



# Birding Alone

I still like to call it my *first* Ross's Gull, though nearly 20 years later I regret to say that it remains my *only* Ross's Gull. The bird, a lovely little adult, showed up in 1990 at Baltimore's Back Bay sewage plant—where else?—and though I didn't discover it, just seeing it is still, after close to two decades, among the most prized of my birding memories.

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joy what is still in many circles referred to as *the* Ross's Gull. But even had I been able to avail myself of some miracle of transportation, there would have been no reason to go: for 30 years ago, news of that particular "bird of the century," like news of the nearly contemporary Newport Smew, like news, even, of the Nantucket reef-heron eight years later, took literally months after the rare bird's arrival to penetrate to even the most active birders in small Midwestern towns. I found out about the Smew in our public library, when I read a half-mocking article in *The New Yorker*, and I can remember hearing no one utter a word about the Massachusetts Ross's Gull until the news appeared on the back page of *Birding* magazine. And the reef-heron, the first of its species ever recorded in the ABA Area, wasn't even a bump on my horizon of expectation when I arrived, innocent, in eastern Massachusetts in September of 1983.

I leave it to the reader to draw any conclusions about the cluelessness of my provincialism; what I find interesting today, however, is not how charmingly unworldly we all were "back then," but rather how we all reacted to each of these succeeding revelations of our ignorance. We did not, strange as it may seem, fall into regret and despair, beating our breasts and rending our hair with the birder's lament "if only I'd known!" Search as deep as I can, I still cannot recall experiencing a single shred of envy, not a scrap of bitterness, not a tatter of a sense of lost opportunity when word finally trickled in of a missed rarity near or far. Instead, those wondrous sightings inspired us to prepare for the day when something as rare, something as exotic, something as excit-

These past few years, though, my mental lingering over that long-ago experience has broadened, has perhaps deepened, to be about more than just the beautiful and charismatic bird that entered the pages of my notebook and the pages of memory on that dull gray day in Baltimore. As I've pondered the experience, and as I've compared it over the years with other, more recent twitches and chases, successful and not, the story of the Baltimore Ross's Gull has come for me to stand for a way of birding life that is in real danger of passing away, and it has come, for me, to highlight the many and not always felicitous ways in which birding has changed over the past decade.

I was a new birder and still a young birder in 1975, and there would have been no way for me to take the trip from southeast Nebraska to Newburyport to en-



Until recently, it was nearly impossible to encounter a **Ross's Gull** without also having an immersion experience in human culture and community. In the internet era of today, however, one can bypass human culture and community and go straight to the gull—with troubling consequences for birders and for birding.

*Colored pencil on smooth Bristol, by © Steve Carbol.*

ing should fall out of the sky onto our local marsh or into our neighborhood woodlot. Each tardily received “dispatch from the field” sent us to the library and to our mentors to learn, for example, why it should be called *Western Reef-Heron*, or where the ethereal pink on the breast of a Ross's Gull comes from, or how many North American zoos hold Smews among their captive waterfowl. And when we found

out, we shared that information at the meetings of tiny obscure clubs, in vigorous discussion on the way to a favored birding spot, or in clumsy and derivative notes submitted for publication in local and regional journals.

This flat-affect resignation did nothing for our life lists back then, and the modern vantage point may diagnose in it an almost pathological lack of birderly ambition; but this

pattern of learning of great rarities only after it was far too late to do anything about it had some benefits, too. Knowing that the bird was gone, and that there was no chance that we could possibly see it even if we had been willing to cross the continent, removed that nagging sense of urgency that is all too characteristic of so much birding in the early 21st century. Instead, distant sightings served us back then not as sources of immediate anxiety and eventual regret, but as inspiration, as motivation to learn, to prepare, to talk to each other about what might some day happen. The news of a Brown-chested Martin in Massachusetts, a Black-tailed Godwit in New Jersey, a Spotted Redshank in Kansas provided fodder for fantasy, for productive engagement with the possibilities of the future rather than resentment of the frustrations of the past.

