

BIRDS, BOOKS, A



Autumn's in the Air: Bob Whites

ND FILM

How Birding Became Almost Cool

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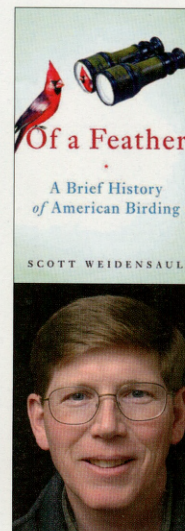
PAINTINGS BY JAMES MCCLELLAND

A review of Scott Weidensaul, *Of a Feather: A Brief History of American Birding* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007).

Perhaps you fancy yourself a sophisticated person, one who wouldn't be caught dead peering through binoculars at some twittering little dicky bird. Perhaps you're one who considers birdwatchers a quirky bunch populated by the likes of Miss Jane Hathaway on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or by chubby cartoon characters in *The Far Side*. You may not be alone in your prejudices, but you're definitely out of touch. Much has changed over the past half-century. Miss Hathaway and her ilk notwithstanding, "birding" is one of the fastest growing pastimes in North America.¹

If you are a birder and find yourself ticking off a list of spring warblers at Point Pelee or fighting seasickness while tracking shearwaters and petrels off the Oregon coast, the person beside you is just as likely to be a Fortune 500 CEO as a Denny's waitress. Birding today is a great democratizer, enjoyed by the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak.² A new book by Scott Weidensaul, *Of a Feather: A Brief History of American Birding*, recounts the origins and development of this wildly popular hobby once thought to be the exclusive province of geeks and weirdos.

Weidensaul himself claims to have been "a little off center" as a kid. "I was alone in the neighborhood," he writes, "in deciding to tan (with questionable success) the hide of a road-killed woodchuck...in raising thirty monarch butterflies in my bedroom, which smelled of caterpillar droppings for weeks...[and in keeping a] ring-necked snake that lived under my bed" (228–29). However, like many another twelve-year-old, Weidensaul "hunted and fished and joined the Boy Scouts" (229)—and loathed the binocular-toting





Miss Hathaway on his favorite sitcom. But despite his aversion to Miss Hathaway, birding had him hooked.

In the first chapter, Weidensaul reviews the impressions of early explorers concerning North America's birds. John White, John Lawson, Mark Catesby, and John Bartram, among others, described and named some of these birds. A few of these names have survived until today: "blew" jay, "hooping" crane, Canada goose, laughing gull, and purple finch (27). Sadly, though, some of the avian sights they described haven't: flocks of Carolina parakeets "of a green Colour, and Orange—Colour'd half way their head," and hoards of passenger pigeon so vast as to "obstruct the Light of day" (15).

The adventures of aspiring poet and bird enthusiast Alexander Wilson, and of his better-known rival, John James Audubon, occupy the second chapter. Wilson walked enormous distances in fifteen of then-eighteen United States, "taking copious notes, shooting and stuffing birds, and grilling locals about what they know of their region's birdlife" (50). He shaped this information into a remarkably thorough work titled *Ornithology*, illustrated by Wilson himself.

Audubon, in contrast, clearly the superior artist, was,

according to Weidensaul, "self-aggrandizement personified, a master at the calculated effect" (59). When he traveled to England and Scotland in the 1820s to sell subscriptions to his magnificent *Birds of America*, Audubon "made sure to look every inch the 'American Woodsman' he proclaimed himself to be—the long, flowing hair, a hunting shirt and wolfskin jacket, a fur cap with a bushy tail" (59)—all a put-on. Today, both Wilson and Audubon are namesakes of birds, societies, and journals.

The development of North American ornithology, closely connected with westward expansion and associated military detachments, is explored in the third and fourth chapters. Many of North America's western species now bear the names of the explorers and military officers involved: Lewis Woodpecker (Meriwether Lewis), Clark's Nutcracker (William Clark), Nuttall's Woodpecker (Thomas Nuttall), Townsend's Warbler (John Townsend), Cassin's Finch (John Cassin), Harris' Sparrow (Edward Harris), Gambel's Quail (William Gambel), Bendire's Thrasher (Charles Bendire), Xantus' Murrelet (John Xantus), and Heermann's Gull (Adolphus Heermann), to name just a few.

