

AFTER THE OWL: REFLECTIONS ON BIG BIRDS

by Matthew L. Pelikan

About a year ago, in February, 1996, an epochal birding event took place in Rowley, MA: the appearance of a Great Gray Owl. Like the Ross' Gull that appeared in 1975 in nearby Newburyport, this owl was seen and enjoyed by literally thousands of people, many observing the species for the first time; and like the Newburyport prodigy, the Rowley Owl quickly grew famous. But beneath their similarities, these two resonant events rang with very different tones.

In March 1975, the world of birding was poised for growth but hovering under the radar of the general public. An organization called the American Birding Association, in its seventh year, was beginning to take root. Closer to home, a modest birding journal, *Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts*, began its third volume year. But you could go to Plum Island on a weekend and not see another birder. And the world still viewed us with amused tolerance: eccentrics deemed harmless.

Then an odd-looking gull turned up in Newburyport and helped launch a bull market in birds that has lasted more than two decades. Word of the unprecedented sighting sprinted through phone lines; hundreds, then thousands of birders converged to see "the bird of the century." On March 4, two days after the Ross' Gull was conclusively identified, *New York Times* reporter John Kifner admired the "dedicated men and women [who drove] hours through the darkness to take up their cold watch" around Newburyport Harbor. It sounds like an old John Wayne movie.

Noting archly that "birdwatching . . . is not a widespread obsession," Kifner described Salisbury residents "bemused" by the torrent of gull-seekers. But the fame of the gull continued to grow; the birders continued to pour in; and ultimately it was clear that the pilgrims who descended on the Newburyport seawall had bushwhacked an oblivious world with their enthusiasm, their organization, and above all their numbers. The Newburyport Ross' Gull endures as a potent symbol of the maturation of modern birding.

Twenty-two years later, coverage of the Rowley Great Gray Owl struck a different note. This bird brought joy to thousands of birders, but it also generated wider controversy than any other bird I can think of. Just as the Newburyport Gull pointed to what birding could become, the Rowley Owl symbolized the complex fulfillment of that optimism.

A March 18, 1996, article by Brian MacQuarrie in *The Boston Globe* remarked that, among owl-watchers, "the tone is reverential, almost awestruck." But the birders-on-a-quest stuff quickly gave way to reports of residents griping about traffic and birders voicing concerns over "abuse" (MacQuarrie's word) of

the tame and confiding owl. Birding circles from here to the Internet buzzed with anecdotal accounts (some undoubtedly true, and that is too many) of birders trespassing or pursuing the bird in hopes of a better look. Photographers, chasing the ideal shot, lured the bird in with live mice (including, I have heard, one inside a lucite ball once the shutterbugs realized that about five mice would fill the owl and end the photo op). Trespassing and harassment are hardly innovations, but the wide distribution of reports, whether true or distorted, vastly amplified these issues.

Many ornithologists were appalled by the fact that the bird was banded at all, let alone the public manner in which the act took place. One eyewitness reports that weight, measurements, or condition were not even noted: the owl was simply trapped, banded, displayed like a trophy to the spectators, and released. Meanwhile, though I suspect that most birders were considerate, locals (no longer "bemused") were actively, publicly cranky over traffic and parking along their street. Whatever the level of misbehavior, the circumstances surrounding the Rowley Owl virtually guaranteed a public relations disaster for birding. The world's jaded view of us—and perhaps our slightly jaded view of ourselves—found its voice in the altered rhetoric of the newspapers: we're not John Wayne anymore.

For birding has grown. Figures in the tens of millions are cited to describe the number of Americans who bird. Clubs, books, periodicals, online bulletin boards and chat rooms, tour companies, birding festivals, organized walks, and prodigious life lists have all proliferated; birdfinding and bird identification have progressed faster than semiconductor design.

Make no mistake, this is a great thing. Flocks of birders form an enormous resource for data collection, recreational cooperation, and environmentally enlightened voting. Our economic clout has infused public policy around hot-spots, and indeed in entire countries, with a leavening of ecological sanity. And the success of birding has created new continents of possibilities for having fun. But our numbers make a huge problem out of what might, when birders were scarce, have been nothing more than a minor indiscretion. Indeed, even the best-behaved birders can be a problem if there are enough of them; in the worst case, a crowd of thoughtless observers can turn a magnificent bird into a tawdry circus act.

