

LEO: RIDING TO SIX HUNDRED  
ON THE ABA GAME BOARD

by Pat Noyes Fox, Lexington

Probably being in the last quarter of my life, I thought it time to turn my attention from foreign lands to North America. Seeing 600 species north of Mexico seems like getting a high-school diploma when the big shots are getting their Ph.D.s with lists of 700 and 800 in the ABA area. The Six-hundred Club, once the goal, no longer exists but is still an objective for middling birders. Go for it, old girl, I thought; think about "Time's winged chariot hurrying near."

The Colima Warbler would be my last nesting wood warbler north of the Rio del Norte - the Rio Grande. (I discount the Bachman's, which is probably extinct. Even Roger Tory Peterson has never seen one. I note it is no longer on the ABA checklist.) The Colima nests only at Boot Springs in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park in southwest Texas. The very words beckoned. Boot Springs is reached by a rocky, sometimes steep trail, about five miles of it, above the Chisos basin. It would be impossible for me to hike it, but it can be done on horseback. I was brave enough. I signed up.

Embarrassing. The day before a call came from the Chisos remuda to Jim Lane that we must come to be weighed - lunch, water, camera, and avoirdupois. It was comforting that they cared about their horses and matching them to us - a Percheron perhaps? No backpacks are allowed unless worn, an unbalancing thought. Along the walls of the tack room were what looked like small feed bags. These were for our feed and whatever we felt we needed on the trail. (We called them ditty bags in WW2.)

The much anticipated, much dreaded day. Singly, our names are called out to mount. In the remote past, I could manage this on my own, but the powerful boost by the wrangler is much appreciated. Everybody is watching. Thus did I meet Leo, a bay gelding with a nice face, strong legs, good manners, and tempo largo - "a slow and solemn degree of movement."

Pretrip advice from a horsewoman daughter was to wear jeans with smooth seams. But ah! The western saddle. I hadn't sat on anything harder than a bleacher in years and not on that part of me. The saddle is shaped to pound the inside of your thighs and your pelvis with every move of the horse. It feels as if there is no padding between it and your bones - hardly the case. Tension mounted with me. I don't remember the scenery going up. The itinerary says it is spectacular, with awesome views and forested with oak, pinyon, and juniper. Out of the corner of my eye I could see there were ravines, but I looked only at the trail. The height of the horse was enough.

No steering is necessary. The horses know their places in line. Leo and I are last except for a kindly wrangler. Leo negotiated the rocky trail, the U-turns on the switchbacks and steep inclines with the aplomb and care of a dowager, or whatever the male equivalent. Most of the time the rest of the string were far above us, hooves rattling the stones. The wrangler kept telling me that I was letting Leo get away with being lazy. He got me a switch - surreptitiously dropped. I had no intention of hurrying Leo; his pace suited me well. It was all I could do to keep my two knobby bags from swinging against his withers, hold the reins, keep my hat on, and my mind on the sweet smell of horse. And why I was doing this.

The two hours up to Laguna Meadows Leo controlled me. There in a grove was an iron hitching rail, a rest stop. With the wrangler's help (de rigueur!) I slid off, legs like butter, and went and sat on a log to relish the relief. Colimas were heard, seen. I don't care.

Leo doesn't have to be hitched. He joins us. He loves people, a pet. Group members feed him snacks from their lunches until I protest lest they make him sick. My horse.

Off again across the meadows strewn with the charred logs from an old fire. The trail is grassy and flat for a while. Then back and forth, around the 180-degree turns, over the ridge and down. Down is worse. You can't just dangle; you must use those unused muscles in your legs. Hang in there. We get glimpses of the boot, a rocky spire for which the place is named.

A corral among the trees, a cabin - Boot Springs. Horses are tied, and we stagger on our own feet at the place dreamed of; we're there.