I am not claiming any great moral virtue in our approach 30 years ago. But that approach gave to our birding experiences a satisfying fullness that is not invariably an aspect of our hobby today. By the time that Baltimore sewage plant was graced by Maryland's first, and my first, Ross's Gull, I had, like most of my birding contemporaries, been thinking about the bird for years. I'd been living on the East Coast by then for most of a decade, and I'd already been able to put my fantasizing to good use in a couple of failed chases for the bird. I well remember sheltering under the raised hatchback of Peter Alden's car at West Milford, Connecticut, one miserably wet day, and I well remember standing shivering on Newburyport's sacred seawall itself on a bitter cold winter afternoon. No luck.

*Martha's Vineyard,  
Massachusetts;  
August 2004.  
© Peter C. Alden.*



No luck, but lots of fun all the same, and it bothered us only a little to return to imagining what it might be like to see the bird, to go back to our obsessive reading of Grant's *Gulls*, fantasizing the pink blush into those poorly reproduced black-and-white photos.

In 1990 it was my turn. A friend and I drove down from central New Jersey, following the new signs put up by the sewer authority: "This way to the Ross's Gull." We joined the throng standing around in the murky dawn. The atmosphere was as festive as it was aromatic, and that first hour was full of reunions with old friends and first conversations with new ones; that first hour also featured a comical plenty of false alarms every time a new Bonaparte's Gull or a pale-plumaged pigeon flew past. But after an hour, The Bird flew in to bob and float daintily in the toxic brew churning in a high-walled aeration tank. The rush of 500 eager birders from one end of the plant to the other was registered on seismographs all up and down the East Coast, and I half believe the rumor that circulated in the days thereafter that the ebbing tide reversed to fill the channels of Back Bay, there was so much weight concentrated around the gull's chosen pool. In any event, there was oohing, there was aahing; shutters whirred and film rolls were replaced; and the strange clicking sound many of us thought we heard was later identified as the mass and simultaneous addition of a check mark to hundreds of proudly curated life lists. It wasn't just a life bird, it was a life moment.

It was a life moment in the sense that our experience of the Ross's Gull, unique and unexpected as it was, seemed somehow to fit into a process of preparation and anticipation. It wasn't that we felt we deserved the bird for having had to wait for so long, or that the sighting had anything at



*Nantucket, Massachusetts; June 1983. © Rob Cardillo / VIREO.*

Both birds crossed the Atlantic Ocean to get to eastern Massachusetts, and both were firsts for the ABA Area: **Western Reef-Heron** (right) and **Red-footed Falcon** (left). Word of the former spread slowly through North America, carrying with it an element of mystery and wonder; news of the latter saturated every birder's inbox, with real-time updates streaming in during the entire two-week period of the bird's visit.

all to do with our superior skills (with the exception of the original discoverer). Seeing the Ross's Gull felt instead like an accomplishment—not in the sense of *our* having accomplished something, but rather the accomplishment, the fulfillment of an almost dialectical interplay of events and non-events: of hearing about the bird, learning about the bird, seeking the bird, talking about the bird, missing the bird, dreaming of the bird, and on and on until the Hegelian synthesis emerged in the person of a dapper little flesh-and-feathers gull. Considered in this way, as the logical conclusion to a sort of birding syllogism, the Ross's Gull, or more to the point our *experience* of the gull, came to be an event in our private history, an experience related to all the other experiences in our birding career. It felt like a new landmark in a landscape of events and experiences, each of them ultimately related to every other, and every one ultimately contributing to our ability to understand and to enjoy them all.

For my friend James and for me, too, after the four-hour drive from New Jersey and the hour of waiting at the sewage plant, seeing the Ross's Gull was occasion for not just rejoicing but also gratitude. Of course we were grateful to the bird's original discoverer, Gene Scarpulla; but even more we were grateful that we had been moved to make the trip at all. Recall, if you can, what it was like to be seriously interested in rare birds and vagrants just 17 years ago. Things weren't all that different from what they had been in, say, 1975, when there was no expectation that an adolescent birder in southeastern Nebraska should hear about a Siberian waif in Essex County, Massachusetts, while the bird was still actually there. Fifteen years later, it was still a couple of days before a friend called from Washington, D.C., to ask whether I'd heard about the bird. I hadn't. It took another two days of persistent dialing before I was able to get through to the Voice of the Naturalist telephone recording for details and directions. And we waited until the weekend to make the drive, meaning that the bird had been present for the better part of a week before we first breathed the heady aroma of a mega. By rights we should have been not just grateful but delirious that the gull was still showing when we arrived.

