

# Whither Listing?

**L**isting.  
*L-I-S-T-I-N-G.*

Like it or not, listing is an incontrovertible part of who we are. It can be an awkward topic—like religion or politics.

But the matter of listing is central to our identity as birders. Listing gives meaning and focus to the activities of so many birders, just as opposition to listing inflames the passions of so many other birders. And even the avowed *non*-lister (in distinction from a card-carrying *anti*-lister) cannot claim ideological neutrality—no more so than can atheists or anarchists claim indifference to religious or political dogma.

Over the years, I have determined that there are five basic components—and five corresponding attitudes—toward listing. And with just a little bit of contrivance, all five of them can be seen to start with the letter C.

Let's take a look now at the five Cs of listing.

First, there is the view of the list as a **collection**. The bird is a thing to be gotten, to be collected, like a bull elk or rare stamp. Collecting tick marks is a less consumptive activity than harvesting game, of course, but it would require a mighty act of denial to ignore the connections between listing and hunting. The modern lister has managed to sublimate some of his primal urges perhaps, and the lister-hunter often masquerades as a workaday attorney or electrician or refuge biologist. Deep down, though, there is something primitivistic, something bewitching, about what Roger Tory Peterson has called "the spell of the lure of the list".

For a great many of us, collecting inevitably leads to **competition**—in the form of fishing derbies, memorabilia shows, and Big Days. Every once in a while, the competitive aspect of listing unleashes opprobrious behaviors such as *stringing* (making reckless misidentifications) or *suppressing* (sitting on a rarity). But more often than not, competitive

listing is good, clean fun. Today's top listers tend to be friendly rivals, rarely bitter enemies; for every stringer or suppressor, there are dozens of *sharers*. And even the hardened non-lister cannot help but admire some of the top feats of competitive listing: 231 species in one day in New Jersey, 8,402 species in one lifetime on Planet Earth, 15,752 (and counting) "total ticks" in the ABA Area.

In this consumer age, it is appropriate to view the list as a sort of commodity, to regard listing as a form of **commodification**. Welcome to the world of listing, where checklist entries are fungible—where Big Day birding teams trade stakeouts and secret tips, where eager listers select tour companies on a BPD (birds per dollar) basis, where tour operators guarantee lifers ("Whooping Crane or your money back"). One might even speak, as the philosophers do, of the *reification* of the lifelist—the process whereby abstract concepts (species names, tick marks) are transformed into material objects. Sound far-fetched? Then you might want to reflect upon our practice of capitalizing the so-called Standard English Names of birds.

The commodification of the lifelist has been linked by many recent writers to the cause of **conservation**. But the close ties between listing and conservation predate—by several generations—this era of ecotourism. Without counters and clickers, there would be no seawatches or hawkwatches. Without block busters and county listers, there would be no breeding bird atlases. Without fanatics, there would be no World Series of Birding—that fabulously successful conservation fundraiser sponsored by New Jersey Audubon. Indeed, without listers, of all shapes and sizes, there would be no Christmas Bird Count—the largest ecological inventory of all time.

I have portrayed the first four Cs of listing as a natural progression, from collection to competition to commodification to conservation. And I have characterized listing primarily as a corporate, a communal, enterprise—carried out in the context of friendly competition, Big Day transactions,

and CBC compilations. But what of that large chunk of the birding endeavor that is individualized, personalized, even private? Is listing relevant, is listing meaningful, on a birder-by-birder basis? Absolutely. For me, and for most of us, I suspect, what matters most is the personal record, the daily journal, the field notebook. What matters most is the list as lifestory, as keepsake, as **chronicle**.



A little while ago, during a layover in Anchorage, my companions and I sneaked out of the airport to see the sights. We walked down a street whose name I have forgotten, we ate at a restaurant that I can't remember, we talked to perfect strangers. And we saw birds that, were I not a lister, I would surely soon forget about. But I kept a list that hazy afternoon, and so I have a permanent record, a personal chronicle, of what I saw. Among other things: a little flock of Common Redpolls in the birches and a raft of Red-necked Grebes along a roadside pond; Black-billed Magpies and Rock Doves (er, *Pigeons*; need to update that entry) in the railyards; "Dusky" Canada Geese in a rainpool, a juvenile Mew Gull (*brachyrhynchus*, of course) on a mudflat, and an Orange-crowned Warbler (*lutescens* was my guess; didn't see it well) in an alder thicket; and two Savannah Sparrows.

Two Savannah Sparrows. Two plain ole LBJs, common as dirt over much of the ABA Area. And yet another chapter in my long chronicle of encounters with what is really an extraordinary animal. Chapter One opens on the morning of 21 April 1984, in a dewy alfalfa field one mile east of Barboursville, Virginia. The setting for a subsequent chapter is a colorless sand dune at Barnegat Light, New Jersey, inhabited by a few "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrows back on 18 November 1989. A much later chapter concerns the events of 15 April 1999—among them the sighting of a "Belding's" Savannah Sparrow in a rank salt marsh outside San Diego, California. And the most recent chapter, as we have seen, takes place in Anchorage, Alaska—on 18 August 2003, if you were wondering. Along the way, there have been literally hundreds of other chapters—and hundreds of memories—each one consisting of a date, a location, and "comments".

And the story of *Passerculus sandwichensis* is just getting under way. I intend to make the acquaintance of the "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow one of these days—in Imperial County, California, I imagine. I expect one day to enter chapters for Maine, Louisiana, and many other places. And I'm looking forward to encore performances in Illinois and Massachusetts, in North Dakota and Oregon, and elsewhere. In the Savannah Sparrow volume alone, there shall

be hundreds, maybe thousands, more chapters—and an equivalent number of memories—each one of them consisting of a date, a location, and "comments".



*When everything else has gone from my brain—the President's name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family—when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.*

So writes Annie Dillard, in the prologue to her memoir, *An American Childhood*. It's a lovely image, tinged with melancholy perhaps, but not without fond reminiscence.

From the lister's perspective, though, Dillard's prognosis is incomplete.

There will no doubt come a time when I cannot remember the state capitals, nor the neighborhoods where I lived, nor even my own name. What will be left, then, is topology: the gentle rise of the old pasture, the wide swale farther out, the flat ridgetops beyond. And something else: right in front of me, in the wet grass, the little brown bird with a short tail. It's flying away. Streaky. It's coming back. *Seep*. It's about to land. *Seep*. *Seep*. On that weed. A yellow piece in front of the eye. *Passerculus sandwichensis*.

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— TED FLOYD



Savannah Sparrow  
(*Passerculus sandwichensis*).  
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