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Whiskered Auklet, Dutch Harbor
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Jaguar, Pantanal
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The American Birding Association, Inc., seeks to encourage and represent the North American birding community and to provide resources through publications, meetings, partnerships, and birder networks. The ABA’s education programs develop birding skills, an understanding of birds, and the will to conserve. The ABA’s conservation programs offer birders unique ways to protect birds and their habitats.

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On the cover: Atlanta, Georgia. Davis, California. Madison, Wisconsin. That’s where Patrick Maurice, Ioana Seritan, and David La Puma (l to r) traveled from to bird gorgeous Rocky Mountain National Park and environs during the ABA’s Camp Colorado 2013. Ms. Seritan is a Grand Prize winner of the 2013 ABA Young Birder of the Year contest. The ABA offers a wide variety of fun, educational programs and events for birders of all ages. For more information, go to events.aba.org. Photo © Jeffrey A. Gordon.
Welcome to the ABA’s Birder’s Guide series!

If you are already a member of the American Birding Association, thank you! I hope you’ll find this new quarterly publication useful, interesting, and of the high quality you associate with the ABA. We’re working hard to make the Birder’s Guide series something you’ll be proud of and look forward to.

If you’re reading this online, or picked up a copy at a birding festival, nature center, or other birdy place but are not yet a member of the ABA, welcome! The American Birding Association is a group of women and men, younger and older, from many different backgrounds and with many different ways of enjoying birding.

Though we’re a diverse bunch in many ways, we’re all united by an interest in how we can get more from our birding time and how we can give more to this wonderful sport—hobby—science—passion—obsession.

And so, we’ve developed the Birder’s Guide series. Designed to be practical, opinionated, authoritative, and accessible, the guides are a chance for us all to explore a topic of perennial interest to birders in depth, to share what works, what’s new, and what you need to know to be up to date.

For our inaugural issue, we’re focusing on birding travel, a subject near and dear to my heart and to the hearts of nearly all birders. And while birding travel may conjure up images of weeks-long expeditions to places remote and exotic, that’s only part of the picture. After all, what is one of the main questions survey takers use to determine who is or is not a birder or birdwatcher? “Do you travel away from home with the primary purpose of watching birds?”

The destination, as they say, is less important than the journey. Wherever your birding travels take you, I hope you’ll find the ABAs Birder’s Guide to Travel will improve your journey.

Good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon
President, American Birding Association

PS: The Birder’s Guide series is meant to be shared! If you enjoy this publication, please tell a friend or a whole flock of friends. Many of the issues will be available for free download here: <aba.org/birdersguide>. And please take the next step and become an ABA member by visiting <aba.org/join> or calling us at 800-850-2473! In doing so, you’ll not only benefit yourself and your own birding, but also the entire birding community and, in turn, the birds themselves.
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Welcome to the ABA’s Birder’s Guide to Travel!

This first issue of the ABA’s Birder’s Guide series strives to provide you with helpful, practical information to enhance your future birding travel experiences. Are you pondering a new location to visit? Articles on New Brunswick, Louisiana, and Colombia aim to persuade you to consider what may be some new possible destinations. If you’ve never been birding on a boat, or even if you have, pelagic birding guru Debi Shearwater offers not-to-be missed advice in her “Pelagic Birding Primer”. Not sure what (and what not) to pack? Alan Knue’s “Birding 411” article is here to help get you through airport security as easily as possible. And Diana Doyle’s “Tech Tips for Travel” offers sound advice on which apps and websites can help you make the most of your trip once you get there.

Speaking of websites, be sure to drop in at <aba.org/birdersguide> every once in a while. We plan on offering expanded online content as the series progresses. Look for the symbol on the left to get all the online details.

No matter what your interests, or your time and ability to travel, I hope you will find something useful in this issue. If you didn’t, please let us know what you’d like to see in the next issue. Let us know what you liked, too, so that we can start planning next year’s Birder’s Guide to Travel. And as always, we love to hear from folks who want to offer their own advice to the rest of the membership by penning an article.

Happy travels!

Michael L. P. Retter
Editor, Birder’s Guide
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About the Authors

**Diana Doyle** travels 12 months a year aboard a catamaran, aptly named “Semi-Local”, and is the Department Editor for Birding’s “Tools of the Trade” column. She’s working on her “personally found” list, trying to locate birds without land or sea tour groups, guides, or listserv stakeouts.

**Jim Edsall** is an expert wood carver/sculptor living in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. He has created more than 700 sculptures representing more than 180 bird species, some of which have been presented to President Bill Clinton and artist Robert Bateman. His work is on display in interpretive centers and museums across Canada and the U.S. An avid birder, Jim is also an expert on local butterflies, moths, mosquitoes, dragonflies, and ticks.

**Richard Gibbons** is the Director of Conservation for Houston Audubon. He has worked as an ornithologist throughout the Americas for 17 years, during which time he earned his PhD at Louisiana State University’s Museum of Natural Science, where he split his time between coordinating citizen science projects in Louisiana and studying birds, wetlands, and climate change in Peru’s high Andes.

**Alan Knue** has traveled extensively around Canada, the U.S., the Caribbean, Middle America, South America, Australia, and Europe, and has recently begun sampling the diverse avifaunae of Asia and Africa. Alan’s home port is Seattle, Washington, where he lives with his partner Rob, one dog, and one indoor cat.

**Susan Myers** is a tour leader for WINGS/Sunbird and has been a specialist in Asian birding for almost 20 years. The author of the *Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo*, she makes no apologies for a slight bias towards the rainforest birds of Southeast Asia. Originally from Australia, Susan now spends a lot of her time in North America’s incomparable Pacific Northwest, exploring a very different type of rainforest, as well as volcanoes and plains.

**Debi Love Shearwater** has been blazing a trail by offering pelagic trips on the West Coast with her company, Shearwater Journeys, for nearly four decades. A world traveler, she leads expedition voyages to the far ends of the Earth. Debi is a past member of the ABA Board of Directors and resides in Hollister, California.

**Nate Skinner** has worked in tourism operations in Alaska, Ecuador, and Colombia, where he once served as the Director of Development and Communications for Fundación Proaves. Nate holds a master’s degree in environmental policy and natural resource management. He, his wife Sarah, their son Samuel, and two dogs currently live in Denver, Colorado.

**Nate Swick** manages the ABA Blog and various other social media initiatives. He lives with his wife and young son in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he is an environmental educator for several local organizations.
Bons oiseaux, bons temps en **Louisiane**!

Louisiana proudly stands apart from the rest of the United States with its unique history of rural French-speaking Cajuns and

Ornithology in Louisiana shares an equally rich and textured history. Alexander Wilson worked through the swamps and hills of Louisiana to produce the U.S.’s first ornithological account, *American Ornithology*. Soon thereafter, John James Audubon was overwhelmed with the birdlife of Louisiana and gained inspiration there for the majority of the prints in his *Birds of America*. The tradition continued, with ornithological giants such as Harry C. Oberholser, George H. Lowery, Jr., John P. O’Neill, J. V. Remsen, and Ted Parker honing their craft in Louisiana. Today, a growing group of ornithologists and committed birders continues to make substantial contributions to the understanding of Louisiana’s birds.

Louisiana has more than its fair share of outstanding birding opportunities. Spring migration in the coastal woodlots and rice fields is unforgettable. The highest concentrations of trans-Gulf migrants are centered on the Texas-Louisiana state line, and compared to famous destinations in adjacent Texas (e.g., High Island, Sabine Woods), the migrant traps of southwest Louisiana are relatively underbirded. Summer birding provides some of the best opportunities anywhere to see such breeders as Swallow-tailed Kite, Swainson’s Warbler, and Bachman’s Sparrow. Autumn sees a long, protracted procession of migratory birds working their way southward, and wintering birds arrive with each passing cold front.
the saucy mix of cultures in New Orleans. U.S. literature, music, and art have been inspired by this melting pot since the 1700s.
What may be the most exciting aspect of Louisiana birding is the opportunity for discovery. Louisiana is still largely composed of wildlife habitat with cities sprinkled throughout, rather than the other way around, as in many other states.

It was this fact that provided the state’s Important Bird Area Program the enviable challenge of having to draw lines around huge areas of land because there were no clear breaks. Although you may run into more people with a rod and reel or Catahoula hound than a binocular and field guide, the outdoor camaraderie is evident. Louisiana’s great outdoor tradition is reflected in its willingness to devote swaths of land to a staggering number of state parks and wildlife management areas, not to mention the vast Kisatchie National Forest.

Louisiana is touted as America’s Wetland. With more than 40% of the U.S.’s coastal marshes, it’s easy to understand why. These highly productive marshes provide habitat for millions of birds and act as a natural nursery for coastal fisheries. To the distress of many, these marshes have been eroding at a rate of 25–30 square miles per year due to land subsidence and the impediment of marsh-nourishing sediments. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita accelerated the problem when they roared ashore at opposite ends of the state in 2005. Adding insult to injury, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill washed rafts of crude oil into the marshes and onto the beaches, miring Louisiana’s birds as the world looked on in horror. Now, the restoration of America’s Wetland is the focus, and nature tourism is being seen as an important part of a sustainable coastal economy.

Despite habitat loss, birding continues to grow in popularity in Louisiana, and state and local governments are responding with new opportunities. Several birding trails offer insights to birding areas throughout the state, while new citizen-science projects such as the Louisiana Bird Atlas provide that little extra motivation to get observers out there and explore.

**Geography**

Although Louisiana is often thought to consist only of swamps, marshes, and bayous, the truth is that those terms apply to only a small percentage of the state. Fields and forests abound. Thousands of acres of national forest lands cover much of the sandy hills of the north central region. There is even a knob in the north that is almost defiantly referred to as Driscoll Mountain, towering at 535 feet above sea level.

Oak/hickory is considered to be the climax forest type for much of the state. Nevertheless, settlers found considerable prairie in the southwest and a band of pines near the coast, especially in the southeast. The prairie was expropriated for rice fields, and “Attwater’s” Prairie-Chicken and Whooping Crane were all but extirpated by 1919. The old-growth bottomland hardwoods were virtually all harvested and sent to local mills. As a result, Ivory-billed Woodpecker was last documented here in 1941. Nor were the oaks and hickories safe. They, too, were cut, and pines planted in their place by the...
large lumber companies, who were also the large landowners. The pines, of course, could be cut for market every twenty years or so, while the hardwoods would require a human lifetime to mature.

The four main habitat types found today are pine uplands, coastal marshes, coastal prairies of the southwest, and bottomland hardwoods of the Mississippi/Atchafalaya/Red River floodplains. A subclassification of the pine uplands is the Shortleaf Pine area in the extreme north, along the Red River. The pine uplands comprise three distinct regions. They are in the west central portion of the state, the north central district, and the parishes north of Lake Pontchartrain. The coastal marshes extend from the Gulf inland for some 20–25 miles. Generally treeless, the marshes do support low oaken ridges, called cheniers, that serve as resting and foraging points for trans-Gulf Neotropical migrants. The bottomlands are dotted with cypress/tupelo swamps that exist in areas where runoff is poor or nonexistent. It should be remembered that over the eons, the Mississippi River has flowed through a great deal of Louisiana. An abandoned river bed, therefore, stands an excellent chance of becoming a swamp at some point. A number of reforestation projects center around the bottoms in northeast Louisiana.
Here is a sampling of birding locations across the state which, together, offer birders the wide variety of habitats and birds that make Louisiana a great travel destination. These excerpts come from the forthcoming ABA Birdfinding Guide, *A Birder’s Guide to Louisiana*, by Richard Gibbons, Roger Breedlove, and Charles Lyon. It will be available for purchase from Buteo Books <www.buteobooks.com>.

**Peveto Woods Migratory Bird Sanctuary**

If you are new to Louisiana, you may not be familiar with the term *chenier* (pronounced shuh-NEER). It is a French word meaning “place of oaks”. These are “oak mottes” to our Texas neighbors, but you ain’t in Texas, mes amis. The slight elevation permits oaks and other trees to persist and serve as forested habitat islands in a sea of marsh. This habitat is a welcome respite to migratory songbirds heading north, south, or along the coast. For this reason, cheniers can be excellent birding spots and have the potential to be mind-blowing in April and early May if the winds are out of the north or there is substantial rain.

Peveto Woods Migratory Bird Sanctuary is owned and maintained by the Baton Rouge Audubon Society. (In the past it was known by a variety of other names, including the Holleyman-Sheely Migratory Bird Sanctuary.) Considering the last few hurricanes to strike the area, maintenance has been a tall order. Trails lead to views of wind-blown scrub, fields, hedges, and oak and hackberry woods that dot the landscape. The woods here are best visited during spring when migrants can be seen coming in off the Gulf, although this island of trees may hold interesting birds at any season. The deer flies and mosquitoes build to an unforgiving mob by late spring or summer, so dress and slather accordingly.

To reach the sanctuary from the LA-27/82 intersection at Holly Beach, drive west on LA-82 for 8.7 mi. Turn left at PR-528 (Gulf View Road), heading south toward the Gulf of Mexico. After a quarter mile, take a right onto Beach Blvd and go 2.9 miles to the park entrance.
mi., take another left onto the first gravel road, which leads to a parking area. Pause at the metal donation box at the entrance to the woods to contribute to the sanctuary’s upkeep. Bring a lawn chair and use insect repellent. One of the best areas in this chenier is the watering hole just east of the sanctuary’s entrance. Fifteen or more species of warblers within the span of three or four hours is not an uncommon number during the peak of migration. The more regularly-occurring warblers that can be seen include Yellow-breasted Chat, Ovenbird, Louisiana and Northern waterthrushes, American Redstart, Northern Parula, Worm-eating, Golden-winged, Blue-winged, Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Tennessee, Nashville, Kentucky, Hooded, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Yellow-throated, Black-throated Green, and Canada. Rarely seen are Swainson’s, Mourning, Cape May, Cerulean, and Black-throated Blue. Exceptional finds are Virginia’s, Connecticut, Hermit, Townsend’s, and Painted Redstart.

Eastern Wood-Pewee, Empidonax flycatchers, and Great Crested Flycatcher forage in the sanctuary. Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos (the latter uncommon), Yellow-throated, Warbling, and Philadelphia vireos, Veery, Gray-cheeked, Swainson’s, and Wood thrushes, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Baltimore Oriole are found almost daily. Lesser Nighthawk, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Lazuli Bunting are very rare but possible.

**Rice Country**

The Louisiana rice country, for purposes of this chapter, is the land west and south of the city of Lafayette—loosely bounded on the west by the Mermentau River, on the south by LA-14, and on the north by US-90. LA-91, LA-13, and LA-35 are the important north-south arteries, whereas LA-92 aids in traversing the rice field habitats east to west. This is not to say, of course, that rice isn’t grown in other regions, or that shorebirds aren’t found elsewhere. Indeed, there are rice fields far to the north in the state and great shorebirding may be had in those areas, as well as along the coast. Nevertheless, this is the very heart of Louisiana shorebirding. This is where our only Black-tailed Godwit was found in 1994 and where, some years, a Curlew Sandpiper or a Ruff is located. Winter visitors also include scarce-but-regular Vermilion and Ash-throated flycatchers.

There are many approaches to a day of shorebirding that include such an extravagant number of venues. An advisable route would be to drive west on US-90 from Lafayette to the community of Duson and explore to the south between LA-343 and LA-719, checking the fields that can be accessed by public roads. Return to Duson and continue west on US-90 to the town of Rayne, a village that advertises itself as the “Frog Capital of the World”. Turn left (south) onto LA-35 and continue 15 mi. or so to the town of Kaplan. Along the way, check all of the intersections, particularly the one with LA-699. Explore the side roads for fields containing shorebirds.