Colorful tales attend the lives of these people. To these early ornithologists, the only way to study birds was down the barrel of a shotgun. Collecting dominated nineteenth and early twentieth century ornithology.

Charles B. Cory, president of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), when declining an invitation to address an Audubon Society meeting in 1902, growled "I do not protect birds. I kill them" (144).

Fortunately, the attitude of ornithologists has changed, and today the AOU is at the forefront of bird protection. This sea change was due in large part to the work of a cadre of "Angry Ladies," featured in chapter five. During the late 1800s, feathers adorned the hats of many fashionable ladies—the bigger the feather, the more fashionable the hat. Herons,

egrets, and other birds were slaughtered in frightful numbers to meet the demand for these accessories.

Although it was women who wore the hats, it was also women who brought the millinery industry to its knees. Harriet Lawrence Hemenway, a formidable New England blue blood, is credited with raising up the modern-day Audubon Society in part to counter this slaughter. Many other prominent women of the time promoted the protection and love of birds. These women included Florence Bailey, Mabel Wright, Cordelia Stanwood, Anna Comstock, Gene Stratton-Porter, Fanny Eckstorm, and Rosalie Edge.

The concept of the "bird book," the availability of a handy guide to identification, is reviewed in chapter six. "Field guides make the natural world knowable," Weidensaul notes. "[T]hey are the first entry point for most people into the diversity of life on the planet" (188). Bird guides from the early nineteenth century, however, looked more like medical reference tomes, hardly something you'd want to haul into the field.

The first truly portable bird guides were produced during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Chester Reed's little *Bird Guide*, which appeared in 1906, provides a notable and influential example. But it was Roger Tory Peterson, an art teacher from New York, who in 1934 birthed *The Field Guide to the Birds*, the first truly modern field guide.

Today, in addition to updated editions of Peterson's classic, a plethora of guides is available, including *Birds of North America* of the Golden Field Guide Series, the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds*, *National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, and Kenn Kaufman's *Focus Guide to Birds of North America*—not to mention hundreds of handbooks to other regions of the world.



Perfectly Plumed: Cedar Waxwings

In "Death to Miss Hathaway (How birding became almost cool)," chapter seven, the modern avocation of birding takes center stage. A most notable development in the history of this activity was the founding of the American Birding Association (ABA). In the late 1960s, Jim Tucker, an Adventist educational psychologist who had taught biology at Forest Lake Academy, was doing a postdoc at the University of Texas. Tucker was a committed conservationist, but he was frustrated by the fact that the National Audubon Society, of which he'd been a local leader, had shifted its emphasis from birds to a more environmentalist focus. Despite a growing interest at the time in birds and bird watching, no organization catered specifically to the needs of bird enthusiasts.

In December 1968, Tucker mailed a typed, eight-page, mimeographed newsletter he called *The Birdwatcher's Digest* to a handful of friends and invited them to join his new "American Birdwatcher's Association." He set the dues at three dollars per year. News of Tucker's

organization spread rapidly and people began to sign up in droves. The name was changed to the American Birding Association and the newsletter became the bimonthly magazine *Birding*. The first ABA conference featured Roger Tory Peterson as its plenary speaker. Tucker, clearly, had discovered and filled an unoccupied niche.

Today, four decades later, the ABA boasts thousands of members, the cost of membership is now forty-five dollars, and *Birding* has morphed into a slick, award-winning magazine. It also publishes a newsletter, *Winging It*, which provides tips on bird identification, as well as *North American Birds*, a continuation of the journal *American Birds* once produced by the National Audubon Society.³

Tucker, currently McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning Exceptionalities at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, has left the ABA leadership team, but his interest in birds and nature continues unabated.⁴ He and his wife, Priscilla, have authored several nature-themed devotionals published by Review and Herald Publishing Association and by other outlets.



In the final chapter, "Beyond the List," Weidensaul makes a pitch for bird conservation. He deplores "hard-core listers who spend a small fortune tracking down a single species they need to flesh out their North American list, only to ignore it mere moments after they've seen and identified it" (282). He recalls how, during a birding trip in Central America, he was "tailed for days...by a tour member who scarcely raised his binoculars to look at the birds we found. Instead, he was forever scribbling in his notebook, asking me to spell the names of birds I'd found" (282).

