

**“Any local notes?”  
the president invites,  
and around the room  
hands fly up.**

**A**T 7:45 P.M., the president leans into the gavel, and eighty-odd members of the bird club move to be seated. Meetings are *supposed* to begin at 7:30 p.m., but they never do. Nobody expects them to, and nobody particularly wants them to, either. After all, the opportunity to gab with birders is one of the reasons people join a bird club.

From my seat I study my fellow members—nodding to some, exchanging greetings with others. You can learn a lot about a club and its members by watching how they take their seats.

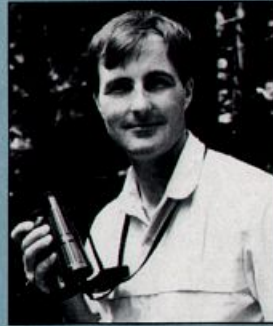
This is an old club, an established club, boasting many decades of ornithological tradition. Its membership is national, even international, but it serves a specific geographic community. One of the club's strengths is its geographic mix. Its present membership is talented, active, and there are a few—yes, a few—who could sit in the presence of the Giants of Birding.

As the conversational clots move to be seated, members segregate themselves roughly along age lines. Elder statesmen gravitate toward the front. The club's rank and file fill the middle. The Young Turks assemble toward the rear.

The club's reputation as a tough audience is well deserved. One measure of a good meeting is the acerbic quality and quantity of abuse members heap upon each other. Guest speakers, on the other hand, are

Pete Dunne

## AMERICAN BIRDING



### The Club

*Illustration  
by Keith Hansen*

rarely eaten alive (and only a few have been mauled to the point of disfigurement).

Even before the last member is seated, before all conversation can draw to a close, the president starts the meeting. His lines of welcome might be recorded in the minutes, but they are lost to the assembly, drowned out by a loud, prolonged...

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Quiet,” a young member encourages (ignoring his own good advice). This is going to be a spirited meeting.

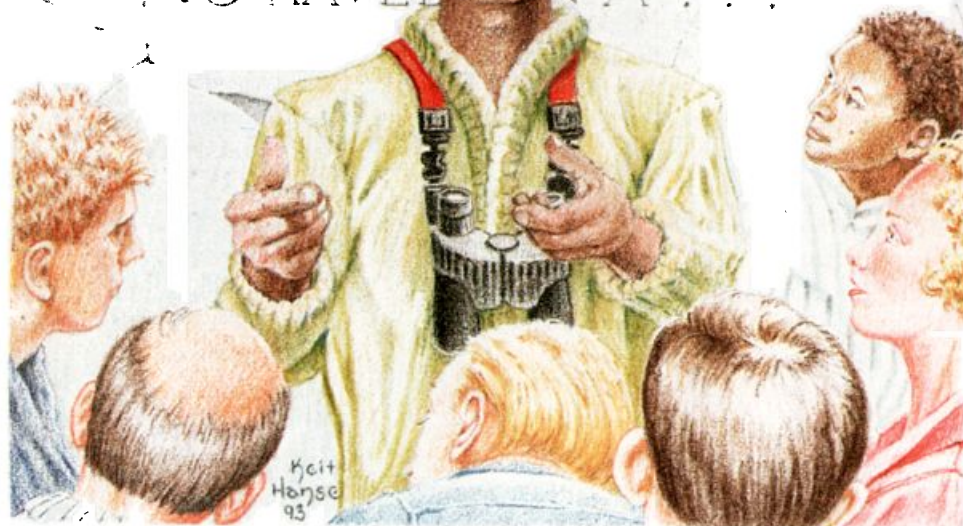
The colorful nature of this particular club's idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, the motivation for this column is not what distinguishes this bird club from others. What fascinates me more are the things that bird clubs everywhere have in common.

I get the opportunity to travel quite a bit. It has been my fortunate

pleasure to address many clubs in many places—some large, some small. Some housed in church halls, some closeted in nature-center auditoriums. Some that meet on the first Tuesday of every month; others on the third Wednesday or last Thursday.

But all clubs I have addressed, and those that I have not, serve the same function. They provide a structure for interaction. They serve the social needs of birders. And although every club has its quirks, all are bound in a ritual of procedure that makes most meetings resemble each other, no matter where they are held.

EARLY T... EVENING...  
WHILE SCANN... THE OCEAN...  
I SAW WH... BELIEVED...  
... TO HAVE... A...



Silence finally reigns in the hall. A summary of the previous meeting's minutes are read and several corrections offered. A motion is made to accept the minutes with corrections. Seconded. All in favor express the satisfaction by proclaiming...

"Ayyyyyy."

The next matter of business is the introduction of visitors. The cutting edge of the club's acerbic tradition does not commonly fall upon visitors (unless they do something really stupid—like report a Broad-winged Hawk in February). On the contrary, the club goes out of its way to make visitors feel welcome. Tonight there are three in attendance. Each is treated to a round of applause.

There is also one new member inducted into the club—a practicing psychiatrist named Laura. Membership is open to anyone who has attended two meetings, who can secure the sponsorship of two club members in good standing, and can afford the modest club dues.

Few who are interested in birds fail to mount these procedural obstacles; fewer who are not serious about birds try. Laura, in the estimates of her two sponsors, is a beginning birder whose

enthusiasm vaults any barrier between her and membership. The club agrees. Laura's induction is unanimous and includes a welcoming dose of heckling from the Young Turks—snide reference to the "over-representation" of psychologists in the club (a jab directed mostly at the club president, a practicing psychiatrist).

