

Bare-naked Birding

Birding, like hunting and fishing, is devolving into a recreation defined by gear rather than skill. Perhaps this is a bleed-over from the marketing assaults of the past couple of decades. After all, the equippers have convinced American hunters that without camouflaged, de-scented, Gortex-treated clothing no one has a chance in hell of bagging Bambi, who is already habituated to an automated feeder. Next they will be hawking snowballs to Eskimos who, given global warming, may actually need them.

How has this “stuff pushing” impacted birding? Consider the tools of the trade. As a young birder in the late 1960s, I knew of one top-line scope—the Balscope. Resembling a shoulder-fired missile, the Balscope had limited utility with both its heft and its light-gathering capability (it had none). The result is that we used these scopes only as a last resort. The same can be said for our binoculars and field guides—limited choice, utility, and appeal.

Today the choices are unlimited. A quick thumb-through of *Birding* confirms this fact. But is this new generation of Sibleyed, walkie-talkied, iPodded birders

Chambers County, Texas; April 2002. © Brian E. Small.

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*Kern County,
California;
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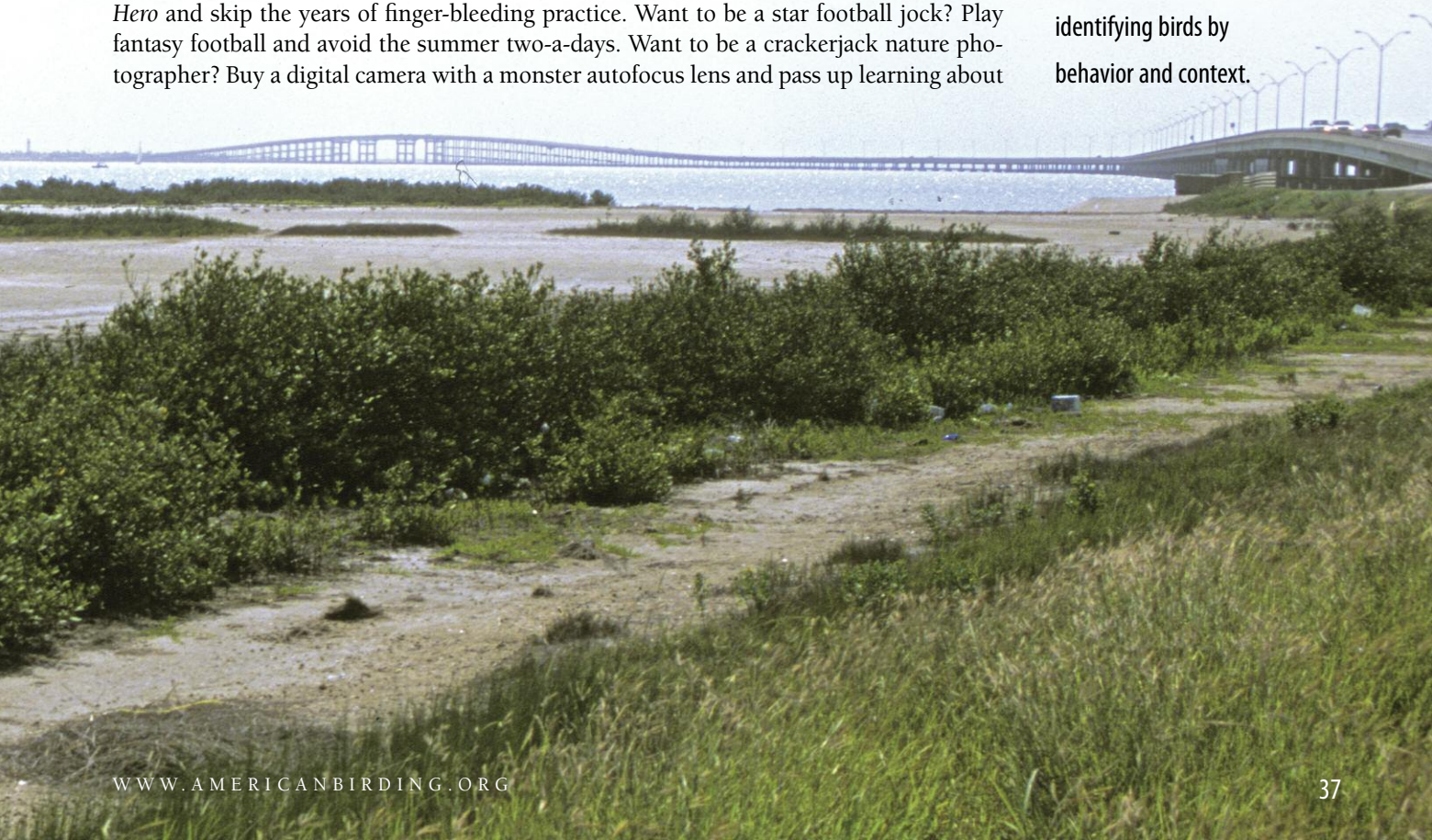
Chambers County, Texas; April 2005. © Brian E. Small.

This western **Willet** (subspecies *inornatus*; left) is more than feather tracts and bare part coloration. Even at a distance, and without the use of optical equipment, it may be reliably identified by habitat (bottom), foraging behavior, and body structure. This article encourages birders and photographers to lay down their gear, and think about ways of identifying birds by behavior and context.

more talented or skilled than those before? Or has this gear orgy actually impeded skills that birders once developed *because* they were forced to rely on their own unamplified or unmagnified senses?