But, notes Weidensaul, "Lists can be a tool, a means as well as an end, and the well-balanced birder uses them as such" (283). What begins as a competitive sport for some folk can lead to a deeper appreciation for birds and for nature in general. Kenn Kaufman, who at sixteen dropped out of high school and hitchhiked across America to "chase birds," was sent home by California authorities for roving the state as an "unsupervised minor" (291). Not one to be deterred, Kaufman worked at odd jobs and even sold his blood to raise enough money to head out once again. "[A]bout fifty dollars a month was all he needed," writes Weidensaul, "sleeping outside and eating the cheapest food (including dried cat food) the grocery stores carried" (291).

In 1973, having spent less than a thousand dollars the entire year, Kaufman succeeded in breaking the previous "Big Year" winner's record with 666 species—but just shy of the 669 species seen the same year by an equally obsessive—if less eccentric—birder, Floyd Murdoch.⁵

Murdoch, a son of prominent Adventist educators W. G. C. Murdoch and Ruth R. Murdoch, calls himself a "frustrated ornithologist." An expert field naturalist and charter member of the ABA, he eschews reductionist science. Unlike Kaufman, though, he stuck with school and



The Courtier: White Peacock

merged his love for birds with that of history, his other passion. Murdoch's "Big Year" served as a sabbatical from graduate studies at American University. Once back on campus, he cleverly melded his two loves into a single dissertation titled "For the Birds: A History of Bird Protection in the United States."⁶

For both Murdoch and Kaufman, writes Weidensaul, "it was the process and not the results that counted" (293). After completing his doctorate, Murdoch retained his focus nature. For four years, he served as president of the Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS). These days, he's raising funds for a million-dollar nature center at the church-owned Mt. Aetna Camp and Retreat Center in Hagarstown, Maryland. In his spare time, he leads birding trips to the tropics and is active with programs at the ANS and Smithsonian Institution.⁷

For his part, Kaufman has abandoned listing altogether and dedicated his life to writing, editing, and introducing novices to the joys of birding and nature. He says we need “a lot more people who had maybe seen a yellow warbler and who understood that there was a connection between this attractive bird and its need for habitat” (295).

A quick trip to Amazon.com and you’ll discover a small constellation of books by Kaufman that encourage the appreciation and identification of birds, butterflies, insects, and mammals. His recently published *Kaufman Guia de Campo a las Aves de Norteamerica* was a

labor of love jump-started with his own resources, a project undertaken on behalf of the underserved Hispanic American community.

Of a Feather is not about Adventists and birding, so Weidensaul understandably overlooks many other Seventh-day Adventists who have contributed significantly to bird appreciation and ornithology.⁸ Ernest S. Booth (1915–84), an avid birder, founded the first Adventist graduate program in biology and the marine biological station at Walla Walla College. For many years he ran a business out of his home, Outdoor Pictures, which specialized in slide sets on natural history subjects, museum specimens for schools, and

nature publications. He published two bird guides and wrote a high school biology text used widely in Adventist schools.

C. Roy Smith (1926–94), who taught biology for many years at Andrews Academy, was one of Michigan’s premier birders and coauthor of the *Bird Finding Guide to Michigan*. Edgar O. Grundset (1921–99), an enthusiastic birder and long-time professor of biology at Southern Missionary College (later Southern Adventist University), inspired many young people to take up birding. Asa Thoresen (1930–2006), longtime professor of biology at Andrews University, was a recognized expert on the biology of alcids, a family of seabirds; his *Auks of the World* will soon be published posthumously.

Chris Haney, graduate of Southern College and chief scientist and vice-president at Defenders of Wildlife, has published extensively on the ecology of marine and terrestrial birds. Floyd Hayes, professor of biology at Pacific Union College and coauthor of *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*, has published scores of technical and popular papers on Caribbean birds and other wildlife. Cheryl Trine, who earned a doctor-



Picture Perfect: Eastern Blue Jay

ate from the University of Illinois in woodland birds, edits the Ornithological Societies of North America's *Ornithological Newsletter*.


Pamela Rasmussen, assistant curator of mammalogy and ornithology at the Michigan State University Museum and a graduate of Walla Walla College and the University of Kansas, coauthored *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide*; she made international news in 1997 for rediscovering the tiny forest owlet of central India, long thought to be extinct. Carl Swafford and Benton Basham inculcated a love for birds in many a young person in and around Collegedale, Tennessee. Bobby Ray Harrison, professor of art and photography at Oakwood College, earned international recognition in 2005 for helping to rediscover the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.