The excellent chance to see a Yellow Rail is the reason hundreds of birders now flock to Louisiana in the autumn. Photo © Michael Retter.
In Kaplan, turn right (west) onto LA-14 and proceed for 1.5 mi. to its intersection with LA-13. Turn right (north) and drive about 15 mi. to Crowley, checking side roads for suitable habitat. At Crowley, turn left onto westbound US-90. Two mi. west of Estherwood (a junction marked as Midland on some maps), turn left (south) onto LA-91 and drive (remembering, of course, to check the side roads) about 12 mi. to Gueydan, a town which self-bills as the “Duck Capital of the World”. At Gueydan, turn right onto LA-14 and go west for 7.7 mi. to LA-717; turn left (south). This road is a loop that eventually winds back around to LA-14 and passes through some of the best goose and duck habitat to be found anywhere in the state in winter. When LA-717 again intersects LA-14, turn right to explore the section of LA-14 between Gueydan and Kaplan not yet traveled; then turn left at Kaplan onto LA-35. LA-92 intersects LA-35 about 8 mi. north of Kaplan. Turn left here and check the fields for shorebirds along this road for about 13 mi. to the village of Morse. At Morse, take a right onto LA-91 to return to US-90 at Estherwood.

Because of the ephemeral nature of rice (and crawfish) farms, it is impossible to know from day to day, much less from week to week, which intersections are hot or which road will be the most productive. One simply drives the area watching for flocks of shorebirds. Dry, bare ground generally requires only the briefest of glances, but may harbor an American Golden-Plover or two in spring. Very wet rice fields with the green shoots reaching high above the water, though they may contain herons, ibis, Black-necked Stilts, and yellowlegs, are not usually shorebird hotspots. Shorebirds seem to particularly prefer mudflats. The trick is to find a field in which the farmer is changing the water level. As the water moves from one field to another, it exposes vast, soaked flats, often teeming with life near the surface upon which the shorebirds thrive. After a few days of frantic feeding, the birds drift away to find rich new fields. It is not unusual to find 10–15 species sharing the same half-acre in mixed flocks numbering in the hundreds. Occasionally, they will be found by the thousands.

Not exactly electrifying, summer birding in the rice fields nevertheless may be interesting. Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, Green Heron, both night-herons, Roseate Spoonbill, Eastern Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Indigo and Painted buntings, and Dickcissel nest here, in addition to Mottled Duck and King Rail. Wood Storks put in an annual appearance as post-breeding dispersers.
from Mexico.

Birding picks up in fall with the arrival of rails and migrating shorebirds. These fields collectively represent the most reliable place in the state to see Yellow Rail in late autumn. The rice farms in south Louisiana often are cut for a second crop in late October and early November. Knowledgeable birders will look for a combine (a harvesting machine) working a field near a road and then focus their gaze on the rice stalks just in front of the reaper. Virginia Rail and Sora will often flush as the machine bears down upon them. With a little luck and a modicum of patience, one will be rewarded with the sight of a Yellow Rail as it begrudgingly flies away from the combine to a less hazardous locale.

Winter birding here is outstanding. Least and Western sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitchers are common, interspersed with a few Stilt Sandpipers. Geese (including Ross’s) and dabbling ducks abound. Every so often, a Golden Eagle or a Ferruginous Hawk will be spotted. These fields are the winter haunt of Short-eared Owls, best observed in early evening as they begin their dusk patrols in search of rodents. In late winter both yellowlegs species are around in fair numbers, as are Black-necked Stilts. Look for Horned Lark in the drier fields, along with Lapland Longspur. Lincoln’s Sparrow is present in the hedgerows, and Harris’s Sparrow has been found here. Look for Sprague’s Pipits, always present in small numbers, in shortgrass areas such as roadside shoulders and grazed pastures.

Springtime, however, is the pride of the rice country. Great flocks of Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Semipalmated, Western, Least, and Stilt sandpipers, Dunlin, and Long-billed Dowitcher are commonplace. In lesser numbers, but present, are Semipalmated Plover, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, White-rumped, Baird’s, and Buff-breasted sandpipers, Wilson’s Snipe, and Wilson’s Phalarope.

Before birding the rice country, be sure you have ample gas, a Louisiana roadmap, and your spotting scope. As in many other parts of the state, road shoulders are at a premium. Park as far off the highway as possible and set up your scope, where practical, in front of your vehicle.

Lake Martin—Cypress Island Preserve

To get to Lake Martin from the intersection of I-49 and I-10 in Lafayette, drive 6.2 mi. east on I-10 to Breaux Bridge (LA-328, Exit 109). Turn right (south) onto LA-328 and drive 1.7 mi. Turn right onto East Bridge St. for 0.2 mi. and then left onto LA-31 (Main St.). Drive south 2.7 mi. to Lake Martin Rd. and take a right. It is 1.8 mi. to the northeast side of the lake. The Nature Conservancy has undertaken the management of a portion of these varied habitats. While the lake has its points of interest at any season, the rookeries in spring are nothing short of incredible! It is one of those rare phenomena that really must be seen to be fully appreciated. Even the non-birding local folk, as well as casual tourists, line the roadsides in April. The cypress limbs bend with the weight of birds. The sight of thousands of herons and egrets of every description attending upon their nests is staggering. Hundreds of Anhingas, ibises, and Roseate Spoonbills add to the drama. The occasional Neotropic Cormorant will be spotted.

Lake Martin is of interest beyond the rookeries. Wood Thrush, Northern Parula, and Prothonotary, Yellow-throated, and Hooded warblers can be heard singing during the breeding season, while a plethora of songbirds use the area as a stopover in migration. House and Winter wrens, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned kinglets, Orange-crowned Warbler, and a host of other species overwinter.
Bons oiseaux, bons temps en Louisiane!

**Sherburne Wildlife Management Area**

Located on the eastern edge of the Atchafalaya Basin, this extensive hardwood habitat has historically been one of the best and easiest places in the state to encounter Swallow-tailed Kite between late March and the end of June. To get to this area from either Baton Rouge or Lafayette, take I-10 (west from Baton Rouge or east from Lafayette) to Exit 127 (just east of the Whiskey Bay bridge over the Atchafalaya River) and turn north onto LA-975. This mostly gravel road, while not exceptionally well maintained, is generally passable. Caution should be exercised as all-terrain vehicles and other auto traffic are often present, and there are many blind curves where your view is blocked by the river levee. LA-975 winds about for 17.4 mi. until it intersects US-190 to the north, just across the Atchafalaya River from the little village of Krotz Springs. Obey the speed limit in this town, where the law is quite diligent about monitoring the passing motorists.

The birding along LA-975 can be interesting in winter, but it is excellent during migration and in early summer. There are a couple of side roads leading away from the river (toward the east) that allow auto traffic and may be explored. Watch for Wild Turkey, or at least listen for the “gobble” of the males in early spring. Keep an eye to the sky during the breeding season for the many soaring species. In addition to Swallow-tailed Kite, you are likely to see Anhinga, several species of herons and egrets, Mississippi Kites by the dozen, and Red-shouldered Hawk. In late summer, Wood Storks may be seen taking advantage of the free transportation that the thermals provide. Other nesters of the basin include Downy, Hairy, and Pileated woodpeckers, Acadian and Great Crested flycatchers, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Black-and-white, Kentucky, Yellow-throated, and Hooded warblers, American Redstart, Northern Parula, and Summer Tanager. Around stream crossings and side-road canals, listen for the ringing song of Prothonotary Warbler and the sharply insistent whistles of Swainson’s Warbler.

Birding the west (levee) side of the road can be equally productive. The levee is posted “no trespassing”, so driving or walking on it is prohibited. Nevertheless, Indigo and Painted buntings and Orchard Oriole are extremely conspicuous from the roadway in summer. In fact, Breeding Bird Surveys con-
ducted in this area for a great many years by Van Remsen have shown this overall area to contain the state’s highest concentration of breeders that winter in the Neotropics. In winter, the entire area is great for wintering wrens and sparrows.

It is possible to drive for many miles on the continuation of LA-975 (which might be signed by some other name) north of the US-190 junction. Return to US-190 and head east to reach Baton Rouge. You can get to Lafayette by heading west to Opelousas on US-190, then turning left (south) onto I-49 to its end at I-10.

**Stuart Lake**

Located in the southern sector of Grant Parish, Stuart Lake lies in the Catahoula Ranger District of Kisatchie National Forest. The habitat is pine upland, and the entire area could easily be traversed in a morning’s hike.

To reach this sylvan delight, go north from Alexandria on US-167 for about 16 mi. to the sleepy community of Bentley. Turn right (east) at the caution light on LA-8 and proceed for 1.6 mi. Take another right onto FS-147, Work Center Rd. This avenue passes a pine-seed orchard under which the grass is always mown, providing forage for many ground feeders. Follow this road for 0.8 mi. Take a right onto FR-146. Although only 1.1 mi. in length, this gravel lane brushes shortgrass meadows and a tangle of mixed forest, the former good for Upland and Buff-breasted sandpipers during spring. The meadows also support residents such as Eastern Bluebird and Eastern Meadowlark. During spring and summer, Eastern Kingbirds can be seen, as well as Eastern Wood-Peewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Kentucky, Hooded, and Yellow-throated warblers, and Summer Tanager.

Take a left when FR-146 intersects Stuart Lake Road. Proceed north on this winding asphalt for 1.4 mi. Here, several white-marked longleaf pines house a Red-cockaded Woodpecker cluster. Another active cluster can be found within yards of the road at 1.7 mi. The birds are most reliably found at cluster sites such as these very early and late in the day.

The open area beneath the pines is the result of controlled burns carried out in an attempt to approximate nature. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers require relatively mature longleaf pines, but they also insist that the area below their colony site be open and without dense tangles.

Other species benefit from the burns. Bachman’s Sparrow is a plentiful permanent resident here, although it’s a skulker except during the early breeding season when singing. During winter, Henslow’s Sparrow can be fairly numerous; however it often requires several flushes before it decides to perch and provide a good view. At 2.1 mi., another paved road leads to the left. This is the entrance to the Stuart Lake Recreation Area. Quiet during summer and abandoned during winter, Stuart Lake is a scenic spot where one can pause simply to enjoy the ambience or take a jaunt on the nature trail, along which one may hear the buzz of a Worm-eating Warbler during spring and early summer.

**Cross Lake**

Although not an exceptionally large impoundment, this 8,000+ acre open body...
of shallow water has produced a surprising number of rarities, particularly in winter and during migration. A few examples are Surf, White-winged, and Black scoters, Common Merganser, Red-throated Loon, Red-necked and Western grebes, Sabine’s Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, and Ringed Kingfisher. The lake is just large enough so that Bald Eagle is not unexpected during the colder months. Wintering ducks run the gamut and include the entire Anas spectrum, plus Canvasback, Redhead, scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and Ruddy Duck. A male Cape May Warbler spent a recent winter along the lakeshore, and a year or so later a male Tropical Parula did so, as well.

While Cross Lake may well be Louisiana’s number one inland lake for rarity sightings, the bad news is that development along the shores has severely limited the chances for birders to use a spotting scope to search for them. In fact, a large portion of the water’s surface cannot be scrutinized from the few spots along the banks that allow public access. Added to the problem is the lack of adequate parking, as the narrow shoulders and the law prohibit pulling off the road except in emergency situations. Nevertheless, the reward-to-risk ratio is great enough to warrant a visit by birders during the winter. This is particularly true if it is combined with a side trip to one of the nearby parks or nature areas.

To begin a tour of Cross Lake, take the northbound I-220 bypass from its junction with I-20 west of Shreveport and exit west onto Lakeshore Drive (Exit 2). At 0.9 mi., the road Ts at South Lakeshore Drive. Turn left and drive 0.4 mi. to the entrance to Ford Park. Ford Park occupies property on both sides of the road; however, the small segment of the park on the lake side can be more interesting to birders and is worth a look. In addition to a good view of the lake, resident White-breasted and Brown-headed nuthatches can be seen and heard here. Red-breasted Nuthatch joins them during irruptive winters. Also in winter, Winter Wrens and Rusty Blackbirds work the lake edges where bald-cypress and tupelo occur.

A public boat launch operated by Shreveport Parks and Recreation is 0.2 mi. farther along on the right—one of the very few sites from which a scope gives you a good look across an expanse of open water. Visible from here is an island rookery used by Double-crested Cormorants, herons, egrets, and perhaps even a Bald Eagle. During post-breeding dispersal season, the roosting birds number in the tens of thousands.

At 0.7 mi. farther, the Valencia On Cross Lake special event center has a parking lot with a great view across the lake. The next

FREE Louisiana Guide Online!
For the first time ever, you can get a FULL copy of an ABA Birdfinding Guide online for FREE! Just go to www.aba.org/siteguides/la.html. The ABA gratefully acknowledges the support of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area in making this free e-guide possible. Hard copies are available for purchase from Buteo Books at www.buteobooks.com or 800-722-2460.
An opportunity to use a scope doesn’t come for an additional 1.4 mi. Here, a small turnout at a grocery and boat dock offers a limited view of the lake. One of the lake’s heron roosts may be observed off to the right. A half-mile ahead you may legally park on the right just prior to crossing a bridge that spans a very small arm of the lake. Continue west on South Lakeshore Drive for an additional 5.5 mi. to LA-169 (Greenwood Mooringsport Road), and access to the next birding site.

*Walter B. Jacobs Memorial Nature Park*  
This park is best reached as a side trip from the south lakeshore trip detailed above. Travel north on LA-169 (Greenwood Mooringsport Rd.) for about 3.5 mi. into the small community of Longwood. Here, LA-169 meets Blanchard-Furrh Road, which is marked by a caution light. Turn right and go east for 2.7 mi. to the entrance to Walter B. Jacobs Park located on the north (left) side of the road.

This nature center, complete with exhibits, feeders, and birding trails, is always a joy to visit. In winter, the patient birder may see Blue-headed Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Fox Sparrow, Pine Siskin, and Purple Finch. A late-spring walk along the trails may yield a glimpse of Red-shouldered Hawk, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Louisiana Waterthrush, Swainson’s (rare) and Yellow-throated warblers, and Summer Tanager.

*Richard Fleming Park*  
From the entrance to Walter Jacobs Park, turn left (east) toward Blanchard and drive 1.4 mi. to North Lakeshore Drive. Turn right (south) and proceed for 1.8 mi. and turn right onto West Lakeshore Drive. From this intersection, it is 1 mi. to the Richard Fleming Park entrance on the left. The park is small enough to walk, rimmed by a 0.4-mi. loop trail. This small stopover for migrants attracts Warbling and Philadelphia (uncommon) vireos, Blue-winged, Mourning (uncommon), Magnolia, Yellow, and Black-throated Green warblers, and American Redstart. White-breasted Nuthatch is almost always found, along with Barred Owl.

Winter species include Blue-headed Vireo and Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped warblers. Some of the common breeders are Prothonotary Warbler, Northern Parula, and Yellow-throated Warbler. Be certain to walk the trail that parallels the bayou leading to the lake from the boat ramp. In many years, Winter Wren is one of the most numerous species encountered along this peninsula during the colder months. This area serves as an excellent migrant trap, as well.
ABA Birding Rally: San Diego, California

October 12-16, 2013 • San Diego, CA

Hosts: Gary Nunn, Jon Dunn, Forrest Rowland, Jennie Duberstein, George Armistead, Jeff & Liz Gordon, Bill Stewart, John Puschock, and more. Pelagic leaders include: Paul Lehman & Guy McCaskie.

Cost: $1195

Extension: October 17-18 to the Salton Sea ($495)

At a nexus for migration, with a generous diversity of near endemics, birding Southern California in autumn is unparalleled. With the longest county lists in the ABA area all in southern California, many species and good numbers of them abound. Just over 500 species have been recorded in San Diego County, and new finds are being added to the list all the time. Migrants are plentiful in October and regional specialties include California Gnatcatcher, California Thrasher, Wrentit, Nuttall’s Woodpecker, often Lawrence’s Goldfinch and even Mountain Quail is a possibility. Offshore we’ll search for alcids, jaegers, and “rafting” Black and Least Storm-Petrel, which may number several thousand strong.

Join your fellow ABA birders in this unique birding hotspot to enjoy the diversity of its birds and the good company too.

Photos by © Steven Tucker

IFO • Winter Sparrows of the Southwest

December 5-10, 2013
Sierra Vista, AZ

Instructor: Homer Hansen
Cost: $1395  Limit: 6 people

Southeastern Arizona is home to many resident species of breeding sparrows and a favored location for migrants to overwinter. We will visit semi-desert grasslands and riparian woodlands to observe the behavior and habitat selection of over 20 species of sparrows, towhees, and longspurs.

