



The Origins and Legacy of BirdChat

A Brave New World is a Scary Thing

In the late 1980s, computer-savvy birders started setting up local computer bulletin boards, or “BBSs.” On these BBSs birders were exchanging bird sightings, asking the kinds of questions that birders always ask each other, and posting the transcripts of the then-very-common telephone-based rare bird alerts (RBAs).

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Norm had any idea where the new technology of e-mail distribution lists (list-servers, or listservs for short) would take birding. I joined BirdChat sometime in 1993. Shortly thereafter, I started transcribing the Kansas Rare Bird Alert and posting it to BirdCntr. My life has not been the same since!

In 1996, Chuck Williamson asked me to help as a “listowner” on BirdCntr. Norm Saunders had bowed out of list management and Chuck was in need of help. In 1998, Chuck was moving even further away from BirdChat and the BirdRBAs,

I remember the first time I summoned The Osprey Nest BBS, maintained by Norm Saunders in Maryland. Granted, being from Kansas I didn’t have many bird sightings to exchange with those East Coast birders. But here, at my fingertips, were other birders I could ask about field guides, about binoculars, and about good places to go birding wherever I might be headed.

At about this same time, Chuck Williamson in Arizona was also starting up a BBS for birding and birders in Southeast Arizona. Norm and Chuck started communicating, and in 1990 they started up something called BirdRBA. Because of his affiliation with the University of Arizona, Chuck was able to start this discussion list on the university’s computer system. The goal was to provide a forum—via this newly emerging communication tool that would eventually be called the internet—for the posting of RBA transcripts from across the nation. This initiative eventually evolved into the now-well-known BirdEast, BirdCntr, and BirdWest mailing lists.

In 1991, Chuck and Norm founded BirdChat. BirdChat became the forum for bird-related discussions that went beyond the RBA transcripts on the other lists. I have often wondered if either Chuck or



Perhaps the most venerable of birding e-institutions is the National Birding Hotline Cooperative—or BirdChat, as it is much better known. BirdChat has inspired countless state, provincial, regional, and continental spin-offs, as well as thematic lists devoted to topics that run the gamut from bird records committees to bluebird boxes. BirdChat is for many internet birders their first destination during each online session; it was on BirdChat, for example, that many birders first learned of the bizarre and wonderful **Brown Hawk-Owl** that visited St. Paul Island in the fall of 2007.

Ink on smooth Bristol, by © Steve Carbol.

and he asked if I would also help out on BirdChat listowner duties with longtime subscriber Laurie Larson. Not too long after that Dave Rintoul became a third listowner. It has been fascinating to watch not only the evolution of BirdChat and the BirdRBA family, but the numerous state and regional birding lists as well.

The Brave New World

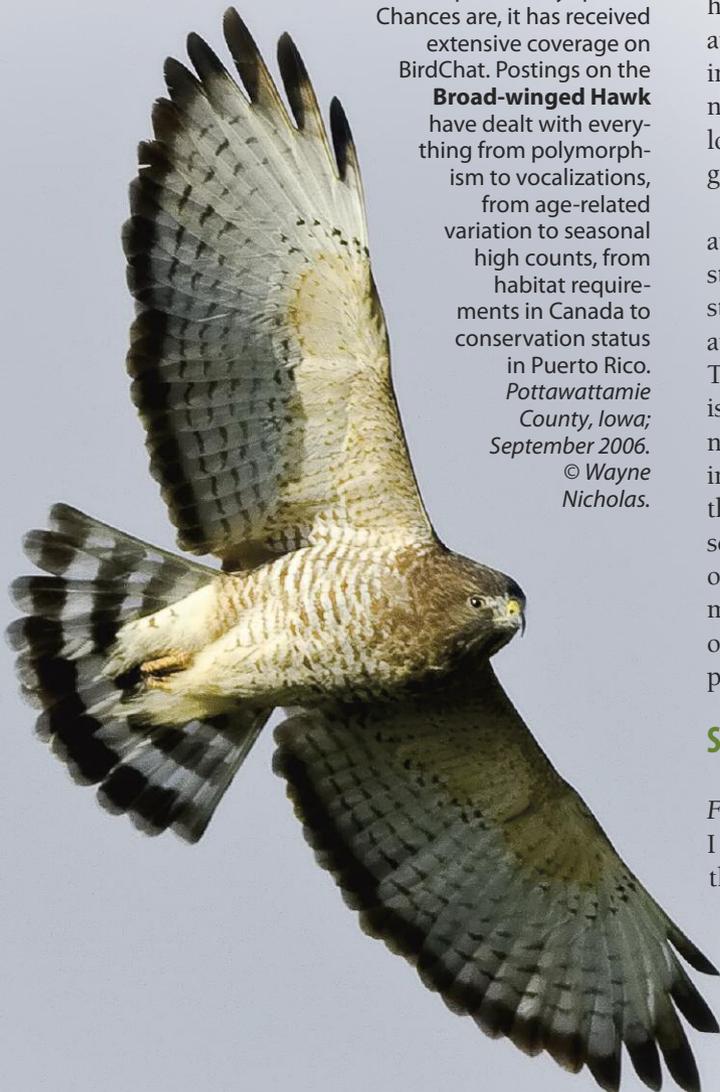
BirdChat is a community in a constant state of flux. Active membership runs around 1,500 with thousands more following the daily discussions on BirdChat's own archives or on mirrored websites such as Jack Siler's Birdingonthe.net. BirdChat is probably the oldest of the

