



Jeffrey A. Gordon. Photo by © Liz Gordon.

This past November, a discussion took place on the long-running e-mail list, BirdChat. The principal topic was whether or not birders err in consuming large quantities of fossil fuel in their travels.

I won't rehash all the various arguments here. It's an interesting question, certainly, but what really caught my attention and what I would like to take up was one of the responses sent privately to the originator of the topic, Ken Allaire, which Ken then quoted anonymously. The unnamed author decried the (initial) dearth of responses on the topic, then penned the following four sentences:

This is why I don't associate with birders anymore. As a group they are selfish, short-sighted people who deny, distort, or trivialize their impacts (not limited to fossil fuel consumption) on the natural world. And few of them con-

tribute to the one thing that matters most to birds: wilderness preservation. As I see it, birders are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

As I see it, birders are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Wow, I thought. That's a pretty amazing thing to say. Amazing to me, especially, as I had just returned from the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival in Harlingen, Texas, where I'd spent a week in the midst of several hundred birders, young and old, newly minted and veteran, celebrated and unknown. And despite having been in such close proximity to all those birders for all that time, I couldn't think of a single one who even remotely met the description of birders given by that BirdChat correspondent. Not one.

I saw people for whom a birding trip to South Texas was something they'd saved for and looked forward to, a highlight of their year, or several years. I saw local kids from South Texas, their somewhat befuddled parents in tow, who were in the process of absorbing as much knowledge about local birds and other wildlife as they could. I saw people who have devoted their lives to the study, appreciation, and conservation of birds, earning far less money than they would have by taking jobs in more traditional, environmentally destructive occupations.

And, as I do every year there, I saw the birding and nature community of South Texas, nearly all of them working as volunteers, roll out the plushiest and reddest of carpets they could to

everyone, local or visitor, who wanted to find out more about the amazing birdlife of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and to join in celebrating it.

No, these people sure didn't look like the problem to me, even though all of us had participated in the burning of fossil fuels to attend this gathering—although I should mention that all the festival field trips were conducted by bus or van, relatively efficient uses of fuel. Indeed, with all the attention and focus being lavished on birds and the environment that week, I would say that birders are a big part of the solution.

How I wished that the anonymous commenter from BirdChat could have been there in South Texas alongside me. Surely he or she would have seen the obvious good nature of birders there. Selfish? Short-sighted? No way.

Everywhere I go, festival or not, I find that birders are just as caring, generous, and environmentally aware as any other group you could name, usually far more so.

Have I ever met birders who seemed wholly unconcerned with the welfare of the creatures they watch? Sure I have. I've also met birders who are Nobel Prize winners. Both are remarkably uncommon.

Not that we birders can't or shouldn't play an even bigger role in conservation. I think we should, no question. I'll have more to say about what and how in future columns.

—Jeffrey A. Gordon

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