Photo by © Michael Retter

ABA Birding Rally: Plymouth, Massachusetts

January 31–February 3, 2014
Plymouth, MA


Cost: TBA

When the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth in 1620, what did they see? There must have been Razorbills, Black Guillemots, and probably murres, and even Great Auks working the coast. Things have changed a bit since Captain John Smith’s days, but a lot is still the same too. The Clam Chowder has always been good, and the tough, plump Purple Sandpipers still work the tide-line along the rocks, while scoters and Common Eiders still drift offshore, just as they did in 1620. The Cape Cod area is a hotbed for rarities too. Join your ABA birding friends in legendary Plymouth!

King Eider with Common Eiders

Photos by © Jeremih Trimble
ABA Convention: Corpus Christi, Texas
April 22–26, 2014 • Corpus Christi, TX

ABA Convention Staff: Jeff Gordon, Tom Johnson, Jen Brumfield, George Armistead, and more. Speakers include Gerrit Vyn, Brian Sullivan and Jeffrey Kimball.

Registration: Opens Sept 20th, 2013

Migration is at its best in April along the Gulf Coast and there’s no better spot to take it all in than Corpus Christi. Join ABA members and staff for thrilling field trips in search of migrants and Texas specialties.

South Africa Safari
October 7-17, 2014
Capetown and Kruger National Park

ABA Safari Staff: Adam Riley, Jeff & Liz Gordon, Forrest Rowland, George Armistead, and more.

Registration: Opens January, 2014

Big game, incredible birds, an amazing group of people all gathering for a great cause. Join the ABA, Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures, and BirdLife South Africa for an utterly unique Safari experience. Safari profits will help support local conservation efforts through BirdLife South Africa.

IFO • The Cradle of American Ornithology
March 26–30, 2014 • Philadelphia, PA

Instructors: George Armistead, Bert Filemyr & Ted Floyd

Cost: TBA  Limit: 16 people

The City of Brotherly Love is the birthplace of our nation, but also the birthplace of bird study in North America. Join Pennsylvania natives Ted Floyd and George Armistead as they retrace the steps of luminaries such as Audubon, Wilson, Cassin, Say, and Bond (yes, James Bond!), among others. We’ll examine the rich history of this area and of course go birding too.

For all the latest details on these and more events, go to events.aba.org. Call Nancy at (800) 850-2473, x234 or email her at nhawley@aba.org to reserve a spot!
Let me be totally upfront: This is a frivolous article. I probably should apologize, but I feel we need more fun in birding. There’s a time and a place for serious, but it’s also important to just enjoy the birds. So here goes!

This is my list of the 20 best birds in Asia. It’s purely subjective, of course. You may scoff at my choices and cry in disbelief that I omitted the incomparable Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler (or some other deserving bird). I’ve chosen these birds simply because I like them, and because I have photographs of some of them. I left out many birds because I only have room for 20. But, hey, with so many favorite birds to choose from (I have way more than 20 favorites in Asia!), I don’t feel too bad about mixing and matching.
1. **Great Argus**  
*Argusianus argus*  
*Thai-Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Borneo.* To be honest, if I were to write my list of the 20 Best Birds in Asia tomorrow, and then again the next day, it would undoubtedly be different each time. But right now this bird is at the top of my list and has been for some time. Surely it would make anyone’s Top 10. Not only does it live in one of the world’s most beautiful forests, but the male, in particular, is an amazing creature, and has one of the more memorable calls of any bird. I imagine he sees his own reflection and is so enamored with himself that he calls out, “Oh, wow!” (Please indulge a momentary lapse into blatant anthropomorphism...) The other great thing about this amazing pheasant is that, unlike so many of its ilk, it is quite possible, if you time it right, to really get to know him, to spend some time with him. He can be quite approachable, especially in Danum Valley in Borneo. It’s remarkable that when humans cease to harass many of these birds, they begin to tolerate us.

2. **Blue-headed Pitta**  
*Pitta baudii*  
*Endemic to Borneo.* The pittas are among the most glamorous birds in the world. And where do you find most of them? Why, in Asia, of course.
It's hard to pick the best out of a large group of very attractive and enigmatic species, but to my mind the Blue-headed Pitta is simply one of the world's most dazzling creatures. For many birders, the pittas are the Holy Grail. A friend of mine, Chris Goodie, spent a whole year seeing all the world's pittas. Check out his slide show at <pittasworld.com>. I chose the Blue-headed Pitta for its beauty and charisma. But I could equally have selected Bar-bellied Pitta (Vietnam), Ivory-breasted Pitta (Halmahera), or Gurney’s Pitta (southern Burma and Thailand)...

3. **Great Slaty Woodpecker**  
   *Mulleripicus pulverulentus*  
   Northeast Himalayas, Southeast Asia, Sumatra, Java, and Borneo. I've never met a birder who doesn't claim woodpeckers as one of his or her favorite groups, and Asia has the best collection of any continent. (I apologize for sounding biased.) This species is the world's largest extant woodpecker (the larger Imperial Woodpecker of Mexico is now, sadly, extinct), and, rather unusual for a woodpecker, it is gregarious. The species is active and noisy, with a very distinctive braying call, and usually appears in groups of up to seven birds. Personal tastes vary, and others might prefer the diminutive and crazy Gray-and-buff Woodpecker or the stately White-bellied Woodpecker, but for me, the Great Slaty Woodpecker illustrates better than any other species the fact that birds are simply flying dinosaurs.

4. **Indian Peafowl**  
   *Pavo cristatus*  
   India and Sri Lanka. Everybody knows this bird, and many will wonder why on Earth I’ve included this bird on my list. All I can do is trot out the old platitude that “familiarity breeds contempt.” To appreciate the beauty of this bird in its natural habitat is a truly wonderful experience. It’s not just the peahen who is captivated by the male’s shimmering display!

5. **Mrs. Gould’s Sunbird**  
   *Aethopyga gouldiae*  
   The Himalayas, western and central China, northern Southeast Asia, and Vietnam. There are many very fancy Asian sunbirds. Like little jewels on wings, they make up another group from which it’s hard to choose a favorite. But this one qualifies because of its tasteful color scheme as well as its name. Elizabeth Gould never received enough credit during her short lifetime, so it’s fitting that such a gorgeous creature bears her name. Elizabeth was the artist who created many, if not most, of the magnificent bird and macropod illustrations that were attributed to her husband, John Gould, or to Henry C. Richter, another illustrator employed by her husband. She died at the age of 37 soon after the birth of her eighth child. That should give you
reason enough to never call this bird by the abbreviated name, “Gould’s Sunbird”!

6•Fire-tailed Myzornis
(Myzornis pyrrhoura)
Bhutan, China, India, Burma, and Nepal. This exceptional babbler sports my favorite color—green—so it’s on the list! A small jewel of the Himalayas, this bird has the added appeal of being rather uncommon. More than that, it is found in one of the most breathtaking places in the world. I firmly believe that, if possible, all birders should see the Himalayas before they die. It’s the birder-travelers’ mecca!

7•Siamese Fireback
(Lophura diardi)
Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. There are a number of families that reach their aesthetic pinnacle in Asia: the pit- tas, the babblers, the hornbills…and the pheasants. So no list of the best birds in Asia would be complete without at least a couple of these spectacular creatures. The amazing coloration and head ornamentation of the Siamese Fireback makes this species a standout amongst a stellar cast.

8•Spoon-billed Sandpiper
(Eurinorhynchus pygmeus)
Breeds in northeast Russia and winters in Southeast Asia. I hardly need to justify this one, do I? With its odd spatulate bill, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is a rare, unusual, and cute shorebird. It ticks all the boxes for many a birder. BirdLife International classifies this fascinating species as critically endangered, with a population of fewer than 600 individuals, and rapidly declining due to habitat loss over its breeding, migratory, and wintering grounds. And as if that's not enough, this bird has to contend with hunting, disturbance, and climate change!

I hate to say this, but—go see it now!

9•Great Hornbill
(Buceros bicornis)
The Himalayas and Southeast Asia to Sumatra, and the Western Ghats in India. I could have chosen Rhinoceros Hornbill or Helmeted Hornbill, with their fabulously ornate bills and wild facial patterns. I could easily have filled this entire list with hornbills. They’re all equally fabulous, but I have some great memories of this bird. Like that time I spent an hour watching a family of White-handed Gibbons in company with a dozen or so hornbills, which were feeding together in a huge fruiting fig. Mama gibbon held her tiny baby around the waist with her foot while it played. I love this photo of a female in Cambodia having a bit of a scratch.

10•Bornean Bristlehead
(Pityriasis gymnocephala)
Borneo. I really should have put this one much higher on the list. Its appeal is obvious: crazy looks, baffling taxonomic affinities, unusual behavior, and weird vocalizations. Best of all, it’s found in one of the most exotic and exciting places in the world. What’s more, it’s now placed in its own family. With family listing rapidly becoming the latest fad in birding, everyone loves this old skinhead.

11•Steller’s Sea-Eagle
(Haliaeetus pelagicus)
Far-eastern Russia and northern Japan. Steller’s Sea-Eagle is simply one of the most amazing birds I can think of. By one measurement, weight, it is the largest raptor in the world. And the setting in northern Hokkaido on the pack ice is stunning, albeit way too cold for my liking. Just look at the size of that bill!

12•Red-crowned Crane
(Grus japonensis)
Japan, China, and Korea. All cranes have that certain something that appeals to the aesthetic eye, and this species is my favorite. It’s arguably the most stately of the cranes and has been depicted in Japanese and Chinese art for centuries. This lovely bird is also featured in many myths and legends as a symbol of longevity and nobility. It is said that the tancho lives for a thousand years. There is something magical about watching a pair of cranes calling...
and bugling in unison, performing their complex and graceful dances in the snow. Both birds throw their heads back and point their beaks skyward as the male lifts his wings over his back during the unison call, while the female keeps her wings folded at her sides—all followed by bouts of bowing, jumping, running, stick tossing, and wing flapping.

13•Philippine Frogmouth  
(*Batrachostomus septimus*)

The Philippines. Frogmouths are crazy. You can tell just by looking at them. Of course, all of those crazy features (the bug eyes, the improbably wide mouth, and the ridiculous hairdo) have functions prescribed by millennia of evolutionary pressures. Whatever the reason, they combine to make the Asian frogmouths a fabulous group. I picked this Philippine “Froggy” because I adore this photo.

14•Malaysian Rail-babbler  
(*Eupetes macrocerus*)

Thai-Malay Peninsula, Borneo, and Sumatra. A secretive, ground-dwelling (and good-looking) bird, this inhabitant of the amazingly rich lowland tropical rainforest is intriguing and charismatic. Its habits are poorly known, and it is a difficult bird to observe, which only adds to its appeal. Its taxonomic affinities are somewhat mysterious, too. This bird may be related to the African *Picathartes* rockfowls or to the rockjumpers of southern Africa, but it seems most likely that it belongs in its own family. The best way to find it is to listen for its easily overlooked vocalizations and then to wait patiently and hopefully for it to walk past a gap in the thick vegetation to allow a brief view. This is my favorite kind of birding—trying to get a glimpse of a shy but splendid bird in beautiful forest.

15•Satanic Nightjar  
(*Caprimulgus diabolicus*)

Sulawesi, Indonesia. The combination of a fascinating history, a fantastic name, and good looks earns this species a place in my list. An Indonesian endemic, it was discovered in 1931 at Klabat Volcano on Sulawesi and was known only from a single specimen until it was refound in 1996 in Lore Lindu National Park in Central Sulawesi. The name refers to a local superstition associating a mysterious nighttime *plip-plap* sound with the nightjar, which is said to be a demon that tears out the eyes of sleeping people, the sound being that of the quickly-removed eyeballs! It turns out the bird is not the author of the sound, but the name persists. As for what makes the popping eyeball sound...maybe a frog?

16•Oriental Bay-Owl  
(*Phodius badius*)

Western Ghats in India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Borneo, Sumatra, and Java. Handsome and mysterious, the Oriental Bay-Owl is one of the strangest of all the owls, and its secretive nature only adds to the mystery. I was lucky to be able to watch and photograph this amazing creature in the daylight for more than an hour during one of my trips to Sri Lanka. The
race assimilis, photographed here, is sometimes split as Sri Lanka Bay-Owl. Note the blood-sucking fly on its eye!

#17 Wallcreeper
(Tichodroma muraria)
Southern Europe to Central Asia and the Himalayas. I love a good taxonomic conundrum! Historically, the Wallcreeper was placed with the treecreepers (e.g., Brown Creeper), but these days some authorities place it in its own family, while others place it with the nuthatches. A long-billed, rock-climbing insectivore with butterfly wings, this is a bird of rugged high mountains. It hops and flits around rocky cliff faces in search of insects and spiders. The plumage is dull gray-brown, but as the bird takes short flights, the extraordinary crimson wings with white-spotted black primaries are revealed. This enigmatic bird has an undeniable charisma that places it high on every birder's wish list.

#18 Black-and-yellow Broadbill
(Eurylaimus ochromalus)
Thai-Malay Peninsula, Borneo, and Sumatra. The broadbills are essentially an Asian family (with a couple of less-than-spectacular-looking species in Africa). This particular species is one of the world's cutest birds, and a perennial crowd-pleaser. The combination of yellow, black, white, and pink plumage; that crazy, wide, blue bill; and big, bright, yellow eyes give this bird an unforgettable appearance.

#19 Blue Nuthatch
(Sitta azurea)
Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, and Java. A little gem of a bird! The appeal of this bird lies in its behavior, color pattern, and location. One of the nice things about birding in Sumatra and Java is that this bird is one of the most common members of mixed flocks. Most people look for them at Fraser's Hill, in Malaysia, where they seem to be less common. I prefer to have a whole bunch of them descend upon me, as they do in the mountains in Gunung Gede on Java or Mount Kerinci on Sumatra.

#20 Giant Ibis
(Pseudibis gigantea)
Cambodia and southern Laos. The Giant Ibis may not be all that attractive, but it has a certain je ne sais quoi. Maybe we are attracted by its rarity, or its amazing size—it really is a giant (a word that's often overused in bird names)—or maybe it's the adventure of searching for it—or the fact that it's a survivor of a horrible war. Or perhaps it's a combination of all these. Regardless, it's a thrilling bird, and the Wildlife Conservation Society's project in the northern plains of Cambodia is one of my personal favorite conservation efforts.

Did that little list whet your appetite to come exploring in Asia? I hope so! Please feel free to suggest your own favorites for the 20 Best Birds of Asia—and I welcome your ideas for new lists, such as “20 Best Birding Sites in Asia” or “20 Most Soul-destroying Birds in Asia”, on the ABA Blog via the Birder’s Guide website at <aba.org/birdersguide>.
Colombia—a breathtakingly beautiful, biologically diverse country with a cultural vivaciousness rivaling that of the world’s most boisterous of nations. A nature lover’s paradise, Colombia is first in the world in number of bird species and second in amphibians, plants, orchids, freshwater fishes, and butterflies. In fact, Colombia is considered to be one of only 12 mega-diverse countries on the planet, accounting for approximately 14% of the entire world’s known flora and fauna.
From soft sandy Caribbean beaches to the majestic snow-packed peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, from soggy Andean páramo grasslands to steamy jungles and sprawling Llanos savannas, Colombia has it all and then some. Even with Colombia’s tremendous nature tourism potential, few have dared to visit and experience this jewel of a country—until recently.

To many, if not most, people, Colombia conjures images of a brutal civil conflict, kidnappings, armed guerrillas, illicit drugs, and the murderous drug cartels which profit from them. The only widely-accepted positives to come out of Colombia, it would seem, are its decadent coffee and beautiful people. Colombia’s image has no doubt taken a beating over the years, and its negative portrayal is exacerbated by mass media and pop culture. Look no further than the 2011 movie La Colombiana, featuring an attractive young woman bent on exacting revenge upon the narcotraficantes responsible for her parents’ deaths, to see these stereotypes at work. The movie was boycotted throughout Colombia because it portrayed the country as a nation full of drug trafficking and violence. Another example of this mix of stereotypes is the popular U.S. TV show Modern Family, which features Sofía Vergara as the voluptuous Gloria, a beautiful trophy wife who regularly makes references to growing up in a Colombian drug cartel. Indeed, the world’s media have done an impressive job spinning Colombia as a violent, drug-infested, third-world nation where only the foolish dare travel. Car bombs, burned-out cocaine manufacturing jungle camps, mountains of packaged drugs, and pleading kidnapped foreigners have saturated the news. Many would-be travelers assume that these stories reflect the typical Colombian experience. I reject this notion, and wish to reveal the incredible and the unique that Colombia has to offer—and perhaps sway your opinion about this misrepresented nation. Colombia is an absolute must-visit for any serious birder/naturalist or adventure traveler. I hope to inspire you to take a second, deeper look at this remarkable country.

