

# YOUNG BIRDERS

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## From Rhode Island

*Tom Seiter*

Hello, my name is Tom Seiter, and I am a fifteen-year-old birder. I was asked to write for *Bird Observer* so that others could know where I stand, being so young. Many other birders I have met in the past year have told me that their one regret is that they didn't start birding earlier. They have said to me that I am lucky to have started so early, and become addicted. My friend Peter Capobianco was the one who interested me in this hobby, and when he did, he had already been birding for six months. One of the things that annoyed us both in the beginning is that whenever we would call a bird, not many people would listen to us; we had to pay our dues. Then suddenly, during one birding trip, everybody began to take an interest in the birds we called out. It's been like that ever since. Now other birders even look up to us because of our vision and hearing.

I currently have 346 birds on my life list. I am keeping eleven state lists. I've been birding for about thirteen months, and just recently came back from a trip to Texas, exclusively for the purpose of birding and butterflying. That trip was like Christmas; it seemed as if I saw a life bird every ten minutes. In that six-day period, I accumulated 85 lifers and 204 trip birds. Although rain was predicted for the first two days, there wasn't a cloud in the sky; the conditions were perfect.

In addition to Texas, I've also been on trips to Oregon and California, where I birded a little, but not much. On those trips I added 40 of my 346 birds. I'm also hoping to go to southeast Arizona next year with Peter and Hugh Willoughby, our mentor. Mr. Willoughby is the one who takes us everywhere, and brought us to Texas. He's been really great to us. I am hooked on this hobby, and would like to make a living doing something like leading tours or being an environmentalist.


In the year that I have been birding, I have seen three rare birds. In Texas, I recently got my life Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. We got great looks, while Peter photographed it as it posed and sang for us. I also have an adult Black-tailed Gull which was seen from the John H. Ferry traveling from Connecticut to Long Island, New York. There apparently is not an official New York record for this bird yet, but Peter, Mr. Willoughby, and I all have it written down as a New York state bird. I also have Garganey, which happens to have been only my second life duck, my first being Mallard. It was my thirty-fifth life bird (which several birders who don't yet have it on their life lists told me is not fair). The rare birds are the most fun to get, and especially to find.

My favorite birds so far include Pileated Woodpecker, Greater Roadrunner, Elf Owl, Northern Shrike, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Painted Bunting, and Hooded Warbler. I have not yet seen King Eider or Swallow-tailed Kite, but they both look like really cool birds. I also love hummingbirds, owls, and especially warblers.

Peter and I have not yet done any Big Days, but I'm hoping to do so, and break a couple of records when we learn to drive. The day we got Black-tailed Gull in New York, we sighted sixty-two day birds, and we didn't have half the land birds possible in the month of February. The American Birding Association Big Day record in that month for New York is sixty-four, which easily could have been broken if we had known about it. Besides breaking Big Day records, I have a goal this year to break 400 year birds, and get listed in that category for the year 2000. I also want to be listed in the states of Rhode Island and Massachusetts as having seen fifty percent of all the species that have ever been seen in each state.

It is not always easy for me to go out and bird because of school. I always have too much homework, and also I have to stay after school for band, after-school labs, and baseball. Because of these things, I have missed a couple of good birds that Mr. Willoughby and Peter got without me. I've missed California Gull and Sandhill Crane in Massachusetts, and have missed many in Rhode Island. I also lost out on seeing a Mongolian Plover, because I was out of state then. It is always irritating to miss out on a good bird, but no one can go out all the time for everything.

One thing I have learned while birding is that there are some pretty funny characters out there; every birder I have met has a different personality. We once asked a fellow birder if he had seen any Snowy Owls around Plum Island the day we were there. He said, "No, but I did see a Short-eared Owl last year at Salisbury Beach." Meeting these characters is one thing that makes a stinky birding day good.

Birding is my favorite hobby, and whenever I get a chance I love to go out looking for the good ones. Thanks to people like Mr. Willoughby and my mom, I can go out fairly often, which is really fun. I looked forward to this spring's warbler season, and can't wait to go out next spring! 

