

A Birding Interview with **Jessie Barry**

Jessie Barry is a leader in the next generation of birders, artists, and ornithologists. She writes for *Birding* and *WildBird* magazines; was a contributing author to the *National Geographic Complete Birds of North America* and *Good Birders Don't Wear White*; and is a former editor of the American Birding Association's student newsletter, *A Bird's-Eye View*. She has worked in the field from the Arctic to the Amazon; filled the role of hawkwatcher at Cape May, New Jersey; and competed in the World Series of Birding and Great Texas Birding Classic. Barry currently serves as Assistant Curator of the audio collection in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Macaulay Library.

Birding asked Barry to divulge the contents of her field notebook and to share her perspective on how today's young birders will change the future of birding and ornithology.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: Did you really know the names of 30 species of ducks when you were two years old?

Jessie Barry: I could rattle off names of and identify ducks at two. My first word was duck, so I am told. Needless to say, I was raised in a family with an appreciation for the natural world. From my great-grandmother, who was a birder, to her son, an Arctic goose biologist, my dad's generation followed suit with a love for the outdoors, which is instilled in me. Like many other birders, I was introduced to the birding community by a mentor. My sixth-grade science teacher took me on a Christmas Bird Count, and I've been a birder ever since.

Birding: What are some of the ways that older birders can encourage kids to care about birds?

JB: There are tons of ways to do this. Almost anything that exposes kids to the fascinating world outdoors will kindle their interest in it. Take them along birding, out for a hike, kayaking, or on a walk in the woods. It doesn't have to be through a

special program or anything fancy, although there are a number of great programs out there.

Previous generations grew up exploring the woods, prairie, or marsh. In this day and age, unfortunately, it is a safety concern to let your kids spend the day in the woods on their own, and fewer kids are growing up with woods as their backyards. Adults need to take a little more initiative to spend time outdoors with kids. In my case, it was my dad and grandfather who frequently took me paddling in a marsh behind my house. As with other things in life, what you grow up with affects many later decisions, demonstrating the importance of getting kids exploring the outdoors from an early age.

Birding: Many of North America's top birders were products of a birding renaissance in California during the 1970s. What modern movements are spawning young birders today?

JB: There may be nothing that compares to birding in California in the '70s. I would have loved to have experienced it! Today, the internet is a portal for young birders to find others who share our passion for birds. The ability to connect with others who also spend their weekends looking for rare birds, read field guides before bed, and are dying to see the birds beyond their home states is what helps young birders make it through peer pressure in middle and high school. Road trips are planned through instant messaging, listservs host identification discussions, and there are a few spots that bring us together, such as young birder camps, conferences, and the "intern house" in Cape May.

Programs supported by the American Birding Association, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT), Leica, and WINGS have played a huge role in building a generation of birders. To set the time frame, the attendees of the first VENT camp in 1986 are now in their thirties, and participants in the inaugural ABA/Leica Young Birders' Conference in 2000 are in their mid- to late twenties. Ask hotshot birders in that age bracket if they went to a young bird-

er event, and you'll find that many of them did. These programs fostered the core of this generation. Your support of young birder programs, so that they can continue to be affordable, with scholarships available, is making a difference for the next generation.

Birding: How are you making the transition from young birder to professional birder/ornithologist?

JB: It's been a smooth transition for me so far. I am grateful for a number of people who gave me their support and encouragement as a young birder. The key for me was gaining field experience throughout high school and college, each job opening new doors. I'd suggest any young birder follow similar footsteps, getting involved in undergraduate research especially. I made a big step recently, starting work at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. I'm figuring out very quickly it's the hub of ornithological activity in North America. The Lab is built largely on the reputations of renowned ornithologists, but from a birder's perspective it's changing, becoming a place where birding meets ornithology, reaching out to a broader audience.

eBird represents the epitome of this change. It is a free online checklist program (with all your listing needs), designed for birders by birders, that makes valuable contributions to monitoring bird populations. It's the perfect application for birders to contribute their everyday sightings to a science-based program. The eBird project leaders are phenomenal birders, representing the very best of the next generation of birders, creating a worldwide database of bird sightings. They're backed by a team of excellent programmers and brilliant analysts. It's a very exciting project, bringing millions of field observations together, providing information that will be more valuable in the future than we could ever predict today.

Birding: Why do you keep a field notebook? What's in it?

JB: There is no better way to improve your birding skills

than by keeping a field notebook. Field notebooks are things of personal preference in many ways. Most (and mine) include the standard date, time, location, weather, and habitat information, along with a combination of sketches, checklists (with the number of individuals!), and brief notes. My notes range from behavioral observations to how a migration day related to the weather to the fine details of field identification. Now, I enter my checklists into eBird upon returning from the field. While the field notebooks on my shelf have a lot of sentimental value, the information entered into eBird has intrinsic value to population monitoring and conservation.

These days you can buy great binoculars to help you see birds, and a slew of field guides so you know what to look for, but a fundamental step in bird identification is training yourself to pick out details. Taking field notes is the best way to learn this skill. The process of note-taking often leads to more questions, so you are more engaged in the field and really watching a bird, not just identifying it. Try going out with a notebook in your pocket instead of a field guide. You'll see.

Birding: What modern tools can birders use to complement the time-honored practice of patient observation and careful note-taking?

JB: There are so many. Here's one very recent example. With my Cornell Lab colleague Chris Wood, I am hosting a new series

of online videos presenting the tools, tips, and techniques for taking your birding to the next level. It's called *Inside Birding*, and it's all about reaching out to large numbers of people and teaching them birding skills. Check it out online <AllAboutBirds.org>.

Birding: How will this new generation change birding and ornithology?

JB: I think this generation will bring birding and ornithology together, again. Ornithology started with people in the field making observations, collecting specimens, describing behaviors, subspecies, vocalizations, and breeding biology,



Jessie Barry. Photo by © Chris Brown.

and sharing their findings. Early ornithologists knew birds intimately and were trying to discern the big picture. Sometime in the past century the field aspect was lost for many ornithologists. One can get a Ph.D. in ornithology today without even knowing the birds that migrate across campus. Currently, there is a divide between ornithologists and birders, stemming from a lack of mutual respect and understanding.

Like a number of other birders of my generation, I am pursuing birds as a career. There is something of a split between those seeking an academically based vs. a birding-oriented path. The academic types with childhood roots in birding are choosing projects that are field-based, often applying the evolutionary concepts we can see clearly as birders in the field. The birding-oriented side is finding it harder to break new ground in North America. We have reached a plateau in our understanding of identification and distribution. Interests are shifting to sorting out subspecies using genetic tools, heading farther afield to other continents, and using advanced technology to tackle challenging topics like nocturnal migration and flight calls.

Many of these interests integrate new technologies with traditional field observation. This is how my generation will use birding field skills in ornithology, and I'm hopeful the results will reach the birding community. I'd like to see more portals for birders and ornithologists to share their findings, conveyed in a style and language everyone can understand. Although there are underlying differences between birders and ornithologists, there is a common thread—to conserve birds and their habitats. Among my peers, we share a strong feeling of responsibility to do so. I think this generation of birders can bring the two communities together, working for the common goal of conservation.