

## THE ETHICS OF NATURE WATCHING

by Verdie J. Abel

For many years the reputation of law-abiding and conservation-minded hunters and fishermen has been marred by the acts of individual "ugly" sportsmen who litter, hunt or fish out of season, cross private property, and commit other violations of civil and ethical law. In recent years, however, a new species of outdoorsman has emerged—one who does not take to the woods and fields to hunt or fish, but to pursue instead a hobby of watching and photographing birds, flowers, and other wildlife.

As an increasing number of nature lovers take to the out-of-doors in search of "life" birds and rare flowers, an astonishing number of violations against man and nature have been reported. Just as hunters are criticized for crossing fences and committing other violations to get at a trophy deer, so should birdwatchers who cross private boundaries to get a rare bird for their life list be regarded as equally at fault. Many nature lovers are under the misconception that since their hobby is a nonconsumptive use of the nation's wildlife resources, it is acceptable to bend the rules a bit in order to fulfill a lifelong dream of seeing a rare bird or photographing a rare flower.

A perfect example of this happened in 1987 when a Long-billed Curlew was found on Coast Guard Beach in Eastham, within the boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore. Following the announcement of the discovery, dozens of birdwatchers from all over New England crowded into the area to get a glimpse of the western shorebird. Unfortunately, people were found crossing National Park Service fences, trampling marsh grass, and, worst of all, crossing into posted tern and Piping Plover nesting areas. How much more abusive can someone be than to deliberately cross a boundary that protects a federally endangered species such as Piping Plover?

Another less dramatic example of thoughtless behavior occurred in the winter of 1988-89 when a LeConte's Sparrow was discovered in an agricultural field on the North Shore. I was leading a birding trip to the area at the time and decided to learn the whereabouts of the bird to see if it was possible to enter the property where it had been found. Word was that the sparrow was in a plowed field near Newburyport and that the owner had agreed to let people look for the bird. Upon arriving at the field, I was astonished to find two dozen or so other vehicles belonging to more than fifty people who were combing the field to find the poor creature. Suddenly someone found the lone bird in a clump of weeds, and the birdwatchers quickly crowded around within ten feet of the tiny bird, totally surrounding it. Not only was the unfortunate LeConte's hundreds of miles out of its normal range, it was surrounded by dozens of obsessed nature

lovers, slowly moving closer to get a better look, leaving the confused bird no escape. After I determined for myself that it was the LeConte's Sparrow and after everyone in my group had a chance to see the bird quickly, I left the area bewildered, hoping never to be part of such a scene again.

Birdwatchers and photographers are not alone in violating ethical principles; scientists and naturalists are also guilty upon occasion. Simply being part of a research project or an employee of a public or private environmental agency does not give that person the right to cross onto private property or enter posted areas without permission. Not only is the law broken, but a precedent is also set, giving program participants and other witnesses the idea that such infractions are permissible.

Examples of such unethical activities include occasions when naturalists or birdwatchers intentionally scare birds to see field marks or flush a bird simply to allow "a better look." This approach to birdwatching sometimes involves chasing birds, clapping hands, or even throwing lit firecrackers in order to flush a bird. Certain birds, such as shorebirds, are especially vulnerable to disturbance during their migration when energy reserves are essential for long-distance flight. A loss of vital energy reserves through repeated disturbance in the spring may affect the success of the nesting season. Although aggressively pursuing birds does not violate any man-made laws (unless an endangered or protected species is involved), it may cross the line from acceptable birdwatching to unethical obsession.

The playing of bird-call tapes during the breeding season is a common practice. Playing the call of a screech owl or the territorial song of a breeding male may attract songbirds very close, allowing a good view of specific field marks. Unfortunately, this practice also takes the breeding bird away from its nest of eggs or nestlings, thereby jeopardizing the offspring, leaving them subject to predation or unregulated temperatures. Young birds often cannot regulate their body temperature and may die as a result. This practice of drawing birds from their nests is especially dangerous to owls, which nest in the middle of the winter. Bird lovers who call owls during this time of the year should be cautious not to occupy the parent bird's attention any longer than necessary.

As ethical, conservation-minded citizens, nature lovers must obey a few simple rules to maintain a good reputation and merit respect:

1. Always consider the welfare of the plants and wildlife first. No life bird is worth the needless loss of another life.

2. Obey all postings and respect fenced areas. Just because you don't see the nesting birds or rare plants does not mean they don't exist. A shoe can crush an endangered plant no matter whose foot is in it.

3. Avoid disturbance of roosting birds or resting animals. The energy they use escaping is needed for completion of the migratory journey or a successful nesting season.

4. Avoid the use of tape players to attract birds during the breeding season, and use tapes cautiously at other times.

5. Respect the rights of landowners. Should you wish to enter private property, get the owner's permission.

**VERDIE J. ABEL** was a ranger/naturalist at the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary at the time he wrote this article. He is now teaching in the Biological Sciences Department at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, where he is continuing his graduate work in wildlife ecology. Verdie is an enthusiastic birdwatcher and is interested in the history of wildlife conservation. This article first appeared in *Cape Cod Driflines* [July 1989, 4(2): 17] and is reprinted here slightly modified with permission of the author and the publisher.

*Buying a used VW?*  
Complete Pre-purchase  
Evaluation  
Golf - Jetta - Quantum  
\$50.

**GT** Shop  
Inc.  
(617) 923-0941

We service Nissan, Honda,  
Saab, Toyota, VW, Volvo

106 Pleasant Street  
Watertown Square

*Formerly Coop Garage*