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American Kestrel: ABA Bird of the Year

In the birding world, perhaps even more often than in “real” life, things have a way of just coming together. The cover of the March, 2011 issue of *Birding* is a wonderful example of a number of fortuitous coincidences.

Back in the summer of 2010, I was thinking about ways the ABA could make itself more visible, especially in the field, which is where the relationships the ABA is built on happen: birder to birder, and birders to birds.

It occurred to me that, at this point in our history, there are few things more useless than an ABA membership card—not the membership, I hasten to clarify, but the *card*. At the moment—and fixing this is on my to-do list—the card doesn’t get you discounts on anything, or special access to anywhere.

Even if you *do* have an ABA card, it probably just sits at home in a drawer. It doesn’t let anyone know that you’re a member, and it doesn’t help you identify anyone else as a member, either.

I’ve been wanting something that would not only say you’re a member, but also a *current* member. What I’ve had in mind is a thank-you for—and a visible sign of—your ongoing support of the ABA.

One of the simplest, most elegant solutions I’ve ever seen to just this sort of problem is employed by our friends at New Jersey’s Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO). CMBO sells an annual pass to gain access to a choice bit of habitat called the Rea Farm, better known to most birders as the Beanery.

Now a lot of places sell annual passes. State parks are a good example. But they usually give you a window decal for your car. The Rea Farm stickers need to be visible *in the field*, so CMBO prints up a small circular sticker designed to be affixed to the rain guard or barrel of your binoculars, the signal piece of birding gear. Each year’s sticker features the observatory’s stylized falcon logo with a differently colored background.

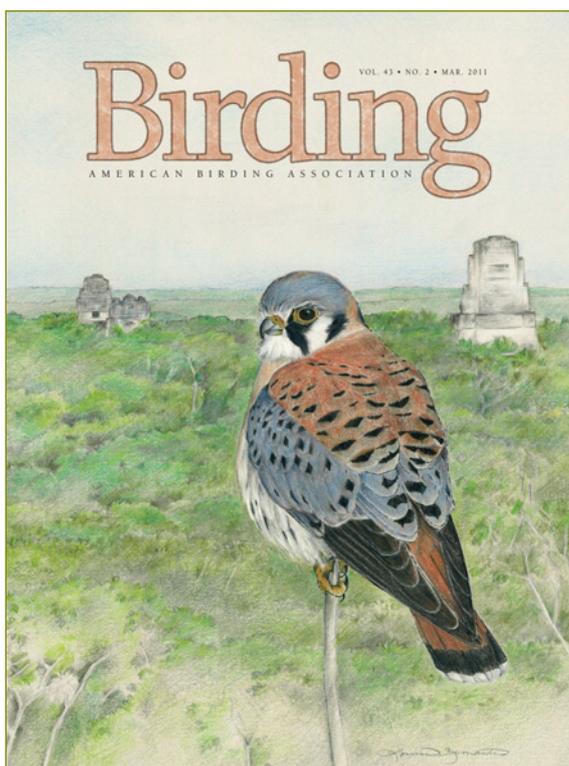
Over on the Gulf Coast, the Houston Audubon Society takes a slightly different approach to field-visible annual passes for their sanctuaries: a cloth patch with a different species of warbler each year.

The ABA’s very own conservation and education program, Birder’s Exchange, has also shown the value of little, round—in this case, unvarying—logo stickers that can be prominently affixed to birding optics. All over Central and South America, those Birders’ Exchange logos signify the generous support by ABA members of tropical birders and ornithologists.

I wanted to borrow something from each of these great programs: a small, inexpensive sticker and a different species of bird each year. Bound into the March 2011 issue of *Birding*, you’ll find a couple of these

stickers—the debut of the **ABA Bird of the Year**.

It seemed to me that the natural choice to kick off this program was the American Kestrel. It’s not just for all the reasons I outline in the note that accompanies the stickers (wonderful bird, colorful, common but imperiled, beloved of new and veteran birders alike), but also because the kestrel was a top vote getter in the “election” held a few years ago, when it was proposed



that the ABA should change, or at least reevaluate, its logo.

As a member at the time, I wasn't especially in favor of changing the logo. I like the stylized tropicbird with the blues and greens of land, sea, and sky. I think it does a logo's job well. But I agreed that there was merit to the idea that the ABA should have a totem that was more accessible than a rare, if striking, tropical seabird.

For the record, I did vote for the kestrel. I figured then, as I still do, that one of the things our organization most needs is change, and I was willing to go along with the program. But it turns out the single biggest vote-getter was "keep the tropicbird" and so it was kept. I think this Bird of the Year program gives us the best of both worlds: a time-tested graphic signature coupled with a regularly updated, more familiar species.

I took this idea to the ABA staff and they liked it. I asked *Birding* Editor Ted Floyd this past December what would be the soonest we could get a kestrel on the cover of *Birding*, and I received a pleasant surprise. He told me he had been in touch with Louise Zemaitis to do the March 2011 cover, and that it would feature a bird in Guatemala. He thought it likely she would do something endemic to the tropics, maybe a woodcreeper or a puffbird. But he also thought Louise would be open to illustrating a kestrel instead.

As you now know, Louise was more than happy to oblige. I love her cover art. It gives me a wonderful feeling of the tension between the familiar and the exotic that I think so animates birding. I've tried to describe that feeling in my "Birding Together" column on p. 9 of the print version of the March issue.

Time was short. A lot of tasks remained to be completed in order to launch the Bird of the Year by March. ABA Graphic Designer Ed Rother, working from a preliminary pencil sketch of the cover, did a fine job of adapting Louise's art as an image we could shrink down to sticker size. I'm so grateful to Ed and to ABA Director of Publications Bryan Patrick for the careful and quick work they did to make this project happen.

Finally, the Bird of the Year concept doesn't stop at just a sticker. We've got all kinds of ideas about featuring kestrel-related content in various venues throughout the year. We'll also be doing some fundraising both for the ABA and for kestrel conservation. Watch our publications and our website for more on those fronts.

We want your input, too. Do you know of a kestrel research or conservation program that we should feature? Or maybe you have an inspiration about a way the Bird of the Year could be used that we haven't thought of? Perhaps you'd like to nominate a species for the 2012 ABA Bird of the Year? As always, the staff and I seek your input. Feel free to contact me by e-mail <jgordon@aba.org>.



About the Cover Illustration Text and illustration by © Louise Zemaitis

I was pleased when I received a phone call from *Birding* Editor Ted Floyd requesting another piece of artwork for *Birding* magazine so soon after my Savannah Sparrow and robber fly cover (November 2010). The lure of creating a piece of artwork with a Guatemalan bird was too great. Regardless of time restraints, I had to do it.

Then came the second call. "Louise. What would you think of illustrating a North American migrant in Guatemala? Let's say the American Kestrel?"

Great! I love kestrels. Having started my birding career as a hawk watcher, and being from Cape May, I am also keenly aware of the kestrel's plight. After various communications with Liz Gordon for coaching and Jerry Liguori for stellar reference materials, I was on my way.

The layout of the male American Kestrel at Tikal was pretty straightforward. I have always enjoyed creating compositions that involve foreground and background. I do, however, tend to get caught up in the background vegetation. It always takes me at least twice as long as I expect it to! I think I used at least seven different shades of green pencils. The bird itself was a lot of fun. Male kestrels are so beautiful. They have always been one of my favorite subjects.

Just one item of business remains for me. Having never been to Tikal, I need to go there some day and see an American Kestrel, along with all the other wonderful birds that occur there. Now that would be fun!