

AMERICA'S BIRDING TEAM - OPUS 3

by John C. Kricher, Mansfield

Ted Turner owns a television network on which are broadcast the games of the self-proclaimed "America's team," the Atlanta Braves. If competing on Turner's network qualifies one for status as a national symbol, then the Manomet Swifts are soon to become America's Birding Team, for in the autumn of this year, "National Geographic Explorer," a regular Turner cable exclusive, will feature the Third Annual Cape May Bird-A-Thon competition, the World Series of birding. Last year, the exploits¹ of Wayne, Rick, Warren, John, and Betty found their way to Channel 7, courtesy of Robin Young. This bit of birding broadcasting won an Emmy Award for Robin. No kidding. It did. Now who can top that? Well, National Geographic is going to try. They sent a film crew with us this year in an effort to further document and dissect the odd psyche of birding and birders.

Ever hear the expression, "lights, camera, action"? Want to know what it means? It means midnight at the Great Swamp on a wet boardwalk listening for Barred Owls with two 250-watt floods in your eyes. It means scanning for shorebirds from the tower at Brigantine with a macro lens millimeters from your face, presumably recording footage of your nasal hairs. It means stopping to have your battery pack changed so your portable mike won't fail in the midst of an important utterance that all America should share. Example: "Got it?" No? Scan more to the right. Hurry, it's almost over the trees. Now do you have it?" "Yep." "Good. Let's go." It means being interviewed in front of a spotlighted clump of Phragmites at Dividing Creek near midnight after being up for nearly forty hours and being asked, "Why are you so intense about this? Why don't you look happy? Are you really having fun?" As Rhett said some years back, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

In spite of taking the Cecil B. De Mille approach to birding, we did OK. We logged 175 species, equal to our first effort of two years ago, but not quite good enough to beat the National Geographic team in the out-of-state competition. They totaled 178 and thus won the Stearns Award for the second consecutive year. Of course, the Geos didn't have a film crew with them. You see, rumor has it that the Geographic birding team was less than enthusiastic about having the Geographic film crew along - something about slowing them down. We can't imagine what. Anyway, Geographic TV covered us, not their native sons. Nonetheless, we congratulate the Geos on their victory, as we do the two New Jersey teams, one led by Rich Kane, the other by Greg Hanicek, who tied for first with 199 species to share the grand prize in a total field of twenty-five teams.

Birding for twenty-four hours involves large measures of luck, skill, and stamina. We seemed to generate a fair amount of all

¹See "World Series of Birding 1985: A Tale of Five Swifts and a Robin" in *Bird Observer* 13: 184, August 1985.

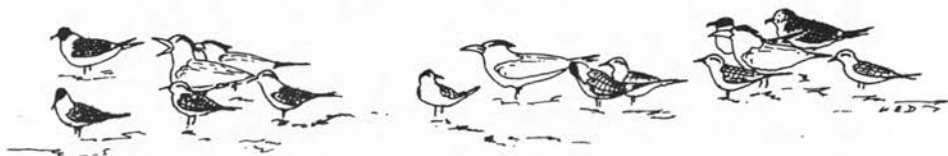
three. Deciding on a traditional north-south route, we began at the Great Swamp with virtuoso bird-caller, Wayne Petersen, whistling in an Eastern Screech-Owl and hooting in a Barred Owl. A flashlight on the beams of the information center revealed a nesting phoebe, and the surprised tyrannid became the temporary center of attention for four birders and four film-makers. Night birds didn't fail us. Great Horned Owl, Virginia Rail, Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Black-billed Cuckoo, American Woodcock all made noise within our earshot. Overhead the chips of migrating warblers and the call notes of Swainson's Thrushes put us in an optimistic mood for daybreak at Waterloo.

Alas, the dawn brought fog. Great Crested Flycatchers called. The Louisiana Waterthrush was where it belonged and talking. A "fee-bee" from a Black-capped Chickadee was important. Had we missed it at Waterloo, we'd never reclaim it. South Jersey hosts only Carolinas. But the mist-laden trees were not buzzing with the songs of northern warblers. No Pileated Woodpeckers answered Warren Harrington's ringing imitation Pileated call. Waterloo was generally quiet, the dawn chorus more like a requiem. Not a creature was stirring, not even a grouse. The film crew clicked off footage of us standing around listening to the quiet. The level of excitement was somewhat less than that of a dull golf match. Bye Waterloo.

Our next stop resulted from the previous day's scouting efforts and was an unqualified strategic success. We returned to the Great Swamp and began racking up birds quickly: Bobolink, Eastern Bluebird, King Rail (flying across a meadow), Common Moorhen, Solitary Sandpiper. Our list had a healthy breakfast and was growing fast. On to our grassland sites, where scouting again paid dividends in the forms of Grasshopper Sparrow and Upland Sandpiper. Bull's Island, on the Delaware, produced several other birding teams (some smiled, some said hi, some didn't make eye contact - but at least nobody took a shot at us) plus the obligate Cliff Swallows, Cerulean Warblers, and Acadian Flycatcher. Gotta keep going; we're doing well. On to Institute Woods in Princeton. Gotta hurry.

