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American Birds

THE MAGAZINE OF RECORD AND DISCOVERY · SPRING 1994

MIGRATORY BIRDS OF THE AMERICAS: CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD

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PHOTO: RICHARD FRANK

American Birds
The Magazine of Record and Discovery

FROM THE PRESIDENT

For most people who love and watch birds, there is no more thrilling time than spring migration. This wondrous spectacle, coupled with the season's beauty, stimulates our senses and captures our imaginations.

The feats of beautiful, small birds navigating hundreds or even thousands of miles and encountering great dangers along the way are astonishing, but there is more here than the kind of events that belong in *Ripley's "Believe It Or Not."* Equally astonishing is the symbolism and reality that these birds cross international boundaries without so much as a pause, and that they stop where they must—without passports—to rest and feed.

More than any other group of creatures I can think of, migratory birds illustrate the shared heritage of the Americas. This fact was recognized in 1940 when an international agreement called the Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the Western Hemisphere was opened for signature. Today 22 nations have signed the Convention, including Argentina, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States.

The Convention calls on these nations to identify species of birds that "may at any season cross any of the boundaries between the American countries" and "to prevent the threatened extinction of any given species." It also calls for creation of national parks and other reserves, free of commercial exploitation. This is great stuff, but perhaps because the Convention was signed during World War II, it has never received the attention it deserves.

In the United States it wasn't until the early 1980s that Congress had appropriated even the first dollar for the Department of the Interior to carry out the Convention. Interior now receives on the order of half a million dollars annually to support such endeavors as a training program for managers of parks and reserves in Mexico and university graduate programs in wildlife sciences in Costa Rica and elswhere. Such programs are building a cadre of informed and committed biologists and resource managers who will hold positions of increasing responsibility in their national governments.

National Audubon would like to see the Convention used to identify and protect key habitat areas for birds and other wildlife, and its full implementation is a top priorities of *Birds in the Balance*, our campaign to save migratory birds and their habitats in the Americas. We see the Convention as an ideal way to establish a framework and common agenda for conservation in the Western Hemisphere. Migratory birds should be the Convention's flagship, and among its chief beneficiaries.

To this end National Audubon and a dozen other non-governmental organizations have called on President Clinton to add conservation and biodiversity issues to the agenda of next December's summit conference of democratically elected leaders in this hemisphere. We have had an encouraging reply to this request and are pressing to have the conference result in concrete, expanded commitments to conservation under the Western Hemisphere Convention. Conservation of migratory birds is the common responsibility of the peoples of the Americas, and—with help from the Audubon family—the birds themselves can deliver this message.

Peter A. A. Berle

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FRONT COVER: Calliope Hummingbird
Photograph by Wayne Lankinen.

PHOTOGRAPHS, LEFT COLUMN TO RIGHT: KENN KAUFMAN; CHRIS WILLE; JONATHAN ALDERFER

"Sierra Color"

FROM THE EDITOR

DURING THE PAST QUARTER-century, birding has changed; but without a familiarity with larger patterns and events, it is impossible to analyze the implications of those changes. In 1969, while the first man was walking on the moon and the *Saturday Evening Post* was publishing its final issue, the National Audubon Society was planning to change the name of its birding magazine from *Audubon Field Notes* to *American Birds*. April 1970 saw the first Earth Day, which brought environmental concerns into the political mainstream, and that was also the year when an estimated 231 million TV sets were in use worldwide and that Congress created the Public Broadcasting Company. Soon after, birding took to the airwaves.

Sandwiched between the activism of the Sixties and the excesses of the Eighties, some think of the Seventies as a decade of polyester, tasteless indulgences like disco and heavy metal, and the period in which roads got clogged with 40 million sweating joggers. It was also in that time, in a real sense, that birding came of age. We all learned that there were thousands of others in our ranks, which suddenly made us unself-conscious about our passion. We eased out of our carefully cultivated knee-jerk defensive posture. We hotly debated, in print and in person, esoteric field-identification problems. We ceased hiding our binoculars as we cruised parks, shorelines, and refuges. Between 1970 and 1980, participants on Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts increased 103%. And wonder of wonders—the level of one's field skills was the great equalizer. An excellent young birder was a welcome addition on a field trip of older and more seasoned enthusiasts. Young hot-shots learned that skill and excellence were superb ways to strut their generational stuff, and that was so exciting they forgot to notice how tough it is to become an expert.

