

## A Birding Interview with Amy Hooper

Editor of *WildBird* magazine, Amy Hooper also pens tidbits about birds, birders, and birding in her wide-ranging blog, “WildBird on the Fly”. She travels frequently to see birds and meet birders, and she actively supports a number of organizations that help conserve and preserve birds, including the American Bird Conservancy, the American Birding Association, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, and the National Audubon Society. She champions young birders. Hooper enjoys reading, driving her 1972 BMW 2002, yoga, and baking cookies in her apartment in Costa Mesa, California.

In a free-spirited interview with *Birding*, Hooper shares her enthusiasm for travel, blogs, the Duck Stamp, and families who bird together—and muses on the birding trip of her dreams.

— Noah K. Strycker

**Birding:** As editor of one of the major bird magazines (*WildBird*), how do you see your role in North American birding?

**AH:** I try to educate, encourage, and entertain readers. I want birders to feel more knowledgeable and more excited about this hobby/sport/lifestyle/whatever-you-call-it after they read the magazine. I also try to emphasize the need for birders to do three things: go beyond their personal enjoyment of birds, help beginners learn about birds, and work directly toward habitat conservation. Today’s birders need to nurture tomorrow’s birders and conservationists.

**Birding:** Travel is a big part of your job, to festivals, workshops, and such. What’s it like to visit so many different places and see different birds? Where do you go birding closer to home?

**AH:** I love to travel—love it. The chance to visit other parts of the country, to hang out with like-minded birders, and to see birds that don’t appear in Southern California thrills me. It’s a huge job

perk. During trips, I often stop and think, “Someone’s paying me to walk around outside and look at birds with these neat people. Awesome!” At home, I always bird during morning walks around eastside Costa Mesa and like to hear the Black Phoebes, Cassin’s Kingbirds, and Northern Mockingbirds doing their thing. If I’m not tied to a computer in the office, I might bird at San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary in Irvine or at Back Bay in Newport Beach. It’s so cool to have these oases in the midst of the concrete jungle.

**Birding:** How did you get started in birding?

**AH:** Actually, my career led me to birding. I’m an editor who became a birder, not the other way around. After graduating with a journalism degree, I began working as a magazine editor in 1995 and joined the *WildBird* staff in 1998. That was my first exposure to birding. I don’t mean to sound as if I was completely oblivious to birds before 1998, but they were not constantly on my sensory radar during my younger years and I wasn’t aware, except at a superficial level, of birdwatchers or birdwatching. After becoming editor of *WildBird* in 2002, my awareness of birds and my interest in them grew even more—largely because of some birders in my age range. Their incredible passion for birds increased my enthusiasm, so I credit a handful of folks with prodding me to become a better birder—but I’m still a novice compared to them.

**Birding:** You are one of the few women holding a leadership position in North American birding. What’s that like?

**AH:** Honestly, it never crossed my mind before now... But the question does make me wonder why there aren’t more women in birding leadership positions. What’s up with that?

**Birding:** Why do you champion young birders?

**AH:** That's a no-brainer. Young birders represent the future of birding and, more importantly, the birds. Period. Birders in their teens and 20s today are destined to become the next generation's ornithologists, biologists, and activists who discover information, make connections, work on behalf of the birds, and fill the watchdog role for species conservation. Today's young birders need all the support and encouragement they can get from older enthusiasts and professionals. In fact, I think it's the duty of birders who truly care about the birds' survival to mentor kids, teens, and college students who show an interest in birding.

**Birding:** What do you think about bird blogs?

**AH:** To get geeky for a second: I ♥ BLOGS. Since 2002, I've been addicted to them. Let's back up: "Blog" is the contraction for "web log", a term for an online journal or diary. Many blogs are just that—a personal record of an individual's life—but many others discuss current events in general or particular topics. I started WildBird on the Fly <[wildbirdonthefly.blogspot.com](http://wildbirdonthefly.blogspot.com)> in late 2005. It gives me the chance to share information that can't appear in the magazine because of time and/or page constraints, and it lets me interact with birders who share my online addiction. It also lets me write regularly, which isn't always the case as an editor, where you're working with other writers' words, not your own words. I really like being able to report from festivals and other events—writing about the field trips and activities, posting pictures, letting birders know what they could do and see if they participate in future events.

**Birding:** Describe your idea of a dream-come-true birding trip.

**AH:** I want to visit Central America—haven't been to any

spots down there yet—and see as many of those colorful tropical species as possible. This might be considered blasphemy, but I'm not a lister and don't have a Central America wish list. (I have nothing against listing, though.) This dream trip would include a small group—probably only 10 of us. My travel companions would be fun-loving folks who

enjoy good food, beverages, music, conversation, and sarcastic humor as much as they do birds and other wildlife. Plus, they wouldn't mind my frequent stops to take pictures with a rubber duck.

**Birding:** Among the many bird conservation and fundraising efforts you advocate, which ones are closest to your heart?

**AH:** The Great Texas Birding Classic and World Series of Birding in New Jersey come to mind because of their youth divisions. I really like the fact that children, some just in first grade, can bird together in a competitive fundraiser and have a lot of fun. The competitive aspect of those events can make the scavenger hunt even more exciting for a kid who's recently been exposed to birding. Speaking of "hunt", the

Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp also comes to mind. It's a great conservation tool available to all birders. We pay just \$15 a year at a local post office or at <[duckstamp.com](http://duckstamp.com)> for a Duck Stamp with a beautiful painting, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service contributes \$14.70 per stamp toward the purchase and restoration of wetland habitat in national wildlife refuges. That habitat benefits more than just waterfowl, and the stamp lets birders enter NWRs for free. Last spring, I heard a long-time and respected birder say he'd never seen a Duck Stamp, and I was flabbergasted. We need to make sure that more birders know about the stamp's considerable benefits and purchase it. We also need to get beyond the hunting stigma attached to the stamp.



**Amy Hooper.**

**Birding:** What do you see as the future demographic trends in birding?

**AH:** Given the number of aging baby boomers, I predict that a fair number will become active birders—"active" in the sense that they'll become a vocal component of this community and that they'll increase the mainstream culture's awareness of birds, birding, and habitat conservation. I really would like to see those boomers share their enthusiasm for birding with their children and grandchildren, increasing the number of families who bird together. I'd like to see those families welcomed into clubs and at festivals with activities timed to accommodate busy parents' schedules.

**Birding:** What will be the hot issues and topics for birders in the coming years?

**AH:** The Ivory-billed Woodpecker, obviously, and habitat and species conservation, necessarily. We need to convince more birders to pay for conservation. We're willing to spend hundreds and thousands of dollars on optics and other products; we individually should contribute similar amounts to conservation projects. It's our responsibility to fund the work that will protect the birds that we watch.