We hustled through Princeton Woods, which was another Waterloo. The residents were there but few migrants and little sound. A gorgeous male Hooded Warbler perched out in the open for us but we couldn't take time to watch it. Had to keep moving. Do you suppose Thoreau would have understood the logic of a birdathon?

Into the van and through the pinelands we drove, stopping to nail Prairie and Pine warblers, Brown Thrasher, and Northern Bobwhite. It was a warm, sunny, spring day in New Jersey. Good early beach weather. Yawn.



Luck graced us at Brigantine. We blasted around the dikes recording such species as Whimbrel, American Oystercatcher, Pectoral and White-rumped sandpipers, Gull-billed Tern, Black Skimmer, Brant, Common Loon, Seaside Sparrow, and Least Bittern (which Warren calls a "bittin"). The sun was still high in the sky. We had some time.

South on the Garden State Parkway trying to keep to 55, at least in theory, as we drove on to Stone Harbor. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron right where it was supposed to be at the heronry. Sanderlings and Purple Sandpipers at the beach and jetty. List growing, sun descending. On to Cape May. Move with purpose.

Victorian Cape May: Common Scoters at the jetty, Piping Plovers on the back beach, Yellow-breasted Chat at Higbee. A lawn near Lake Lily where a male Blue Grosbeak was hopping about like a House Sparrow. A Belted Kingfisher on a wire over a farm pond. Good ole Cape May, we still have a chance! If we can only get to Bear Swamp before the sun gets to the horizon. Let's go; time's marching.

We arrived at Bear Swamp nearly twenty-two hours after we had begun at Great Swamp. Dusk. A Summer Tanager was singing taps. We met nearly every other team, each in search of the nesting Bald Eagles. The national birds were playing coy this year. We missed them, as did most of the others. Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's-widows began their night's work of monotonous vocalizing. The movie lights literally spotlighted the courtship of two amorous Whip-poor-wills, probably giving the avian component of our film an R rating.

Darkness had fully claimed daylight as we pulled up to the Dividing Creek marshes, near the quaint Delaware Bay town of Bivalve. Several carloads of teenage funseekers, innocent slaves to their raging hormones, were out for a night of rock music and body-rubbing in the salt marsh. They hadn't bargained for twenty-five consecutive carloads of birders and one film crew. The wind was still, the mosquitos awesome. But, in the still of this peaceful New Jersey night, the Black Rails were talking. "Kikki-doo" ended our day on a most pleasant note.

"Cut. Kill the lights. OK, people, it's a wrap. Let's go home."

JOHN C. KRICHER is a professor and chair of the Biology Department at Wheaton College, with a growing reputation as an author. He has two books in press: *Exploring the American Tropics* to be issued in the spring of 1987 by Prentice-Hall and *A Field Guide to Eastern Fields and Forests*, which will be published by Houghton Mifflin Co. John is president of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association and lives in Mansfield with wife Linda and a menagerie of seven cats, four pygmy goats, and a female collared peccary.

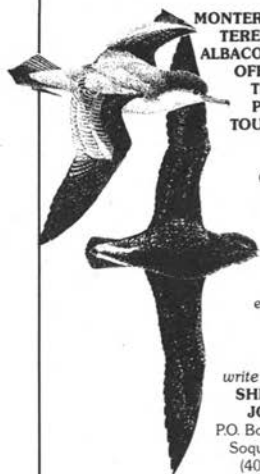
SHEARWATER JOURNEYS

Offering the finest seabirding trips
in North America

1986

SAN JUAN SEAMOUNT EXPEDITIONS

Aug. 4-6/Sept. 2-4
\$250



MONTEREY BAY, MON-
TEREY SEAVALLEY,
ALBACORE GROUNDS-
OFFSHORE MON-
TEREY, STORM-
PETREL STUDY
TOURS, CORDELL
BANKS &
BEYOND.

Over 30 in-depth
pelagic, natural
history trips to
choose from.

Two to five
leaders will
accompany
each trip. \$39-62,
depending on
the trip.

write for brochure:
**SHEARWATER
JOURNEYS**
P.O. Box 1445 Dept. M
Soquel, CA 95073
(408) 688-1990

Smaller! Lighter! Brighter! NEW NIKON ROOF PRISM BINOCULARS



Who would have
thought binoculars this
light and compact could be so bright and
sharp, even on cloudy days or in fading light!
It's the unique Nikon combination of
ingenious design, superlative coated optics and
rugged precision construction that makes it
possible. Choose the all-purpose 7x26 or extra
powerful 9x30, from the maker of the famous
Nikon camera system. See the difference Nikon
quality makes.

For literature and discount prices covering a
complete line of sporting optics and
accessories, write to the "Optics Headquarters
for the Outdoorsman."

BIRDING

P.O. BOX 5 BO
AMSTERDAM, N.Y.
12010



Natural History Books

Field Guides—Extensive stock of hard to find
foreign and domestic guides (10% discount on
most)

New & Antiquarian books—for the amateur
naturalist and collector - also scientific mono-
graphs and fine color plate books

Quarterly Catalogues—(\$2.00)
and search service



Patricia Ledlie—bookseller
Box 46B, Buckfield, ME 04220 U.S.A.
207-336-2969