

A Birding Interview with George Fenwick

George Fenwick, founder and president of the American Bird Conservancy <tinyurl.com/2dyar29> for the past 15 years, is a native wild bird's best friend. For a lifetime of service to conserving native wild birds and their habitats, he was given the ABA's Chandler Robbins Award in 2009 and nominated for the 2010 Indianapolis Prize, the world's leading award for animal conservation. Fenwick holds a Ph.D. in Pathobiology from Johns Hopkins University, where he studied the effects of exotic species on native avifauna, and he worked in a variety of capacities during 15 years with The Nature Conservancy.

In this forthright *Birding* interview, Fenwick lays it on the line for bird conservation—and asserts that in the future we will wish we had done more for birds in the past.

—Noah K. Strycker

Birding: Is the Cerulean Warbler our modern-day canary in a coal mine?

George Fenwick: Sure, but there are as many canaries and coal mines as there are birds and habitats under siege. Condors dying from lead poisoning are a canary for lead in every environment, sage-grouse are a canary for the decline of sagebrush habitat, and Red Knots are a canary for over-harvest and decline of Delaware Bay resources. We can turn these canaries into success stories such as for the Peregrine Falcon, the Eastern Bluebird, and the Hawaiian Goose if we care enough to act. Everyone can take steps to conserve important habitats near home, and everyone can support regional or national organizations that they feel are effective in addressing issues important to them, but the birding community can best succeed by reducing threats to birds such as habitat loss, toxics and invasives in the environment, and other large-scale threats by collective, organized action.

Birding: Why did you start the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) in 1994?

GF: I started ABC because I saw a huge, vacant niche for bird conservation, and nothing in 15+ years since has dissuaded me from that impression. ABC works with many groups, but in the end we need to depend on the bird-specific ones to advance bird conservation. Most conservation groups do good things, but just don't have the needed focus on birds.

We need nonprofits in conservation. Government can't do the whole job for us. In my admittedly biased view, nonprofits generate most of the good, new ideas; they have the will to stay the course through changing political systems; and they bring additional resources to the table. Government cannot lobby itself for change.

Birding: What are ABC's current and upcoming campaigns?

GF: ABC's current campaign has three themes: safeguard the rarest; conserve habitats; eliminate threats. Our next campaign will likely be the same. "Safeguard the rarest" refers mainly to establishing reserves needed to conserve the world's rarest bird species, those down to just one or a few sites on Earth. We have created or expanded 40 such reserves in Latin America in the past few years. We also need to "conserve habitats" at the landscape level for declining, rare, and range-restricted species in the U.S. Most of ABC's work has been in conjunction with Partners in Flight and the various "Joint Ventures," but we are now expanding, as with our new Hawaiian birds campaign. "Eliminate threats" refers to ABC campaigns to reduce broad-scale threats such as collisions with glass, wind turbines, and cell towers; getting rid of bird-killing pesticides; getting cats out of bird environments; getting rid of exotic species; and reducing other major threats.

Birding: What is the status of ABC's effort to reduce bird deaths from collisions?

GF: Collision with glass and other manmade structures is an equal opportunity killer: Practically all species are affected, but perhaps nocturnal migratory birds are most harmed. Ovenbird and Tennessee Warbler are especially hard hit, according to some studies. This is probably the greatest killer of birds in absolute numbers, on par with habitat loss. There are many ways to reduce this carnage, and we are just getting started. It is important to act now because there are solutions—such as ever-improving window applications—that can be implemented now to reduce these needless deaths. Check out the ABC website for tips to reduce collisions.

Birding: Which is more harmful to birds: climate change or cats?

GF: No matter which issue conservationists address, the opposition always responds by saying some other problem is worse, so, they ask, why blame them? Evaluating relative harm to birds across different threats is complicated. For example, climate change may be the greatest issue facing the world today, but if all our energies are spent addressing this threat at the cost of all others, we may well lose much of our biodiversity to other threats, such as exotic species, pathogens, and poor land management in the meantime. ABC can add only a little to the climate debate, but with the same resources we can do many other things to help birds.

Birding: What should be done about Hawaiian birds?

GF: The richest and most environmentally conscious nation in the history of the world should not turn its back on its most imperiled natural heritage. Problems for Hawaiian birds, such as the Palila, Millerbird, and Maui Parrotbill, are huge. This nation needs to gear up and do what it takes to solve the problems for “America’s Galapagos.” Solutions exist, and failure is just not acceptable.

Birding: Why is ABC active in bird conservation throughout the Americas, rather than just North America?

GF: Conservation of neotropical migrants requires consideration of the full life cycle of each species, including wintering habitat south of the U.S. Beyond that, though, ABC emphasizes conservation of threatened Latin American species and habitats simply because so little has been done there, and because we should regret losses of all birds, not just those in the U.S. Some species, such as the Santa Marta Screech-Owl, were not even discovered until a reserve was established and bird monitoring begun.

Birding: What is the purpose of ABC’s El Dorado Bird Reserve in northern Colombia?

GF: El Dorado is arguably the most important single site in the Americas for endemic bird species. ABC supporters funded the creation of this reserve and ecododge, but it is owned and managed by Fundación ProAves, an excellent Colombian conservation organization. Something on the order of 16 bird species occur *only* there, including the Santa Marta Antpitta and Santa Marta Warbler, and the forests were being lost to

cutting, exotic species, and other threats. You should visit!