**Tom Seiter** lives in Riverside, Rhode Island. His first birding experience came when he was fourteen, walking through private woods with his friend, Peter Capobianco. Peter told him the names of many birds, most of which he had never heard of in his life. He has been an avid birder ever since. Tom is a member of his school's band program, first chair trombone, a Rhode Island Hospital volunteer, and part-time employee of a printing company.



*Photograph by Megan Seiter*



## Young Birders from Rhode Island

*Peter Capobianco*

I have been birding for about a year and a half now, and so far I have 361 life birds. I was asked to write this article so that people could see a “teenage birder’s perspective,” but I do not think that my perspective would be that much different from that of any other birder. Like other birders, I have had many memorable experiences, but the most memorable would probably be the time I saw my life Mongolian Plover and my life Gray-crowned Yellowthroat.

It was July 24, 1999, when I got my life Mongolian Plover. Like most summer days, it was way too hot and humid. I was with my good friend and birding mentor, Hugh Willoughby. Pat Ryan, another one of my good friends, was also with us. It was just like any other birding day: we were trying to get a good day list. So, we arrived at the Quonochontaug Marshes to look for shorebirds and other waterbirds. When we got there, several other people were looking for the same birds that we were, including a group from Massachusetts. We asked them if they had had any good birds in the area, and Dan Furbish told us that they had heard that a Mongolian Plover was at Charlestown Breachway!

Well, you can guess that we got to Charlestown Breachway fairly quickly. But people on the nearby beaches had taken all the spots in the parking lot for the Breachway, and we ended up having to walk about two miles. We finally got to the Breachway area about forty-five minutes later. We looked all over for the bird, and of course were not able to find it. However, most of the people looking for the plover were on the opposite side of the five-foot-deep channel, which meant that they had to walk across it. I remember thinking “What kind of crazy people would walk across that channel with their regular street-clothes on?”

Well, we had just about given up and were getting ready to start the long hike back to the car. Lucky thing we procrastinated, because just as we were leaving, this very nice lady, Marcia West, came running toward us saying, “It’s back! It’s back! We’ve got it! We’ve got it!”

We ended up being just as crazy as the rest of them and waded across that channel. We got great looks at the bird, and I was able to take some decent photographs of it through Mr. Willoughby’s Swarovski telescope. Linda Ferrareso, codiscoverer of the rare plover, said that she was glad that somebody had a camera, just in case the bird disappeared again. She also had a cell phone with her, and the word went out to birders everywhere, right from the middle of the Ninigret sandflats. One thing is for sure: wading across that channel was worth it!




*Gray-crowned Yellowthroat*  
Photograph by the author

Another memorable birding experience occurred on a recent trip to south Texas with Hugh Willoughby and Tom Seiter. While I had many experiences on that trip that I will remember for the rest of my life, probably the best one was getting my life Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. We never expected to see anything as rare as a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. After all, it is always hard for Mr. Willoughby to get a life bird because he now has 703 life birds! We all had good looks at this bird, and I was able to get pictures. Fortunately, they came out pretty well!

Tom Seiter ended up getting eighty-five new birds on the trip, and I left Texas with seventy-six lifers. This was a very successful trip, and I had some of the most fun birding that I have ever had. Now we are trying to talk Mr. Willoughby into taking us to Arizona!

Over the last eighteen months, in addition to the Mongolian Plover and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, other pretty good birds that I have seen include Long-billed Murrelet, Pink-footed Goose, and Garganey.

I have also become very much interested in photographing the birds that I see. I now have pictures of 136 species. I have been able to take pictures of several rarities, such as Black-headed Gull, Audubon's Oriole, and Green Jay. But I don't have pictures of some of the more common species yet. Hopefully, one day I will be able to photograph a Rock Dove.

I am glad that I started birding because it has been loads of fun. But I do regret one thing. I regret that I wasn't born about thirty years earlier, so that I could have seen the time "when there were still birds," as many older birders have said to me. Overall, though, I have had a good time birding, and I have Hugh Willoughby to thank for getting me started. 

**Peter Capobianco**, age fifteen, lives in Riverside, Rhode Island. He just finished his freshman year at East Providence High School, where he played at the number three spot on the varsity tennis team. He has also played baseball since he was five, and made all-star baseball teams for the past seven years.

