the possibilities were infinite, no number would ever mean anything, and bird-listing would be as dull as counting

raindrops. No, we get our local or regional checklist, and then we see how many of those species we can find. I think it's a really good way to get started in birding, or in any branch of natural history. When I started to get into moths in a big way, the first thing I did was to start keeping a list. After a while our curiosity kicks in: We become more interested in the creatures and their habits and habitats, and we stop caring so much about list totals, but it's not really a change in direction.

Birding: Throughout your successful career, you have worked mostly freelance, cooperatively with but independently from the birding establishment. Was that on purpose?

KK: Yes, it was. I've always valued independence more than the security of a full-time job. At the same time, I'm grateful to the people and organizations that have allowed me to do enough of this kind of freelance work to be able to survive on it.

Birding: You have many projects in progress and a seemingly endless list of new ones on the horizon—all with the basic purpose of recruiting more people in the effort to save our environment. To what do you attribute your strong environmental ethic and energy for this work?

KK: Generalities don't drive me. Clean water, breathable air—obviously, everyone who's not insane is an environmentalist to the extent of wanting those things. So that's just basic. But biodiversity is not so universally valued; in fact, the average person has no concept of the diversity of living things. People won't work to preserve that diversity if they don't even know it exists. So a first step is just to get

people turned on to what's out there. To me, the diversity of life is something magical and precious, something with spiritual value as well as scientific value. I want to get more people excited about nature's variety, to increase the likelihood that we can preserve some of that variety.

Birding: You have said that "serious" birders can get in the way of conservation efforts by intimidating beginners. Would you explain what you mean, and suggest how experienced birders might interact with newcomers in ways that would help the environmental movement?

KK: I should start by saying that birders in general are incredibly welcoming and helpful to newcomers. But sometimes our best intentions misfire. We'll take a group of beginners out, and we'll be obsessed with showing them something "good", when they'd be thrilled with a good look at a flicker, or a jay, or a beautiful Red-winged Blackbird. We pass those by as unimportant and finally get the people zeroed in on a Clay-colored Sparrow, or something, and they're thinking "Huh?" And then they don't go on a second field trip.

Sure, in that example, one person in the group will get turned on by that Clay-colored Sparrow, and that person will go on to become a serious birder, and we'll be under the illusion that we've succeeded. But I'm more concerned about the others, the ones who don't come back. It's easy to fall into this pattern of thinking that a beginner is someone who isn't an expert *yet*—y'know, Jon Dunn at the age of ten. But the vast majority of beginners will always be beginners. And there's nothing wrong with that. We really don't need any more people who can identify third-winter Thayer's Gulls. We need a *lot* more people who have some appreci-

ation of birdlife and who will act on it—by supporting habitat protection, buying shade-grown coffee, planting native plants, laying off the pesticides. We need millions of perpetual beginners who will do these things. If you drive away a dozen such people by your efforts to create one "serious" birder, you might as well be shooting hawks and cutting down old-growth forest.

Birding: If you could have one wish to improve our world, what would it be?

KK: My wish is that every person might learn to recognize fifty species of plants and animals native to his or her own region. That may not sound like much, but I'm convinced that it would profoundly change each person's sense of values, each person's sense of responsibility to the ecosystems that support all of our fellow creatures. That basic level of natural history could revolutionize our view of humanity's place in the world. Maybe I'm just a dreamer, but I'm going to go on trying to communicate that basic appreciation of nature to everyone.

Legendary among birders, Kenn Kaufman has spent his life observing, drawing, photographing, writing about, and teaching people about birds. At 16, he traveled 80,000 miles across North America in a year in search of birds, and chronicled his adventure in Kingbird Highway. He has authored eight books on nature, including field guides to North American birds, butterflies, and mammals, and he recently broke new ground with the first Spanish-language field guide to North American birds. Kaufman regularly contributes to every major birding magazine and has been awarded the American Birding Association's highest honors. He and his wife Kim reside in Ohio. —NKS

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