

## EDITORIAL: BIRDERS AND RECORDS

Perhaps more than any other scientific field, ornithology has benefited from the contributions of amateurs; today as in the past, the border between "birder" and "field ornithologist" is a permeable one. Where species are normally found, where they might wander, and how numerous they are figure among the most basic information in the study of birds, and the thousands of active birders represent a data-collecting army of imposing proportion.

To be sure, data gathered by birders have limitations. Birders often focus on rarities at the expense of more common species, and they often notice just the presence of a species while missing opportunities to note numbers or behavior. Birding records are fraught with uncontrolled variables, and of course sight records are only as good as the knowledge and skill that goes into them. But as soon as birders start keeping records that go beyond the most basic, check-it-off-once-and-forget-about-it lists, they turn into amateur field ornithologists. Over time, records compiled by birders can yield profound insight into the status and distribution of birds.

Since its inception over a quarter-century ago, *Bird Observer* has compiled and published bird reports from eastern Massachusetts, and thousands of birders have used the journal to learn about the region's avifauna. As birding has grown, more and more birders have begun contributing records, making it possible for us to present increasingly detailed pictures of the bird life in the eastern portion of the Bay State.

In recent years, the advent of the Internet has further broadened our reporting base, while simultaneously creating new possibilities for collecting and sharing information. We're birders, not computer nerds — but we've done our best to exploit these possibilities. Our "records department" has added a volunteer to glean Internet reports for significant sightings. We post records-related material — reports of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC), the MARC review list, a state bird list, and photos of interesting birds found in the state — on our web site:

<http://people.ne.mediaone.net/marjrines/BirdObserver.htm>

The indefatigable Marj Rines has begun incorporating the records we receive into a computerized database, which we hope to make generally available (perhaps on our web site) to anyone who wants information about Massachusetts birds. Look for more changes like this, and let us know if you have additional ideas.

Another important change is scheduled for 1999: the records editors at *Bird Observer* are going to work with Seth Kellogg, the editor of *Bird News of Western Massachusetts*, to include records from western Massachusetts in *Bird Observer*. A reporting network already exists for western Massachusetts, associated with *Bird News*; by combining that network's efforts with the work of our own volunteers, *Bird Observer* will be able to present a unified picture of Bay State birds, from the Nantucket Shoals to the spine of the Berkshires. We feel that this broadened scope

will greatly enhance the value of the records that appear in the journal, and we hope it will encourage birders in both the eastern and western portions of the state to broaden their exploration. All of us at *Bird Observer* look forward eagerly to working with our colleagues west of Worcester County.

### Beyond the Bay State

At the same time that these events are taking place in Massachusetts, there are important changes on the continental scene: the "publication of record" for bird sightings in the United States and Canada is undergoing a rapid and exciting evolution. *Field Notes*, and its predecessor *American Birds*, have long been published by the National Audubon Society. But in 1997, the American Birding Association, the continent's leading birding organization, arranged with National Audubon to assume publication of *Field Notes*. (NAS will continue to publish the annual Christmas Count summary.) This important journal retains its network of reporting observers and regional compilers, but is now produced by the same production team that is responsible for *Birding* magazine. Seasonal summaries of the birds from each of twenty-seven regions appear in every issue, along with analytical articles discussing important events and trends, color photos of some of the most interesting birds, and an essay summarizing the season on a continental scale. Each issue of *Field Notes* is a short course in North American bird distribution, providing a sweeping, coherent look at a picture that individual birders see only in fragments. Reading this publication is a powerful way to enhance your understanding of our continent's bird life.

*Bird Observer*, *Field Notes*, and other regional, state, and local publications that publish bird records exist in symbiosis with the birding public. These periodicals collect and distribute information that is important to birders; birders, in turn, provide that information and support the publications by subscribing to them. If a journal can't sustain a viable subscriber base, it perishes, and with it goes its network of volunteers and the information that it used to distribute.

For this reason, all of us at *Bird Observer* are grateful to our subscribers: your support makes it possible for us to continue performing a mission that we think is important, and your interest and loyalty inspire us to persevere in a job that is not always easy.

Many of you are already also supporting (and learning from) *Field Notes*. But if you're not, we urge you to give that journal a try. By subscribing, you will make yourself a better birder — and you will contribute to the revitalization of a publication that is a critical piece of the North American birding world. Subscriptions to *Field Notes* are \$20 per year (four seasonal issues); members of the American Birding Association receive a discounted rate of \$17.95. You can call ABA at (800) 850-2473, write PO Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO, 80934, or e-mail [member@aba.org](mailto:member@aba.org) to subscribe.