In the 1980s and 1990s, birders continued to revel in the world's greatest game, unconsciously ingesting all of the self-made, no-cost entertainment, and, for serious birders, a rip-roaring big day in Texas or California was still the drug-less high of choice. For many of us, the bird chase led to a robust appreciation for all of natural history and its limitless subtleties.

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFFREY STERN

The first desktop microcomputer was marketed in 1975; sophisticated gadgetry that would forever change the game. Numerous menu-driven bird-listing programs became available facilitating multiple list keeping. Some birders, particularly facile with computers, have since designed their own customized avian data bases. Today, for the price of a subscription, there are worldwide electronic mail forums accessible by personal computer, through which birders can informally discuss anything ornithological.

By the late 1980s, millions of American businesses and private citizens either owned telephone answering systems or were acquainted with their operation. We were all learning that our favorite sport is scientific and competitive, and could easily employ modern information technology to run an incredibly efficient information network. Tape recorded rare bird alerts, accessible by telephone 24 hours a day, rose from 25 in 1975 to 125 in 1994.

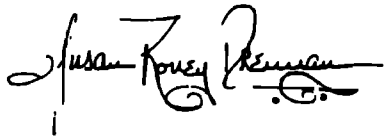
In the 1980s and 1990s, entrepreneurs realized that there is money in the madness of bird enthusiasts. They annually spend millions on bird books, bird seed, travel, hotels, expensive equipment, and memberships to bird-oriented organizations. From the late Seventies to 1986, four new magazines for birders of varying interests emerged and enjoyed healthy readerships. In 1978, the first automatic-focus camera was marketed and, since then, bird publications have printed countless pictures taken with them.

In the past two decades more than 200 avian field guides, 100 bird-finding guides, and 150 specialized bird handbooks, encyclopedias, atlases, and checklists have been published and sold. Who says birders don't mean big business?

In spite of all of these technological changes, the most serious field people remembered that memory is a fond deceiver and they could always be noticed carrying field notebooks, writing down worthwhile observations on the spot. They knew then and know now that errors of omission are certainly often more serious than those of commission. Decades of carefully collected field notes taken by literally hundreds of observers, led to constantly rising identification standards, while standards of documentation seemed headed for the stratosphere.

Nostalgia operates in funny ways. We tend to concentrate on the fun and successes. Thus encapsulation of any period in birding eludes easy labeling. It has been a long and strange journey that has been nothing if not extreme. This is my last editorial in the last issue of *American Birds*. It has meant, for me, decades of patient discovery, warm friendships, and fascinating colleagues. I have had the privilege of associating with articulate and lucid regional editors, freewheeling artists, crackerjack photographers, and unassailable writers. Each issue was an unbalanced mixture of hard work and hard play. Not one was perfect but many were very very good. For that we can all be thankful. We've loved every minute of it.

See you in the field!



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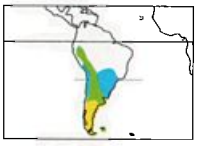

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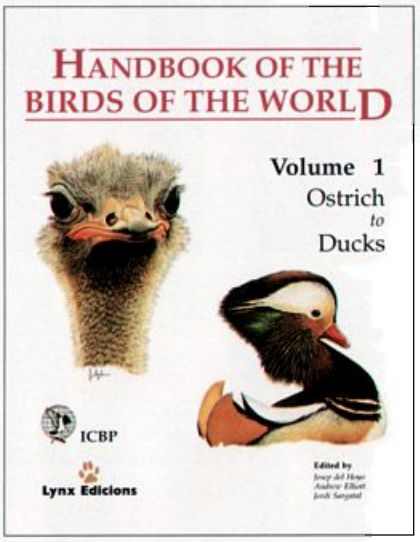

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HOW TO READ THE REGIONAL REPORTS

Birds have no respect for range maps. Bird distribution in North America is constantly changing, as birds expand their ranges into new areas, disappear from former strongholds, or alter their patterns of migration.

Our knowledge of bird distribution is also changing constantly, as discoveries continue to come in. Keeping up with all these developments is a challenge for ornithologists, conservationists, and birders.

