

HOTLINES AND BIRDING TALK BY COMPUTER

by Jane Lufkin Davis

What splits and lumps are most likely to appear in the next AOU Checklist? Where can I find an active Sage Grouse lek? And what kind of woodpecker is that in the car commercial?

Birders have been asking (and answering) questions like these by computer mail through the National Birding Hotline Cooperative (NBHC). (A recent participant speculated, for example, that the mysterious woodpecker is the Common Goldenback, *Dinopium javanese*.) In addition to providing discussion forums, NBHC is a convenient source of hotline reports. Tired of listening to busy signals and frantically scribbling directions? NBHC will send you hotline reports from your region automatically for you to print out at your leisure. NBHC began as a newsfeed for Rare Bird Alert (RBA) information, and its founders hope it might someday include every RBA in North America.

NBHC was formed to share birding information electronically among North American birders, although participants now write regularly from other countries ranging from Finland to New Zealand. Technically, NBHC is a group of mail lists run from a computer in Arizona, ARIZVM1. These lists are mirrored, which means that mail sent to each list is reflected back to all subscribers. The result resembles a computerized conference call: numerous readers can respond to a single message. At last count, there were 325 participants.

The NBHC lists that post regional hotline report transcripts are BIRDEAST, BIRDCNTR, and BIRDWEST. NBHC lists that provide discussion forums are BIRDBAND (to discuss banding) and BIRDCHAT (to discuss wild birds and birding). BIRDCHAT, the most popular list, is devoted to general birding topics. Recent discussions have included experiences with certain brands of tripods, pros and cons of having binoculars adjusted for close focus, evaluations of bird videos and books, environmental legislation, fossil bird discoveries, and lists of birds seen at various locations. Most postings relate to trip planning. Chatters, as they call themselves, want to know what species to expect in a particular area at a certain time of year, or the best place to bird if you have limited time in a strange city. You can also get details on where to find a particular target species for your trip list or how to make local contacts.

There are two ways to take advantage of this technology: accessing the NBHC lists through online mail and logging on to a public access bulletin board. If you can send and receive electronic mail at work or school from people outside your facility, your system is probably linked to Internet or BITNET, the networks that enable you to access the NBHC.

To subscribe to a list, you should first decide which list you want to

subscribe to. In these examples, BIRDnnnn refers to any of the lists. Simply substitute the suffix of the list you want for the nnnn (e.g., substitute EAST for nnnn). You can then send a mail message to the address:

LISTSERV@ARIZVM1.BITNET

(or for Internet LISTSERV@ARIZVM1.CCIT.ARIZONA.EDU)

with the following as the first line of the message text: SUBSCRIBE BIRDnnnn
first name last name

You must use your full name, not just your user name or last name. Likewise, do not terminate the text with any punctuation. For example, if I wanted to subscribe to BIRDCHAT, I would send this message:

SUBSCRIBE BIRDCHAT Jane L. Davis

A few hours after you subscribe, you will get mail from the list server software acknowledging your subscription and giving you basic information about how to subscribe and how to change your distribution options. You will soon start getting messages. If you have joined a hotline list, these will be hotline reports. For example, BIRDEAST subscribers receive reports from Maine Audubon, Voice of New Jersey Audubon, New Brunswick RBA, Cayuga Lake Basin (New York) Birdline, Audubon Society of New Hampshire, Carolina RBA, Philadelphia, Voice of the Naturalist (the District of Columbia area), Cape May, the Connecticut RBA, and the Massachusetts Voice of Audubon. Only transcribers are allowed to send mail to the hotline lists.

If you have joined one of the discussion forums, you will get messages from other subscribers. Most of the lists send only a few messages each week. The exception is BIRDCHAT, which may send over a dozen a day. If you are a personal computer user, these messages could fill up your mailbox quickly. To avoid this problem, some users prefer to subscribe for the brief periods that they are logged on. Others send commands to the list server to limit the number of messages they receive.