The Colombian Conflict

Colombia remains in the throes of a civil conflict that has been smoldering for nearly 60 years. In certain parts of the country, deadly scuffles between government forces and “illegally armed forces” do occur. The conflict’s roots run deep through Colombian history. Revolutionary armed forces opposed to the central government emerged in the early 1960s, and today there is a three-way clash among guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government forces. Ordinary Colombian citizens, who want only peace and stability for their country, have been unwillingly and literally caught in the crossfire.

The conflict has its peaks and valleys, and in recent years the Colombian government has tightened its grip and driven back “illegally armed forces”, such as the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army). Current peace talks taking place in Cuba between the Colombian government and the FARC offer a new sense of hope for Colombians that widespread and lasting peace may finally be realized.

Colombia is a large country (almost twice the size of Texas), and the majority of these scuffles are confined to specific regions near the Pacific Coast and along the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. Much of Colombia is open for business and birding, and hundreds of birding trips...
Colombia’s Natural Bounty

An indirect consequence of the armed conflict is that paramilitary and revolutionary groups have limited large-scale development of Colombia's extensive forested and savannah regions. In this way, the unfortunate conflict has had the fortunate side effect of preserving and protecting vast swaths of critical habitat for birds and other wildlife, leaving many ecosystems and landscapes unspoiled and pristine.

A biologist’s dream, Colombia is truly one of the world’s mega-diverse countries, and is considered by some to be the most biologically diverse country on Earth. With vastly different eco-regions supplying endless possibilities for adventure and discovery, it’s easy to see how intoxicating a nation this can be for birders. Colombia's geography is the key to its biological richness and natural wonder. Varied climates, two coasts, and ever-changing landscapes host an inconceivable array of species, many of which have only recently been discovered. The country is usually divided up into five regions: Amazon, Andean, Caribbean, Pacific, and Orinoco (or Llanos). Near the Ecuadorian border, the Andes split into three distinct chains: the Western, Central, and Eastern cordilleras. The divergence and separation of these three massive mountain chains, along with ample geologic time and distinct environmental factors, endowed Colombia with a plethora of unique ecosystems and habitats. Endemic species of all classes can be found throughout the country. Many areas, such as the species-rich Andean, Chocó, and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (itself a distinct chain of mountains with high levels of endemism), harbor tantalizing numbers of bird species found nowhere else on Earth. Several areas of Colombia’s remotest parts have yet to be explored by scientists, undoubtedly hiding species new to science and the world.

A Birder’s Paradise

With new avian species consistently being discovered (or rediscovered, like the once-thought-extinct Fuertes’s Parrot in 2004), Colombia is the Holy Grail for birdwatchers. Nearly 1,900 bird species have been recorded in the country thus far, among them more than 70 species endemic to Colombia. Several years ago, intrepid birding-tour agencies began slowly but steadily building an increasingly visible presence in the country. Birding tours continue to pave the way for wildlife tourism in Colombia. Most agencies offer tours lasting from 6 to 30 days, visiting the Andean chains, Caribbean coast, and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It’s not unheard of for birders to walk away with 600–800 species, and that’s just on the short tours!

Tips for Traveling

Although Colombia’s tourism industry is in its infancy, there are positive signs that the country is preparing to become a top destination for international travelers. The government is investing more heavily in infrastructure projects, linking key travel areas, and reopening regions which were previously off limits due to insecurity. Hotels, eco-lodges, reserves, and other small operations are beginning to establish themselves near main highways and travel routes, providing visitors with amenities once only available in the large cities. Colombia can be tricky to navigate even for the most seasoned traveler. It is advisable to research a tour with an established agency and let it do all the planning and logistics. Many key birding sites are pri-
vately owned reserves, difficult to locate/ access and often lacking overnight lodg- ing. Do extensive research if you plan to travel individually (not recommended for remote birding sites) and be proficient in Spanish, as English is not spoken outside of established travel spots. Birding tours operated by reputable agencies which have the expert knowledge and experience to handle the unexpected, are, for many travelers, worth the peace of mind.

The geography of Colombia makes land travel somewhat arduous. But it’s all worth it from a birder’s perspective. The countryside is a mosaic of varied habitats, small towns, coffee plantations, immense river valleys, and jagged peaks—often all within one blink. Indeed, it is possible to visit several different ecosystems in a single day’s drive. Most tours, especially those with an Andean focus, spend a lot of time travelling between birding sites, frequently using muddy and bumpy “roads” to access remote sanctuaries or reserves where unique species can be spotted. Patience, coupled with a sense of humor, will help travelers look past these annoy- ances. The reward of seeing and observing some incredibly rare species makes up for every last bit of a long, bumpy day. Travel light, as most tours use small 8- to 12-pas- senger vans to shuttle between sites, and be prepared for any type of weather. A newly illustrated, portable field guide, Birds of Colombia by artist and naturalist Miles McMullan, is a great substitute for the bulky bird guides we’ve become accustomed to for this part of the world.

Birding agencies design their tours to take advantage of the best and safest birding spots. It is currently unwise from a safety standpoint to travel to deep parts of the Chocó and southern and northern Amazon/Llanos regions, so most tours fo-
cus on the Andean, Caribbean, and Santa Marta regions. Keep in mind that reputable agencies will not include areas that are known or suspected to be unsafe, both for the well-being of their clients and the company’s reputation. Below are general trip itineraries to the regions most agencies build their trips around:

**The Andes Region** • With endemic birds just a few minutes’ cab ride from Bogotá’s international airport, it’s easy to understand why some time should be spent exploring the three distinct Andean chains of central Colombia. Bogotá is a massive, pulsating metropolis of eight million people—and the start of most bird tours. Before heading out to the countryside, don’t miss the capital city’s birdlife! Parque Nacional Natural Chingaza is about a 45-minute drive from the center of Bogotá and harbors the endemic Brown-breasted Parakeet as well as many other noteworthy species. Additionally, Bogotá’s local wetlands provide birders with several other key endemic species. La Florida, just minutes from the airport, is a good place to find the endemic Bogotá Rail. These wetlands and small pockets of trees offer chances at two other endemics: Apolinar’s Wren and Silvery-throated Spinetail. Outside Bogotá near Laguna de Pedro Palo are areas where two more Colombian endemics reside: Black Inca and Turquoise Dacnis.

After this enticing introduction, most birding tours head southwest of Bogotá and end up near the city of Ibagué (ee-bah-GAY), where Yellow-headed Brush-finch resides along with the endemic Tolima Dove. Nearby, tours attempt to view Cauca Guan near Parque Nacional Natural Otún Quimbaya, an important haven for one of the last remaining populations of this species. Many tours stop and/or stay at Reserva Río Blanco, near the town of Manizales, to spend some time with the endemic Brown-banded Antipitta. An antpitta feeding station at Río...
Blanco attracts this species as well as Chestnut-crowned, Bicolored, and Slate-crowned antpittas. Next up for many Andean specialty tours is a jaunt to the quaint and caffeine-fueled colonial town of Jardín (hahr-DEEN), located in a part of Colombia known as the Zona Cafetera or “coffee region”. Not only can you sip perfectly roasted Colombian coffee in the idyllic town square, but a short walk from the town center is an Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek! Jardín is where tour groups access a known roosting site of the once-nearly-extinct Yellow-eared Parrot. Due to the tireless efforts of Colombia’s Fundación ProAves, this species was brought back from the brink of extinction and downgraded from critically endangered to endangered in 2010. ProAves’s work establishing a reserve and extensive education programs within and around the town of Jardín have increased the parrot’s numbers, currently believed to be around 1,000 individuals. This conservation success is an example of how community involvement and environmental education can rewrite the future for what many feared to be the unavoidable loss of one of Colombia’s most iconic parrot species.

After Jardín, many bird tours head to a newly established and growing birding mecca in the Chocó region called Reserva Las Tangaras. Many believe this to be the best place in the world for tanagers, and the reserve does not disappoint. Within the bird-bursting forest near Las Tangaras there are two endemics, Black-and-gold and Gold-ringed tanagers, along with other specialties, such as Purplish-mantled Tanager and Chocó Vireo. On many tours, this is as deep into the Chocó forest that birders get. Continuing north, birders find themselves in Colombia’s second largest city, Medellín (mehd-eh-YEEN). Another impossibly huge city with towering buildings on steep mountain inclines hugging the city’s midsection, Medellín is energetic and lively, home to millions of people and an easily-seen endemic bird, Red-bellied Grackle. Depending on the tour, an overnight stay in Medellín recom-
mended) may be in the cards, or this may be just a quick trip on the way to yet another ProAves reserve which protects a recently discovered species, Chestnut-capped Piha. The piha reserve, locally known as Reserva Arrierto Antioqueño, is also home to White-mantled Barbet, Chestnut Wood-Quail, Stiles’s Tapaculo, and Chestnut-crowned Gnatcatcher. From the piha reserve, most agencies take their guests to another spectacular location, La Reserva Natural Cañón del Río Claro. Nestled within a steep limestone canyon, the river itself is quite a sight, and the lodge has many adventure activities besides birdwatching. A stop at Río Claro gives an opportunity to visit one of South America’s largest Oilbird colonies. A short drive and hike takes birders to La Cueva de los Guácharos (the Cave of the Oilbirds), where hundreds of these strange birds can be found in their pitch-black abode. Birders with flashlights are rewarded with fantastic views coupled with a cacophony of these birds’ screeches, growls, and clicks. A truly unique experience, it is well worth the hike for a chance to observe these peculiar birds in their natural setting.

For many tours, Río Claro is one of the last stops before heading back to Bogotá. On the way, however, a visit to La Victoria, a small town north of Bogotá situated in the massive Magdalena River valley, may be in order. Even more endemic species can be seen here, among them Beautiful Woodpecker and a few hummers. Most Andean tours end in Bogotá, where birders begrudgingly board their planes to return to their points of origin. For others, the return to the capital may just be one leg of the trip before visiting another intriguing part of Colombia.

An Andes tour provides birders with an astonishing number of endemics and mind-blowing abundance of other species, many of which are much more difficult to see in other, more heavily-trampled countries, where excessive playback has reduced response rates from

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Top: Over seven million people live in Bogotá, but there are still great birds in the forested hills right alongside the city. Photo © Raphael Chay. Bottom left: Vermilion Cardinal is one of the dry-forest specialties of the Guajira Peninsula. Photo © Nick Athanas. Bottom right: Golden-fronted Whitestarts feeding on the road near Jardín. Photo © Tim Mitzen.
many species. A trip to the Colombian Andes is sure to please even the most demanding of birders.

The Caribbean Coast and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta • The Caribbean part of Colombia has some spectacular spots, most of them undeveloped when compared to Caribbean locations in other countries. Pristine beaches, coastal wetlands, and dry forests await birders near Barranquilla (barr-ahn-KEE-yah), Santa Marta, and the Guajira (gwah-HEE-rah) Peninsula. Grandiose snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta beckon birders to high montane cloud-forests exploding with endemic birds and numerous specialties. You can bake in the hot, dry sun of the Caribbean coast while looking inland at the towering peaks, where wet forests and cooler climes await.

Most tours begin in Barranquilla, a bustling city known mostly for being Shakira’s hometown and also for hosting the second-largest Carnival party in the world, behind only Rio de Janeiro. So if you’re planning a trip from early to mid-February, know that you’ll be engulfed in this city’s celebrations! (A taste of the festivities is well worth the effort.) Birding tours fly into Barranquilla to take advantage of Parque Isla de Salamanca and its endemics, such as Chestnut-winged Chachalaca, Bronze-brown Cowbird, and the extremely rare Sapphire-bellied Hummingbird. This short trip also offers numerous chances to see Bicolored Conebill and Northern Scrub-Flycatcher. Many tours continue birding along the Caribbean Coast toward the Guajira Peninsula—and more specifically—at Los Flamencos sanctuary, where you can see American Flamingo as well as Chestnut Piculet, Vermilion Cardinal, Orinocan Saltator, Green-rumped Parrotlet, and White-fringed Antwren.

An absolute must for any serious birder is a few-day visit to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. This isolated mountain range, distinct and separate from the Andes, reaches staggering heights of over 18,000 feet but is only 26 miles from the hot beaches and dry forests of the coast. The astonishingly rapid ascent makes the Santa Marta mountains the highest coastal range in the world, a curious dichotomy when you experience the warm Caribbean beaches and waters quickly giving way to chilly, wet montane forests and eventually to glacier-capped peaks. Due to its isolation, this fascinating mountain range has nurtured an impressive array of endemic species. In-the-know agencies reserve rooms at El Dorado Bird Reserve. El Dorado’s lodge is about four hours from the city of Santa Marta, and the birding starts the moment the jeep begins its climb up the winding and bumpy mountain road. This splendid lodge commands spectacular views of the snowy peaks above and valleys below, courtesy of the lodge’s large viewing windows. Birding at El Dorado is a memorable experience. The lodge has several feeders with dizzying numbers of hummers visiting throughout the day. Additionally, a worm station draws in the endemic Santa Marta Antpitta, and a compost heap is occasionally visited by Black-fronted Wood-Quail. The focus at El Dorado is on the numerous endemics that can be seen either along the San Lorenzo Road or via the trail system within the reserve itself. Some of the area’s avian highlights include Santa Marta Screech-Owl, Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner, Santa Marta Bush-Tyrant, Santa Marta Tapaculo, Santa Marta Brush-finch, Santa Marta Mountain-Tanager, Santa Marta Woodstar, and Santa Marta Sabrewing. Given the names of those birds, can you tell this area is a hotbed of endemism? A few days spent exploring the different elevations and forested habitats here might well be the highlight of your trip.

Colombia is a uniquely diverse country with unparalleled travel opportunities, and is quickly becoming a top destination for traveling birders and wildlife enthusiasts alike. This much-maligned country may not be for everyone—at least not yet—but those who dare travel in search of one-of-a-kind encounters, and who are willing to form their own opinions, will find a nation that is spreading its wings and rising to new heights. Experience firsthand what Colombia has to offer, and you will not be disappointed.
Located on Canada’s east coast, the province of New Brunswick is often overlooked as a birding destination.

However, New Brunswick is home to several birding phenomena that should be on every birder’s bucket list. The magnificent Bay of Fundy and its “world’s highest tides” create an ecosystem that plays host to incredible flights of shorebirds, and its rich waters provide food for large colonies of nesting alcids and enormous flocks of pelagic birds in summer.

Despite being relatively compact at roughly 62,500 square kilometers, New Brunswick has a diversity of habitats, from its central highlands (at a modest 500-meter [1,640-foot] altitude) to its 700-kilometer [435-mile] coastline. The eastern coastline on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Northumberland Strait features wide sandy beaches, lagoons, and large salt marshes. The coast of the Bay of Fundy offers rocky cliffs and vast mudflats. Acadian forest covers at least 80% of the province’s land area and provides habitat for many migrants, breeders, and residents. Peat bogs, freshwater marshes, lakes, and beautiful river valleys are all plentiful. Offshore islands, especially the Grand Manan archipelago at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy in the south and Miscou Island in the northeast, provide excellent birding, particularly during spring and fall migration.

The changing seasons present very different birding opportunities. June is the best time to visit New Brunswick for breeding species. Late July and August is the best time to view the concentrations of seabirds and shorebirds along the Bay of Fundy. Winter birding can also be rewarding, with northern finches, hawks, and owls, but visitors should remain aware of unpredictable weather and its associated travel conditions.

