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Editorial Policy

Ontario Birds is the journal of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Its aim is to provide a vehicle for the documentation of the birds of Ontario. We encourage the submission of full length articles or short notes on the status of bird species in Ontario, significant provincial or county distributional records, tips on bird identification, behavioural observations of birds in Ontario, location guides to significant birdwatching areas in Ontario, book reviews and similar

material of interest on Ontario birds. We do not accept submissions dealing with "listing" and we discourage Seasonal Reports of bird sightings as these are covered by *Bird Finding in Canada* and *American Birds*, respectively. Distributional records of species for which the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) requires documentation must be accepted by them before they can be published in *Ontario Birds*.

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Letters to the Editor

The following are excerpts of letters written by OFO members in response to the article by Outdoor Editor Bob Rife, published in a recent edition of *The Globe and Mail* and reprinted in *OFO Newsletter* #12 (July 1987). This article, entitled "Birders: as culpable as poachers", is critical of the actions of some birders and raises important questions about the ethics involved in our ornithological pursuits. Thanks to all the respondents for expressing their views on this highly controversial subject.

D. M. Fraser
Editor

OFO members courteous

I have only been a member of OFO for a year, and have been on many outings with them. Always the greatest care and courtesy has been entrusted upon the birds we have observed and their habitat. The OFO members that I have "birded" with have maintained the ABA Code of Ethics to the utmost consideration, and are not "bird hunters"... It is the good reputation of OFO that attracts other birders (like myself) to join and promote not only birding, but the conservation and preservation of the environment and (subsequently) habitat.

Wendie Vipond
Toronto, Ontario

Shrikes disturbed by photographers

One point that has bothered me for a long time is the need for photogra-

phers to use a close up flash, particularly in the case of owls and nesting birds. Several years ago we had Loggerhead Shrikes nesting on our property. We came home from a few days at Pelee to find branches cut off the tree, others tied back and left that way, just to get a "good picture"!

Possibly too much emphasis in birding circles in general has been placed on numbers—whether it be getting that 400th, 500th or 700th bird—rather than enjoying the birds and doing our best to hope a few of them survive for future generations.

Bouquets to the considerate, genuine bird watcher, but unfortunately there are a few of the other kind!

Darlene Dalke
Oshawa, Ontario

Birding — a non-consumptive resource use

As an avid birder, I have never considered bird watching to harm the species I am observing in any way. Rather, it is a totally non-consumptive use of the resource, leaving the observed species available for the enjoyment of others.

However, I believe that the occurrence of a "group" of birders, attempting to sight a rare species can cause problems. There seems to be something about a "gathering" of birders in one spot which causes *some* of the birders to become overly eager, pushy and overbearing. I suppose it could be compared to a gathering of fans at a rock concert, where some tend to get the same

desire to try and get close.

I do not *personally* know any birding "slobs". I believe that the overwhelming majority of birders exercise restraint and common sense when birding.

Manson Fleguel
Pembroke, Ontario

Code of ethics or social conscience?

In reading the ABA code of ethics again I find many laudable features, but I find a few things difficult to accept without qualification.

Firstly, despite all the good that it does, we will always be left with the slobs who won't read it or won't care even if they do. It should be the responsibility of each and every conscientious birder to kindly shame the slobs into being more considerate of others. For it is the birders, and not just the wildlife that will suffer. We wouldn't need a code of ethics if people had a social conscience.

Secondly, under the fourth and fifth items of the code, no nest record program could exist if nobody approached nests, and those who do participate in nest record keeping do not, or at least have no need to handle eggs or young birds. A great deal of good comes from nest records and they are frequently consulted even by the Ministry of Natural Resources (or their equivalents elsewhere).

If Mr. Rife really wants to do some good he could campaign for legislation to ban ATVs and trail bikes, that not only significantly disturb wildlife of interest to birders, photographers or hunters, but also

tear up the habitat of the wildlife and destroy rare or sensitive vegetation, and perhaps worst of all disturb a great many people in serious ways. Or he might worry about the ever increasing proliferation of chemicals polluting the environment, or the industrial pollution of lakes, rivers and forests, or the continuing encroachment of human activity on the few remaining Carolinian forests, or the constantly increasing population of this country that is steadily "eroding" the fields we need for agriculture and the forests and prairies etc., that are needed by the wildlife we are trying to protect. Some politicians and economists feel it is essential to have continued population growth, but I prefer to think of that as people pollution, slowly and steadily destroying the quality of life we have in this country by continually destroying our environment. While Mr. Rife has a point about birders and photographers it seems to me there are worse and more insidious problems for the Ministry of Natural Resources to deal with. If we protect the habitat we have in this country (and the rest of the world) from the ever increasing demands of human population, there will always be some wildlife that could readily withstand the disturbance of birders, and even of photographers.

