



Thoughts on Choosing Articles

by *Sheryl DeVore*

When *Birding* Editor Ted Floyd suggested an issue devoted to “Dimensions”—essays about the behaviors of birds and birders—my first reaction was, “Hooray!” We receive many interesting submissions for this popular column, and we could accommodate five or six of them in one special issue.

But then came the difficult part—choosing the essays and editing them. As a longtime editor and writer of myriad story genres from hard news to analysis pieces to lengthy features, I strive to bring clarity and understanding to the reader while maintaining the author’s style. With non-fiction essays, that job becomes even more crucial. An essay introduces you not only to a new way of thinking, but also to the soul or the personality of the author—more so than any other genre. That is the challenge and the joy of being the editor of “Dimensions.” In some instances, it’s more about the choosing, rather than the editing—although both must be done.

I read a submission first for clarity of tone and for viewpoint. Sometimes the theme is fairly easy to recognize; other times it can be so subtle that I may be only vaguely aware of it. But it must be there, along with the writer’s ability to make the words flow like honey on a warm day.

When reading the best submissions, I often feel “moments of pure joy when time stops and I find myself experiencing an instance of unexpected beauty that leaves me breathless.”

Actually, that quote is not mine. Jason Leifester wrote it in his piece “Beauty Unexpected” (pp. 58–60). That line was about seeing a bird. But the statement accurately portrays what I feel many times when I read “Dimensions” pieces that we decide to publish.

After you, as a reader, nod your head, “Yes, yes, I’ve had that experience with a bird, too,” Jason takes you to an unexpected place, not to a first glimpse of a rare Common Piping Guan in Trinidad or the highly sought-after Resplendent Quetzal. He takes you on a ride with an unexpected turn, which often is what makes an essay sing.

In “The Pro” (pp. 40–43), Bruce Whittington lets you in on all that he is thinking as he views what might be a rarity in Alaska. He fumbles with equipment, can’t find his batteries, and describes the scene in such detail that you imagine it is happening to you. He takes you on a ride, too. You are cheering him on to get that picture of that bird, and then when he gets it, alas, he loses something else.

J. D. Phillips’ “Cascade of Light” (pp. 48–50) leaves you nearly breathless through the entire ride. Each word tumbles to the next and soon you feel as if you are Phillips standing alone experiencing what he is, and at the same time trying to understand some of his thoughts that might not mirror your own.

Sara Lenoe’s essay, “Dancing Puffineers” (pp. 52–56), is filled with abandon, glee, and sometimes melancholy. Her descriptions of human behavior are as fascinating as the puffins and other seabirds she is watching. Even when she is walking ever so softly and carefully at night around a storm-petrel’s nesting site, you can see her dancing in her mind.

Sounds and descriptions captivate readers in essays—and no one has done it better in this collection than Lisa Bender. In “The Reign of the Acorn Woodpeckers” (pp. 44–47), she describes the bapping and dunking and plinking of woodpeckers with amusement, sarcasm, and wit. You can hear those sunflower seeds kerplunking as she and her husband try to sleep at night. You can hear her musing to herself, “Should I be mad, should I be glad, or should I just get even?”—but she does this in a subtle way by showing rather than telling.

“Dimensions” writers aren’t afraid to describe something in a different way. They avoid clichés, replacing them with fresh ideas for combining words, seeing a bird, seeing ourselves. They allow us to laugh at, wonder about, and question ourselves, to become more human while we are watching birds.

Once the stories are chosen, the editing is more mechanical. Words are rearranged, and then arranged back again to retain the meaning, the author’s intent, or the style or the feel of the piece. I am the least heavy-handed with these pieces compared to anything else I edit. But I am most careful because these essays reflect the hearts and souls of people like me when they encounter the creatures we love to chase, watch, feed, and study.

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