

The Phalarope Conspiracy

One of Nuttall's Phalaropes

I was fortunate to grow up in a rural town with parents who were very tuned into everything happening in the natural world. Conversation at dinner was most often a recounting of who had seen what; first robins or dandelions, my father's discovery of a fox den with pups playing outside, and his promise that he would take us all to watch it from a distance.

I can't remember when I was first drawn to birds. Five or six perhaps? About that time an aunt gave me an old dog-eared copy of Chester Reed's little guide to common birds, with black and white illustrations that I promptly colored in as best I could based on the brief descriptions provided. My first journal began on January first when I was nine. My fifth grade teacher had given me at Christmas a bound book with blank pages. After much thought about what was the most important thing I could do with this treasure, I decided I would make my very own bird book, a conglomeration of field notes such as "I saw a Chipping Sparrow on April ten," together with bird pictures from magazines and Thornton Burgess stories cut from the *Boston Post* after Daddy had read it to us the night before . . . if the story was about birds.

The addiction to birds never left me. I brought home the Forbush volumes from the town library, reread them almost to the point of memorization, renewing over and over until the librarian asked my father to bring them back. I would wait a month or two until I thought she had forgotten, then take them out again. On my thirteenth birthday I was given a heavy package which turned out to be a brand new copy of *Birds of America*, edited by T. Gilbert Pearson. I still remember my amazed delight when I found that the mysterious package was my first grownup bird book. In retrospect I wonder whether the town librarian ordered it for my parents to save wear and tear on the library's set of Forbush. About the same time my father permitted me to use an old 4x pair of field glasses his uncle had carried in the Civil War. With these two acquisitions, birding went to a new level. But *Birds of America* was not a pocket guide. I soon discovered I could not trust my memory. I found I needed a notebook and pencil to describe what I saw, then race back to the house to look at pictures and text, only to find I hadn't noted presence or absence of wing bars. I still carry notebooks.

I never had the opportunity for a truly academic education in ornithology, but mentors like Edward Howe Forbush (unbeknownst to him), Jim Baird, Archie Hagar, and Bill Drury added immeasurably to my appreciation and understanding of bird biology. I read everything I could get my hands on, buying books once I had my own income. The Avian Encephalitis outbreak in 1956 led quite accidentally to eleven years as staff ornithologist at the Encephalitis Field Station established by the U.S. Public Health Service in 1957, which in turn led to cajoling as many birding friends as possible into volunteering their help on Duxbury Beach for two seasons while I netted, banded, and blood-sampled fall migrants. This in turn led to the founding of the Manomet Bird Observatory in 1969. But that's another story.

In 1970 I spoke at the March meeting of the Nuttall Ornithological Club describing the establishment of the first bird observatory on the Atlantic Coast, the first woman ever to speak to this bastion of “the old guard” of New England ornithology and at the same time the first official female guest of the club. I was told that there were regular attendees who chose not to attend that evening, but I would have no idea who they were. And incidentally, there have been rather few women speakers since. I was elected a member in 1974 and in 1984 became the first woman to serve as president of NOC. 🐦

Kathleen S. Anderson

The Phalaropes

My Dad grew up in Brooklyn but had spent some time in the country as a kid and knew the names of all the common birds. We lived in a new subdivision in White Plains, New York, in the 1930s, and I quickly became very interested in the local bird life. Dad and our neighbor across the street were my sources of information whenever I wanted to know the identity of a bird.

I continued to be interested in natural history, especially birds, as I grew older and eventually majored in zoology at college. But we never went outside to look at actual living animals – ours were dead and reeking of formaldehyde.

I watched birds in a desultory way during my teens and twenties, but in my early thirties I discovered Mass Audubon, and Jim Baird took me under his wing as a volunteer and then as an employee. I became involved with birds in earnest, answering bird queries from the local populace, making study skins, generating nesting records, and writing simple pamphlets to answer common questions about birds and other animals. Jim helped me obtain a small grant from the American Museum of Natural History, and I spent close to five years every spring studying the American Robins in the twenty acres around my suburban house to find out how well they were succeeding in maintaining their population (not well, it turned out).

I got to know Archie Hagar when I went to see him about terns in Massachusetts, as I was about to take on a Tern Protection Program for the nesting birds in Massachusetts – mostly on Cape Cod. He was extremely helpful, as usual, and I took over from him as Secretary of the Northeast Bird Banding Association (known as NEBBA). I didn't know he was going to propose me for membership in the Nuttall Ornithological Club, but I do remember that the AOU annual meeting was being held in Boston, and there was some angst in the bird world about the fact that NOC did not admit women members. I think this may have been the impetus for a review of the club's policies and the subsequent decision to admit women.

I was delighted and a little awed to be a member of such a group, and it saddens me to think that some members felt that they could no longer remain. 🐦

Deborah Howard