

A *Birding* Interview with **Lisa White**

As Director of Guidebooks in the Trade and Reference Division at Houghton Mifflin, Lisa A. White exerts a powerful behind-the-scenes influence over the publication of field guides and other bird books—the backbone of the guidebooks category. She edits the Peterson Field Guide series, the Kaufman Field Guide series, and other nature books. She has edited award-winning titles such as *The Singing Life of Birds* (2005) by Don Kroodsma and *The Grail Bird* (2005) by Tim Gallagher, and she edited the light-hearted compendium of birding advice, *Good Birders Don't Wear White* (2007). She lives in Boston with her husband and two sons.

White gives *Birding* a glimpse into the world of publishing, foretells the future of field guides, and explains how to keep track of 50 authors compiling one bird book.

— Noah K. Strycker

***Birding*:** Could you describe the process of procuring, producing, and promoting a book?

Lisa White: I could fill this magazine with the specifics of how it all works! But briefly, it all starts with either a query or a proposal. If it's just a query, I let the author know what I need to see to be able to consider the work. Or, that it's not something I'd consider at all. Once I have a proposal, I look at how the book would fit with our list, what the competition is, and other comparable books (and how successful they've been). If it's a narrative type of book, the quality of the writing is key. If it's a straight field guide, the writing style, while still important, plays a smaller role in relation to elements such as illustrations and maps. Sales, marketing, and publicity factors are weighed as well. Once I've acquired the book, I work with the author on developing it. The amount of my involvement varies a lot, depending on the author and the particular book. Then, once the final manuscript is turned in, I do a substantive edit before turning it over to the production editor, who sees the book through the

production process, which includes copyediting, proofreading, and indexing, as well as page composition. There's a designer, a manufacturing manager, and then when the book gets closer to its publication date, marketing and publicity get involved. There are an awful lot of people who work very hard on every book we publish.

***Birding*:** How will field guides for birders change in the next 10 years?

LW: I think that the biggest change we can expect in the next 10 years will be in the way field guide content is delivered. That is, a significant shift to a digital format. Not that that will completely replace printed books. But, as mobile devices—whether PDAs, smart phones, or iPods—become more user-friendly, affordable, and of higher quality, they'll be a more attractive option. Imagine being able to carry the content of 10 field guides on a device the size of an iPod. When that's easy to do, the quality is high, and it costs very little, the younger birders who grew up with computers will be eager consumers.

***Birding*:** How does Houghton Mifflin carry on the legacy of Roger Tory Peterson?

LW: One of Peterson's goals was to help familiarize people with nature so that they'd want to protect it. Identifying animals and plants is one of the first steps, and that's what field guides are for. So we continue to publish and promote the series he started. We revise the guides—some of the most recent revisions are *Mammals*, *Animal Tracks*, and *Ferns*—and, although there aren't many subjects we don't already cover, we do publish new guides. Still a few years away, but in the pipeline, is a field guide to North American dragonflies, which will be a stunning book by Ed Lam. We've also recently launched a subset of the series, the Peterson Reference Guides, the first of which was *Gulls of the Americas*, by Steve Howell and Jon Dunn. And, in honor of the centennial of Peterson's birth (28 August 1908), we are publishing a new field guide—*Birds of North Ameri-*

ca. We've not only combined Peterson's eastern and western guides, but everything has been updated—the taxonomy, the text, the maps, and some of the art. In addition, the book will direct readers to a website where they can download a series of entertaining and instructional video podcasts. With the publication of his first field guide, Peterson made birding easier and more accessible than it had ever been. By providing an easy-to-use digital product for today's birders, we are following in his footsteps. Peterson was an innovator, and I'd bet that if he were a young birder today, he'd be at the forefront of new technology for birding.

Birding: How did you manage 50 different authors for *Good Birders Don't Wear White*?

LW: Wow, that was a fun book to work on. The authors were all very gracious. We did nearly everything electronically—from my initially contacting the authors via e-mail to editing their essays in Word using Track Changes and e-mailing them back. We kept a spreadsheet of all the authors and the status of each essay. Organizationally, it was one of the most challenging books I've done, but it was also very interesting both to interact with many authors I hadn't worked with before and to edit such short pieces.

Birding: Have you been surprised by one of your book projects turning into a flop or a hit?

LW: Well, I actually haven't had any book turn into a flop—not that I would tell you in print if I had! On the hit side, we were taken a little off-guard by Don Kroodsma's book, *The Singing Life of Birds*. Nothing quite like it had ever been done before, and the timing was probably just right for it. But we just didn't know it was going to get the attention it did. Our amazing publicist, Taryn Roeder, got Don onto *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, and the interview was aired three times. And Don won the 2006 John Burroughs Medal for the book.

Birding: What do you enjoy most about your work?

LW: There's a lot I love about my work. There's variety: I do so many different things, from reading manuscripts and determining whether we should acquire them to doing the substantive editing of books and creative tasks such as choosing photographs for some books. I consider myself fortunate to work with nature authors. It's a generalization, but on the whole, they are smart, warm, and unpretentious; they are down-to-earth people who care about our environment. The kind of books I work on matters to me—I wouldn't enjoy this work if I were editing, say, computer manuals. (And no one would hire me to do that, either!) I get to feel like I am doing my small part to help educate people about nature. Another thing I really enjoy is the tangible reward: At publication, when I hold a finished book in my hands, it's very gratifying to know I had a role in bringing it into existence.



Lisa White. Photo by © Grady Stoodt.

Birding: How do you cope with the unpredictable nature of the publishing industry? For instance, it must have been exasperating in 2005 when two other titles on birdsong were released at the same time as yours.

LW: Sometimes something that intuitively seems like it

would be a negative thing can be positive. The example you gave is a good one: You'd think that the simultaneous publication of three books on the same subject would be bad for all three books, but it can actually be a boon, if a magazine or newspaper decides to review them together when it might not have reviewed any particular one on its own. We saw *The Singing Life of Birds* mentioned together with the other two birdsong books in *USA Today* and *Entertainment Weekly*, two venues that don't predictably publicize birding books.

Birding: Is the market for bird field guides increasing, declining, or holding steady? Why? How does the demand for field guides affect the publication business?

LW: It's at least holding steady, and probably expanding. It's an extremely competitive area of publishing these days, so sales are spread out over a larger number of publishers, which makes it a little more difficult to gauge. Generally, the birding demographic skews older, to people who have leisure time and some money to spend. As baby boomers retire, there are more people looking for something interesting to do. Demand affects which books we can afford to publish. Field guides are expensive books to produce: They're heavily designed and heavily illustrated, with many different components. One field guide may have paintings, photographs, line drawings, maps, and possibly charts or tables. So they can be complicated to put together, which is expensive and time-consuming. There has to be enough demand so that we not only recoup those costs but also make a profit.

Birding: Would you give us a sneak peek into some upcoming projects? For instance, Rachel Dickinson's forthcoming book about falconry?

LW: Nearly every proposal I get for a narrative book includes a comparison to *The Orchid Thief*. No wonder, with the success of the book and the movie adaptation, called *Adaptation*. Rachel's book, about a quirky protagonist who is consumed with a passion and who is perhaps representative of his subculture, comes closer than anything else I've seen. She's got a great writing style, and it should appeal to an audience beyond falconers and even beyond birders. Well before that book, though—in fact this spring—is *Falcon Fever*, a memoir by Rachel's husband, Tim Gallagher, who has been a falconer since he was twelve; *Flights Against the Sunset*, a memoir by Kenn Kaufman; and a new Peterson Field Guide for kids, *The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of Eastern North America*, by Bill Thompson III.