

# The History of *Birding*

## Part V. 1994–2000

The latter years of the 1990s were a transitional time for *Birding* and the ABA—not our first such episode and presumably not our last. The particular juncture that concerns us here is one of a transition to institutional middle age. The ABA staff expanded during this period, and the organization began to get serious about the implementation of programs and initiatives proposed a few years earlier.

The driving force at this time was the undeniable fact that birding in the United States and Canada was in the midst of continuing—indeed accelerating—growth. Formal demographic surveys confirmed the trend, and so did the old-fashioned walk in the woods. More North Americans were wearing binoculars, buying bird books, and observing birds than ever before. But the newcomers to birding didn't necessarily embrace old paradigms or accept conventional wisdom. Hence, the challenge for the editorial team at *Birding*: to meet the needs of a rapidly growing birding community but also to build on the proven successes of our forebears.



The 1994 volume of *Birding* got under way on a festive note: It was the occasion of our twenty-fifth anniversary. The February issue commenced with a dramatic cover painting by David Sibley of a Red-billed Tropicbird being chased down by a South Polar Skua. Did the painting contain a coded message? Was the ABA (represented by its long-time logo, the tropicbird) about to be engulfed by the vexing identification and taxonomic problems of the day (aptly symbolized by the skua)? The take-home message of this silver anniversary issue was that we were ready for the challenge. Of special note in this regard was an essay by Rick Blom (“North American birding: The next twenty-five years”, pp. 26–30). In something of a surprise, Blom predicted that future changes would play out along just two major axes. First, there was the technological axis. Most of the tech-

nological advances that Blom envisaged have indeed come to be realized—or in many instances flat out surpassed. The other axis was attitudinal. Blom projected a more sensitive and holistic sort of birder—more ethical, more environmentalist, more interested in avian inventory and monitoring. The jury is still out on that one.

In 1995 *Birding* underwent yet another one of its periodic enlargements. The February issue measured 8.125 × 10.875 inches—up 18% in areal extent from the previous issue, and an increase of 96% since the early 1970s. The February issue also featured ABA President Dan Williams' clearly articulated vision of the future (pp. 4–5). It was a future with conservation clearly in sight. Speaking of the future, the August issue contained an article (pp. 317–318) that at the time must have seemed futuristic but that now seems preciously quaint. The objective of the article, by Bill Principe, was to “tell you all about the internet, what it means to birders, and how to get on it.” Principe concluded his article with the admonition not to “forget to go outside once in a while and look at birds.” To look at birds such as Lesser Black-backed Gull (August, pp. 282–290; October, pp. 370–381), Bicknell's Thrush (October, pp. 358–366), and Red Crossbill (December, pp. 494–501)—all of which, it turns out, continue to present significant challenges for the birder more than a decade later.

ABA members have always been aware—to some degree or another—of biological variation, and we have seen in several recent installments of “The history of *Birding*” how birders have devised ingenious methods and rationales for sidestepping the inconvenient truth of natural differences among populations. In the 1996 issue of *Birding*, however, it was as though birders had finally caved into ornithological reality. The year started off with a two-part primer on “Mitochondrial madness” (February, pp. 57–63; April, pp. 141–145), and proceeded to look in depth at numerous taxa with no easy answers: the Sharp-tailed Sparrow complex (June, pp.

196–208), Bicknell's Thrush (August, pp. 275–276), Fox Sparrow (August, pp. 327–330), *Spizella* sparrows (October, pp. 374–387), the Solitary Vireo complex (December, pp. 458–471), and others. Along the way, there was the inevitable backsliding—for example, a proposal to establish an official list of “Identifiable Morphologic Units” or “IMUs” (June, pp. 239–240). And the inevitable response of the ABA Checklist Committee: No thank you (June, pp. 241–243).

Paul Lehman's long and distinguished tenure as editor came to an end with the December 1997 issue of *Birding*. The Lehman years, as we have seen, were characterized by increasingly sophisticated articles on a wide variety of taxa; and so it was in Paul's last issue as editor. Coverage included such matters as variation in the call note of Willow Flycatcher (pp. 505–507); the distribution, identification, and taxonomy of Long-billed Murrelet (pp. 460–475); the evolution, ecology, and behavior of Island Scrub-Jay (pp. 476–485); and the population status and life history of Spectacled Eider (pp. 491–495). Lehman put it this way in his valedictory editorial: “It has always been my firm belief that *Birding* should first and foremost educate the birder. But learning should be fun, and detailed treatises covering tertial fringes and mitochondrial DNA analysis can be balanced with humor and tales of birding adventures.” Fittingly, the December 1997 issue closed with a charming whimsy (pp. 531–533) on “Acting your age in birding's golden years”.

Paul J. Baicich assumed the *Birding* editorship with the February 1998 issue, and he quickly embarked upon a course of diversification of the magazine's content. At the same time, the ABA itself was continuing to diversify. Which brings us to a distinctive feature of the Baicich years: a concerted effort to present *Birding* not just as a journal of bird study, but also as a members' magazine. In the 1998 volume, we learned of new undertakings for the ABA, among them the following: acquisition from the National Audubon Society of the journal *North American Birds*, or *Field Notes* as it was known then (February, pp. 8–9); partnering with Birders' Exchange, at the time co-sponsored by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences (April, pp. 143–145); and engagement of birding festivals and other venues for what

was starting to be known as “avitourism” (August, pp. 276–277). New directions for *Birding* included the introduction of the “Possible anywhere” column (June, pp. 212–219) and the inaugural offering in a multi-year series on “The next new ABA birds” (December, pp. 484–491).

It was time for another anniversary in 1999, this one the ABA's thirtieth. Eric Salzman celebrated the “Bird books of the golden age” in the February issue (pp. 38–55), Ken Cordell and colleagues cheered on “The growing popularity of birding in the United States” in the April issue (pp. 168–176), and George Hall paid tribute to *North American Birds* and its bewildering array of antecedents (August, pp. 328–337). Throughout 1999 the series on future additions to the ABA Checklist continued, with expert panels weighing in on Texas (April, pp. 158–166), Florida (June, pp. 245–252), and the Pacific pelagic zone (December, pp. 552–560). By the way, there were a few party poopers during the anniversary year of 1999: Margaret van de Pitte excoriated field guide illustrators for their ingrained ornitho-sexism (August, pp. 366–374), and Ted Eubanks lam-

basted birding listservers for their potential to degrade the human condition (December, pp. 581–582).

Was 2000 the last year of the old millennium, or the first of the new? The purists and pedants are no doubt still debating that matter. Our view? The 2000 volume of *Birding* was characteristically dualistic, affirming our age-old passion for birds while probing cutting-edge questions about identification, population status, and natural history. A selective accounting from 2000: spot-breasted thrushes (April, pp. 120–135; June, pp. 242–254; August, pp. 318–331), White-winged Tern (June, pp. 216–230; December, pp. 540–541), Zone-tailed Hawk (June, pp. 234–241), the sage-grouse complex (August, pp. 306–316), Black Rosy-Finch (October, pp. 402–408), accipiters (October, pp. 428–433), and many others. Finally, in the December issue, there was a review (pp. 563–565) by birding legend Guy McCaskie of a new field guide that distilled a century's worth of knowledge and charted an exhilarating course for the future. “I stand in awe,” wrote McCaskie of *The Sibley Guide*. “I have nothing but praise.”

— Ted Floyd



The twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Birding* (February 1994) featured cover art by David Sibley of a Great Skua in pursuit of a Red-billed Tropicbird.