And meanwhile, in the real world, the successes of birders pushing for increased (or continued) access to prime locations or militating for conservation measures have angered a panoply of other interests: residential, commercial, and recreational. Birders are no longer a fringe group, judged harmless because it is marginal: we have made enemies. And in doing so, we have caught the attention of the news media as they hover on the thermals.

There is no institution that can, so to speak, impose a five-species penalty for Uncool Birding, or claim to speak for all of us when the plover-crushers

counterattack. And this is a good thing. But the tensions, both internal and external, that face the birding world demand some sort of common ground, an irreducible essence to ballast our identities as birders. One of the most lucid and widely recognized articulations of our shared values appears in the American Birding Association's "Code of Birding Ethics," recently subjected to a meticulous revision. We are pleased to reprint the Code in this issue of *Bird Observer*, along with commentary by its chief architect, Blake Maybank.

I hope that the world of birding never loses its diversity or its democratic nature. But the anniversary of a decidedly mixed moment in the history of Massachusetts birding marks a good time for all of us to ponder what sort of relationship we desire to have with each other, with our nonbirding neighbors, and with the birds. We hope that the Code and Blake's article provide useful encouragement for such consideration.

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AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION PRINCIPLES OF BIRDING ETHICS

Everyone who enjoys birds and birding must always respect wildlife, its environment, and the rights of others. In any conflict of interest between birds and birders, the welfare of the birds and their environment comes first.

CODE OF BIRDING ETHICS

1. Promote the welfare of birds and their environment.

- 1(a) Support the protection of important bird habitat.
- 1(b) - To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming.
 - Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area.
 - Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a blind or hide, and take advantage of natural cover.
 - Use artificial light sparingly for filming or photography, especially for closeups.
- 1(c) Before advertising the presence of a rare bird, evaluate the potential for disturbance to the bird, its surroundings, and other people in the area, and proceed only if access can be controlled, disturbance can be minimized, and permission has been obtained from private landowners. The sites of rare nesting birds should be divulged only to the proper conservation authorities.
- 1(d) Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist; otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.

2. Respect the law and the rights of others.

- 2(a) Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission.
- 2(b) Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas, both at home and abroad.
- 2(c) Practice common courtesy in contacts with other people. Your exemplary behavior will generate goodwill with birders and nonbirders alike.

3. Ensure that feeders, nest structures, and other artificial bird environments are safe.

- 3(a) Keep dispensers, water, and food clean and free of decay or

disease. It is important to feed birds continually during harsh weather.

3(b) Maintain and clean nest structures regularly.

3(c) If you are attracting birds to an area, ensure the birds are not exposed to predation from cats and other domestic animals, or dangers posed by artificial hazards.

4. Group birding, whether organized or impromptu, requires special care.

Each individual in the group, in addition to the obligations spelled out in Items #1 and #2, has responsibilities as a Group Member.

4(a) Respect the interests, rights, and skills of fellow birders, as well as those of people participating in other legitimate outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience, except where code 1(c) applies. Be especially helpful to beginning birders.

4(b) If you witness unethical birding behavior, assess the situation and intervene if you think it prudent. When interceding, inform the person(s) of the inappropriate action and attempt, within reason, to have it stopped. If the behavior continues, document it and notify appropriate individuals or organizations.

Group Leader Responsibilities [amateur and professional trips and tours].

4(c) Be an exemplary ethical role model for the group. Teach through word and example.

4(d) Keep groups to a size that limits impact on the environment and does not interfere with others using the same area.

4(e) Ensure everyone in the group knows of and practices this code.

4(f) Learn and inform the group of any special circumstances applicable to the areas being visited (e.g., no tape recorders allowed).

4(g) Acknowledge that professional tour companies bear a special responsibility to place the welfare of birds and the benefits of public knowledge ahead of the company's commercial interests. Ideally, leaders should keep track of tour sightings, document unusual occurrences, and submit records to appropriate organizations.

**PLEASE FOLLOW THIS CODE. DISTRIBUTE IT
AND TEACH IT TO OTHERS.**

Additional copies of the Code of Birding Ethics can be obtained from: ABA, PO Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6599, (800) 850-2473 or (719) 578-1614; fax: (800) 247-3329 or (719) 578-1480; Email: member@aba.org.

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