Ross James
Associate Curator of Ornithology
Royal Ontario Museum
Toronto, Ontario

Birders should pay their way
From my own point of view, I believe that there is a most unfortu-

nate *lessening* of interest in general natural history as more and more people become interested in birding *only*, from the competitive point of view. The art of observation of what is *happening* among a group of birds, and what interactions are taking place between birds and other animals, and their use of the habitat, is apparently being pushed aside for laser-intense concentration *only* on points of identification. I can't abide the "birding boredom" that flares up in a group of birders when there are temporarily no birds in sight! Nor do I take kindly to remarks such as "oh *that* — I've seen one of them (got it on my list) — not interested in trash birds — nothing interesting/good here..."!!!!

About the "licensing" idea for birdwatchers...I think we *should pay our way*. The "hunting licence" is somewhat ridiculous — but we should pay an annual amount to help maintain habitat, to "police" some too-heavily used areas (i.e., *fine* people for using tape recorders to pull birds out of the undergrowth during breeding season, etc).

Quite apart from the general control aspect, I think birders should put some more money towards the fight to protect vital habitat areas. One so often comes across instances of people grumbling about entrance fees to parks and conservation areas — but spending money right, left and centre to use gasoline and pay motel fees, etc. in order to dash half way across the Province — and further — to add a rarity to their lists.

Somehow, we have to stress ecology more, and breeding biology — of course, the new-to-birdwatch-

ing person just gets a field guide, and finds practically nothing in it about behaviour, nesting, etc., so they don't get the general picture *from the beginning*. And without that general picture, it is too easy to zero in on identification alone, in all its aspects.

All this, of course, has to be put into perspective — there is a large majority of birdwatchers that behaves well, does its part in conservation funding, is interested in other aspects of biology than just birds, etc. But as numbers grow, the minority is becoming far too obvious — not only to the majority, but more seriously damaging, to the general public. And I deeply resent that minority.

Rosemary Gaymer
Oakville, Ontario

A West German viewpoint

So far we do not have in Germany a "birder-fraternity", only individuals or small groups of two or three persons are going out for serious birdwatching. The general public interested in birds will follow local guided tours, organized by the "Volkshochschule" or the local chapter of the German equivalent of the RSPB. These activities are normally harmless.

Only two weeks ago I heard for the first time that a hot-line was established in Western Germany recently. We therefore are at the very beginning of this problem. David Lack came to the conclusion that birdwatching is a substitute for hunting, that it is a civilized way of hunting. He maybe couldn't imagine the crowds approaching a rare

bird today. I personally feel the same: birdwatching is a civilized way of hunting. It gives surely the same joy and pleasure to the serious birdwatcher as gives the hunt for a hunter.

How now to stop a dangerous development as described in the article of Bob Rife? Isn't it fact that by installing hot-lines the problem arises? Shouldn't we introduce a new article in the Code of Ethics saying that the establishment and running of a hot-line is contrary to the welfare of the birds? Nobody is forced by this new article not to call an experienced friend or peer to confirm his/her observation. But we would stop the avalanche otherwise arriving at the site, offending the bird and harming the environment.

Another aspect worth considering is the introduction of a licence (and lectures, and examinations to get it) for the photographing of birds, and the compulsory membership in a bird or wildlife photographer society which would have to be established.

I do feel that something has to be done from the birdwatcher community. I would be very unhappy if others, or the government, would force on us restrictions.

Dr. Walter Thiede
Cologne, West Germany

Notion of "licensing" birders assailed

I read Bob Rife's article with a mixture of derision and annoyance. Derision, because Mr. Rife's thesis—that birdwatchers have somehow become a menace to the environment, and need to be licensed like some

species of Pit Bull Terrier—obviously invites derision; and annoyance, because Mr. Rife writes with such apparent, albeit illusory authority that I suspect a large number of readers might actually believe him.

