The Rise of the Amateur Ornithologist (Alias “Bird Watcher”)

by Scott R. Craven

As a kid I never really grasped the idea that someday I could reflect on such things as the 5-cent candy bar or 19.9 cents/gallon gasoline. However, someday seems to be now. One of the changes worth reflecting on is the emergence of the amateur ornithologist—bird watcher if you will—from the “little old lady in tennis shoes” stereotype to a participant in a well-recognized, tremendously popular hobby. Birders are close to becoming the rule rather than the exception.

How popular is birding? A few figures tell the story very well. A 1980 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service nationwide survey identified 2 million “highly committed” birders, 7 million who were “fairly interested,” and 60 million “casual” birders, but birders nevertheless. There are probably other levels of participation ranging from the “disinterested” to the “fanatical,” but they were not tabulated. The total numbers are undoubtedly higher today in 1989, as all available indices point to continued growth in birding. For example, in 1985 Americans spent about $1 billion on bird seed, about twice the 1980 total. Over the same time period, annual expenditures on binoculars almost tripled to $373 million, and $239 million was spent on bird houses, feeders, and baths; up from just over $75 million. Stan Temple’s recent survey of WSO members, indicated that they collectively spend well over a million dollars each year on their various birding-related activities. WSO membership, reasonably static for 10–20 years, has recently seen a growth spurt of 10–15 percent.

Over 600 thousand bird guides are sold each year in the United States. Sales of Roger Tory Peterson’s classic, A Field Guide to the Birds, have topped 3.5 million copies. There is even a simplified youth version of the guide, as well as video versions, audio tapes, records, slide sets, etc. Many other excellent field guides and books on birding have joined the original “field guide” since it was first published in 1934.

Beyond field guides, there are specialty magazines of all kinds: Birder’s World, Birding, and Wildbird, to name a few. One magazine advertises a “center-fold portrait,” a particularly high quality photograph of a bird or birds.
I wonder where that idea originated?? Regular features include "birding hot-spots," "rare bird alert," and other topics. Audubon Magazine is in a class by itself as a fine environmental publication, in addition to its appeal for birders. Publications are filled with advertisements for books, equipment, field clothes, and birding tours to every corner of the globe. There is even a chain of "Wild Birds Unlimited" stores with their own informative newsletter. If the shop in Madison is any indication, they are all stocked floor-to-ceil- ing and wall-to-wall with every conceivable bit of paraphernalia of interest to birders. Catalogue sales companies, such as Duncraft and Audubon Workshop, provide the convenience of mail-order shopping for similar merchandise.

The May 25, 1987 issue of Time Magazine had an excellent article on modern birding. In it the author speculated on the appeal of birding and then characterized the "serious" birder. Birding requires minimal equipment, limited physical dexterity, and a little financial investment (maybe!). Birding is intellectual, yet basically simple, and, if conducted properly, there is no harm to either the quarry or the environment. It's relaxing and can be done just about anywhere from the kitchen window to the wilds of a tropical forest. That's an impressive list of attributes for any hobby!

As Joseph J. Hickey stated in the preface to his 1943 book, A Guide to Bird Watching: "Bird watching embraces individual enterprise on the one hand, collective effort on the other. Above all else, it is marked by a ready exchange of experience, by a high regard for truth, and by a conviction that wild birds express the most spectacular development of nature." It seems obvious then, why it would be easy to get "hooked" on birding once first exposed by a friend, scout leader, teacher, book, or by accident. What then causes some individuals to progress from casual to serious birder?

The author of the Time Magazine article speculates that it is the competitive aspects of birding and a basic "collector" mentality that has resulted in lists and contests. Such competition is no small matter. As birders progress from backyard watching to making lengthy expensive trips to see single birds, the competition can become pretty serious, both competition with oneself or with other birders. The result has been a tremendous growth in the American Birding Association, the acknowledged referee of bird listing. The ABA has about 8000 members, and its checklist committee rules on events like "Big Days" and other competitive birding. They even maintain statistics on leading birders, much like batting averages and other statistics are kept for baseball players! Other services have arisen to accommodate the needs of the serious birder. The North American Rare Bird Alert is a "for-profit" telephone system to alert birders to rarities throughout North America. Local groups, such as WSO and Madison Audubon offer hotline services to report rare species. Such aids must help. In 1972 only 75 birders had recorded over 600 North American species; in 1987 there were over 500!

All birders should guard against activities that could downgrade the image of birding. As J. J. Hickey went on to point out in his 1943 book: "The art of bird watching...at its best is a sport, testing the eye, the ear, and one's legs. At its worst, it is a mad rush to
the next oasis, with birds ticked off on the run, and a great reliance placed on both gasoline and brakes.” Almost 50 years ago, Hickey saw both ends of the spectrum.

There can be no denial of the popularity of birding, but what of its importance beyond individual pleasure and recreation? In fact, what was once a rather unusual hobby is now a necessity for modern ornithology. There are many opportunities for amateur birders to make an important contribution to ornithology: the Christmas Bird Count; Stan Temple’s Wisconsin Checklist Project; Project Feeder Watch; the Breeding Bird Survey; the Nest Record Program; observations of banded or marked birds; inventories, such as the Sandhill Crane count or, the mid-winter Bald Eagle count, and contributions to various research projects are some important opportunities. Much of what we know about birds came from amateur birders or amateurs who went on to careers as professional ornithologists. Consider the contributions of Margaret Nice, or the backgrounds of J. J. Hickey or Roger Tory Peterson as youthful birders in New York City. If you would like to trace the birding history of such an individual, I suggest you read “Joseph J. Hickey: Birder” in *Defenders Magazine*, February, 1982.

The popularity of birding will continue to grow. Important contributions are still possible, and perhaps the biggest one of all might be to be sure each and every one of you introduce a child to the life-long hobby of birding.

Scott R. Craven
Department of Wildlife Ecology
University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI 53706