Club presidents, I have noted, tend to be of a certain type. There are no absolutes, of course, but bird club officers *tend* to be well-traveled, well-connected individuals: People who have birded with "Jon" here and traveled with "Brett" there or who just got back from the most recent birder's conference. Officers *tend* to be people who like the birding (the act) and birders (their confederates) as much as they like birds (the avocational objective).

Preliminaries completed, the meeting gets down to the routine of meetings everywhere—meaning committee reports. The first report is Conservation.

In the hands of the wrong chairman, a conservation report can be as deadly as a whiff of cyanide. Barraged by complex political issues and batteries of supporting facts, I have seen

whole, viable, environmentally sympathetic clubs slip into mass coma.

Happily, this club's present conservation chairman is a master of brevity and poignancy. Issues brought to the body's attention include: Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt's fence-sitting decision concerning the status of the California Gnatcatcher; an update on the old growth forest debate; and an affirmation of the Clinton Administration's decision to renew funding for UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization)—"to try and do something about this crazy overpopulation thing,"

the chairman proclaims.

In the tradition of clubs everywhere, the conservation report is assessed in silence. Even the Turks hold their peace and give attentive ear to the issues that affect their avocation. Then the Conservation chairman surrenders the floor to the Editor of the Newsletter, who in short order surrenders the floor to the Chairman of the Books committee, who in turn...

No doubt you know the procedure. And if you know the procedure, you also know how attention spans ebb and flow (but mostly ebb) as a meeting moves along its course.

"Field trips?" the chairman asks.

A tall man in casual dress stands and offers details concerning the club's upcoming field trip. Club field trip leaders tend to be cut from a different cloth than club presidents. They are younger more often than older. They aren't necessarily well-traveled; they may, in fact, have little or no ambition to bird beyond the borders of their county, region, or state.

They don't know "Jon." They've never birded with "Brett." But they can tell you everything they, and oth-

ers, have ever written about flycatcher identification. And on any given day, on home turf, these local experts can bird stride for stride and go call to call with "Kenn."

"Upcoming programs... Ornithological Studies." The reports run on. And on. There is no universal format governing the number or type of committee reports offered at a club meeting. There is no universal order to their accounting. And there is *certainly* nothing approaching universal receptivity among members of the club.

In fact, after two or three reports, most civic-minded members find their attention wandering, and some weighty issues—like the debate over which new desktop publishing package to buy for the club's newsletter—will put everyone to sleep.

This is where the young members in the rear show their worth. It is their job to remain attentive and interject the occasional snide aside. It

helps keep everyone awake, and speakers on their toes.

There is, however, one item on the agenda of every bird club meeting that brings attentions to heel, and makes even the most somnambulant elder sit bolt upright. It is an item on the agenda that is unique to bird club meetings. It, even more than the evening speaker, is the axis upon which meetings orbit.

"Any local notes?" the president invites, and around the room hands fly up. The club is active once again. Sometimes "local notes" eat up fifteen minutes or more.

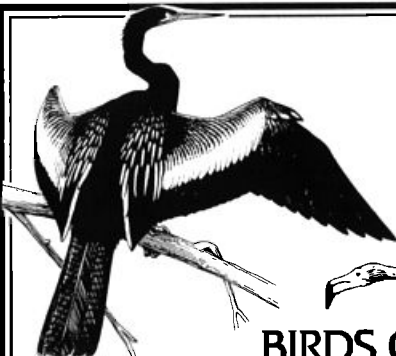
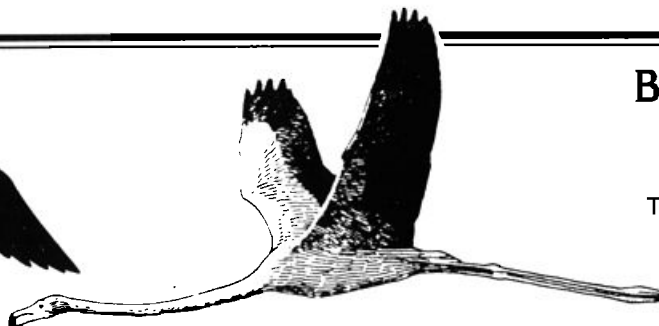
As the sightings are reported—notes on such notable birds as Townsend's Solitaire and Ruff, I reflect on a misconception I once harbored about this ritual. I used to think that sightings were recounted along the lines established by a club's social pecking order—less experienced birders first, more experienced later.

But I think, now, that skill and ex-

perience only indirectly determine the order in which members offer their sightings. I think, now, that it is the merit of the sighting itself that determines when birders jump on line. An average birder with a very exciting bird will play that bird like a good hand in poker, holding it until the end, waiting until most and maybe all of the other sightings lie face up on the table. And then...they stand.

And at that moment, while some catch their breaths and others cry for directions, and the young Turks cry for "details...details..." *At that moment!* Even the newest of members of the oldest of clubs can stand beside Kenn and Jon and Brett, and sit in the company of Giants. ▶

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.

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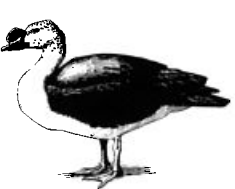
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