

The History of Birding

Part I. 1968–1974

Note: For several years now, this column has had a strong—maybe even an obsessive—emphasis on current and future trends in birding. Well, we’re going to be reversing course for a little while now, as we take a look at our past. Our approach will be a simple one: We will examine back issues of Birding, starting with vol. 0 no. 0, way back in 1968, and winding up all the way in the present. Let’s not be bashful: There is no better record of the American birding experience than what has been chronicled on the pages of Birding.

Of course, there is a twist. It will be clear, pretty much from the outset, that much of the olden-day material in Birding has, in fact, anticipated the present and, indeed, points the way to the future. Perhaps we are not reversing course so much, then, as we are simply shifting gears. We do not wish to “run the risk of becoming tedious and ossified”, as Paul J. Baicich put it in one of his last editorials (“Some changes”, February 2002, p. 8). Our focus here is still on the future, even as we commence a yearlong journey back to the future.



The beginnings are murky. No date is indicated, but it had to be sometime back in 1968 that the quirkily numbered vol. 0 no. 0 of *The Birdwatcher’s Digest* was “published”. It would later be revealed (*Birding*, July/August 1973, p. 125) that the “print run”—if one might call it that—of this five-page newsletter had been 10 copies. The new publication of the “American Birdwatcher’s Association” billed itself as “a journal devoted to the hobby of birdwatching” and “a magazine strictly for birdwatchers”. Membership in the ABA was \$3.

Listing was the main thrust of vol. 0 no. 0, even though official list-keeping was in its infancy at the time. There were only nine entries in the Top 10 Life Lists, and the fifth-best AOU-area annual list for 1967 was a meager 233 species. Progress was anticipated in the listing arena, however, and it was promised in vol. 0 no. 0 that “[e]ach issue

of *The Birdwatcher’s Digest* will include the latest statistics on the various games that members are playing and how they rank on the overall basis.” It was decreed that Hawaii be excluded from the listing game, and it was proposed that Canada be treated as the fiftieth U. S. state.

With vol. 1 (1969), the publication took on the basic format that is still in place today: six issues per year, each one published every other month. The journal’s name was changed to *Birding*, and its total production cost was reported to be \$50 per issue (September/October, p. 1). An understandable emphasis of vol. 1—which ran to 81 pages in extent—was on definitions and ground rules. The competitive and sporting aspects of birding were right away identified as major foci for *Birding*. And just as quickly, the focus on listing was being criticized (March/April, p. 5). Other topics that were tackled early on included the following: “official” state lists (March/April, p. 10), heard-only species (May/June, p. 4), and exotics (May/June, pp. 13–14). It was proposed that the name of the ABA be changed to the American Birding Association (March/April, p. 2), and that Associate and Active memberships in the ABA be based on the size of one’s life list (March/April, p. 10).

By the end of 1969, there were 128 members of the ABA (November/December, p. 16), and *pro tem* officers of the ABA had been appointed (November/December, p. 3). The November/December issue included bird finding information on Swainson’s Warbler and European [sic] Tree Sparrow (inserts), “Notes” on four North American firsts from the Pribilofs and on a Dusky [sic] Redshank “collected somewhere in the Northeast recently” (p. 8), and Noel Pettingell’s “Ten Most Wanted Species” in North America (p. 14). Was there an overarching theme to this first full year of *Birding* and the ABA? According to Jim Tucker (September/October, p. 3), the publication and the organization were emerging as “a proving ground for new ideas, and a testing ground for old ones.”

The tone of vol. 2 (1970) was sometimes cantankerous. (Do periodical publications, like toddlers, go through the Terrible Twos?) The January/February issue opened with a “Forum” (p. 2) that included such verbiage as ‘shudder’, ‘troubled’, ‘factions’, ‘polemics’, and ‘dissatisfied’. The editorial that followed (p. 3) advised against conservation coverage on the pages of *Birding*, which would be “subverting our reason for exist[ence]”. Next came a plea from Dean Fisher (p. 5), with capital letters and an exclamation point, to LEAVE SCIENCE OUT! After that: an essay by George A. Hall (pp. 6–7), on the problems and pitfalls of the competitive aspect of birding. And so it continued throughout 1970: listing and egos (March/April, pp. 9–10), listing and integrity (March/April, p. 13), the pros and cons of collecting (May/June, pp. 5–9), membership qualifications (July/August, p. 2), and, of course, splitting and lumping (September/October, pp. 7–10).

