

RETORTS, REFLECTIONS, AND THOUGHTFUL REFUTATIONS

I'm sure I was not the only reader to be taken aback by J.P. Myers' unabashed birder-bashing (Facts, Inferences, and Shameless Speculations, Fall 88, Vol. 42, No. 3). By suggesting that birding is in effect a trivial pursuit, he belittles the contributions of the thousands of supporters of both the National Audubon Society and *American Birds*.

By scolding us for not doing enough, he disdains our heartfelt gifts to both conservation and ornithology. Shame on you, Pete!

**P. William Smith,
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Pete Myers' column indeed intended to save the world. The question is, who will save the world from Myers?

In a more serious vein. The use of DDT was prohibited from the U.S. 16 years ago. Therefore, it doesn't take a Stephen Hawking, again, to realize that Myers' serious concern with DDT comes from its widespread use in Latin America, where most migratory birds spend the non-breeding season. So, what is the answer to the DDT problem? Invasion of the offending countries by the U.S. Army is a possibility, but probably not a popular one. Perhaps a better solution would be the adoption of a new attitude by American companies, which currently redirect everything that is banned in the U.S. to Third World markets. This is a small world, and we, as a species, must stop playing with our environment (sensu: *planet earth*) before, as Lovejoy alerts us, "the top unexpectedly blows off".

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This is your page. To do with as you please. We hope that you will be provoked, excited, energized, and challenged by Pete Meyers' column, and we dedicate this space to your insight, opinions, ideas, recommendations, questions, complaints, challenges, and daydreams. Write to Retorts, *American Birds*, 950 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022.

Dr. Myers may get some entertaining expressions of rage from birdwatchers who don't read far enough to realize that his "Dose those birdies" slogan is tongue-in-cheek: a roundabout way of pointing to one disturbing possibility of pesticide poisoning. Personally, I thought he brought forth an idea that's worth discussing. We're all opposed to persistent pesticides anyway, because of their *proven* negative effects, so we can take this question for its scientific value: can a buildup of pesticide residues in the brain lead to faulty navigation on the part of migratory birds?

Maybe. Maybe not. It would take laboratory work to answer the question. But I want to make a couple of related points:

1. Pesticides could possibly constitute *one* cause, but they are certainly not *the* cause for vagrancy in birds. There is no reason to believe that vagrancy in birds has increased in recent decades. Here in California, the number of *records* of birds out of range has increased dramatically since the early 1960s, but this can be laid almost en-

tirely to the vast increase in coverage. Following the example set by Guy McCaskie, hundreds of California birders have learned about "vagrant traps," and these favored points are now scoured during migration.

We know today, for example, that the Farallon Islands off central California produce numbers of eastern warblers every year, now that there is a very thorough survey by the staff of Point Reyes Bird Observatory. But long before the days of regular coverage, W. L. Dawson visited the Farallones in May, 1911 and recorded Magnolia Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, and Ovenbird there, the latter two representing first California records. Even earlier, the Farallones produced California's first Black-throated Blue Warbler in 1886 and its first Black-and-white Warbler in 1887. Clearly vagrancy is not a new phenomenon here. These early records are from many years before the widespread application of chlorinated hydrocarbons like DDT.

2. If vagrancy (= faulty navigation) in birds were being caused by a buildup of pesticides in the brain, we would expect most vagrants to be adult birds (*i.e.*, those that have been around long enough for the buildup to occur). Actually, a significant majority of vagrants are young birds in fall, attempting to migrate for their very first time.

I hasten to add that this letter is not meant as a defense of persistent pesticides! If anything, it's a defense of the study of bird vagrancy—I wouldn't want people to assume that any bird out of range is simply freaked out on DDT. Incorrect navigation by migratory birds is a phenomenon that undoubtedly has complex causes and long-standing significance.

**Matt Sanders,
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