However, responsible birdwatchers will also recognize that, among the dross of hyperbole and exaggeration that in Mr. Rife's case substitutes for serious journalism, there are a few grains of truth. It is indeed true that there do exist birders who behave in an irresponsible manner, either occasionally or habitually. I do not believe that it is a serious problem—certainly not serious enough to warrant Mr. Rife's insulting and inflammatory headline—but we should recognize it before it becomes one. Undesirable behaviour among birdwatchers falls into three categories; behaviour damaging to the bird itself, such as excessive disturbance, especially in the breeding season; behaviour annoying to landowners, principally trespass and damage to crops and/or fences; and behaviour inconsiderate to other birders, such as scaring away rare birds by too close an approach. Precisely how the bulk of the birdwatching community can discourage these activities, other than by moral suasion, is admittedly not an easy problem. However, what is especially fatuous about Mr. Rife's self-serving diatribe is the suggestion that a license would somehow miraculously eliminate those problems that do occur. One has only to look at the activities of Mr. Rife's own constituency, the hunters (presumably all duly licenced according to his fondest

desires) to recognize the nonsensical nature of his arguments.

David Brewer
Puslinch, Ontario

Photographers are main culprits

I both agree and disagree with Mr. Rife's assessment of birders' activities these days. I agree that birders are more and more often disturbing birds and this alarms me, however, I do not feel that birders are "as culpable as poachers". I have yet to see birders intentionally kill birds.

The introduction of cameras to birding has probably been the worst thing that has happened to this hobby. Too many amateur photographers have to get a photograph of every bird they see. They don't realize that the incredibly glossy photos that they see in books are taken by dedicated photographers who sometimes work for weeks to get a single roll of film. These amateur photographers still have to get within ten feet of a warbler or sparrow to get a good shot. There was a time at Point Pelee when you could talk to other birders and find out that there was a Le Conte's Sparrow in this bush by the point, or that there was a Whip-poor-will in this stand of trees by the Nature Centre.

These days, when a rare or attractive bird is spotted, the amateur photographers are usually the first ones there and the last to see the bird. Last spring at Point Pelee I had one of these people say to me, "There was a Scarlet Tanager over here a minute ago but I had to chase it away over to the other side of the point to get a good shot of it".

These people aren't doing the hobby

any good and by the number of cameras you see under the arms of birders, the potential for real harm is great.

The hobby of birding is not nearly as bad as the acts of poachers or hunters. The act of the poacher or hunter is *always* permanent. The actions of birders are not so. It seems to me that the best birders are still the best birders and these people, who are well known to the birding community, have the ability to combine a love for the hobby with a love for the birds. It would appear that the over-eager and just plain obnoxious birders are going to ruin it for everyone.

I, myself, am not one of the best birders, but I would rather put down a bird as unidentified than chase it away. I tried photography about ten years ago but as soon as I realized what was happening I stopped and haven't tried it since. I am disturbed by what is happening to birding, both through the sheer numbers of new enthusiasts and the inconsiderate activities of some others. The latter can be remedied, the former is an unfortunate tribute to just how enjoyable this hobby is.

Mr. Rife is sounding like a hunter who is as frustrated as I am that the increased numbers of people in the woods, and the negligent behaviour of some, is scaring away both animals and birds. However, it seems that he wants to blame this on the birders alone. The incremental damage done by one more birder is still less than the incremental damage done by one more hunter.

Doug Hanna
Fergus, Ontario

Photographs in last issue

The only other photographs that come close to the quality of those found in the August issue of *Ontario Birds* [Vol. 5(2)] are in *Social Studies* by Fran Lebowitz. Her photographs, however, are meant to be funny. Since *Ontario Birds* is "serious stuff", why are the photographs so nauseating to look at? Photography is our most exacting visual medium, especially well suited for social and scientific documentation. Birds may be more difficult to photograph than other subjects, but the majority of photographs which appear in this journal, should not. Poor photographs are not "better than nothing".

Tom Reaume
Ballinafad, Ontario

Ed. Note: I'm glad that someone wrote a letter about the photographs in the last issue, because this gives me an opportunity to provide both an explanation and an apology.

I agree with your letter for the most part, although I assure you that the original photographs were any-

thing but "nauseating" — most were from good to excellent quality. Their poor appearance is solely due to poor reproduction during printing and I apologize to the photographers.

Since the spring, I have made a number of production changes in an attempt to meet budgetary restraints. Some worked out well. Others didn't. No one feels worse than I do about the results. I would like nothing better than to blame everything on the printer but, as editor, I am the one who is responsible for ensuring that *Ontario Birds* remains a quality periodical. Therefore, I can only add that I have now found a more reliable printer and can give my solemn promise that the poor quality of the last issue will not occur again during my tenure as editor.

D. M. Fraser
Editor



Black-capped Chickadee/drawing by Jim Ireland