

Some Thoughts on Bird Identification and the American Birding Association

Jeffrey A. Gordon • jgordon@aba.org

What is it about identifying birds correctly that feels so good? I don't know about you, but I find that when I'm in the field and my birding faculties seem fully engaged (both increasingly infrequent occurrences, sadly), there are few experiences in life more fun or ful-

filling. It's wonderful being outside, tuned in, and somehow harmonizing with the chorus of life all around me.

Then there are those days, or parts of days, where I feel really out of sync. I struggle with identifications, second guess myself, and generally make a hash of it. Those

days aren't nearly as much fun, although I've come to a grudging respect for the role they play in moving me forward.

I believe it's the same with any significant practice: My experiences with things like running, writing, meditating, guitar playing, singing, cooking, public speaking, marriage, and other worthwhile disciplines suggest that all of them offer their students periods of both grace and of awkward stumbling.

I think that skill in identifying birds is never going to go out of style. Like athletic prowess, verbal felicity, or artistic creativity, it's something people will always admire and aspire to.

And I don't think that identifying birds is some kind of byzantine parlor trick, amazing to see done well, but of little practical use. I think it matters. Getting the names of birds right is absolutely key to a deeper understanding of what's going on in our environment.

So I'm a big fan of bird identification. I think it is, at a minimum, one of the key components of the ABA's bedrock—the feldspar in our granite, at least. I don't ever



ABA Board member John Robinson teaches bird identification.

expect the ABA, or any significant manifestation of the birding community, to stop talking about it. Helping people get better at identifying birds will, as far as I can see, always be a big part of what we're about.

But I'm also convinced that, as Robert Fripp said, "Discipline is never an end in itself, only a means to an end." He wasn't talking about bird identification, but he could have been.

And while I stand by my statement above about getting the names right being key to a deeper environmental understanding, you can certainly be pretty darn good at bird identification without much of an understanding of the bigger picture.

You can also be pretty darn good at bird identification and be a joyless drudge, a misanthrope, or a crashing bore. You can wield your skill at diagnosing birds as both a cudgel and a scalpel, actively turning others off from birding.

What I find in practice, though, is that good birding, and particularly, great birding, requires all three legs of the stool: sharp identification skills, a broad and deep ecological context, and considerable social and communication ability.

Further, those second two legs actually strengthen the identification component. The really crackerjack identification wizards I know are that way in large part because they know a lot about birds beyond just their names, and because they share and interact well with other people.

So while I think the ABA ought always to be concerned with advancing our collective and individual knowledge of field identification, I also think it's crucial that we work on developing our "beyond-ID" understanding of birds, and our prowess at strengthening our community.

There's one other point I'd like to touch on regarding the ABA and bird identification. The first is that ID,

more than the other two areas of competence, has, in theory, a *right answer*. This (sometimes illusory) certitude gives identification not only a simplicity, but also a snap and a swagger that don't as easily flow from the messier, more multivariate equations of ecology and sociology.

What's that bird? Usually, there's a single correct answer. If you get this one wrong, you can approach the next one with a clean slate. And that one you'll get either right or wrong.

But what about understanding a certain weather system and its impact on migration? Or coming up with the best way to show or tell a group of school kids—or a town council or a planning and zoning commission—why birding matters and why birds and birders are worth caring about? Those are essay questions for sure, not simply true or false, as ID often is, or is perceived to be.

I think it's important to be aware of these differences as we decide what to tackle in the ABA's publications and online forums. Identification will always provide a satisfying chew and crunch that we won't get elsewhere. But a truly satisfying, complete meal doesn't just involve a juicy grilled steak or Portobello cap. It also takes in a pleasing variety of side dishes and beverages, as well as how the table is set and the people sitting and the conversation flowing around that table. All the pieces matter.

For my money, many of the most interesting questions in our community right now are being asked and answered in those other birding realms of ecology and community. I think it's the ABA's job to lead there, too.

But identification will always have its place and it will always be a central one. And I will always cherish and anticipate those days, past and future, when it feels like I'm getting all the answers right.