— The Editors of *Bird Observer*

## NEW TOYS FOR ENHANCED BIRDING

One important advantage birding has over some other outdoor pastimes is that it costs very little money to become a full-time participant. Decent binoculars are available for under \$50 (I usually recommend the Bushnell 10x50 Powerview model to my beginning students); add to that a Peterson field guide, and you have all you really need to become a full-fledged birder. After a year or two, you may want to add a spotting scope, upgraded binoculars, and more books. Although you can, if you wish, splurge on birding tours and top-of-the-line optics, birding is really quite an inexpensive activity.

Compulsive spenders, rejoice! Recently some new items have appeared on the market that, though not originally designed with the birder in mind, do add to the fun.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed highly sophisticated night-vision equipment for military use. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, much of this equipment was sold off to other countries, including the United States, for both military and police use. A few years later, some entrepreneurs realized that there could be a civilian market for such things, and ads began appearing in magazines catering to hunters, fishermen, boaters, and militaria collectors.

I recently purchased a set of Moonlight brand, Russian-made night-vision binoculars (actually, two separately-focused monoculars fastened together). Powered by two AA batteries, they amplify starlight 30,000 times, giving a bright picture even in near-total darkness. The image appears in green and black and has a degree of clarity comparable to that of a copied videotape. Magnification is only 2x, but of course this is to keep the light intensity as high as possible. They originally appeared in catalogs with an \$800 price tag, but were \$325 when I bought mine. If you shop around, it may be possible to find even lower prices.

Owling with this device is a whole new experience. It is great fun actually to see the screech owls flitting toward you in response to your calls. I was even able to watch a saw-whet owl in my back yard on one memorable evening last summer, and these glasses are even useful for watching other suburban wildlife, such as skunks and raccoons.

Other night-vision products now available include monoculars, goggle headsets, and rifle scopes. New products are appearing that use established Russian technology reproduced in American-made versions. The industry has begun to target birders as a market, and we should be seeing more ads for night-vision equipment in our magazines. For current ads, check out shooting periodicals such as *Shotgun News*. Prices are still quite high, but as was the case in the past with transistor radios and VCRs (and maybe will be the case with

image-stabilizing binoculars?), we can expect prices to come down with competition and a wider market.

Some direct-mail marketers seem to think that I am a law-enforcement officer, and I am constantly getting catalogs for police equipment in my mailbox. One item that caught my eye last winter was the "Bionic Ear," a long-distance surveillance microphone with optional disk enhancer. (I bought one for \$150). With this neat little device, you put on the earphones and point the flashlight-sized microphone in the desired direction. The twelve-inch-diameter parabolic reflector pinpoints the direction and helps eliminate background noise. To avoid damage to your ears, the device shuts off automatically if the sound goes above 100 decibels.

I field-tested this gadget during spring migration, and it's great! You just sweep the treetops, pick out a sound that interests you, and head for it. My hearing is not what it used to be, and this thing helped me track down species that I would have missed entirely. The whole rig fits in a gym bag and weighs very little. Ads for this product, like those for the night-vision equipment, appear regularly in magazines for the shooting sports.

Do you need this stuff to become a first-class birder? Of course not! However, as my wife constantly reminds me, the only difference between big and little boys is the price of their toys. You might consider the items for your own use, or as gifts for birders you know. They are a lot of fun — like birding generally!

— Robert Campbell

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## Write for Bird Observer

*Bird Observer* gladly considers for publication manuscripts or article proposals from any member of the birding community—local or foreign, professional ornithologist or backyard birder. We are happy to hear from first-time authors and beginning birders, as well as from established experts. The only requirement is that material be relevant to New England birds and birders.

Among the types of material we'd like to see:

- Articles presenting original scientific research
- Documentation of significant records
- Field notes describing interesting encounters with birds
- Biographies of ornithologists or birders with regional ties
- Results of surveys and censuses
- "Where to Go" articles describing good birding locales
- Articles on birding equipment or methods
- Notices and news items
- "Point of View" articles on birding-related issues

In addition, the magazine is always in need of book reviewers and qualified peer-reviewers for scientific and technical articles.

*Bird Observer* tries to provide a mix of lively, informative writing in each issue. Why not contribute your insights and experiences to help us achieve this goal? Send manuscripts or proposals to *Bird Observer* at P.O. Box 236, Arlington, MA 02476-0003, or email the editor at [mpeli74592@aol.com](mailto:mpeli74592@aol.com).

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