Birding: With the Environmental Protection Agency’s ban on many insecticides harmful to birds, are wild birds now safe from chemicals?

GF: Not yet. However, the EPA is more attuned to protecting birds from contaminants than at any time since we began working on the problem, and the agency should be lauded in this regard. Grassland and marshland species are especially vulnerable because those areas are sprayed more frequently than others. Through efforts by ABC and its partners to restrict or prohibit the worst pesticides, we estimate that annual mortality from pesticides has been reduced from an estimated 67 million birds in 1992 to perhaps 15 million today. We are still at a stage in which broad strokes—such as limiting food import tolerances for pesticides outlawed in the U.S.—can make a huge difference.

Birding: Do you believe interest in birds and bird conservation is increasing?

GF: I wish I could say yes, but I am really not so sure. I often tell audiences of my visit to a Borders bookstore near where I live. There I counted three shelf feet dedicated to bird books and 52 feet dedicated to manga (Google it). So, if this is an

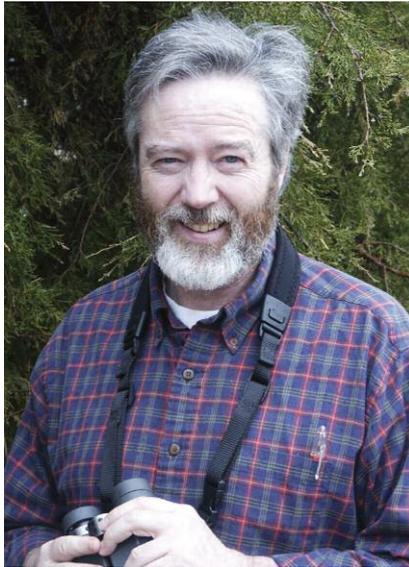
indicator, U.S. society seems to me to be drifting further from nature. If that is true, then that makes readers of this interview even more important to the future of birds.

Birding: Is conservation ultimately pointless?

GF: Only in terms of geologic time. Otherwise, thinking this is short-sighted. E.O. Wilson said it better than I can: “The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.”

Birding: Why don’t birders support conservation more?

GF: Ah, the \$64,000 question. Here are some of the answers I hear: “Birding is a hobby or escape.” “Conservation is a downer.” “Birders haven’t any spare money for conservation.” “Conservation is the job of government.” “There is already enough conservation and plenty of birds.” Each of these views is the beginning of a conversation, and conservationists need to provide persuasive answers. In the future, we will always wish we



George Fenwick. Photo by © George “Ansel” Wallace.

had done more for birds in the past.

Birding: Why have conservationists shifted away from protecting individual species to focusing more on broad ecological issues?

GF: Starting about 25 years ago, conservationists began to see the true scale of the threats to biodiversity and they blinked. They saw the task of species-by-species conservation—for example, the campaigns to save the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken or Hawaiian Crow—as being ultimately overwhelming and thus fruitless. So they retreated to “more efficient” landscape (or ecosystem, or hotspot—or you pick the term) level approaches. I believe we abrogated our responsibility to species. Sure, landscape-level conservation is terrific, but I am not convinced the overall results of the past quarter century have been that much improved over single-species approaches of the past. At any rate, there is no reason not to employ all effective approaches to conservation from the species level to the global level. We can protect single threatened species while also addressing landscape-level change.

Birding: What do you think of the “commodification of nature” approach, or defending biodiversity in economic terms?

GF: This is just another tool that can do

some good in some audiences and in some situations. ABC encourages careful ecotourism, carbon mitigation that protects forests, and other economic tools, but appreciation for nature—a willingness to protect nature for its intrinsic value—is our best hope. My main fear of an economic basis for conservation is that it may result in a succession of increasingly worse compromises as other commodities increase in value in the public perception.

Birding: Is the U.S. going greener?

GF: I can't say whether the U.S. is going greener or not. It is hard to separate the rhetoric from the reality—we lack metrics to evaluate good vs. bad in terms of progress—and harder still to predict the staying power of the more positive activities now under way. Let's just keep pushing and being optimistic in the face of some fairly overwhelming short-sightedness, cultural obstacles, population demographics, and daunting scientific facts such as climate change.

Birds provide relief from these sobering facts. Of all living things, birds have most ensconced themselves in our minds as being representative of all that is good about nature. For me, the song of a Wood Thrush always improves my morning or evening. In many talks, I have offered a free lunch to anyone who does not have a picture of a bird in their house. I have never yet had to pay up.

New Antpitta Discovered

As this issue of *Birding* went to press, news broke of a new bird species, recently discovered in Colombia. The bird is an antpitta, and the name Fenwick's Antpitta (*Grallaria fenwickorum*) has been proposed, honoring George Fenwick and his family.

The bird was discovered in early 2008 at the Colibri del Sol Bird Reserve, which had been established by the American Bird Conservancy and its Colombian partner, Fundación ProAves, a few years before to save two other rare species, the Dusky Starfrontlet and Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer.

Important to Fenwick personally, the holotype for the new species was released alive back into the wild.

“I am especially proud of this because it is a reflection of ABC's partnership with superb organizations such as ProAves,” Fenwick said, “and of our mutual successes in saving rare bird species in many parts of Latin America over the past few years.”



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