Late spring and early summer is the best time to search for the several boreal specialties New Brunswick is known for. The largely coniferous forests of the north and central areas are home to large numbers of warblers, thrushes, vireos, and flycatchers, but of particular interest will be Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Gray Jay, and Boreal Chickadee. Though some of these species are fairly widespread in New Brunswick, the recently completed Maritime Breeding Bird Atlas shows their populations are concentrated in the northern third of the province. Within the northern forests, the central uplands host another sought-after breeding bird, Bicknell’s Thrush. With an estimated population of fewer than 1,000 breeding pairs in the province, Bicknell’s Thrush is restricted to scrubby or rejuvenating forests of birch and fir at altitudes above 450 meters [1,476 feet]. Listen for this rarity on early mornings in late spring. Mount Carlton Provincial Park, with its excellent hiking trails, is a good spot to look for these species, but the Christmas Mountains and other locales offer suitable habitat as well. Note that many of the logging roads that criss-cross the north will require a vehicle with high clearance and good tires.

Machias Seal Island, located off Grand Manan Island and the southernmost point in New Brunswick—if you don’t accept Maine’s claim to the island—hosts a nesting
1. Though irregular in much of the ABA Area, Common Redpolls are more-or-less expected in New Brunswick. Photo © LIGHTRAE.CA

2. Saltmarsh Copper, one of the region’s endemic butterflies. Photo © Jim Edsall.

3. Red-necked Grebes are often easy to see. Photo © LIGHTRAE.CA

4. A handsome male Spruce Grouse struts his stuff. Photo © LIGHTRAE.CA

5. Common Murres nest in densely-packed colonies on offshore islands. Photo © LIGHTRAE.CA
Hundreds of thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers stage along the Bay of Fundy each fall. Photo © Sybil Wentzell.
A colony of some 5,000 pairs of Atlantic Puffin, 1,000 pairs of Razorbill, and 500 pairs of Common Murre. The number of visitors to the island is restricted to 15 a day, six days a week, so book well in advance. Access to the island from Canada is limited to the highly reliable Sea Watch Tours <www.seawatchtours.com>, whose boats sail out of Seal Cove on Grand Manan from around 25 June to 7 August. Visitors who have made arrangements to go on shore can get close-up views of the nesting birds from blinds built on the island. Those who are not granted on-shore access can get good looks at the birds as they forage for food in the waters around the island.

The upwelling of nutrients caused by the massive tides at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy creates a rich food source which attracts hundreds of whales and thousands of seabirds. Several whale-watching companies located in St. Andrews and on Grand Manan provide access to offshore waters. (A list of some of these companies can be found on p. 44. They usually operate from late June into September. It is best to take the trips that go furthest from shore, and it might also be wise to check to see which have knowledgeable birders on staff.) Along with plenty of whales and other sea life, one may see large flocks of foraging shearwaters. Tens of thousands of Great Shearwaters and smaller numbers of Sooty Shearwaters come from the south Atlantic to spend the summer in the Bay of Fundy. As summer progresses, they are joined by Manx Shearwater, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, South Polar Skua, Northern Fulmar, Red and Red-necked phalaropes, gannets, and Wilson’s and Leach’s storm-petrels. Puffins and other alcids can also be seen on these trips. Large flocks of Bonaparte’s Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes around the islands occasionally yield Little, Black-headed, and Sabine’s gulls. There is always the possibility for the discovery of something rarer, like Great Skua, Cory’s Shearwater, or Long-tailed Jaeger.

During the summer, New Brunswick’s coastal areas can be well worth a visit. Salt marshes provide breeding habitat for bird species such as Willet and Nelson’s Sparrow, as well as three endemic butterfly species: Short-tailed Swallowtail, Maritime Ringlet, and Saltmarsh Copper. The white sand beaches of the eastern shore from Miscou Island to Buctouche Dunes Nature Park host a small breeding population of Anderson Hollow Lighthouse in Harvey Bank. Photo © Sybil Wentzell.
the endangered Piping Plover in spring and summer.

From late July through September, the salt marshes and beaches welcome some 20 shorebird species working their way back to South America. Tidal pools and lagoons on the Acadian Peninsula, the shore of the Northumberland Strait, Waterside, and Saint’s Rest Marsh host multitudes of Black-bellied and Semipalmated plovers, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, Solitary, Semipalmated, Least, White-rumped, and Pectoral sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Found in lesser numbers are American Golden-Plover, Piping Plover, Hudsonian Godwit, Baird’s, Stilt, and Buff-breasted sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Wilson’s Phalarope. As summer wanes, these species are replaced by Red Knot, Sanderling, and Dunlin. European vagrants such as Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, and Black-tailed Godwit are rare visitors, and Western Sandpiper and Marbled Godwit can occasionally be found among the regulars.

The most spectacular concentrations of shorebirds are found on the mudflats of the upper Bay of Fundy, which was designated as a Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve in the late 1980s. Starting in late July at various localities like Mary’s Point, Johnson Mills, and Dorchester Cape, Semipalmated Sandpipers begin to mass in the tens of thousands. The early arrivals are adults, followed soon by the young of the year. They quickly build up in numbers so that flocks of over one hundred thousand birds are possible by mid-August. Approximately 90% of the world’s population of Semipalmated Sandpipers pass through the Bay of Fundy on their way south. They feed for weeks on small crustaceans in the mudflats before flying non-stop, 5,000 kilometers [3,100 miles], to the coast of South America. The flocks are often put to flight by marauding Peregrine Falcons and Merlins. The sight of 50,000–100,000 Semipalmated Sandpipers flying and undulating like waves on the bay should be experienced by all birders. It is one of those moments when putting a checkmark on a page becomes secondary to our love of birds and the awe-inspiring spectacle of nature at its best.

In late fall and winter, New Brunswick hosts Arctic and pelagic species, as well as occasional European vagrants. Coastal bays on the Bay of Fundy do not freeze, accommodating wintering waterfowl, grebes, and alcids. Specific areas that provide good winter seawatch conditions include Mace’s Bay, Green’s Point, and St. Andrews. Species reported there include Common Eider, all three scoters, Harlequin and Long-tailed ducks, Red-throated Loon, Horned and Red-necked grebes, Dovekie, Thick-billed and Common
1. Snow Buntings are winter visitors to New Brunswick’s shores. Photo © LIGHTRA.E.CA

2. Razorbills can be found in large flocks as they head off to fish. Photo © LIGHTRA.E.CA

3. Black Guillemots are readily found in the sheltered bays. Photo © LIGHTRA.E.CA


Hopewell Rocks. Scenic views like this are par for the course on the Bay of Fundy. Photo © Sybil Wentzell.
murre, Razorbill, and Black Guillemot. Barrow’s Goldeneye can be found on the Gulf of St. Lawrence in areas where open water persists, such as Cocagne. Duck concentrations will occasionally produce Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, and King Eider. Migrating flocks of Canada Geese occasionally bring with them Barnacle, Pink-footed, Greater White-fronted, and—exceptionally—Graylag geese. Gull flocks around Courtney Bay, the Saint John West Sewage Lagoon, and Black’s Harbour often produce Iceland and Glaucous gulls and, less frequently, Black-headed, Common [Mew], and Lesser Black-backed gulls. Ivory Gull is a rare visitor on both coasts.

Arctic-breeding passerines that winter in New Brunswick include Northern Shrike, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, and both Common and Hoary redpolls. Rough-legged Hawk, Snowy Owl, and Northern Hawk Owl are all scarce but regular winter visitors. Many of these species are found in open grasslands such as the Tantramar Marshes and Grand Lake Meadows.

New Brunswick provides opportunities for birders in all seasons. Because of its small size, even a short visit can be very rewarding, but there is enough diversity of habitat and birds to provide weeks of exploring. More information on birding New Brunswick can be obtained from the *Birds of New Brunswick: An Annotated List*, published by the New Brunswick Museum. A good online information source is [Birding New Brunswick](birdingnewbrunswick.ca).

Some of the Bay of Fundy’s highest tides are found here at Shepody Marsh. Photo © Sybill Wentzell.
Left: Short-billed Dowitchers taking a rest on their long journey. Photo © LIGHTRAE.CA
Right: Great Shearwaters fly north to spend the summer off the coast. Photo © Tracey Dean.
Birding at Sea
A Pelagic Primer
Birding can take you to a huge variety of places—from the oaks along the Texas coast in search of migrating warblers to the bitter cold in Colorado to chase “chickens”. No matter what, we love it. Eventually, curiosity and the desire to add to the life list prompts many birders to head out to sea.

The word “pelagic” means “of the sea” in ancient Greek. These days, it’s come to mean “of the open sea”, that is, “far from shore”. Certain fish, such as the Great White Shark, are pelagic. Certain marine mammals, including most whales, are pelagic. And certain birds—albatrosses, shearwaters, petrels, alcids—can be seen best, if at all, by venturing far out to sea.
To me, nothing is more thrilling than the sight of thousands of storm-petrels skipping over the sea, or a Black-footed Albatross flying up the wake of your boat as you cross the edge of the Monterey Submarine Canyon...

...Or sorting through a flock of Black-capped Petrels sitting on the water for that single Fea’s Petrel in the Gulf Stream. Seabirding is full of never-ending surprises—witness the first record of a Northern Gannet at California’s Farallon Islands last year!

Organized pelagic trips in North America have seemingly reached an apex, with more pelagic trips currently offered than ever before. Many entities now operate pelagic trips from both the East and West coasts. Local operators are your best resource for information, and many have websites. (Be sure to check the Pelagic Directory on p. 52 for details.) Ferry routes can sometimes be productive, and some adventurous birders even lounge on cruise ships, looking for seabirds.

Preparing for your trip can add immensely to the overall experience. Knowing how to dress, what to bring and what not to bring on the boat, and which season is best can help the seabirder get the most out of the trip. This is a concise guide on how to prepare for a typical pelagic trip, what to expect on board, and other tips.

VESSELS • Nearly all one-day pelagic trips are conducted on fishing or whale-watching vessels, which in the U.S. are inspected and certified by the Coast Guard. Most such vessels range from 45–75 feet and have a capacity of 25–55 persons, which is also regulated. Sometimes, the amount of time the skipper can be at the helm is also regulated, unless a second skipper is on board. Usually, there is a first mate, or deckhand. A restroom, or “head”, as it is called on a boat, is available.

DRESSING FOR SEA • Layers are the key! Pelagic trips in May from North Carolina and from San Diego may be quite warm, even hot. But pelagic trips from Monterey Bay, Bodega Bay, or Half Moon Bay, California, can feel as cold as a day on Attu, even during summer. Being able to shed layers according to the weather is the best plan. Your outer layer should consist of a waterproof jacket and, sometimes, waterproof pants. It is always best to bring the pants. The operator will tell you at the dockside if you should put them on. Even if there is no ocean spray, this outer layer can shield you from the wind, providing an extra layer of warmth. In some instances, long underwear, heavy coats, and gloves are essential. Bring a hat that can be secured so that it does not blow away. Footwear should be comfortable, as you will likely be standing for most of the day. It can range from sandals on warm-weather trips to closed-toed shoes for cold days. (Note that some trips require closed-toed shoes; you may find yourself birding in the rain on a pelagic, so make sure you’re prepared with proper waterproof gear.)

Photo © Michael L. P. Retter
check with your operator.) Sea water can splash onto the deck, making waterproof footwear the most practical option. And don’t forget sunscreen—at sea, the sun reflects off the water, meaning that you could get a sunburn on the bottom of your nose!

**FOOD AND DRINK** • On some larger vessels, it is possible to order food from the kitchen, or galley. Menus can range from greasy hamburgers to freshly cooked tuna. On smaller vessels without a galley, you need to bring your own food and drink. The operator will let you know. In any case, it is always good to keep something in your stomach, as an empty stomach will betray you with nausea! Pretzels or crackers stuffed in your pocket can come in handy for a fast snack. Carbonated beverages are also good. Beverages with screw tops are best to prevent spillage on a rocking boat. Snack on small amounts at a time that you can throw overboard in a pinch. You won’t want to have your hands full of food when that lifer White-faced Storm-Petrel zips by the boat!

**STUDYING UP** • Learn the best time of year for seabirds in the region you visit. Check the operator’s website or blog for past trip reports or a printable checklist. The most recent new field guide, *Petrels, Albatrosses, and Storm-Petrels of North America: A Photographic Guide*, by Steve N. G. Howell is highly recommended. As with land birding, knowing which species you might see at a given time of year can be the best preparation, especially with seabirds.

**TYPICAL TRIP** • Most trips last for a day, although a few are overnight. Typically, the trip organizer greets folks at the dock and gives an introductory talk before the boat leaves the harbor. The organizer usually introduces the leaders, points out the location of the head, describes the “dos and don’ts” of the trip, and provides safety instructions. Some trips do not allow smoking, for instance. Most vessels have a public address system over which the sighted birds are announced, although leaders usually have sufficient voice to get the word out. Many leaders coordinate among themselves and the captain with family radios or headsets. Chumming, the practice of baiting the water with fish, popcorn, and/or fish oil, is typically used to draw seabirds nearer to the boat. Often, the boat will make stops, which allows these wake followers to catch up so that birders have closer views. Don’t forget the non-avian animals! Stops for whales, dolphins, ocean sunfish, or sea turtles could be part of the day, too. Seabirds are drawn to feeding marine mammals, so these stops can lead to some of the most productive seabirding of the trip.

**OPTICS AND CAMERAS** • Obviously, you’ll want to bring your binoculars. Many birders prefer to use lower-powered optics because of the movement of the vessel, as well as the seabirds. It is always a good idea to bring a handkerchief or lens cloth to wipe seaspray off your lenses. Spotting scopes are fairly useless on a small vessel, and are often not permitted at all. If you have a camera, bring it. Even a small point-and-shoot can capture an albatross sitting on the water a few feet from the stern. Larger lenses are becoming common on pelagic trips. Be sure to bring protection from spray for such equipment.

**SEASICKNESS** • For most people, seasickness is the biggest concern on pelagic trips. It can be prevented for the vast majority of people simply by following this simple advice: Get a good night’s sleep prior to your day at sea. Visit the dock the day prior, so that you know the location in advance. Fumbling around the morning of the trip causes anxiety, which will make you more tense on board. Avoid alcohol the night before the trip. Avoid using any colognes or perfumes. Absolutely do not skip breakfast, but do not eat greasy food. A full stomach is best. Take seasick medication at least an hour prior to boarding, or whatever the product label recommends. If using the Scopolamine patch, try it at home first. It makes some people dizzy, so it may not be for you! Do not use it on a boat trip if you experience this. The morning of the trip, go easy on coffee and other liquids so that you don’t have to use the head regularly. Once on board, stay out on deck in the middle of the ship, focusing on the horizon, with fresh air in your face. Avoid the front of the ship, or bow, which gets the most movement. Ask others to get your food or drinks from inside the cabin, if you do not feel well. Eat your pocket snacks. Do not read, including your field guide, while on board. In fact, doing anything complicated with your hands that requires looking down and away from the horizon for an extended period is not a good idea. This includes flipping through your pictures on the back of your cam-

**HELPING SEABIRDS SURVIVE**

Seabirds are becoming increasingly threatened, and at a faster rate globally than all other groups of birds. From the Ashy Storm-Petrel, endemic to the California Current, to the old-growth-forest-nesting Marbled Murrelet, seabirds are facing declines due to a variety of impacts on both their breeding and feeding grounds. Learn more about the issues they face and ways you can help them at these organizations’ websites: American Bird Conservancy <www.abcbirds.org>, Island Conservation <www.islandconservation.org>, and Oikonos <oikonos.org>.
ETIQUETTE • Show up on time. Most operators will not wait for latecomers, who forfeit their fare. Share the space on board with others. Everyone is there to see marine life. Don’t be a “bow hog”. If you are tall, check to see if someone shorter is trying to get a view from behind you. If you are at the rail along the rear of the boat, or taffrail, and see someone approaching, make way, as that person could be seasick. Be kind to your fellow travelers. If you see a seabird that you think might be rare, be sure to alert a leader immediately, not in the parking lot at the end of the day. Take responsibility for yourself. If the leaders are regularly calling out “Pink-footed Shearwater”, and you simply cannot pick one out, approach a leader and ask for help. Leaders want to help, but they cannot read your mind or know which birds you haven’t seen well. Have fun!