The Regional Reports, published four times a year, contain a wealth of information about our dynamic birdlife. To those seeing the reports for the first time, they might appear difficult or technical, but they are not; anyone with any birding experience will find the reports easy to understand. If you have hesitated to dip into this section of the magazine, we invite you to read the report from your area of the continent; we predict that the information there will alternately surprise you and confirm your ideas about birdlife in your region. To help you get started, here are answers to some questions that may occur to first-time readers.

What kind of information is included, and do the Regional Editors just report everything that's reported to them?

Regional Editors do not report every sighting of every bird. Such a list would be huge, unwieldy, and not very useful. Instead, they solicit reports from as many observers as possible, screen the records for accuracy, choose those that are most significant, look for trends and patterns of occurrence, connect scattered bits of information, and ultimately come up with a concise, readable summary of the real bird news—the important avian events and trends of the season throughout their region.

Why are there so many abbreviations in the text?

We abbreviate some frequently-used words and phrases to save space. Most of these are easy to understand and remember. (See the list of abbreviations at the end of this section.) In addition to these standard abbreviations, some Regional Editors use shortened versions of the names of some birding hot spots; they list these local abbreviations in a separate paragraph, just after their introductory comments and just before their main species accounts.

What do the initials in parentheses mean?

Most records published in each report will be followed by initials, to indicate the source: the person(s) who found or reported the bird(s) mentioned. The initials may be followed by et al. (short for et alia, meaning "and others"), or preceded by fide (literally, "by the faith of"—meaning that this is a second-hand report, and the person initialed is the one who passed it along to the Regional Editor). A dagger (†) before the initials means that this person turned in written details on the sighting.

There are good reasons for giving credit to the observers involved. Readers may be reassured about the accuracy of surprising sightings if they know who the observers were; researchers who want to know more about a certain record may be able to contact the observers directly.

Who are the people who send in their sightings?

All observers are invited to send in notes to their Regional Editors: details on rare sightings, species that were scarcer or more numerous than usual during the season, unusual concentrations on migration, and so on Reading the reports for your region for a few seasons is the best way to find out what kinds of information are desired. Although the Regional Editors cannot cite every record that they receive, every contributor helps them to produce a more thorough and accurate summary.

Why are some bird names in heavier or blacker type?

We use boldface type to draw attention to outstanding records of rare birds. General categories of birds that the Regional Editors would place in boldface would include: any species that has been recorded fewer than 10 times previously in a given state or province; any new breeding record for a state or province; or any bird totally outside established patterns of seasonal occurrence. (For the most part, records are not boldfaced unless they are backed up with solid details or photographs.) Birders who like to know about rare birds (and most of us do) can get a complete rundown of the season's outstanding rarities by scanning all the Regional Reports for those boldfaced birds.

What are the boxes marked "S.A." ?

"S.A." stands for "Special Attention" (and, by coincidence, is pronounced "essay"). The purpose of the boxed essays is to draw attention to particularly noteworthy phenomena or trends.

Likely topics for essays include new population trends or new patterns of bird distribution, unusual invasions or migration events, field research projects that have yielded new data, specific conservation problems that have an impact on birdlife, or detailed discussion of some outstanding (or perplexing) rare bird record. Experienced readers of *American Birds* make it a point to flip through all the Regional Reports and read all the S.A.s, even in regions where they do not read the rest of the text

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swale at Helechal rice fields Aug. 6 (RLN), but neither were seen. A flock of 18 Am. Golden-Plovers was noted at Antigua (NG) as well as three Red Knots in September. Five Red Knots were seen on Aug. 7 (FS, RLN) at Las Salinas, Cuba, where they are considered rare. A juv. Ruff seen Sept. 23 near Jolly Harbour, Antigua (NG, KL) apparently represents the first Antigua-Barbuda record. It was compared closely as it fed with a small flock of Pectoral Sandpipers. Gull-billed Terns are considered rare in Cuba, but one was seen clearly at Las Salinas Aug. 7 (S.C.O.), and an early Caspian Tern was noted at Los Canales Aug. 1 (RLN). Sooty Terns were noted offshore at Playa Hiron Aug. 6 (RLN).