The command SET BIRDCHAT INDEX means that, rather than sending each message as it is posted, the list server sends you a daily list of the subject lines of all the messages posted that day. You can retrieve the messages you want to read when you have time, following instructions appended to the list. The command SET BIRDCHAT DIGEST sends you all the messages of the day concatenated into a single message. A typical weeknight BIRDCHAT DIGEST mail message contains thirty BIRDCHAT messages, totaling about 800 lines. Weekend traffic is much lighter, averaging two to eight messages.

After you have read messages from a discussion forum for a while, you will feel ready to join in. To post a message, send it to

BIRDnnnn@ARIZVM1.BITNET.

Remember to substitute the suffix of your choice for the nnnn, as in previous examples.

Give your message a subject line that summarizes the topic: this makes it

easier for future readers to find it. Every message to the BIRDnnnn lists is archived, and the list introductory mail points you to instructions for searching these archives. It is considered good etiquette to include a line within the mail message itself that gives your name and electronic mail address. (Some institutions have mail utilities that strip the mail headers off messages, so repeating header information within the message helps people who may want to reply directly to you.) An added benefit of these lists is the friendships you can form through exchanging private mail with other participants.

To stop receiving mail from any list, send a mail message like the following to

LISTSERV@ARIZVM1.BITNET
(or for Internet LISERSV@ARIZVM1.CCIT.ARIZONA.EDU)
SIGNOFF BIRDnnnn

Do not append your name to this message, or it will not work. Before sending the message, double-check that you have addressed it to LISERSV and not BIRDCHAT. All messages about joining and searching the lists go to LISERSV. The most common mistake of new users is sending their SIGNOFF message to everyone who receives the list, rather than to the system that manages it.

It does not cost anything to subscribe to NBHC. Home computer users, however, need to subscribe to a network service to access the Internet or BITNET. These services usually charge a monthly fee plus a charge per hour of connect time. Most services have a special discount or a number of free hours for the first month of a subscription.

Several services are available for Massachusetts users. CompuServe (800-848-8990) offers two plans. The first plan has a monthly membership fee of \$8.95, sixty free electronic mail messages per month, and unlimited connect time in their thirty basic services (not including NBHC), plus \$8 per hour connect time for other services. The alternative pricing plan costs \$250 per month plus \$12 per hour connect time.

The World Information Utility from Software Tool and Die (617-739-0202) also offers two plans. The first plan costs \$5 per month plus \$2 per hour connect time. An alternative plan costs \$20 per 20 hours connect time, if you pay the \$20 up front.

MV Communications (603-429-2223) offers three plans. Casual access is \$7 per month and includes one hour connect time per month. Normal mail and news access is \$20 per month and includes three hours connect time per month. Finally, bulk access (used on top of one of the above) is \$20 for each additional thirty hours of connect time per month.

EZ-E-Mail from Shecora Associates, Inc. (603-672-0736) offers four rates: \$7 per month, \$19 per quarter, \$35 semiannually, or \$60 per year.

The phone numbers above are for voice, not modem, access. For the most

current prices, check with the company.

Sprint Communications (800-877-7746) offers a service called PC Pursuit that reduces phone costs for dialing into some network services. You can also purchase packages like TAPCIS (registered trademark) from Support Group Inc. (800-872-4768), which reduces your CompuServe connect time by letting you do your reading and editing off line.

The procedure for accessing the Internet or BITNET from your home computer depends on which electronic mail service you subscribe to. For example, if you have a CompuServe account, type "go mail" at the ! prompt, and select menu item 2 to compose a message. After you exit from the message, you will be prompted for address information. On the "Send to (Name or User ID):" line, type the following: INTERNET: listserv@arizvm1.ccit.arizona.edu

If you do not have access to BITNET, Internet, or a service like CompuServe, you can log into a public access bulletin board for read-only access to NBHC lists. The Osprey's Nest, in Colesville, Maryland, is accessible using PC Pursuit. It offers all the regional hotline lists, plus weekly summaries of the BIRDCHAT discussion. In order to get BIRDCHAT information from The Osprey's Nest, you must have a communications program that supports some form of the XMODEM transfer protocol. The BIRDCHAT messages are collected and compressed in files that you cannot read unless you download (copy them to your home computer) and unpack them.