Why go to sea in search of birds? Like going over one more hill, or around one more corner of a path, going to sea is a new frontier for many landlocked birders, and a continuing adventure for experienced seabirders. Think of it this way: more of Earth is covered by water—some 70%—than dirt. Shouldn’t you experience it?

On board the whaling brig, Daisy, in the South Atlantic, famed ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy wrote on 28 October 1912, “I now belong to a higher cult of mortals, for I have seen the albatross!” Venture out to sea, and join the club of pelagic birders.

The author thanks Clay Kempf for his help with reviewing this article.
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mid-2013 through early 2014

If you would like to participate in next year’s Pelagic Directory, please contact Michael Retter at mretter@aba.org

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Canada

Port: Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick
Destination: Mouth of the Bay of Fundy
Duration: 4–5 hours
Cost: $65/adult, $45/child; plus tax; includes fish chowder lunch
Organizer: Whales-n-Sails Adventures. (888) 994-4044; www.4whales.com; info@whales-n-sails.com
Target species: Great and Sooty shearwaters, Wilson’s Storm-petrel, Northern Gannet, phalaropes, Atlantic Puffin; Razorbill; Common Murre; Black Guillemot; Common and Arctic terns, Northern Fulmar, Great and South Polar skuas, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Eider, Great and Double-crested cormorants, Manx Shearwater.

Port: Big Bras d’Or, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia
Duration: 2–4 hours
Destination: a pair of islands 5 miles from coast
Cost: $38
Organizer: Bird Island Boat Tours. (800) 661-6680; www.birdisland.net
Target species: Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Black-legged Kittiwake, Great Cormorant, Black Guillemot, Northern Gannet.

New England

Port: Hyannis, Massachusetts.
Destination: Nantucket Shoals
Date: 9 Nov 2013
Duration: 8 hours
Cost: $110
Organizer: Brookline Bird Club. ida8@verizon.net
Target species: thousands of sea ducks, loons, grebes, shearwaters, Northern Gannet, alcids, gulls, and possible migrating passerines.

Virginia

Port: Virginia Beach, Virginia, aboard our own vessel, the Stormy Petrel II
Destination: Continental Shelf and Slope Waters, possibly Norfolk Canyon
Date: TBA, probably mid-Jan. 2014
Duration: 13 hours
Cost: $190/person/trip
Organizer: Brian Patteson, Inc. (252) 986-1363; brian@patteson.com; www.seabirding.com/; seabirding.blogspot.com/
Target species: Manx Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Great Skua, Dovekie, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin. Black-browed albatrosses, Cape Verde Shearwater, and Swinhoe’s and Black-bellied storm-petrels.

North Carolina

Port: Hatteras, North Carolina aboard our own vessel, the Stormy Petrel II
Destination: Gulf Stream, Continental Shelf and Slope waters
Duration: 10–11 hours
Cost: $160/person/trip; discount for multiple trips
Organizer: Brian Patteson, Inc. (252) 986-1363; brian@patteson.com; www.seabirding.com/; seabirding.blogspot.com/
Target species: May—August: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Manx, Sooty and Audubon’s shearwaters, Wilson’s, Leach’s, European, and Band-rumped storm-petrels, Bridled and Sooty terns; Trindade, Fea’s, and Bermuda petrels, Red-billed and White-tailed tropicbirds, Masked Booby, Red-necked Phalarope, all three jaegers. Winter: Manx Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Great Skua, Little Gull, Dovekie, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin. Mega-rarities have included Yellow-nosed and Black-browed albatrosses, Cape Verde Shearwater, and Swinhoe’s and Black-bellied storm-petrels.

Port: Wanchese, North Carolina (Oregon Inlet) aboard our own vessel, the Stormy Petrel II
Destination: Gulf Stream, Continental Shelf and Slope waters
Duration: 12 hours
Cost: $180/person/trip; discount for multiple trips
Organizer: Brian Patteson, Inc. (252) 986-1363; brian@patteson.com; www.seabirding.com/; seabirding.blogspot.com/
Target species: Similar to Hatteras departures except for slight possibility to see White-faced Storm-Petrel

PACIFIC OCEAN

Washington

Port: Westport, Washington
Destination: Grays Canyon
Duration: 8–11 hours
Cost: $140
Target Species: Black-footed Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Sooty Shearwater, Pink-footed Shearwater, Fork-tailed Storm Petrel, Red-necked and Red phalaropes, Pomarine Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger, Sabine’s Gull, Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Cassin’s Auklet, Rhinoceros Auklet, Tufted Puffin. Also possible are Flesh-footed Shearwater, Buller’s Shearwater, Short-tailed Shearwater, Leach’s Storm-petrel, South Polar Skua, Long-tailed Jaeger, Thayer’s Gull, Artic Tern.

Oregon

Port: Charleston, Oregon
Destination: 15 miles offshore
### Central and Northern California

**Port:** Half Moon Bay, California  
**Destination:** Continental Shelf, Pioneer Canyon  
**Duration:** 8—10 hours  
**Dates:** 4 Aug., 20 Oct. 2013; sells out every year.  
**Cost:** $167 (Aug.); $196 (Nov.)  
**Target species:** Tufted Puffin on Aug. trip; Great White Shark on Nov. trip. 100% success rate for the puffins. Past rarities have included Hawaiian Petrel, Blue-footed Booby, Northern Gannet. Landing on the islands is not permitted. Variety of whales and leatherback sea turtle possible.

**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys.  
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

**Port:** Half Moon Bay, California.  
**Destination:** Farallon Islands  
**Duration:** 9 hours.  
**Dates:** 4 Aug., 20 Oct. 2013; sells out every year.  
**Cost:** $167 (Aug.); $196 (Nov.)  
**Target species:** Tufted Puffin on Aug. trip; Great White Shark on Nov. trip. 100% success rate for the puffins. Past rarities have included Hawaiian Petrel, Blue-footed Booby, Northern Gannet. Landing on the islands is not permitted. Variety of whales and leatherback sea turtle possible.

**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys.  
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

### Port: Monterey, California*

**Destination:** Monterey Submarine Canyon, north of Point Pinos  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Dates:** 2, 9, 16, 23 Aug.; 6, 10, 11, 13, 15 Sep.; 5, 13, 25 Oct. 2013  
**Cost:** $154  
**Target species:** Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses; Northern Fulmar, Sooty, Short-tailed, Pink-footed, Flesh-footed, Buller's, Black-vented shearwaters; Ashy, Black, Least, Fork-tailed, Wilson's storm-petrels; Red, Red-necked phalaropes; South Polar Skua; all jaegers; Sabine's Gull; Elegant, Common, Arctic Terns; Common Murre; Pigeon Guillemot; Scripps's, Guadalupe, Craveri's murrelets; Cassin's, Rhinoceros auklets; Tufted Puffin. Rarely Short-tailed Albatross; Great-winged, Murphy's, Hawaiian, Cook's, Bulwer's petrels; Streaked, Cory's, Great, Wedge-tailed, Manx shearwaters; Wedge-rumped, Leach's storm-petrels; Red-billed, Red-tailed tropicbirds; Magnificent, Great frigatebirds; Thick-billed Murre. All Monterey trips are excellent for a wide variety of marine mammals.

**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys.  
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

### Port: Newport, Oregon

**Destination:** Perpetua Bank  
**Date:** 5 Oct. 2013  
**Duration:** 10 hours  
**Cost:** $165  
**Organizer:** The Bird Guide, Inc.  
http://thebirdguide.com/pelagics/  
**Target species:** rare albatrosses, South Polar Skua, Flesh-footed Shearwater

### Port: Newport, Oregon

**Destination:** 25 miles offshore  
**Date:** 21 Sep. 2013  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Cost:** $140  
**Organizer:** The Bird Guide, Inc.  
http://thebirdguide.com/pelagics/  
**Target species:** Buller's Shearwater, South Polar Skua

### Port: Newport, Oregon

**Destination:** 25 miles offshore  
**Date:** 7 Sep. 2013  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Cost:** $140  
**Organizer:** The Bird Guide, Inc.  
http://thebirdguide.com/pelagics/  
**Target species:** typical pelagic species.

### Port: Bodega Bay, California

**Destination:** offshore Bodega Canyon, 800 fathom line, Cordell Bank  
**Duration:** 11 hours  
**Dates:** 30 Aug., 20 Sep., 18 Oct. 2013  
**Cost:** $198  
**Target species:** Rarities have included Light-mantled, Shy, Short-tailed albatrosses; Great-winged, Murphy's, Hawaiian (2012), Cook's, Parkinson's petrels; Flesh-footed, Streaked, Wedge-tailed, Manx, Cory's shearwaters; Long-billed Murrelet; Parakeet, Crested auklets. Good chance for up to 6 storm-petrels; South Polar Skua; large numbers of all 3 jaegers; record high counts of Sabine's Gull. Can be excellent for Humpback (45 in a day) and Blue whales, many other marine mammals.

**Organizer:** Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society in conjunction with Alvaro's Adventures.  
www.alvarosadventures.com, 650-504-7779 or SCVAS at 408-252-3740.

### Port: Bodega Bay, California

**Destination:** offshore Bodega Canyon, 800 fathom line, Cordell Bank  
**Duration:** 8—10 hours  
**Date:** 18 Aug. 2013  
**Cost:** $130  
**Target species:** Breeding birds of the Farallons, with a focus on Tufted Puffin, Cassin's Auklet; should see thousands of Common Murres, many Pigeon Guillemots, shearwaters, and Black-footed Albatross on our short time off the shelf. Great opportunities for whales and at least 4 species of seals/sea lions.

**Organizer:** Alvaro's Adventures.  
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

### Port: Half Moon Bay, California

**Destination:** Offshore seabirds of San Francisco waters  
**Duration:** 8—10 hours  
**Date:** 18 Aug. 2013  
**Cost:** $130  
**Target species:** Last year we found a Hawaiian Petrel near this date. Shearwaters, Black-footed Albatross, storm petrel flocks, alcids.

**Organizer:** Alvaro's Adventures.  
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

### Port: Half Moon Bay, California

**Destination:** Farallon Islands  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Date:** 11 Aug. 2013  
**Cost:** $140  
**Target species:** Breeding birds of the Farallons, with a focus on Tufted Puffin, Cassin's Auklet; should see thousands of Common Murres, many Pigeon Guillemots, shearwaters, and Black-footed Albatross on our short time off the shelf. Great opportunities for whales and at least 4 species of seals/sea lions.

**Organizer:** Alvaro's Adventures.  
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

### Port: Newport, Oregon

**Destination:** 25 miles offshore  
**Date:** 4 Aug., 20 Oct. 2013; sells out every year.  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Cost:** $140  
**Organizer:** The Bird Guide, Inc.  
http://thebirdguide.com/pelagics/  
**Target species:** jaegers, Sabine's Gull, Arctic Tern, Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel.

### Port: Newport, Oregon

**Destination:** 25 miles offshore  
**Date:** 21 Sep. 2013  
**Duration:** 8 hours  
**Cost:** $140  
**Organizer:** The Bird Guide, Inc.  
http://thebirdguide.com/pelagics/  
**Target species:** typical pelagic species.
Pelagic Directory

Organizer: Shearwater Journeys.
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

Port: Bodega Bay, California
Destination: Deep water off Bodega Bay towards Cordell Bank
Duration: 10 hours
Date: 30 Aug. 2013
Cost: $140
Target species: Historically a rare bird hotspot!
Black-footed Albatross, storm-petrel concentrations, migrant Long-tailed and other jaegers, South Polar Skua, Buller’s Shearwaters.
Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

Port: Half Moon Bay, California
Destination: San Mateo County waters
Duration: 8–10 hours
Date: 1 Sep. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: White-chinned Petrel a few years ago, a good area for storm-petrel flocks (Ashy, Black, Wilson’s, Fork-tailed) and shearwater concentrations (Buller’s, Flesh-footed), Scripp’s, Guadalupe, and Craveri’s murrelets possible.
Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

Port: Half Moon Bay, California
Destination: Half Moon Bay
Duration: 8–10 hours
Date: 7 Sep. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: We will head out looking for warmer water edges and where the life is! Great time for South Polar Skua, Tufted Puffin, storm-petrels, Buller’s and Flesh-footed in with more common shearwaters.
Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Offshore Monterey, albacore fishing grounds 20–40 mi.
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 7 Sep. 2013
Cost: $192, sells out every year.
Target species: Same as Monterey trip above (*), but with better chances for Scripp’s, Guadalupe, Craveri’s Murrelets; high jaeger counts. Rarely tropicbirds. Blue Whale is often seen.
Organizer: Shearwater Journeys.
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Seavalley, south of Point Pinos
Duration: 8 hours
Dates: 12, 14 Sep. 2013
Cost: $154
Target species: Same as Monterey trip above (*).
Organizer: Shearwater Journeys.
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Submarine Canyon
Duration: 8 hours
Dates: 12, 13, 14, 15 Sep. 2013
Cost: $150
Target species: Same as Monterey trip above (*).
Organizer: Shearwater Journeys.
(831) 637-8527; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.com; www.shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Bay
Duration: 8 hours
Date: 24 Aug. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: We will head out looking for Black-footed Albatross, concentrations of shearwaters and storm petrels if present in the

Target species: Cook’s Petrel, South Polar Skua, Ashy Storm-petrel
Organizer: Monterey Seabirds.
http://www.montereyseabirds.com/

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Bay
Duration: 8 hours
Dates: 8, 22 Sep. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: Ashy, Black, Wilson’s storm-petrels, Buller’s Shearwater
Organizer: Monterey Seabirds.
http://www.montereyseabirds.com/

Port: Half Moon Bay, California
Destination: Half Moon Bay
Duration: 8–10 hours
Date: 14 Sep. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: Warmer water edges for South Polar Skua, Tufted Puffin, storm-petrels, Buller’s and Flesh-footed in with more common shearwaters. Can be combined with next day’s Monterey trip.
Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.
www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Bay
Duration: 8 hours
Date: 15 Sep. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: We will head out looking for Black-footed Albatross, concentrations of shearwaters and storm petrels if present in the
bay this year. Scripps's Murrelet if water is warm, jaegers, alcids, South Polar Skua.

Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures. www.alvarosadventures.com; 650-504-7779

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Bay
Duration: 8 hours
Dates: 29 Sep.; 6, 12 Oct. 2013
Cost: $130
Target species: Scripps’s Murrelet; South Polar Skua; Streaked, Buller’s, Black-vented, Short-tailed shearwaters.

Southern California

Port: San Diego, California.
Destination: 9-mile bank, Channel Is., Pt. Conception, Arguello Canyon, Rodriguez Dome, San Juan Seamount, and more
Duration: 5 days
Dates: 2–6 Sep. 2013
Cost: $1150
Target species: Cook’s, Murphy’s, Bulwer’s, Hawaiian petrels; Red-billed Tropicbird; Craveri’s, Scripps’s, Guadalupe murrelets; Least, Ashy storm-petrels; Black-footed, Laysan albatrosses.
Organizer: Searcher Natural History Tours. www.bajawhale.com; (619) 226-2403.

Port: Santa Barbara, California
Destination: Channel Islands, Santa Lucia Escarpment, nearby banks and deepwater canyons
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 21 Sep. 2013
Cost: $195
Target species: Cook’s Petrel; Red-billed Tropicbird; Craveri’s, Scripps’s, Guadalupe murrelets; Least, Ashy, Black storm-petrels; Black-footed Albatross; Buller’s, Pink-footed, Flesh-footed shearwaters; South Polar Skua; Sabine’s Gull; Long-tailed Jaeger.

