

# The ABA

## Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

As I begin my tenure with the American Birding Association, I would like to reflect on the beginnings of ABA, on where we are today, and on the direction for the future of the organization.

As I meet various individuals and we talk birds, we usually end up with the question, How did you get into birding? For me, I have to go back to when I was six years old, back when my mother and grandmother would give me the bird cards from the Arm & Hammer baking soda boxes. I still treasure my fifteen bird cards, and my favorite birds back then were: Bobolink, Scarlet Tanager, American

Redstart, and Eastern Bluebird. The artwork on the front of each card was by Louis Agassiz Fuertes (still my favorite bird artist). The title on the back of each card was "Useful Birds of America", followed by a short natural history description of each bird, and ending with the bold statement "For the good of all, do not destroy the birds." Times have changed, but the spirit of that little encouragement is nicely captured in the current mission statement of the ABA: "The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds."

My first bird book, after the bird cards, was published in 1942 and was titled *Birds at Home*, by Marguerite Henry and illustrated by Jacob Bates Abbott. In the forward to the book, Rudyerd Boulton, of the Division of Birds at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, writes: "Facts are interesting to children and to adults alike, and when they are expressed in good everyday English they become positively exciting." He continues: "Here there is none of the technical and unfamiliar verbiage of the scientist nor the florid romanticism of the ordinary writer of children's books." Boulton concludes with this statement: "Parents would be well advised to read this book to avoid the embarrassment of being corrected by the younger set." I'm sure each of you reading about

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the beginnings of my life-long interest in birding will also have your own unique stories. Now many years removed from my earliest knowledge of birds, I still have a passion for observing birds, and I can tell stories about the 2,000+ species I've seen all over the world. I also have a collector's habit of acquiring new and used bird books whenever I can.



Now, on to the beginnings of the American Birding Association. In 1968, Jim Tucker, one of the leading birders of the day, conceived of a journal and an organization focused on birding for fun, and as a way for birders everywhere to connect with each other. He also felt that his idea could be a way of getting more people involved in conservation. Here is how Claudia Wilds, writing in the twenty-fifth anniversary volume (1994) of *Birding*, put it:

*In December 1968, Tucker sent a dozen birding friends the only issue—Volume 0, Number 0—of The Bird-watcher's Digest. In this flyer... he proposed that they form a group to exchange birding information and publish their list totals. The recipients responded with a flood of suggestions and long lists of other names and addresses. The first suggestion, made by Stuart Keith, was to change the name of the newsletter to Birding. Volume I, Number 1 was dated January–February 1969 ... By the second issue the organization had a name, the American Birding Association, and the terms birder, birding, and bird-watcher had lighthearted new definitions. Jim Tucker was editor from the beginning.*

Early on, a membership policy was instituted. No matter how large the association grew, only 150 elective members would be permitted, and they would be the



Jim Huffman (left) and Stuart Keith (right) were among the founding fathers of the ABA, and their legacy of birding for fun remains a core component of the modern ABA's outlook. *Unknown location; September 1972. © Arnold Small.*

only ones to vote for the board of directors. To be nominated or to nominate oneself as an elective member, one had to have an ABA-area bird list of 500 or at least one state or province list with 70% or more of the official total, and then be elected to the roster by current elective members. This policy lasted for twenty years. Membership dues were \$3 annually.

During those early years, the ABA was only *Birding* magazine; there was no ABA Sales, no conventions, no other publications, no conservation or education programs, just the magazine.

The American Birding Association, as an organization that is thirty-six years old, has a true sense of history, but it is also still young enough to continue to adapt and move forward. As I take over the leadership role with ABA, I can tell you that we are embarking on exciting new paths for the organization, but without forgetting the path that forged our identity. Here are some specific goals of mine:

- Recent government data indicate that there are 46 million birders in the United States. The ABA's membership has remained rather stagnant at around 20,000 for several years, so we must look at creative ways to bring new people into our organization. We will survey birders and

non-birders alike to find out what the public wants from the American Birding Association. If we are truly a membership-driven organization, then we must be aggressive in our pursuit of new members.

- For many years it has appeared that the ABA has been "going it alone", and not collaborating with like organizations. In these times it seems to me that to survive we must work with as many organizations as we can. The collaborative approach will also get us to the table to be a voice for birding and bird conservation.
- At one time we were the only game in town concerning our bird-store sales. Today, look around at our competition. From book dealers to nature stores, other competing businesses continue to invade our niche. We must continue to furnish exceptional customer service at ABA Sales. In addition, we must be ahead of others in our merchandise selection for our consumers.
- In the area of conservation, the ABA's Birders Exchange program is one of our crown jewels. We collect donated new or used equipment and distribute it to our colleagues working to conserve birds and their habitats throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. This program is growing by leaps and bounds, and with your continued support of donated goods, we can continue

Birds, of course, are the allure of any ABA Convention. In this elk-browsed aspen grove, conventioners enjoyed leisurely viewing of Williamson's Sapsuckers, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, and Cordilleran Flycatchers. *Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado; June 2000. © Brian E. Small.*





The ABA's week-long annual convention is *the* event of the year for many ABA members—newcomers and old timers alike. Each night's banquet features good humor and great food, presentations of major awards, and a full-length feature talk by a noted birder or ornithologist. *Tucson, Arizona; July 1999. © Brian E. Small.*

to enhance local awareness of birds and the habitats on which they depend.

- In our education initiatives, our student program provides opportunities for young birders who want to learn more about birds and to share their interests with each other. Currently, over 300 youth are participating in ABA student programs. This is an area in which we need to market the ABA, to encourage additional students to become members. If we don't begin growing our membership from the bottom up, then what is our future?
- Another component of the ABA's education program is our Institute for Field Ornithology, with an emphasis on teaching birders about birds in their natural habitats. The program is designed to provide a comprehensive look at bird biology, conservation, and field identification. Instruction, provided by noted ornithologists, is divided between field and classroom ses-



As the ABA moves into the twenty-first century and beyond, one thing will remain constant: our abiding fascination in and concern for populations and communities of wild birds. *Scott's Oriole, Riverside County, California; April 2002. © Brian E. Small.*

sions. This program is also one from which we can reach new audiences by additional marketing and public-relations campaigns.

We will continue to provide and to expand our major programs, while at the same time exploring innovative ways to keep up with the broadening interests of the birding community, which we represent. The ABA does not want to duplicate what other organizations are already doing; instead, we wish to create new and improved ways to provide our current suite of services.

The American Birding Association believes that your connection with birds can lead to an increased awareness of the natural world. Our goal is to turn more adults and children into active birders and dedicated conservationists. By applying our recreational focus on birding to our education and conservation programs, we will be moving ahead with bold plans for the future.