



2014 Great Canadian Birdathon. Photo: Jeff Gordon

Embracing change —the evolution of Ontario birding: mid-1990s to 2016

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Being out in nature and watching birds has always been an important part of my life. I was lucky to have very ‘outdoorsy’ parents who prioritized hiking, fishing and camping throughout the year. The exposure early on to the outdoors almost certainly ignited my interest in natural history. This interest quickly turned into an obsession for one particularly charismatic group of animals: birds.

I really became a birder during my teenage years. I already knew my common yard birds and waterfowl species, and was just getting a taste of more obscure groups like warblers and flycatchers when a

fortuitous event happened. I watched a John and Janet Foster nature documentary on migratory birds that featured Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO). Luckily within a year, LPBO's program manager, Jon McCracken, allowed me, a rather exuberant newcomer, to volunteer at LPBO for a month in August of 1994. The phrase may be overused, but it must be said — this experience changed my life. I now wanted to become not only a serious birder, but also a bird biologist working in the conservation field.

Very quickly, I came to understand that there was a whole community of incredible and generous birders and naturalists across Ontario. More than any technology that existed in the mid-1990s, this group of people provided the tools and lessons I needed to become the birder I am today.

Quite a lot has changed in the 20 years since then. There are more birding products and ways to engage with birds than ever before. We've even had our first big Hollywood movie about birding — *The Big Year*. New technologies, and particularly the emergence of the smartphone, have given birders an almost limitless supply of resources, literally at our fingertips. Gone are the days when a birder only had one field guide (my first was the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* 2nd edition published in 1987) and a pair of binoculars. There are now dozens of field guides (many available in electronic formats for smartphones and tablets), in addition to easier access to audio recordings of birds.

The electronic age also means that eBird is now a household name. Although it was established in 2002, this Citizen

Science program geared toward birders has only really taken off over the past six years. This incredibly successful crowd-sourced bird data collection tool was launched by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society and is administered in Canada by Bird Studies Canada. eBird is not just a place to enter and keep track of observations; it also has numerous 'explore' features that help birders find birds and see the latest observations from birding hotspots around the world. The alert notifications feature enables people to find out about rarities anywhere in the world within an hour of their being found; eBird is a game changer.

The increasingly sophisticated cameras of smartphones, along with the almost endless array of digital camera options, have ramped up the prominence of photography in birding. What we have now is a blending of these two pastimes. In fact, many of the best bird photographers I have ever met are also among the best birders I know.

Another significant change over the last decade has been the increase in binocular options available to birders. Sure the big three (Swarovski, Leica and Zeiss) are the dominant high-end brands, but in the past few years several excellent options have emerged at the mid-price range. This expansion of the optics market has made a real impact on new and younger birders. You don't need to pay a huge amount of money in order to have a quality pair of binoculars.

What do these developments have in common? They are helping to increase engagement with birds and birding among a whole new cohort of birders. But these tools pale in comparison with the single

biggest change to the birding landscape...the emergence of social media, particularly Facebook. At present, the Ontario Birds Facebook group has over 5,200 members. What this forum is doing quite successfully is giving people the opportunity to engage directly with the birding community across Ontario and North America. The key component to this engagement is photography. People are taking photos of birds at an unprecedented rate, and Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide forums where people can get help identifying the birds in their photographs. Embracing this burgeoning demand, the American Birding Association recently started using the hashtag #whatsthisbird on Twitter, encouraging people to post birds they've photographed but cannot identify.

Whether you're a fan of social media or not, the bottom line is that these platforms are hugely popular, and they are connecting birders in new and exciting ways. Beginners and younger birders are a big demographic on social media channels. If you tried, you would have a hard time designing a better tool to build connections among young birders and to create awareness and enthusiasm for birds in the next generation.

Birding has evolved over the last 33 years. What has changed most are the ways people are engaging with birds. Birding tours, Big Days, field naturalist outings, birdathons, Christmas Bird Counts, Young Birder camps, reporting sightings to Ontbirds, eBird and posting photos to Instagram and Facebook — it's now all part of the broad birding spectrum. Sure, we may now have a larger contingent of people engaging with the birding community

who still have a lot to learn, but this shouldn't be perceived as a negative development. It presents an opportunity for Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) members to play a bigger role in mentoring the next generation, and not just in the fine art of bird identification, but in the challenges that many populations of birds currently face. I believe the excellent OFO field trip offerings and annual convention have been doing this very successfully for many years, and I am particularly excited to see OFO embracing younger birders with the new Ontario Young Birders club and the dedicated young birder field trips.

All this change does create some issues for the birding community. A few of the big challenges include the overuse of playback via smartphones, the risk of disturbance to birds and bird habitat by people trying to get that perfect photo, the reliability of identifications reported on various internet sites and the reporting of at-risk species to eBird or Ontbirds. All are increasingly part of the new birding landscape. All of these issues, and more, are addressed in the OFO Code of Ethics. This code should be referenced regularly and introduced early to new birders.

At a time when society is arguably more disconnected from the natural world than it has ever been, the emergence of birding as a bridge to the natural world could be exactly what we need. It's an exciting time — and I am looking forward to the next 30 years!

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