QUAIL-DOVES TO BLACKBIRDS

Among the most coveted birds in Cuba are the quail-doves; Key West, Gray-headed, Ruddy, and Blue-headed. All were seen by various parties in the vicinity of Helechal and Las Sabalos (S.C.O.) during the first week of August. Very few Cuban Parakeets were noted during the week at Playa Hiron; two were recorded in the early evening at Los Labalos Aug. 2 (PWS *et al.*). Cuban Parrots were fairly common during the period around Playa Hiron (S.C.O.). A Yellow-billed Cuckoo was noted near Bouqueron, Puerto Rico Oct. 20 (JJD). The uncommon Stygian Owl was noted almost nightly at Playa Hiron during the first week of August (S.C.O.). Two Greater Antillean Nightjars were noted at Los Sabalos Aug. 4 (RLN). A Chimney Swift was seen at Dutchcap Cay off St. Thomas Oct. 18 in a large flock of migrating swallows (JJD), representing a first island record and perhaps only the 8th from the Virgin Islands. Cuba's endemic Bee Hummingbird may be the smallest bird in the world; its tiny size may contribute to its rare status. However, several S.C.O. members were treated to brief looks during early August. Another Cuban endemic, Fernandina's Flicker, is threatened by habitat loss but was still found in some numbers near Helechal (PWS *et al.*, FS). The Giant Kingbird, restricted to Cuba since its extirpation from the Caicos Islands, was not recorded at either La Guira or Zapata by S.C.O. members. This species is very local and may still be extant in e. Cuba. The magnificent endemic Zapata Wren was found at Santo Tomas, Cuba after a trek into Zapata Swamp Aug. 8 (S.C.O.). On Aug. 1 RLN and FS respectively heard and observed a **Marsh Wren** along the roadside edge of a cattail swamp at Los Canales, Cuba. This may represent a first record for Cuba and the West Indies. The vast amount of suitable habitat at Los Canales may harbor more Marsh Wrens than this marginally late summer observation suggests. Early migrant warblers in w. Cuba included Prairie Aug. 7, Black-and-white Aug. 5, Am. Redstart Aug. 6, and Louisiana Waterthrush Aug. 2 (PWS *et al.*). Eleven Bobolinks were noted at Barbuda Sept. 15 (NG).

Addendum: At Green Turtle Cay, Great Abaco Aug. 1–2, 1992, E. Bracey recorded a Key West Quail-Dove, Greater Yellowlegs, Prairie Warbler, and three Olive-capped Warblers. W.R. Burke reported two Am. Oystercatchers at Pointe de Calle, St. Lucia Aug. 3, 1992, representing perhaps the 2nd record for that island. Candidate for bird-of-the-year in the West Indies, an **Alpine Swift** was well described on Aug. 19, 1992 (WRB), representing the 3rd West Indies record. The other two are from Barbados on Sept. 22, 1955 and Mona, Puerto Rico July 9, 1987.

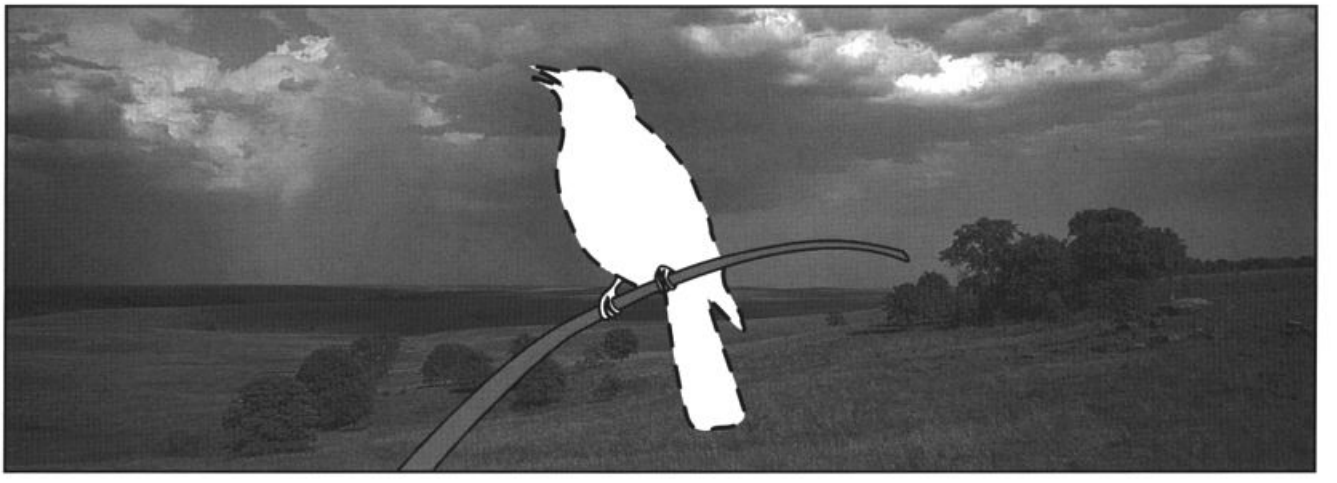
Nowadays, Com. Black-headed Gull is almost expected at San Juan Harbor, Puerto Rico. Indicative of this was one reported there Mar. 11, 1993 (SD). On Apr. 12, 1993 a ♀ Black-throated Green Warbler was seen at St. Kitts (NG). During the week of Apr. 17–23, 1993 on Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles KS *et al.* reported Semipalmated and Black-bellied plovers, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Spotted and Semipalmated sandpipers, and Ruddy Turnstone on the s.w. part of the island near the airport. Migrant wood-warbers seen during the period included Black-throated Green (perhaps only the 4th Bonaire record), N. Waterthrush, and a ♀ Am. Redstart.