Port: Dana Point, California
Destination: 14 Mile Bank
Duration: 6 hours
Dates: 21 September 2013
Cost: $50
Target species: Scripps’s Murrelet, Rhinoceros Auklet.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: 9-Mile & 30-Mile Banks majority San Diego Co., may briefly bird in L.A. Co. waters
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 5 October 2013
Cost: $75
Target species: Storm-petrels (with likely Black and possibly Least, Leach’s, and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Red-billed Tropicbird, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: Some San Diego Co. and most in L.A. Co., maybe briefly in Ventura Co.
Duration: 48 hours
Dates: 12–14 October 2013
Cost: $250
Target species: Good trip for Guadalupe Murrelet, Red-billed Tropicbird, storm-petrels (with likely Black and Leach’s and possibly Least and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Black-footed Albatross, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Northern Fulmar, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua, Long-tailed Jaeger.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: 9-Mile & 30-Mile Banks majority San Diego Co., may briefly bird in L.A. Co. waters
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 5 October 2013
Cost: $75
Target species: Storm-petrels (with likely Black and possibly Least, Leach’s, and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Red-billed Tropicbird, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: 9-Mile & 30-Mile Banks majority San Diego Co., may briefly bird in L.A. Co. waters
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 5 October 2013
Cost: $75
Target species: Storm-petrels (with likely Black and possibly Least, Leach’s, and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Red-billed Tropicbird, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: 9-Mile & 30-Mile Banks majority San Diego Co., may briefly bird in L.A. Co. waters
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 5 October 2013
Cost: $75
Target species: Storm-petrels (with likely Black and possibly Least, Leach’s, and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Red-billed Tropicbird, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua.

Port: San Diego, California
Destination: 9-Mile & 30-Mile Banks majority San Diego Co., may briefly bird in L.A. Co. waters
Duration: 12 hours
Date: 5 October 2013
Cost: $75
Target species: Storm-petrels (with likely Black and possibly Least, Leach’s, and Ashy), Black-vented Shearwater, Sabine’s Gull. Fair chance for Red-billed Tropicbird, Flesh-footed and Buller’s shearwaters, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua.
Packing for a trip is always challenging, especially in this age of increased security and frequent baggage fees. Over many years of world travel, I’ve done a lot of packing. The purpose of this article is to share some of my insights so that you, too, can pack light, get through security lines safely and successfully, and enjoy your trip. Although the focus is on air travel, many of the concepts also translate well to car travel.

Less is Best

Most travel gurus tell you to make a list of essentials, gather them up, put them in a pile, and then get rid of half of the pile. Only then should you make a permanent list of just those items left. When you return from the trip, tweak the list again. Check out my packing list on p. 59, especially the essential items—marked with (E)—that shouldn’t be left behind. Ideally, all essentials should either be worn or packed in your carry-on luggage. You can pack some items in a checked bag, but never put valuable items, such as your binoculars, field scope, cell phone, laptop, or camera, in your checked baggage (a tripod can be placed in a checked bag).

The essentials list is flexible. You can pick and choose which items aren’t necessary for a particular trip. For instance, if you are traveling to The Bahamas, you probably won’t need a knit hat or gloves. This list omits items that many travelers consider essential, including a field scope and tripod, camera, laptop or tablet, water filter, snacks, altimeter, mosquito net, hostel sheet, travel pillow, rain poncho, travel guides, and reading materials. Each person’s essentials list is unique, based on personal needs, comfort, interests, the destination, and whether the trip is part of an organized tour. The important thing is to make a list, so you’ll never forget an essential on your trip.

You can find travel tips, rules, and restrictions at the following websites:

- Transportation Security Administration (TSA) <tsa.gov/traveler-information>
- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) <faa.gov/passengers/>
- Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) <catsa-acsta.gc.ca>

Your Carry-on Luggage

Airline carry-on size restrictions have been in place for many years, and at the time of this writing, all airlines allowed (and often did not charge for) one piece of carry-on luggage plus one “personal item”, usually defined as a as laptop, purse, or briefcase. A small backpack counts as a personal item so long as it is placed under the seat in front of you. Although TSA and CATSA allow a camera bag to be carried through airport security in addition to your other allowable carry-ons, check with the airline to see if this extra piece of baggage is permitted. In the past, airline staff rarely checked the size of a carry-on bag, but it is becoming more common that they tag larger items to be checked at the gate.

The maximum size for a carry-on bag for most airlines within the U.S. and Canada is 45 linear inches (118 linear centimeters), that is, the height, width,
and depth measurements added together. Some regional airlines have less overhead space, and you must check larger carry-ons at the gate. Additionally, many airlines, especially those outside the U.S. and Canada, have weight restrictions and some may have different size requirements for carry-on luggage. Any piece larger than the maximum size will need to be checked or, if it is too heavy, some items will need to be removed. This could be especially problematic if you are on a connecting flight, because you will not have access to any checked luggage and no place to put the excess items! So plan accordingly, and always verify all of your airline’s baggage restrictions before arriving at the airport.

Know the “3-1-1 rule” for carry-ons. This means liquids, aerosols, and gels in your carry-on must be in 3.4-ounce (100ml) or smaller (by volume) bottles, all packed in a single (per person) one-quart-sized, clear, plastic, zip-top bag. The bag should be placed in a screening bin at the airport security station. Medications, infant formula, breast milk, and baby food are allowed in reasonable amounts exceeding three ounces and don’t have to be in the zip-top bag, but you must declare these items for inspection at the checkpoint. A great product to use for your liquids is GoToob <www.humangear.com/gotoob/>; this product comes in several sizes (three-ounce or less), so that you can place shampoo, sunscreen, body lotion, and other personal care products in a drip/leak-proof container that meets the 3-1-1 requirements. They are safe for food, and 100% free of BPA and PC.

It is best to carry all the bare necessities in your carry-on baggage; everything on the essentials list is currently allowed to be carried on. You can also carry on your camera, field scope, and tripod; I have never had a problem carrying these items on a plane, whether for a domestic or international flight. Packing them in protective cases or sacks helps lessen scrutiny. You can also fill a small backpack with your essential items and place that bag in your wheeled luggage in order to have more flexibility on the other end of the flight.

I have heard of birders being questioned about extra batteries in luggage. Both the TSA and CATSA state that you may pack spare lithium batteries in your carry-on baggage, but that lithium batteries are not permitted in your checked luggage. For personal use, there is generally no restriction on the number of spare batteries allowed in carry-on baggage, including those for cell phones, hearing aids, and laptops, as well as AA/AAA batteries. For more information, see <tinyurl.com/TSA-batteries> and <tinyurl.com/Canada-batteries>.

Today’s smartphones, some MP3 players (such as iPod touch), tablets, and many laptops are making it easier to pack less by reducing the number of devices required to maintain the same functionality that multiple “vintage” devices once offered. A mobile computer is potentially an MP3 player, digital camera, GPS device, compass, altimeter, e-book reader, field guide, cell phone, and email and...
social media portal, all wrapped into one portable package. Many field guides and several bird-finding guides are available as apps or e-books, allowing further streamlining of the amount of “stuff” you need to pack. Just don’t forget that power cable to charge your device! Electrical outlets in many foreign countries require, minimally, a plug adapter (varies by country) and run at 240V. Unless your electronic device has a voltage converter included in its power cord (labeled “110–240V”—many modern power cords for laptops and mobile phones have one)—you will need a converter as well, or risk severely damaging your device. There are several options that include both the adapter and converter, and these are widely available at retailers such as Wal-Mart.

Other gadgets to consider packing include (1) car chargers, several of which also have FM tuners that allow you to listen to your MP3 player while in a vehicle; (2) external battery packs and chargers (including the PowerGen Mobile Juice Pack External Battery Pack) that run on batteries such as AA or solar power, which free you from reliance on an electrical outlet for charging portable electronics; (3) multiport USB chargers (the Scosche brand is a good one) for charging multiple USB-powered devices, such as iDevices, e-readers, and cell phones; and (4) an LED flashlight (such as SureFire’s or Led Lenser’s) that is very bright and very compact.

**Your Checked Luggage**

If you decide to check a piece of luggage, it should include most of your clothing, toiletries, an extra pair of shoes or hiking shoes, some of your travel materials and books, and tripod. Consider waterproofing your luggage! A waterfall on the Manu Road in Peru caused most of my clothes to get wet as our van drove through it—all of our luggage was on the roof, and a few of our bags were not completely covered by a tarp. You can purchase waterproof or water-resistant luggage, treat a suitcase or duffle with waterproof agents, or pack clean clothes in plastic bags within your suitcase or backpack. Many people travel with a large backpack or duffle bag. Although these are great options for the young and spry, they are not often good choices for people unwilling or unable to lug 40–50 pounds on their backs. Wheeled luggage, of which there are many choices, offer the best option for most travelers, but be prepared for instances when navigating with wheeled luggage could be problematic, for example, in sandy, gravelly, or muddy conditions.

Pack everything into the smallest piece of luggage you can because nearly all airlines have a weight restriction even on your first piece of checked luggage and charge steep fees for overweight pieces. If you have any connections to a foreign or regional carrier, there are often even more severe restrictions on both size and weight of your checked luggage which can cause much stress at your foreign connecting airport. Again, always be sure to check all airlines’ baggage restrictions. Most airlines still allow one free checked bag on international flights, but most Canadian and U.S. airlines charge for even the first piece of checked baggage on domestic flights.

If you want to lock your checked bag, make sure you use a lock that is approved and can be opened by airport security officers. Look for the symbols on the locks as shown on the TSA website [tinyurl.com/USAlocks](http://tinyurl.com/USAlocks) and see further information for Canada at [tinyurl.com/CanadaFAQ](http://tinyurl.com/CanadaFAQ).

**Travel Clothing**

Birders should consider clothing specially made either for travel or for outdoor enthusiasts. Look for lightweight, moisture-wicking, fast-drying, wrinkle-resistant clothing that provides UV protection, and if possible, contains insect repellent. This type of clothing has many benefits. It is often odor-resistant, so you can wear an article for several days in a row or on alternate days. It is easy to wash by hand, allowing you to pack fewer of each item (for example, one or two pair of undergarments are often all you need if you wash and dry them in your room). Travel clothing often works equally well in extreme climates: Less moisture against your skin means less chaffing and rashes in warm weather and less chill in cold temperatures. And it packs really small. One big tip is to not fold your clothing. Roll it up, and you’ll be surprised both by how much less space it takes up and how much less wrinkled it ends up at your final
destination. Clothing impregnated with permethrin is a great alternative to slathering insect repellent on your skin. A hat with a brim, a long-sleeve shirt, a pair of long pants, and socks all treated with permethrin will keep you well covered and free of bites without using much insect repellent on exposed skin. Most permethrin-enhanced clothing has insect-repellent properties for the life of the clothing, or for 70 or more washings.

Plan to dress in layers, and to bring more under-layers and fewer outer-layers. You’ll need at least one warm layer. Even in the tropics, evenings, nights, higher elevations, and rainy days can be cool or downright cold. A lightweight fleece is a good option and can double as a pillow on your flight. A warm pair of gloves and a knit hat are also important. Both are small, and you’ll be glad you have them if it snows on you in Africa! Don’t forget a waterproof outer layer. Coats work better than ponchos because they provide protection in wind and double as a good outer layer in cool weather. Although the idea of an umbrella may seem strange, birding in a downpour under an umbrella is often a drier and more pleasant way to spend a warm rainy afternoon than the alternatives.

Take one pair of waterproof shoes, suitable for hiking or long walks on uneven terrain. And packing a pair of sandals or lightweight athletic shoes to change into in the evening is a good idea.

Packing well will make your birding trips more enjoyable and less stressful. I have learned a lot about what not to forget, how to pack lighter and smarter, and which gadgets work well and which don’t, but I am always interested in hearing about other people’s travel experiences, strategies, and must-haves. Share them on the ABA Blog via <aba.org/birdersguide>.

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### Packing List

(essentials are marked with (E))

**Checked Bag**
- long pants: 1–2 per week
- undergarments: 1 per every 2 days, including long underwear if needed
- socks: 1 pair per every 2 days
- T-shirts: 1 per every 2 days
- sweater or fleece
- long-sleeved shirts: 2–3
- hiking boots
- snacks
- mosquito net
- hostel sheet and pillow
- field guides and other reading materials
- tripod
- copies of travel documents and itinerary
- empty plastic bags
- roll of toilet paper (for emergencies)
- heavy coat, if needed

**Toiletry Kit**

Essentials (E) will vary due to personal differences. If in carry-on luggage, liquids must not exceed 3.4 oz., and all containers with liquids must fit in a single one-quart zip-lock bag
- shampoo and conditioner
- razor
- deodorant
- shaving cream/gel
- toothbrush
- toothpaste
- sunscreen (E)
- insect repellent (E)
- soap
- clothing detergent
- comb/brush
- other hygiene products

**Carry-on**
- binoculars (E)
- field scope
- field guide (E)
- site guide/notes (E)
- head lamp/flashlight (E)
- sunglasses (E)
- notebook, pen, checklists (E)
- lens cleaners (E)
- travel/flight itinerary (E)

**Basic First Aid Kit**

- Band Aids (various sizes)
- gauze
- cotton swabs
- tweezers
- folding scissors
- Neosporin (or similar antiseptic cream/gel)
- bismuth subsalicylate or Pepto-Bismol (anti-nausea, anti-diarrheal)
- Imodium (anti-diarrheal)
- oral antibiotics (such as Cipro for intestinal infections/traveler’s diarrhea)
- acetaminophen (pain and fever reducer)
- ibuprofen (anti-inflammatory for pain, swelling, and fever)
- diphenhydramine or Benadryl (antihistamine for allergic reactions)
- pseudoephedrine or Sudafed (decongestant for stuffy nose, also useful for air travel to keep sinuses dry)
- Diamox (for high-altitude trips)
- adrenaline kit (for severe allergic reactions)
- motion sickness preventatives
- construction wrap (for sprains or snake bites in remote areas)
Chance favors the prepared mind,” advised photographer Ansel Adams. The same holds for birding: Good travel birders don’t stumble across great birds; they prepare ahead and adjust the odds in their favor.

One strategy for finding good birds in unfamiliar locales is to join a birding festival, where experienced guides choose the locations and show you the birds. There are now scores of these gatherings, ranging from big events such as the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival <rgvbf.org> to smaller, focused gatherings such as the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Festival <lektreks.org>. The ABA maintains an interactive website where you can search festivals by country, state, and month <aba.org/festivals>.

But if you can’t time your travel for a festival—or if your idea of memorable birding doesn’t start with piling into a van with a dozen strangers—you can go it alone. Here are some strategies for how to bird like a local in unfamiliar places.

Given that the days of steamer trunks are gone, replaced by airline luggage restrictions and the confines of a fuel-efficient Prius trunk, I assume you’ll want to pack light. So one theme of this article is to emphasize digital tools and internet resources that let us travel light, yet informed and well-equipped. (For general tips on packing light, be sure to check out Alan Knue’s article on p. 56).

Perhaps you already own a smartphone such as an iPhone or Galaxy, or a tablet such as an iPad or Nook. These gizmos are worth their weight in gold circuitry when it comes to replacing field guides, reference books, field recorders, and notebooks.

If you’re thinking about buying a mobile device, note that there are more app choices for iOS (as in Apple’s iPhone, iPod touch, or iPad) than for Android devices. Because of market forces related to developer tools and monetary incentives, this is unlikely to change in the immediate future. Within the iOS family, I prefer my iPhone in the field, tolerating its tiny screen for the portability. But the new iPad mini is an excellent compromise for those who prefer more screen view.

**Lurk on Listservs**

Listservs, or electronic mailing lists, have transformed travel birding. Now that many conversations among birders take place in a public internet forum, you can listen in and learn what birds are being seen where and when. It’s like having a team of virtual birding guides working for you—for free!

The best source for locating a birding listserv is ABA’s new Birding News <birding.aba.org>, which lets you read a listserv’s recent posts and archives without subscribing. If you do opt to subscribe directly, sign up at least a month ahead, opting for “digest form” so you receive a daily consolidated email message. At this point you are “lurking”—watching rather than participating—to get a sense for what others are seeing and for what is common and unusual to the area.

Depending on your travel region, you may need to sign up for more than one listserv, particularly in a large state such as California or Texas. Listservs are costless, and listening is learning, so it’s worthwhile signing up for all that are relevant.

**Post an RFI**

In addition to lurking on a listserv, you can actively post a query, or RFI (“Request For Information”). Posts should include the acronym RFI in the subject line, such as “RFI—Rosy-faced Lovebirds in Phoenix”. Be sure to sign the bottom of your post with your full name, city, and state.