You can dial into The Osprey's Nest with your modem at 301-989-9036. Set your telecommunications software for eight data bits, one stop bit, and no parity before you dial.

You may also want to capture your bulletin board session in a text file, if your telecommunications software allows this. Before dialing in, create an empty directory on your system where you can store files that you download.

The first time you connect to The Osprey's Nest, the system asks you a series of questions: your name, whether you want to enable ANSI color, and your password. Make up a memorable password of four to fifteen characters; you will be using the same one for all future access. After you enter the password, you may register for longer access to the system. New users are granted forty-five minutes per day, but if you complete the registration form and the system operators validate it, you will be allowed ninety minutes. The registration form comprises your name, address, phone, and type of computer; it is not released to anyone.

The BIRDCHAT messages are stored each week in a file called CHATnnn.ZIP. (The nnn stands for a sequence of numbers.) As previously mentioned, you cannot view files with the ZIP suffix on your terminal screen for reading while you are logged into the bulletin board. You must download a ZIP file in order to expand it into its member files, which you can then read or print.

After logging in, the first menu you see in The Osprey's Nest is the

Messages Menu. For information about downloading and expanding ZIP files, type B for Bulletins at the Messages Menu. To read the downloading information, type FT (for File Transfer). To learn about ZIP files, type ZP. Type Control-Z to return to the Messages Menu. To get to the section where the files are stored, type F for Files. Then type C for Catalog to scan the list of archived files.

For more information about The Osprey's Nest, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Norm Saunders, 1261 Cavendish Drive, Colesville, Maryland 20905.

If you are only interested in the hotline lists, the least expensive option is using the FidoNet echomail system. The Southern Arizona Birding BBS (FidoNet node 1:300/16) will feed the hotline reports to your local area FidoNet node for only the long distance charges incurred, probably less than \$7 a month. You can distribute this amount among all the birders who access the local system, reducing the cost even more. There are over 300 FidoNet nodes in Massachusetts, scattered throughout cities and towns all over the state.

For more information about FidoNet, bulletin boards, or NBHC, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to NBHC, care of Chuck Williamson, 7309 East Princeton Drive, Tucson, Arizona 85710 (fax 602-721-8719), or send electronic mail to Chuck at cwilliamson@pimacc.pima.edu. One of the founders of the NBHC, Chuck gateways messages from the list server at the University of Arizona through a PC-based bulletin board system in his study at home.

In the spare time that he doesn't devote to NBHC, Chuck has been developing software that will allow the automated exchange, indexing, and database storage of field notes. He dreams that, in a not-too-distant future, a home computer system could receive hotline reports, scan species reported against a life list database, and print out directions for lucky birders. Perhaps it could even trigger the alarm clock and start the coffee maker at the same time.

JANE LUFKIN DAVIS is a technical writer specializing in database systems at Digital Equipment Corporation. She discovered the Internet in 1984, while working for a Cambridge compiler developer. That same year, she spent her vacation assisting Jim Karr on an Earthwatch banding project in Panama. BIRDCHAT supports her interests in both birding and computers. Jane enjoys sharing birds and bird lore as much as seeing new birds. She currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Brookline Bird Club and volunteers for the Friends of Stone Zoo. She lives in Stoneham with her husband, Scott, and a housebound cat named Lucy. Her cyberspace address is davis@weorg.enet.dec.com.

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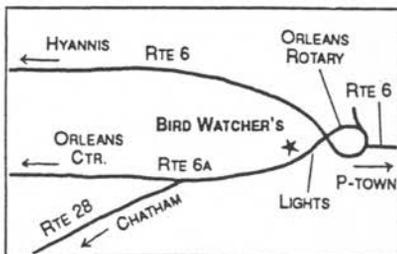
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