Contributors: E. Bracey, W.R. Burke, James J. Dinsmore, Steve Dinsmore, Reinhold Framheim, Nathan Gricks, Kevel Lindsay, Veronica Michael, Desmond & Lisa Nicholson, Fred Sladen, P. William & Susan A. Smith, Kit Struthers & family, Bert Williams.—
ROBERT L. NORTON, 3408 N.W. 27th Terr., Gainesville, FL 32605.

Answers to **That's Bird & Bard Entertainment**, Volume 47, Number 5, Winter 1993 **American Birds**:

1. Woodcock
2. Lark, nigthingale
3. Eagle
4. Falcon
5. Chicken
6. Turtle dove, buzzard
7. Hawk
8. Haggard, a hawk taken as an adult
9. Nightingale, goose, wren
10. Robin (raddock)
11. Kite (puttock)
12. Partridge
13. Starling
14. Wren
15. Cuckoo
16. Blackbird

Silence on the Prairie



A great quiet is hushing America's heartland. Where is the song of the Eastern Meadowlark greeting the Nebraska morning? The cry of the Loggerhead Shrike from its perch in the Oklahoma Osage orange? The call of the Bell's Vireo along the Kansas fence row?

The music of America's prairie birds is being silenced as their numbers dwindle. The statistics are as familiar as they are saddening: Over the past ten years in sections of the central United States, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have been declining by 5 percent *a year*; Orchard Orioles by 9 percent *a year*; and Lark Sparrows by 4 percent *a year*.

The George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center is dedicated to finding the reasons why more than a third of prairie-associated birds are suffering marked population declines. Nationally renowned for its highly successful restoration program for the Bald Eagle, the Center is now focusing its scientific resources on birds in prairie ecosystems.

The Prairie Bird Project is the most extensive of its kind, scheduled to last five years with implications for species ranging from Texas to Saskatchewan. Now in its third year, the project is based on the rigorous monitoring of 62 test plots by ornithologists, biologists and technicians.

Founded 10 years ago and headquartered in Oklahoma, the Center and its programs have been the subject of articles in *Life*, *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic* as well as birding journals. The facility has been selected as one of four breeding centers for raising California Condors for release into the wild.

Supported in the past primarily by corporate and foundation grants, the Sutton Center has never asked for financial help from the birding community. Until now. The expanding scope of the Center's work has brought additional demands that cannot be met without support from those who understand the precarious state of bird populations. This is your invitation as a concerned birder to become part ot this comprehensive and critical research effort.