Bob Holbrook, Floyd Murdoch, Calvin Hill, Brad Benson, Mick Greene, and Frank Clayton administer a Web site for Adventist birders called "The Peregrine Net." Joe Galusha, professor of biology at Walla Walla University and the doctoral student of a Nobel Laureate, Niko Tinbergen, at Oxford, has studied the nesting behavior of gulls perhaps more thoroughly than any other American. Shandelle Henson and I at Andrews University, along with Galusha, lead the Seabird Ecology Team, funded by the National Science Foundation to develop mathematical models designed to predict the behavior of marine birds. There are many others. Most of us are, or have been, avid birders.


Having skinned my share of road kills and started a "life list" of birds at age seven, I, too, was "a little off center." During camp meetings, I gravitated to the nature shelf at the "Book and Bible House"—and I spent much of my time chasing orioles and digging for crinoids rather than warming a seat in the Junior tent. Not surprisingly, I found it easy to resonate with Weidensaul. His writing is bright and lively, his stories entertaining, and his passion for the natural world contagious.


"Bird study has changed over the centuries," muses Weidensaul, "from the earliest days of a few eccentric visionaries tramping through the wilderness, to the rise of stuffy academicians smelling faintly of mothballs; it grew from amateur roots to become a profession then split again into a vigorous hobby with an increasingly general appeal" (312–13). Somewhere along the line, many of us within the Adventist tradition merged with this story and our lives have never been quite the same. ■


A Few Birding Resources for Adventists

 **Find Adventist birders** in your area or around the world, post trip reports, or just chat with fellow enthusiasts at a new Web site: The Peregrine Net—An International Web Club for Adventist Birders and Friends. Join the club at <www.peregrinenet.org>.

 **Birders from all over the world** visit the bird sanctuary right on the campus of Pacific Adventist University, Papua New Guinea. For a checklist of campus birds, visit Mike Tarburton's "Bird Checklists for 468 Melanesian Islands" at <www.birdsofmelanesia.net/>.

 **Take a class** at Pacific Union College's Albion Field Station on the Mendocino coast, and enjoy the birds in nearby tide pools and estuaries. For more information on this summer's art and photography classes, go to <www.puc.edu/Albion/Albion_2008/>.

 **The nature center** at Mt. Aetna Camp and Retreat Center, outside Hagerstown, Maryland, has a huge assortment of stuffed animals, birds, insects, and reptiles from all over the world. Drop by and you may run into Floyd Murdoch, who worked to establish and maintain the center. Visit <www.mtaetnacamp.com> for information and reservations.

 **The World Museum of Natural History** at La Sierra University contains a Southeast Asian bird display—the largest of its kinds in the U. S. The museum also showcases collections of amphibians, reptiles, mammals, gems, minerals, and petrified wood. Find out more at <www.lasierra.edu/centers/wmnh/>.

Notes and References

1. In the updated lexicon of bird enthusiasts, the old term *bird-watcher* has been replaced by the term *birder*. Similarly, *birdwatching* has been replaced by *birding*. See pages 284 and 302.
2. Although, as Weidensaul notes, birding has yet to become popular among non-Caucasians. See pages 298–302.
3. Retrieved March 10, 2008, from <www.americanbirding.org/index.html>.
4. Retrieved March 10, 2008, from <www.utc.edu/Academic/SchoolPsychology/FacultyandStaff.php>.
5. The following book details Kaufman's adventures during his "Big Year": Kenn Kaufman, *Kingbird Highway: The Biggest Year in the Life of an Extreme Birder* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
6. Gary Krause, "Floyd Murdoch: Dialogue with an Adventist Bird-watcher," *College and University Dialogue* 14.2 (2002): 18–19, 23.
7. Retrieved March 10, 2008, from <peregrinenet.org/forum/view-topic.php?106>.
8. The following information on Adventist ornithologists and birders is based on my personal knowledge and/or information gleaned from various Internet sites.

James L. Hayward is research professor of biology at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. He is an active seabird biologist but a lapsed birder. **James McClelland's** biography is on the inside front cover.