

FACTS, INFERENCES, AND SHAMELESS SPECULATIONS

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Phone Freebies



Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*) in jack pine. Photograph/Dale and Marian Zimmerman/VIREO/ z01/6/017.

I HAVE JUST READ A LETTER TO THE editor of *Birding*. The correspondent wrote: "We deserve a national rare bird alert that is as free as all the others." "Deserve?" "As free as all the others?" Does this mean that all those trite variations on not having to do anything but die and pay taxes need

amendments? "Die, pay taxes, and deliver birding information at no charge even if it costs to deliver?"

I would be the first to agree that birding information should be shared freely. The only exception here might be if it involved an endangered species when general knowledge of specific locations could put the birds at risk. This concern underlies reluctance to talk, for example, about confirmed breeding locations for the Eskimo Curlew (I wish I knew...). But if someone asks me where to find a Red-spotted Bluethroat, I would be delighted to tell (Go to Bob's Air Taxi Service in Barrow. Rent a plane. Fly south to Atkasuk. Get out of plane...).

Freely giving that knowledge, however, is quite different from subsidizing the costs of gathering, organizing, and delivering the information. No one has the right to demand that others pay the costs of his or her own avocation.

Perhaps the reason someone perceives local rare-bird alerts to be free is because some people and organizations contribute their time and money as a service to the birding community. The National Audubon Society and its many chapters play varying and substantial roles in this across the country. But only in the most selfish sense (to the user) is this information free. It takes work and time to gather and collate the information. The bigger the geographic region covered, the



California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*). Photograph/Serge LaFrance/VIREO/106/2/002.

larger the network required and the greater the burden on the synthesizer. Make it national and the costs truly add up. The tape machines (one operating continuously plus several backups) are not flimsy home models but industrial strength and industrial cost. The phone line is not free—particularly 800 numbers—and for a national program one line is not sufficient. You can imagine the way that users would complain were only one line available nationally.

Fortunately, many individual and organizational supporters of the nation's local rare-bird tapes recognize that these services don't come free. Unfortunately, not all users bear their fair share of the costs, meaning that a "free" national tape run using the same formula that funds a local tape simply won't work. Hence the laudable efforts of some organizations to provide a service paid for by the user in proportion to the user's benefit, *i.e.*, a fee for service. Perhaps you think the fee structure is wrong, but the concept is right.

I wonder if the writer to *Birding*

makes charitable contributions to the organizations that produce the local rare-bird tapes he so clearly enjoys. I would suggest that he and other users of rare-bird tapes across the country ask themselves how much enjoyment they derive from the information available to them on rare-bird tapes, and especially what they spend (gas, time, tires, etc.) once they learn where the birds are. That rare-bird tape enriches their lives, makes their birding more effective, and directs the flow of a tidy sum of their discretionary money to travel expenses.

Isn't there some irony in an argument that winds up with birders paying Exxon and Michelin for part of their sport, but unwilling to pay for the information that makes it possible?

Climatic relief

Two years ago I gave up hope of ever masquerading as a native California birder, or even a legitimate, card-carrying immigrant. True, it was about then that I moved to New York, meaning that whatever I might wish

to think was pure self-delusion anyway. And true, every time I return to the West Coast it appears that the Golden State has gotten a little grungier, and more like, well, New Jersey near Hoboken, but what dashed my hopes was not the reality of New York nor even the tarnishing of Eden. It was the fact that I had missed the last free-flying California Condor by 30 seconds.

Now I can never win the high moral ground on admission to real California birding. It won't matter how many Ruffs I found in the Central Valley, or Yellow Wagtails on Point Reyes, or Lesser Golden-Plovers at Bodega Bay. Those late-winter mornings near Susanville spent waiting for Sage Grouse to boom—pre-dawn, fingers about as responsive as bananas in liquid nitrogen? Not good enough? No, the acid test will become the condor, and I fail.

It wasn't for want of trying. I had made more than one trip to Mt. Pinos without seeing one. I had scanned more than one mountainside in the Sespe Range, performing topological transformations on every Turkey Vulture that happened to appear at the limits of visual resolution. Then when I joined Audubon it seemed like a done deal, wired, so to speak. All I had to do was stick with the radio-trackers who knew exactly where the last bird was and could lead me right to it.

Linda Blum took me into the mountains above Ventura. Pete Bloom was already there, supine in the bushes within meters of a dead goat and a cannon net, surely one of the odder rituals in California birding. Linda picked up signals from the radio-collared bird and my only tension was whether we would make visual contact before or after it was wrapped up in Pete's net. We wound higher into the hills, heading toward a promontory overlooking the vast expanse of Ventura's disappearing natural landscapes. Linda's receiver started beeping louder as we and the bird converged. But just as we came to the last bluff, its signal began to fade. The bird hugged the hills—it dipped when it should have soared, rather condor-like in the broader scheme of things. Linda was unfazed—easy for her, given how many condors she had handled. It was the closest I ever came.

So much for me and the immortal



Two fire-dependent species; a Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*) in its critical habitat, Jack Pine, which requires fire to produce new seedlings. Photograph/Dale and Marian Zimmerman/VIREO/z01/6/022.

ranks of California birding. It won't matter where it is or how it comes, or even how successful the condor reintroduction program may become, and I am convinced it will be successful. That question will also be there:

Gate Keeper: "Condors?"

Me: "Sure. I saw 14 last week just outside of Flagstaff."

Gate Keeper: "No, real condors. Next."

Thus it is with considerable relief that I knocked off the Kirtland's Warbler last week. There he was, doing just what the guide had promised. Singing. Sitting astride a Jack Pine snag. Displaying for our group just as he had for a sequence of others for at least the previous week. Yes, I would rather have found him myself after a three-hour canoe ride on the Au Sable River. The Gate Keeper prefers that you do things the hard way (There are limits: three-hours downstream; no black flies; sun.). But the fact is that I saw one before global warming got the Kirtland's Warbler.

You probably ought to be planning your trip there now, too. Dan Botkin, a forest ecologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has run a series of analyses that suggest that global warming will force the Kirtland's Warbler to extinction by the year 2010. The end won't come with overheated warblers or habitat inundated by sea-level rise. It will be far more subtle. By Botkin's projections, the Jack Pine forests crucial to the Kirtland's Warbler nesting will no longer grow in the areas of Michigan where the warblers now nest. Jack Pines will thrive farther north. But Jack Pines are only half of the warbler equation. The Kirtland's Warbler nesting is limited to a very small area of Jack Pine forest where special sandy soils stunt the growth of the pines as they recover from forest fires. The peculiar combination of Jack Pine and soil types special to central Michigan and crucial to warbler success will no longer exist once the climate moves the trees northward.

So the clock is ticking. See your Kirtland's Warbler by 2010.

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