birding lists still running. Birders join the list for a few weeks or for years. Many of the early participants have moved on to state or regional lists and spend most of their time on those. But for a large group of birders around the country and even around the world, BirdChat is their daily contact with the birding world.

New Locations, New Friends

Over the years that I have been on BirdChat, I have made friends with birders in many other states. I have received birding tips for trips to Oregon, Maine, Texas, Wisconsin, Florida, Mississippi, and other states. I have hosted birders from Oregon, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Vermont. All of these contacts were initiated via BirdChat. I have birded in Colorado, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C., with BirdChat friends. I bumped

Pick a bird species. Any species. Chances are, it has received extensive coverage on BirdChat. Postings on the **Broad-winged Hawk** have dealt with everything from polymorphism to vocalizations, from age-related variation to seasonal high counts, from habitat requirements in Canada to conservation status in Puerto Rico. *Pottawattamie County, Iowa; September 2006.*
© Wayne Nicholas.



into a Tennessee BirdChat friend on a boat trip off the coast of Maine.

With just a simple message posted to a list like BirdChat, you and many other birders can receive information about and tips on equipment, bird books, guides, and where to find your next life bird. Yes, we did all these things before BirdChat, but now it can happen in real time. We don't have to make phone calls, we don't have to write off for printed information that might be out of date, we don't have to wait for weeks. It all happens in hours or even minutes, not weeks.

When North America's first Brown Hawk-Owl was found on St. Paul Island in late August of 2007, BirdChat knew about it within 36 hours. We were directed to stories and photos, and many of us were wondering where Brown Hawk-Owls are normally found and how soon could we book a flight to St. Paul Island.

We follow migration north and south on BirdChat. We hear of unusual sightings, we answer routine questions, and we share our bird sightings. We grieve when a noted individual in the birding world dies, we cheer when a new species is discovered. For many of us, there aren't a lot of other birders in our local communities, so BirdChat gives us daily contact with other birders.

An internet discussion list does not replace getting out and going birding. It was never meant to become a substitute. It does, however, become a way that many of us stay in touch when we are busy with our nine-to-five jobs and can't get away to go birding as often as we might like. There is also a segment of the population that no longer is able to get out into the field. For those folks, the internet gives them the opportunity to stay in touch with birding. They can see the photos of the super-rarities, or just the super photos of everyday species. Without this resource, they would be limited to what flies by the window of their homes, or what they read in each issue of the magazines. But a magazine comes out only once a month, or less often. The internet changes hourly, bringing new pictures and new reports.

Still a Few Bugs in the System!

Filtered or unfiltered?

I remember hearing a speaker in the mid-1990s say that the internet was over-hyped and underestimated. I think those words still ring true today. There are few segments of our society that the internet has not impacted. From e-mail to web pages and beyond, the internet has changed our work, our lives, our hobbies, and our interactions with each other.



Are you traveling to South Texas with the hope of making the acquaintance of the **Masked Duck**? An RFI (request for information) to BirdChat is an excellent starting point. *Brazoria County, Texas; March 1996.* © Alan Murphy.

Misinformation has always been “out there.” Now we can simply access more of it faster. When we used to call the rare bird alerts, on telephones that were connected with wires, we put faith in the information that was on the recording because someone was collecting all the information, sorting through it, and determining what was of value and what wasn’t. Nowadays, well-meaning individuals can post bird sightings that they feel are valid. Obviously, some users will accept every scrap of information. If it is on the internet, someone will believe it. As users of this unfiltered information, we bear a burden to filter that information and determine if it is valid or not.

Vicarious birding

Just as some birders are no longer able to get out in the field, there are those few who simply choose not to. I’m sure that we’ve all experienced that birder on the internet who rarely gets out of the house. They are apparently glued to the chair in front of the computer monitor and all they do is surf the web, read about birds, ask everyone else on the list about their sightings, and responds to each and every e-mail message. It is a phenomenon that we see on lists usually about twice a year. In late winter, just ahead of spring migration and in late summer, just before fall migration, anything can happen. These birders have cabin fever,

the birding is so slow, and there is nothing to entice them away from the computer. It is at those times that we have to remind people to step away from the computer, pick up their binoculars, and go outside.

