

## REVIEW: *GONE BIRDING!* VCR GAME

by Jane Cumming

So you have reread your collection of *Bird Observers*, planned all the trips you can afford next summer, and run out of things to fill those long, birdless evenings waiting for spring? The *Gone Birding!* VCR game is the perfect solution—a chance to learn more about those distant hot spots, sharpen your identification skills, and enjoy the thrill of the chase as you make your way around North America collecting species for an imaginary trip list.

The quality of the videotape is most impressive. If \$79.95 seems a lot to pay for a game, think of it as an educational tool as well. Three hundred and fifty or more species are variously shown perched, flying, feeding, and displaying during two hours of tape; there is even a pelagic section. Females, immatures, and birds in winter plumage are well represented. My nonbirding friends were very impressed by a Killdeer's broken-wing display, and Sanderlings feeding at the tideline in slow motion made everyone laugh! The video is far more instructive than any field guide can be, particularly since most shots are accompanied by a recording of the bird's song, and I found it held the interest of nonbirding players through hours of play, too. The introductory segments between games by celebrity cohosts Peter Alden, Bill Oddie, and Jane Alexander are amusing rather than instructive and do not relate directly to what is going on in the game itself, but they do provide a glimpse of what birding is all about.

To play *Gone Birding!* you move a token along routes on a map from one famous birding site to the next. The player who ends up with the biggest trip list wins. Various cards determine your goals and obstacles, and the VCR game introduces an element of skill in bird identification, as well as the spice of seeing all those exotic birds and unfamiliar locations. One feature that has proven very popular is the "Rare Bird Alert" card, which gives each player a single opportunity during the game to scupper someone else's plans. For instance, if the winning player is clearly heading for Alaska, you can wait till they pass Vancouver and then divert them to Boston to see the Cox's Sandpiper or to Brownsville for a Jabiru Stork. This is especially effective if they have just left that region.

The number of birds you identify correctly in the video phase determines how far you can move along your planned route. The video trips were filmed all around the continent, so that Massachusetts players might score eleven easily in New York at Central Park but only five in Arizona if they have not birded there. The game can perfectly well be played without access to a VCR machine if you use a pair of dice to determine how many moves (up to twelve) each player will make, substituting luck for skill. We found it fairer to set a default minimum of

six when playing with people who have trouble telling a grebe from a duck, but it did not seem to spoil anyone's enjoyment of the game. However, birders especially will really like the video segment and learn a lot about unfamiliar species too.

You definitely do not have to be a birder to enjoy this game. Nonbirders could just as well be playing tourist, visiting the great cities and national parks. It can be tackled at three skill levels simultaneously: it's a duck; it's a Fulvous Whistling-Duck; it's in the genus *Dendrocygna*. Thus it can be enjoyed in mixed company—birders and normal people! We did find, for instance, that there just is no recognized generic name for a Phainopepla, but for the most part this system worked admirably. In fact, I was embarrassed to find out how much trouble I was having with the sparrows when a backyard birder happily separated hawks from vultures and plovers from sandpipers and won! Of course, the game's special ornithological features—the regional birding information it contains and the Big Day competition at the end of the tape—will appeal mainly to birders.

My only real criticism of the game is that the playing tokens are too large for the board. I have raided another game to find some pieces the size and shape of chess pawns in half a dozen colors and have substituted them for those provided, which makes it much easier for players to move around the map.

I do not think the novelty will wear off quickly, and I am expecting to enjoy this game for years. For birders tempted to fast-forward through the later video trips, which might spoil future games, an excellent alternative has been provided in the shape of the Big Day competition at the end. In this you try to identify 208 species from tantalizingly brief glimpses, and there are no answers provided. Instead, you are invited to send in your identifications as a competition entry, the winner to be drawn in May 1990. The entry fees (the minimum is five cents per bird identified) will be contributed to a fund managed by Massachusetts Audubon Society for the protection of tropical rain forests, and prizes range from binoculars to South American and African bird tours. Purchasers of the game become members of the Gone Birding! Club, which entitles them to a newsletter and discount coupons toward the purchase of birding products. They also get to find out, eventually, what those 208 species really were.

**JANE CUMMING**, a native of Great Britain who has supplied *Bird Observer* with articles about the status of the Common Black-headed Gull (December 1988) and about the birds of Belle Isle Marsh (February 1988), has informed us that in mid-February she will transfer permanently to Dallas, Texas. However, her New England friends will be happy to know that she promises to return here regularly on business trips. Best wishes and good birding, Jane. Reports have it that there are a few birds in Texas too.