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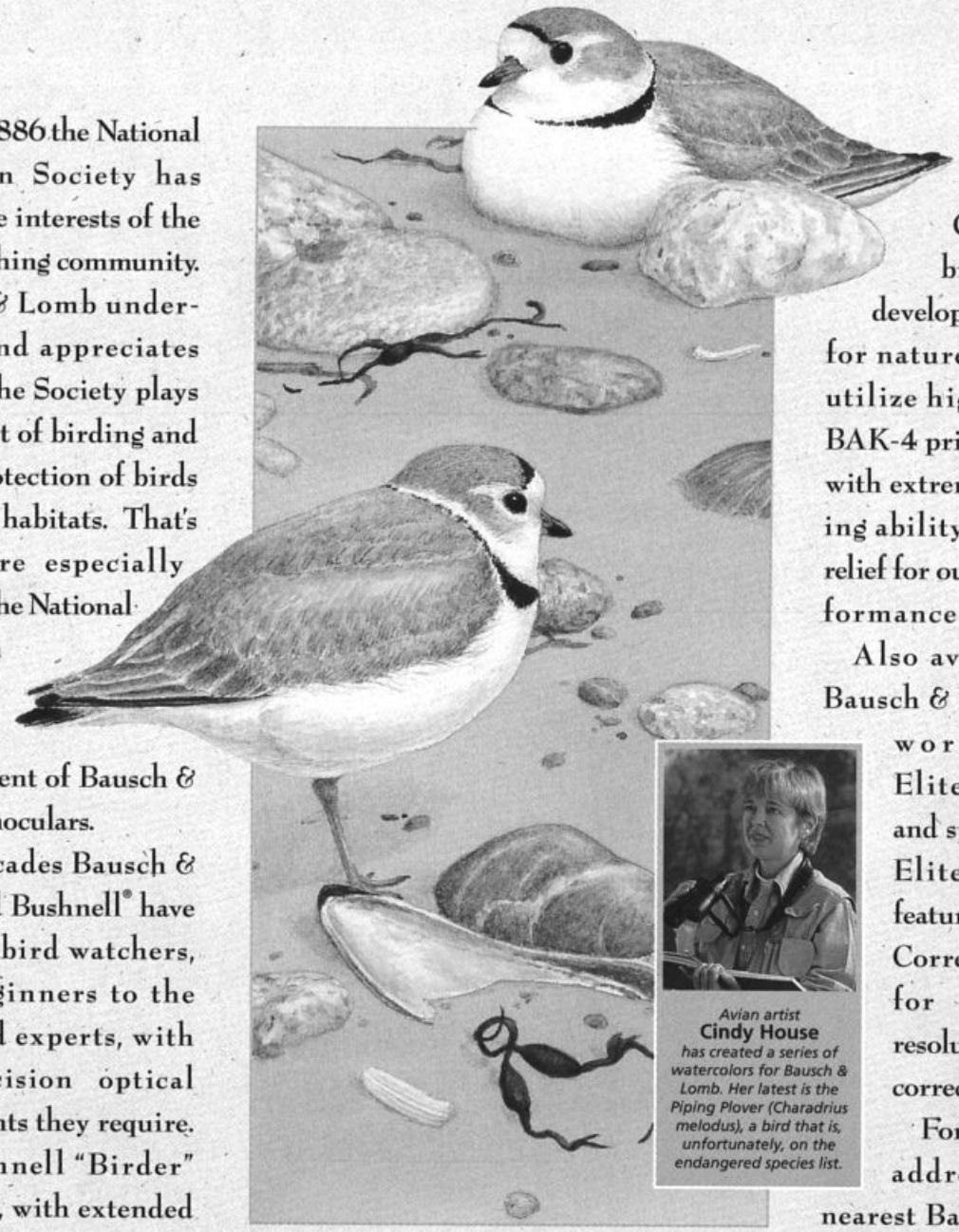

Detail from "Piping Plover" by Cindy House

If you would like an 11" x 14" fine art reproduction of this painting, please send a check or money order for $10 (plus sales tax) with your name and address to: "Piping Plover", c/o Bausch & Lomb, 9200 Cody, Overland Park, KS 66214. Net proceeds will be donated to The American Birding Association for education and bird conservation programs.

Avian artist
Cindy House
has created a series of watercolors for Bausch & Lomb. Her latest is the Piping Plover (Charadrius melodus), a bird that is, unfortunately, on the endangered species list.

The Bausch & Lomb® Custom® Series binoculars were developed specifically for nature study. They utilize high resolution BAK-4 prisms combined with extreme close focusing ability and long eye relief for outstanding performance in the field.

Also available from Bausch & Lomb are the world-famous Elite® binoculars and spotting scopes. Elite® binoculars feature PC-3™ Phase Correction coating for unsurpassed resolution and color correction.

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