How rude!

I am a firm believer that people are inherently kind and gentle. But under certain circumstances, people will feel safely isolated and protected and will exhibit very abnormal behavior. We saw it in the mid 1970s with CB radios, and now we are seeing it again with e-mail. People will write things about, or to, somebody that they would never say in a face-to-face setting. Feelings get hurt, people get angry, and sadly sometimes people even become violent. A new word entered our vocabulary when e-mail became popular and mainstream: netiquette. Netiquette is no different from etiquette, requiring simply that you treat people humanely and civilly just as you yourself would like to be treated.

As list-owner for several internet discussion lists, I occasionally have to remind a subscriber to be more civil in his or her messages. The *art* of writing needs to be more skillfully practiced. In face-to-face discussions, we have the opportunity to hear voice inflections and to read facial expressions and other body language. In an e-mail exchange, we don’t have that luxury. A phrase that is meant as humorous or tongue-in-cheek suddenly be-



In early 2005, South Texas was invaded by Mexican species such as **Crimson-collared Grosbeak**. Many birders regularly consulted BirdChat and its derivatives both for vicarious enjoyment and for tips on getting down to “The Valley” for a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle. *Hidalgo County, Texas; January 2005.* © Jim Burns.

comes offensive because the reader doesn't know the writer and cannot see the wry grin on his face. More than once, I have encouraged a list member to use the delete key quickly and regularly. I have also encouraged other list members to walk away from their messages for at least one hour before they send them.

What Does the Future Hold?

Change is the only constant

Technology will continue to bring changes and challenges just as it has since Gutenberg invented the movable type press. I can't even begin to imagine what sorts of technology will be available fifteen or twenty years from now. But I know that I will be making use of it if it'll help me enjoy my retirement activities. Think of how digital photography has supplanted traditional film-based photography. Look at all those phenomenal pictures that we are seeing today. Aspects of bird plumages are being seen without ever having to take the bird in hand. Let's keep looking at how all the rest of this technology can be a benefit.

Lead by example

I have a saying on the wall of my office, "They can't hear what you're saying when your actions are making so much noise." As a list-owner, I can't expect the other list members to be civil in their messages if I'm not civil. We all have a responsibility to be part of the solution. Offer to lead bird walks. Be active in your local, state, or regional birding group. Submit bird reports to your state records committee. Whether it is in e-mail messages to the list, in private e-mail messages, on the phone or in person, treat everyone with respect. You may not agree with everybody, but you can still treat each person with kindness.

Use it to your advantage

One of the greatest outcomes of BirdChat was that users could see the benefit of an internet-based discussion list.

This realization led to the initiation of state and regional discussion lists. I am constantly prowling our Kansas list, KsBird-L. I serve as secretary of the Kansas Bird Records Committee (KBRC), so I'm looking for sightings of birds that are on the review list. When I see a report on KsBird-L, I encourage, beg, prod, cajole, or bribe the observer, always with the goal of getting a report submitted to the KBRC. Many of these birders may not even know what a records committee is or what it does. So the teachable moment arrives, and people relatively new to birding now know why records are important. Then we invite them to the next state field trip. We provide the opportunity for them to meet other birders who will take them "under their wing" and help them become better birders.

Just as some of our ancestors thought that they'd never need a telephone or television or computer or cell phone, we may think that we don't need a handheld communication device to receive e-mails anywhere and anytime. But we'll probably have them sooner than we'd like to imagine. The option will be yours, of course, but with every action and decision there are consequences. Just make sure you are willing to accept those consequences.

No, the internet is not perfect, but the world isn't perfect either. It is constantly changing and evolving. Today's college students learn differently from how I did. Is that wrong? No, it is just different and different is not wrong. New technology comes along every few months, and it changes what we know about the world around us. We have two choices when it comes to these changes: We can drag our heels and reminisce about how it used to be, or we can take an active part in adapting the internet to our future. It's a brave new world out there, every single day. I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings.

Acknowledgments

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Getting Started on BirdChat

For a quick fix, check out BirdChat via Jack Siler's electronic bulletin board <birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/CHAT.html>. There you will find the complete list of BirdChat postings from the previous few days. For the complete and searchable BirdChat archives, going back to 1 January 1995, visit the BirdChat archives <listserv.arizona.edu/archives/birdchat.html>. To submit your own postings to BirdChat and to reply to other "Chatters," you need to subscribe to the list. Subscription is free. From the homepage of the BirdChat archives, simply click on "Join/Leave the List." It is that easy!