"Where shall we have our picnic?" I ask, ever naive. "No time," says Jim, "We walk and eat." And we do, and there are Colimas and other feathered wonders for the eastener. One warbler was vigorously bathing so we could see the yellow undertail coverts, the eye ring, and rufous crown-patch. An hour or so we walk the trail beside the stream, to listen, peer, munch our food, find a lark's nest - a euphemism for a place to relieve oneself in private. It is enchanting in this remote place. We should be camping overnight - for the night sounds, to look for owls, to watch the sun come up on the desert below.

The rear guard wrangler had left with two riders to go up the trail to a higher peak of the Chisos for the view toward Mexico. So I am really last going back, though I can often observe the rear end of my roommate's horse - anatomy whose reputation is unwarranted.

We pass a young couple with a baby. They have hiked. It would not be so bad being a senior (lots of company) if the young didn't make you feel so decrepit.



*Colima Warbler*

*Painting by Howard Rollin  
Reprinted with permission from Roland H. Wauer's  
Birds of Big Bend National Park and Vicinity, 1973.*

Three hours it takes to get down, back and forth. It must be so hard on the horses. I am way behind, and the wrangler worries, dashing back to me on his pinto. I am oblivious in my bubble of misery. We could see the lodge way below, but it never seemed to get closer. That last hour is forever. Did it take this long to cross the basin floor this morning? A couple of horses act up on a turn; not Leo. At the remuda I wait interminably while the wrangler lets us in the corral one by one. Some have to be helped, immobile on their feet on mother earth, legs unwilling. Pride moves me to our van.

Thank you Leo, for all your hard work, for carrying me safely for six hours, albeit with some misery. I love you more than seeing the Colimas. You were the greater event.

The spring issue of *American Birds*, 1985, reports that in 1983, Crescent-chested Warblers, normally a Mexican species, were in the Huachuca Mountains of Arizona. This is a verified sighting. Then, in 1984, in Ramsey Canyon, they were observed, "evidently a mated pair. . . seen foraging for insects and then carrying the insects up the hillside, as if to feed young birds" (*American Birds* 39: 10). I have always wanted to go back to Arizona. There are also Montezuma Quail there. A black-looking quail, flushed from the roadside below the Davis Mountains, yclept a Montezuma, was less than satisfactory. Holy Grails come in multiples for birders.

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For those not involved in the mystique of birding, ABA stands for the American Birding Association, of which I am a lowly, but almost a charter member. Other than the magazine *Birding*, they publish annually the number of species seen by birders who send in their records. This can be a world list, a country, state, or special areas list, or how many species were seen on a Big Day or in a year, etc. Many scorn this form of self-aggrandizement, but it has its pleasures.

The ABA area is artificial, north of Mexico and all the way to the last Aleutian island, Attu, not many miles from Russia. We play a game, but the restrictions of ABA make it a sporting one. This doesn't preclude the esthetics of birding or improving one's knowledge in spite of what the purists might claim. Adding new species is an exciting goal, but there is always the pleasure of seeing species with which you are not very familiar as well as those that are. Three weeks on Attu would be beyond me, but Big Bend was possible. Thanks to Leo, I finally reached my goal, and a bow to the tour leaders who are the ones with the skill and expertise. As I have, I expect that many birders set themselves mini-goals or become impressive local experts. Birding is on many levels and a lifelong challenge. Ask any birder. Ask Dillon Ripley.

PAT NOYES FOX has seen one-third of the world's species of birds and has visited all the continents except Antarctica. Her father hunted pheasant and quail but had Chester Reed's *Bird Guides* - first of the genre - and took her when very young behind the scenes of the Ornithology Department of the Museum of Natural History in New York. She recalls the excitement of a Red-headed Woodpecker and Barn Owls in Sharon, Connecticut. In World War II she spent three years in the Pacific, crossing that ocean three times by ship, ran a pet show on Guadalcanal, which included native birds, and spent some time in Japan and China. She remembers the Laysan Albatrosses that had to be shooed off the runway on Johnson Island. Years later she became an intensive backyard birder under the aegis of Felix Cutler, went on Pat Garrey's field trips, took courses with Jim Baird, and subscribed to the Cornell Lab's mail-order ornithology course, which she urges on all beginners.



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