This sequence of events did not strike us as unusual. It was just the way things were done: the phone call from a considerate friend, the firming up of details by phone or even by mail, the leisurely debate whether or not to invest the time in a chase.

It's different today, as the example of a different, much more recent Ross's Gull shows, the much celebrated bird at California's Salton Sea in November of 2006. Discovered by Guy McCaskie, that bird provided not just a first record for the finest birding state in the U.S. but also furnished the southernmost occurrence of this high-Arctic specialty ever

anywhere in the world.

I knew about the bird within minutes of its discovery, when the galvanizing word went out on the internet, and soon I was receiving e-mail messages from across the country: Was I going to the Sea, did I think the bird would stay, did I figure the California committee would accept it?—and on and on. I did not end up looking for the bird, though many of my friends and birding companions did, eager to be part of an exciting and probably irreproducible birding experience.

I certainly don't begrudge anyone the excitement and the pleasure of having seen the Salton Sea Ross's Gull. But I believe that the instantaneous nature of the experience of the bird, the immediate notification and the immediate reaction on the part of an eager birding community, shows clearly the way that the internet and the wild abundance of information it provides us have changed birding, and changed it for the worse.

I am no e-Luddite. I can happily spend hours clicking away when I should be doing something productive, fascinated in equal degrees by the gold and the chaff, by the wheat and the dross that come pouring in at the speed of light. There is a downside, though, to this abundance of information and detail. That downside is identical to the upside of the digital revolution: It is easy nowadays to acquire expertise in almost any field, to master in a few months of online diligence the data and details that once eluded a lifetime's study in books, in conversation, and in the field. Want to learn the *Empidonax* flycatchers of the ABA Area? There are huge numbers of photos online, many of them correctly identified, to help translate the arcanelly expressed wing formulas in the handbooks into the structure of the living bird; what once took many field seasons of looking and listening can now be achieved in an afternoon of concentration at the keyboard. Or how about the rosy-finches? Tedious days in the museum used to be followed by freezing days on mountainsides and futile vigils at remote feeder setups, and even then it remained a challenge to fix on a single individual for study in a swirling flock of superficially identical little brown birds. But now, all it takes is Google and a few minutes of comparison to test potential new field marks. Even gulls, the most fascinating and befuddling of field identification challenges, have begun to yield their secrets as they have become the subject of constant and obsessive online discussion.

Isn't this state of affairs a welcome advance over the dogmatic agnosticism of the 20th century's best field guides? Yes, of course. But not for everyone, and not for every situation. I believe firmly that for the experienced intermediate



What, in its fullest sense, is the essence of a mid-winter sighting of a **Yellow-nosed Albatross**? Does it not involve some element of community? Should it not result in some amount of wisdom? Birding in the internet era is in danger of letting go of the full essence of nature study. *Ocean City, Maryland; January 1975.* © Robert Fraunfelter / VIREO.

birder the ready and immediate availability of this vast store of reference information is a boon such as birding has not seen since the invention of center focus. Remember having to go to interlibrary loan for Jonathan Dwight's *Gulls*? It's online now, for free. Remember having to sift through drawer upon drawer of ratty skins trying to sort out female-plumaged buntings? Click on Marcel Gahbauer's spectacular website <[migrationresearch.org/mbo/id/index.html](http://migrationresearch.org/mbo/id/index.html)>, which will eventually illustrate every age and sex class of every North American passerine. It's great, and it's easy.

And it's seductive. Shortcuts to knowledge always are: Who doesn't want to be an expert in his or her chosen field, and especially in his or her hobby, where expertise is by definition the only reward? What has happened to birding is that what was historically the necessary and logical link between knowledge and judgment, information and understanding, has been obliterated, and it is now possible to be, or at least to present oneself as, an expert without having had any real experience at all.

