Birding in the 'Old Days' (pre-1980)

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Just as the status of birds has changed drastically since 1983, so too has the art and science of watching them.

Birding has changed since 1980! The way we watch birds, how we identify them and the resources we use to do so, how we record and report them and even our style of birding has changed over the past 33 years since the first issue of *Ontario Birds*. So let's return to the state-of-the-art circa 1980.

Even the name of our avocation, birding, came into common usage by practitioners and the general public alike in the 1970s. Before the advent/founding of the American Birding Association in 1968, we were bird watchers. It was argued that birding connoted a sportier more aggressive — dare I say — a sexier view of the hobby. The attempt was to exorcise the public view of bird watching as the pursuit of an effete group replete with tweeds and exaggerated excitement over every sighting: "Oh my Martha, I believe it's a Canadian Goose!"

The counter argument is that bird watching implies a more careful study of birds and their behavior. In fact, the appearance of a birder has changed. In 1980, we often wore old work clothes from the office or the shop. Oh, we might have some kind of rough field pants but shirts, sweaters, coats either served many purposes or when they were too worn for the original purpose were pressed into service as weekend bird watching clothes. I have a photograph of George Bryant on the Niagara River in a November pouring rain decked out in an old cloth dress coat. Most of our birding was done on weekends. The median age of the population, including birders, was younger and most people worked Monday to Friday. Often we crossed our fingers that rarities would hang in until Saturday as work time was more rigid than it is today.

Our equipment was pretty simple in those days. Like most things in life, there were far fewer choices. Many birders used either 7 x 50 or 10 x 50 binoculars, often great clunking things that resulted in permanent sore necks (there were no binocular harnesses). My 10 x 50 Bushnell Custom binos had excellent optics and were also useful to swing at attack dogs. During the first atlas, I drove over them — they needed merely to be re-aligned – the dents and scratches were a badge of honour. Don't try this with your modern high precision optics. Serious birders did have spotting scopes. All were straight through models. Many birders had a 20X wide eyepiece and a 30X eyepiece that could be interchanged. Changing eyepieces on a freezing January day often resulted in a hand and knees search in the

snow for one or both eyepieces. Zoom scopes were coming in but the view at higher powers was generally fuzzy and dull and the field of view was restricted. That was it.

Only a limited few professional ornithologists had sound recording equipment — reel-to-reel, of course. We learned the birds' songs and calls by watching them vocalize. New dialects or variations had to be confirmed sometimes via a long chase through the woods. Certainly, such learning was ingrained in our minds, eyes and ears.

World birding was in its infancy in 1980. A tropical birding trip presented special problems with songs and calls. The first LPs presented some songs that had to be memorized ahead of the trip. There were song descriptions in the guide books so it was often a question of "is the mystery bird trilling or buzzing or is it three syllables or four"? As for cameras, in those days a person interested in photographing birds had to buy prohibitively expensive and bulky equipment. Birders were birders, not bird photographers. We prided ourselves in not photographing birds, which was then deemed to be a more passive form of nature study. Birders disparaged photographers and, indeed, to obtain 'perfect' images with huge equipment photographers often damaged habitat and spooked birds. We joked that photographers often had no clue as to the identity of their subjects. There was no love lost between the two groups. Sometimes harsh words were exchanged; sometimes bird locations were not revealed lest "the photographers" descend.

Bird identification was still in its infancy. Remember that up to the 1960s rare birds were often collected by 'museum men'. I can remember very upset bird watchers and vows that the collectors should not hear of any rarities. Worst was when museum collectors from Buffalo 'invaded' Canada to shoot a rarity and secrete the specimen off to their museum.

Even by 1980 there were only two field guides: the classic *Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America* by Roger Tory Peterson third edition and its only rival, the *Golden Guide to the Birds* by Chandler S. Robbins. Serious birders acquired *Birds of Canada* by Earl W. Godfrey. There was essentially no other source to aid in the field identification of birds.

Reporting of birds, rarities in particular, was laborious. The phone — land line, of course — was the only method of getting the word out. If you were out birding and a mega-rarity turned up, you were plum out of luck. Once I pulled up at George's house to be told by his wife, Stephanie, that he had gone to Fort Erie to look for a "Brown Puffin". I tore off and almost two hours later got to nearby Jaeger Rocks on Lake Erie and saw the Brown Pelican. And I was all alone with this mega-rarity!

Everybody missed birds one way or another. Hence, a phone tree was inaugurated in several places. Harry Kerr was at the top of the pyramid in Toronto. If you wanted to know what a trip to Toronto might yield, "call Harry". If you got a call, you would phone the next person on your list BEFORE heading out the door.

If that person didn't answer, you called the next person. Needless to say the phone tree, like democracy, wasn't perfect. In the excitement sometimes people took the phone message but forgot to call right away or if someone was out and missed the call, nobody remembered to call later. Worse still, a relative of the birder forgot to tell her/him about the bird! Friendships were tested and often failed the test. It was even rumoured that some Ontario big listers would stay home to be by the phone rather than go birding and risk dipping out on a mega!

When we went into the field, it was almost always "on spec" since we didn't know from the Internet that there was a fallout. We called it a "wave" in those days, and if I may be permitted to wax nostalgic for a moment, the waves were more frequent and consistently produced more birds than those of today. We weren't tempted to race out after local rarities because we didn't know about them. We just went birding. We didn't go to lake watches where new birds for the year were being reported in real time. Rather, we spent more time in ravines and patches of woods, especially in the fall. There was more interest in finding lasts-of-the-spring-migration and firsts-of-the-fall-migration. Of course, you might think you had found the first or last of the migration but it might be several months later when the local club bulletin came out when you learned that someone else had seen it two days earlier or a week later. On the obverse of the same coin, there were far fewer birders so one had a much better chance of being the finder of interesting birds than is the case today. It wasn't better; it was just different.

Birders kept records at various levels of detail. Some used a new field check-list for each year and entered the first date of sighting for each species and that was it. Some entered sightings on gridded paper — a spreadsheet before we knew that there was such a thing. Some kept notebooks with lists of species and numbers laboriously hand-written for each time in the field. Field sketching of birds was a rare practice in Ontario compared to the plethora of fine bird illustrators in Britain. Sightings were reported to the sub-regional editor for *Audubon Field Notes*, later called *American Birds*. Frequently, we read about the occurrence of a rarity elsewhere in the province half a year or more later when the seasonal report arrived in our mail box. It was up to the regional (Ontario) editor to decide whether any bird reported to him/her should be included in the seasonal report. Birders could see the need for some sort of repository and careful vetting of Ontario bird sightings and that gave rise to both the Ontario Bird Records Committee and the Ontario Field Ornithologists in 1982, to create an Ontario community of people interested in bird study and to whom the OBRC was accountable.

The 1970s and 1980s were an exciting period for changes in the art and process of bird watching. These changes are still reflected in the way we do things today. The big differences, like so many facets of life, pertain to changes in technology.

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