RFIs are acceptable when not abused. Every person on the listserv (potentially thousands of birders) receives your question in their email inbox, so post your RFIs judiciously. Too often an RFI includes a visiting birder’s list of their 127 most-wanted birds, including common species that can be seen at any fitting habitat. How
does one answer a post like that? More often than not, you won’t get a response.

Rather than asking broad general questions, sign up for the listserv early and read the posts. Then, if you see a post on one of your target species, follow up directly with that individual with specific questions clarifying location and access, or requesting news of their latest sighting. You’re certain to get a reply—and may even get an offer for a local tour!

**Note Location Leads**

As you lurk on listservs, read birding magazines, or hear about friends’ birding adventures, keep notes on the birding hotspots.

I have a text file on my laptop, called “Location Leads”, that comprises tidbits of details on birding destinations divided by geographic area. If I must go to Miami, I can quickly look in my notes for nearby birding venues (A.D. Barnes Park) and species of interest to me (Red-whiskered Bulbul). After years of nurturing my file, you could drop me almost anywhere in the ABA Area, and I’d be prepared with my wish list: Picture Canyon for Lewis’s Woodpeckers, Salt Creek Falls for Black Swifts... I’m ready.

**Listen to Songs**

Nothing scores new birds in a new geography like knowing their songs and calls. En route to Washington State, I spent some airplane time reviewing vocalizations on my iPhone. Once there, I heard “put-WAY-doo” during a neighborhood walk, immediately recognized the sound, and knew to look for a California Quail perched on a nearby fence post. Knowing what to listen for translates into knowing what to look for.

Fortunately, there are some great new tools for studying bird songs. If you prefer a structured learning environment, the new Larkwire software (for laptop and mobile devices) is excellent <darkwire.com>

You can select eastern or western geography, and Larkwire guides you through progressive tutorials. (For a detailed review of Larkwire, see “Larkwire: Rosetta Stone for Birdsong”, *Birding*, January 2012, pp. 60-62.) If you already have a foundation in recognizing bird songs and are a good self-learner, the new BirdTunes apps are simple yet thorough <birdtunesapp.com>.

**Set eBird Alerts**

The citizen science project eBird is designed first and foremost for science and conservation, but it’s also a phenomenal resource for birders. The first step is to sign up for eBird’s email alerts and to customize your search settings. (For more details on eBird, see “Happy Birthday eBird: Ten Years and Counting”, *Birding*, November 2012, pp. 58-64.)

If you’re interested in rarities, you never know when a bird you’d love to see might show up within striking range. By signing up for eBird’s “ABA Rarities” alerts, you receive brief email summaries of species and locations <ebird.org/ebird/alerts>. For example, while long-distance driving through Connecticut, I received an eBird alert that a Fork-tailed Flycatcher was being seen—can it be?—two interstate exits away, giving me a life bird for a trivial two-mile detour.

In that same eBird screen, you can customize “Rare Bird Alerts” by specific region, or “Needs Alerts” by species. For example, if you’d like to see an Acorn Woodpecker in Santa Clara County, California, you can customize your settings to receive an email detailing the location whenever someone records that species there. It’s almost like knowing the neighbors!
Spy with BirdsEye
The eBird database offers unprecedented ability to see what other birders are seeing and where. You can access this information via your laptop and an internet connection, or by using a mobile device and the bird-finding app BirdsEye. (For a hands-on look at using BirdsEye while traveling, see “On the Road with BirdsEye: A Cross-Country Review”, Birding, July 2011, pp. 58-60.)

By laptop, go to eBird’s range and point map <ebird.org/ebird/map>, then customize your search to species, geography, and/or time period. A collection of pushpins will appear on a Google map. Click on the pushpin to see that observer’s complete information via your laptop and an internet connection, or by using a mobile device and the bird-finding app BirdsEye. (For a hands-on look at using BirdsEye while traveling, see “On the Road with BirdsEye: A Cross-Country Review”, Birding, July 2011, pp. 58-60.)

By laptop, go to eBird’s range and point map <ebird.org/ebird/map>, then customize your search to species, geography, and/or time period. A collection of pushpins will appear on a Google map. Click on the pushpin to see that observer’s complete report, including location, comments, and other species seen.

The BirdsEye app for mobile devices also accesses eBird sightings. Selecting “Find Nearby Birds” or “Notable Sightings and Rare Birds” automatically brings up the birds reported to eBird near your current location, or at any location you choose. The Audubon Birds field guide app integrates a similar search in its “Find Birds with eBird” option.

Pushpins on a map—showing the precise location of a coveted bird—might seem too easy to be true. Correct, it’s not quite that easy. The pushpin does not show the exact location: it’s either pegged to a default location at a birding hotspot (typically the entrance parking lot) or placed at a “personal location” with some fudging to protect privacy. Don’t go to the pushpin and expect to see the bird! It’s almost certainly somewhere else—potentially even a quarter-mile away.

But there are ways to outsmart eBird. Let’s say there are three pushpin reports, which happened to be with a Gray Kingbird query. It doesn’t take a math genius to infer that the “true” location, before eBird’s algorithm added some privacy noise, is most likely at the geometric center of the three points. I went to that location, looked up, and there was a Gray Kingbird on the wire.

If there are multiple nearby reports, compare the locations. Some eBirders simply pick the nearest pre-existing hotspot; others create a new, more precise, location marker. For example, a Razorbill was reported at Porpoise Point, a residential peninsula with a sand spit into the inlet—odd habitat for a Razorbill, but possible... However, another report on the same day and time (presumably two people birding together) placed the sighting at a custom location out in the inlet—much more likely and, indeed, the bird’s “true” position.

Even if there is only one pushpin eBird report, with a bit of detective work you can deduce the bird’s true location by looking at a Google or Bing satellite map. I was looking for a reported Vermilion Flycatcher, its eBird location marked by a pushpin in woods. Unlikely. But a satellite image of the area showed a nearby open pond with tree snags—perfect Vermilion Flycatcher habitat. Bingo!

Some Great Birding Travel Apps:
• The Sibley eGuide to Birds (iOS, Android, Windows, BlackBerry)
• National Geographic Birds (iOS)
• Peterson Birds of North America (iOS)
• Audubon Birds (iOS, Android)
• iBird Pro (iOS, Android, Windows)
• birdJam HeadsUp Warblers (iOS)
• birdJam HeadsUp Sparrows (iOS)
• BirdsEye (iOS)
• BirdLog (iOS, Android)
• BirdTunes (iOS)
• Larkwire (iOS, some Android, Internet)
• Lifebirds Journal (iOS)
• Birdwatcher’s Diary (iOS)

List the Birds
You may not have much time to study before you travel to a new area, but at least create a short list of what birds are expected there. This provides some structure to any studying you do, and prepares your mind for the likely identification candidates when in the field.

A quick way to create a short list is with a field guide app. For example, the Sibley eGuide to Birds app lets you select your travel area, creating an excerpted field guide. Now you can quickly screen-swipe through a subset of the app’s 810 species.

Similarly, the Audubon Birds app can be set to display only the likely birds in a given area and month.

If you’re visiting a particular park, check that park’s website for a downloadable PDF of their bird checklist, as in this file created for Minnesota’s Tettegouche State Park <tinyurl.com/TSPChecklist>. These files are the digital equivalent of the trifold paper handout available at their visitor center. By downloading and printing this resource in advance, you can highlight the birds to expect for that season and focus your studying on those you don’t know or would particularly like to see.

For general regional birding, print out the eBird checklist of likely species. Although eBird has the option for printing detailed frequency bar graphs by species and county/parish <tinyurl.com/eBirdCharts>, I often find this level of detail a bit overwhelming for an unfamiliar region. To create an eBird short list, log in to eBird and pretend you are submitting a checklist for your travel area. The default list will appear on the screen. Print this and you’ve got a starter cheat sheet! If you want to organize the list by likelihood (frequent, infrequent [less than 10% of reports], and not reported lately), then select the option “Group by Most Likely”. Now cancel your dummy submission.

Find the Birding Trails
Many states now promote their nature tourism with a “birding trail”, which consists of directions to selected birding hotspots along an efficient driving route. Texas was the first state to launch such a trail in 1996, with many other states following. The ABA maintains a list of birding trails on its website <tinyurl.com/BirdingTrails>:

Whereas you once had to plan ahead and request mailed brochures, most birding trails now provide free downloadable PDFs. Some states, such as Florida and Washington, have birding trail apps that suggest nearby birding stops, provide driving directions, and locate needed amenities.

Be aware that the quality of information on birding trails varies widely. Some birding trail brochures are publications designed by the state’s tourism office, containing potentially inaccurate or dated
material. At a stop on the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, listed as a good place for Painted Buntings, I was told by a knowledgeable ranger, “We haven’t seen a bunting here in over a decade.” More importantly (if you bird alone), the stops may not have been vetted for safety. Twice, at sanctioned birding trail sites, I felt uncomfortable and retreated to my locked car.

Plan on Paper

Birding trail brochures are great supplemental information, mostly for their driving directions, but to find the really birdy locations, order an ABA Birdfinding Guide <aba.org/siteguides>.

Each detailed guide is written by experts from the area who provide detailed maps, instructions, and tips to find specific birds. The paper format is excellent for advance route planning and doubles as a stand-alone backup. Reports from eBird are great…unless you stray into areas with no mobile data coverage. Just as a Delorme Atlas & Gazetteer is an important supplement to a car GPS, a Birdfinding Guide will save your trip if—or rather, when—your mobile device goes dead.

Pack Digital Resources

Depending on your birding geography, you may not need to pack heavy paper field guides. Today, many field guides are available as smartphone or tablet apps, letting you pack more optics and snacks. (For a discussion of the transition to e-guides, see “eGuide Me: Birding Without Paper Field Guides”, *Birding*, September 2012, pp. 54-59.)

If you’re already familiar with a paper guide, such as The Sibley Guide to Birds or National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, then it’s best to first transition to that guide’s digital version. Both of these apps are excellent, although I find the Sibley app more streamlined and easier to use in the field. The Peterson Birds of North America app is best for comparing plates of species, and benefits from the larger screen of an iPad or iPad mini.

Locate the Best Habitat

Finding birds in a new geographical area means finding the best habitat. Of course, “best habitat” depends on your target species. If Shiny Cowbird is on your wish list, you may have to excuse yourself from the family reunion for a stop at the Piney Acres Mobile Home Park. The listservs will help you with that.

If you only have a short time, and want to see a number of species, then you want a place designed—or, in the parlance, managed—for wildlife. That means a wildlife management area (WMA) or national wildlife refuge (NWR). Nothing beats a WMA or NWR for one-stop birding. These lands are specifically managed to attract wildlife, creating diverse habitats with ample food supplies. Sure, Fulvous Whistling-Ducks sometimes show up in residential ponds—but you’re much more likely to find them by heading straight to a food-rich waterfowl management area. In addition, most WMAs and NWRs have several-mile auto tours that maximize accessibility. These specially designed routes let you efficiently cover a lot of area, with premium views and habitats, all without worrying about local risks such as snakes or ticks.

If you’re visiting a coastal area, don’t forget to plan ahead using tide tables. An app such as AyeTides makes it easy to schedule a shorebird hotspot for a low tide, or even better a falling tide, which keeps the shorebirds closer as they feed on the newly-exposed mudflats.

If you really want to experience birds of a new area, try a campground for a night or two, particularly during spring to mid-summer. Seriously! By “living outdoors” you increase your birding time and up the odds on those elusive nightjars and owls. Rent an RV, pack a tent, or toss a sleeping bag into a car big enough to use as a minimalist camper. You may not sleep much that night, listening to all the nocturnal sounds, but it’s a performance capped off by the dawn chorus.

Record Your Finds

Given all the new birds you’ll see, and the new digital tools you’ll be using to see them, you may want to explore a new way to keep track of them. Without diminishing the value of an old-fashioned field notebook, there are several excellent digital options to keep your tallies and notes on a mobile device. Lifebirds Journal <eucled.com/lifebirds> and Birdwatcher’s Diary <stevenscreek.com> are two apps for recording sightings in the field. And if you use eBird, the BirdLog app is a big time-saver, letting you upload your sightings directly from your smartphone <birdseyebirding.com>.

For photographers, a camera geo-tagger is a great way to keep track of what you saw while on a whirlwind birding tour. If you use a Canon or Nikon DSLR body, both companies sell a tiny GPS accessory device, for about $200, that connects to the camera’s hot shoe. This tiny gizmo automatically records the precise time, latitude, longitude, and altitude into each photo’s EXIF file. Many of the newest generation of point-and-shoot ultra-zooms also include a built-in GPS receiver. By geo-tagging all your shots, you’ll never forget where you saw that Clark’s Nutcracker or Yellow-billed Magpie.

Tally Ho!

For most of us, traveling to a new birding spot is a treasured opportunity: time off from home obligations or business meetings when you can immerse yourself in new bird sightings, behaviors, and sounds. By organizing your travel with a little up-front work, and adding a few lightweight digital resources, you can maximize that precious time in the field.

ABA’s Birding News is a new aggregator site for one-stop browsing of all the birding listservs.
ruickshank Sanctuary is a little postage stamp of scrub nestled in the middle of the suburban sprawl of Brevard County, Florida. The birders gathered here, hailing from all across North America as far afield as Alberta, packed themselves into the tiny parking lot with one purpose in mind, to see Florida’s one and only endemic bird species—Florida Scrub-Jay—maybe the most special of the many incredible birds one can seek out at the Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival.

Little did the assembled know that they wouldn’t simply be viewing the charismatic and gregarious jays. No, on tap for this day was a full-on scrub jay experience. Long-accustomed to visitors bringing treats, these birds know what it means to have a crowd of binocular-clad humans bearing down on them. They perch on open palms, on top of heads, on cell phone cameras outstretched for that perfect Facebook profile picture. And the birders, for whom this experience is part in parcel of why one comes to a festival like Space Coast, are gloriously lost in the experience. The individuals in charge of this festival, now in its 16th year in Titusville, make sure of it.

The argument that one of the best ways to protect unique habitats and the birds within them is by attracting birders to them in the form of an annual event, is largely settled within the ABA Area. The calendar is filled with events, each one offering birders a full slate of exciting field trips with skilled leaders, trade shows with the newest optics, and talks from leading lights of the birding community. These things are justifications in and of themselves, but in actuality, behind every bird festival is a group of local birders looking to convince their communities that there are economic incentives to protecting bird habitat. Otherwise, Cruickshank Sanctuary would be just another Florida housing development.

Now what about the rest of the world?
That question was on my mind when I was delivered directly from the Space Coast to Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat—literally on the other side of the Earth. I was a delegate to the third Global Bird Watcher’s Conference (GBWC-3), an event sponsored by Gujarat Tourism. GBWC-3 was held from 29–31 January 2013 and attended by nearly 300 delegates from 40 countries.

Gujarat, at the western tip of the Indian diamond, is developing quickly; it is unique among many Indian states in that political and civic leaders are increasingly receptive to the value of a robust tourism infrastructure, particularly one that emphasizes Gujarat’s unique natural advantages. That potential is readily apparent. The birding is simply phenomenal. Despite a population sardined into every square foot of space and a civic infrastructure best described as “pending”, there are birds truly everywhere. Time spent waiting—and there is a lot of waiting in a place like India—is easily turned to time spent birding, and the number of species seen while preparing for something to happen can rival the birds seen when it actually does. This makes for enjoyable birding even within the context of a conference, with its attendant talks and presentations.

I was one of only a small handful of North Americans in attendance, and the only North American birder, period. I found myself regularly in a group with birders from the U.K., South Africa, Belarus, and India. While it was fantastic to be a part of the international contingent, the real surprise was the skill and youth of the Indian birders. India’s emergent middle class has seen dramatic growth in the ranks of its empowered birding community, buoyed by an explosion of inexpensive, quality optics and comprehensive new field guides. This is a nation with an opportunity to set a course that will result in good things for its wild places.

I think what we North American birders miss when we focus our efforts on our own hemisphere is the realization that, on the other side of the world, there is a community of naturalists and conservationists just as passionate, just as enthusiastic, and just as motivated as our own. When presented with an opportunity to visit birders in places like Gujarat, I believe we owe it to them to share our experiences, as well as our expectations. Just like here at home, new birders—and especially new birding communities—look to us for guidance. ✨
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