Birding got a makeover in 1971. In years 0–2, it had been essentially a newsletter, both in appearance and in content. By 1971, however, *Birding* had taken on the look of a professional journal, with a masthead, instructions for contributors, and continuous pagination. There were the usual bird lists and (strongly expressed) opinion pieces, but the expanded content (258 pages in 1971, up from 96 in 1970) allowed for new exploration of such matters as bird finding and bird identification. The lead article in the September/October issue (pp. 155–156) captured the essence of American birding at the time: P. William Smith, writing about the 1971 summer shorebird bonanza at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey, concluded that, “We are only cognizant of the tip of the iceberg, and if this year’s kind of coverage continues I suspect the excitement has only just begun.”

The 1972 volume of *Birding* reported extensively on the interrelated matters of bird finding and bird listing. For example, there was Ted Parker’s article (January/February, pp. 6–10) that began with the simple but shocking words, “In 1971 I observed 626 species of birds in the A.O.U.

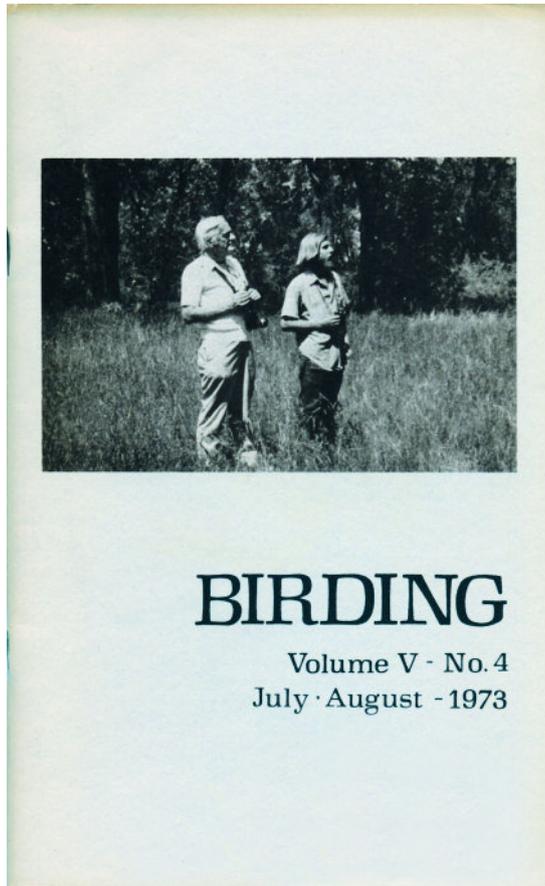
Check-list area.” A few months later, Joe Taylor became the first member of the “700 Club”, as reported with great fanfare in the May/June issue (pp. 114–116). There was pride in these accomplishments, but there was also a palpable sense that more was on the way: The pelagic frontier was opening (November/December, pp. 278 & 280), a national RBA was under discussion (November/December, p. 279), and the first ABA convention was in the planning stages (September/October, p. 201).

A standout in the 1973 volume of *Birding* was the July/August issue. It was the first issue of *Birding* to feature photography—including a black-and-white cover photograph of Roger Tory Peterson and Kenn Kaufman out birding. In addition to a thorough report on the first ABA convention in Kenmare, North Dakota (pp. 128–138), the July/August issue contained such features as the first ABA Checklist report (p. 139), an enumeration of the first slate of elected directors for the ABA (p. 140), and the publication of the newly ratified by-laws of the ABA (pp. 162–166). Incoming president G. Stuart Keith, in his review of the growth of the ABA (p. 127), put it this way: “You’ve come a long way, Baby!”

Yes, *Birding* and the ABA had come a long way, but additional growth and expansion were in the offing. The 1974 volume of *Birding*

was the biggest yet (332 pages), and the ABA membership had grown to 1,872 by year’s end. Continuing an emphasis from the early 1970s, vol. 6 carried frequent coverage of the matter of international birding, with feature articles on a wide variety of foreign destinations, plus Stuart Keith’s epic “Birding Planet Earth: A World Overview” (July/August, pp. 203–216). If Keith’s article reflected the prevailing currents of the day, then Maggie Bowman’s short letter to the editor in the September/October issue (pp. 232–233) laid the groundwork for the future. “My main interest in *Birding*”, she said, “is the hope that you will publish articles on the fine, fine points of field identification”.

— Ted Floyd



The first issue of *Birding* to have a cover photograph (Roger Tory Peterson, left; Kenn Kaufman, right) was the July/August 1973 (vol. 5, no. 4) issue.