Here is an example of this conundrum. I have noticed frequent internet posts (on TexBirds, for example) from bird photographers who do not seem to know the first thing about identifying a bird. They shoot first and ask their identification questions later. Digital photography and digiscoping have attracted a generation of nature photographers who seem not to know a chicken from a duck. Rather than beginning with an interest in birding and bird identification, these photographers have been seduced by the technology and have cut to the chase.

Not that I am all that surprised by this turn of events. We live in an age in which people are demanding the unearned experience. Want to be a rock star? Get a copy of *Guitar Hero* and skip the years of finger-bleeding practice. Want to be a star football jock? Play fantasy football and avoid the summer two-a-days. Want to be a crackerjack nature photographer? Buy a digital camera with a monster autofocus lens and pass up learning about





Along the upper Texas coast, the **Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow** is a smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) specialist. Within these marshes the sparrow is often detected first by its metallic ticking and the quivering of the grass as the sparrow scurries past. *Bolivar Flats, Texas; 31 December 2005. © Ted Lee Eubanks.*

the nature you capture with those pixels.

What I would hope is that these photographers-cum-birders would work to frame their photos within a narrative or experiential context. In other words, photographers, leave the camera in the car and work as hard on your intuitive birding skills as on your photographic talents.

Intuitive birding relies on an amorphous collection of features including posture, behavior, vocalizations, habitat, position within the habitat (high in the tree or low to the ground), and associations (for example, with a feeding flock). Once we called this “giss” (general impression, shape, and size), but I now find that term too limiting. You do not identify your children based on field marks. You simply know them by a complex set of factors that, at times, simply defy description.

Static photos are similarly limited. No matter their quality, photos can be misleading. I recently studied a waterthrush photo posted to a discussion list, and noticed that the head was just slightly turned. However, that turn was sufficient to turn a Louisiana Waterthrush bill into the semblance (or at least profile) of a Northern. In the field the bird eventually would have moved its head, or I could have shifted my position to get a better look. Fortunately there were other marks shown in the pho-

to that helped in the identification (Louisiana), but you see the point. Technological breakthroughs notwithstanding, nothing replaces the *in situ* experience.

Here are a couple of suggestions for how to develop the skills that will allow you to actually take advantage of the new gear without being dependent on it. First, become more sensitized to “giss” by birding without your binoculars. That’s right; embrace “bare-naked” birding. Find a bird, gather as much information about its identity as possible without binoculars or field guides, hazard a guess as to its identity, then put glass to eye to confirm your guess. You will quickly become sensitized to the bird’s every aspect, by noting how it presents itself in life (not just the cartoonish field marks of field guides) and in the ways all aspects of a bird interrelate to form a living, breathing creature.

A great place to begin is your backyard or local patch. For example, each morning I walk the same trail along Shoal Creek in Austin. My five-mile route never varies, and since my primary intent is exercise I never carry binoculars or a field guide. Over the years I have become keenly sensitized to every nuance my trail has to offer, from an odd-shaped bird flying over to an unfamiliar call note. I have seen a remarkable diversity of birds along my path, yet never with binoculars. I will argue that it is because I must rely on my innate senses I have developed a feel or *intuition* for what should or should not be present.



Texas beaches near human habitation are often groomed daily, leaving little debris as cover for roosting shorebirds. The next best thing is a tire rut, and **Snowy Plovers** frequently hide within these depressions to escape the ever-present coastal winds. These birds are easy to detect by quietly waiting for the flock to rearrange itself within the groove, a motion that is far easier to detect without binoculars. *Galveston, Texas; 26 February 2006. © Ted Lee Eubanks.*



This juvenile **Baird's Sandpiper**, indicated by its scaly back, blended nicely with a pebbled beach in Maine. The author initially noticed the bird through its motion, a "field mark" best detected with the unaided eye. *Roque Bluffs State Park, Maine; 6 September 2004.* © Ted Lee Eubanks.

Want to learn shorebirds? I mean, *really* learn shorebirds? Walk among a flock (my favorite spot is Bolivar Flats) and start identifying them without your binoculars. Trust me; at a reasonable range you do not need binoculars to separate the small plovers, for example. They simply *act* different as much as they *look* different. From the mutterings of Long-billed Dowitchers to the brine-fly sweeps of a Snowy Plover, more is to be learned from actually becoming immersed in nature, sensitized to its every shade and tone, than by constraining nature within the restricted range of a pair of field glasses.

Does it work? Here are two examples. In 1987 my birding compadre Jim Morgan and I were working our annual Christmas Bird Count sector in Freeport. As I drove along

the coast I noticed in the corner of my eye what I first thought might be a small falcon zipping by. In total I saw the bird (or at least its motion) for some infinitesimal fraction of a second, but I sensed (remember intuition) something odd about the bird. I spun the car around and we began to track it back toward Galveston. By the end of the chase (at least 20 miles) we had photographed one of the first White-collared Swifts in the U.S.

Over the Christmas holidays my wife and I went to our favorite café in Galveston for breakfast. While walking from the car to the café I noticed an out-of-place bird (i.e., not a robin, cardinal, or mockingbird) flying over. I watched as it dropped into a nearby pecan tree, and upon lighting it blurted a brief *brrrp*. I rushed over to the tree and pished out the Summer Tanager. No binoculars were needed nor were available; it was obvious from the beginning that the tanager did not fit.

The foundation for intuitive birding is experience, those endless hours invested in what we once called birdwatching. Yes, the technological advances have been transformative, but purchasing a Stradivarius does not make you Itzhak Perlman. Nothing can replace the accuracy of the experienced eye. Keep the binoculars around your neck and the field guide in the car or at home. With time, you will learn to see.