I look with real alarm on this electronic legitimization of what we used to call "cramming." But the internet birding culture prizes this cramming of knowledge above all else. In its extreme form (and online phenomena rarely occur in anything but an extreme form), this manifests itself in the so-called identification forum. To be certain, I am excluding from my critique such exemplary forums as Frontiers of Bird ID <[birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/FRID.html](http://birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/FRID.html)>, consistently characterized by reasoned debate and discussion. Rather I am referring to e-groups that allow users to "vote" on bird identification. I occasionally monitor these groups

from Britain, from the U.S., from Germany, France, and Holland, and the typical exchange goes something like this: Query: "What is the bird in the attached picture?" Response 1: "Vesper Sparrow." Response 2: "My guess is Vesper Sparrow." Response 3: "Savannah Sparrow." 4: "No, it's a Vesper Sparrow; look at this similar picture" (this helpful correspondent includes a very pretty photo of a Grasshopper Sparrow in the attachment). 5: "Vesper Sparrow, definitely, I just saw my first one last winter." And the author of the original question brings it to a close: "Thanks, guys, that's 4 votes for Vesper. It's a lifer for me!"

The bird is a Song Sparrow, but the e-experts have spoken, the "guesses" and the "votes" have been tallied, and the budding birder has a life bird out of it. Everyone is happy, and no one has learned anything.

This is a trivial misidentification. But I believe that we should all be deeply concerned about the transformation of the birding community that these absurd ID referenda signal. In the example just adduced, our photographer cast his ornithological bread upon the waters of an anonymous forum, whence soggy answers drifted back from unknown self-proclaimed experts on two continents. When I was a beginning birder, such consultation would have taken place in the field, as a debate among birding companions, or not long thereafter in conversation with our mentors. We might still have got it wrong, but the give and take of ornithological argument—as opposed to anonymous and ungrounded disagreement—would have taught us something about the birds, and the checkmark on our list would be the product of an intellectual confrontation with an in-

tellectual problem, a problem resolved only at the conclusion of a process that valued learning more than knowing.

And that process would have been intensely social. Even if much of our birding activity, in the field, in the library, in the museum, was at the moment solitary, the detailed knowledge we acquired would be subject to qualification, to exception, to refinement or revision, even to rejection in conversation, mental or real, with our friends and with our mentors. We may have collected the raw materials, but they were forged on a social anvil, in dialogue and dialectic with other birders we knew and respected. Even when we were in the field by ourselves, we never birded alone.

The unreflected use of online resources for birding narrows our conception of what constitutes human interaction. By touting expertise, the internet devalues wisdom; by fostering anonymity, it obviates the complexity of true communication. It removes us from community, and then, in a sinister move, claims to supplant that lost community with a new e-polity of its own. But virtual community is no community at all. The internet both creates and conceals a social vacuum.

**T**he quality of private experience and the content of personal memory may perhaps seem not such a serious matter. But it is precisely individual experi-

ence and individual memory that collectively determine the nature of a political culture; if that is true, the online transformation of birding threatens to have some serious consequences indeed. If the traditional model of birding is in the process of being replaced by a new one, then the much-vaunted potential for amateur birders to contribute to science and to influence conservation policy is in danger of vanishing. The new model, encouraged and justified by the internet culture of instant expertise and monadic anonymity, imposes a memory structure that recognizes only discrete episodes, not a gradual and continuous process of learning; experience becomes a series of unrelated events rather than a dialectic of preparation, accomplishment, and qualification. Good luck replaces effort, diligence replaces insight, facts replace ideas. The isolation of events and the decontextualization of experience makes our lives seem less a landscape than an archipelago, and our conduct of our lives less a journey than a series of island hops.

If we cannot any longer conceive of our lives as landscapes, what hope is there that future generations will conceive of landscapes as life? The atomizing impulses of digital communication may well eventually transform our habits of thought to the extent that we can no longer see the vital connections that make up the natural world.