

A Birding Interview with Paul Lehman

Paul Lehman is one of the most-traveled and best-known birders in North America—with an extraordinary talent for finding rarities. He honed his skills while growing up in the New York City area, and found his stride while living in California (twice) and at Cape May, New Jersey. He has created the range maps for almost every major North American field guide on the market today. He is an associate editor for *North American Birds*, the author of numerous papers on bird distribution and identification, a WINGS tour leader, a former *Birding* Editor (from 1989 to 1997), and a former lecturer in geography at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His wanderings have led to the discovery or co-discovery of nine North American first records (Little Curlew in California and eight new species resulting from his extensive fall birding at Gambell, Alaska).

In this intriguing *Birding* interview, Lehman talks of making new discoveries even in heavily birded areas, considers the lure of Gambell, and confesses to an atmospheric addiction.

—Noah K. Strycker

Birding: Tell us about your “sickness”—listing.

Paul Lehman: I’ve always enjoyed it, but it is just one of a number of reasons to get out and go birding. For me, listing is a good impetus to explore little-known regions that might not otherwise beckon. One of my mentors, Bob Smart, started me on “Total Tickies” when I was a young lad in the 1970s—that is, adding up all one’s state and provincial lists. That “sickness” (no argument here!), coupled with my long-time interest in geography, sufficed to propel me into nooks and crannies of every state and most provinces in the ABA Area. I was no longer focused on just the more “glamorous” regions and at their “best” times of the year. Instead, I birded in all of them and at a variety of seasons. *That’s* how one learns avian status and distribution! Ditto the county-listing (and month-listing) fanatics on the state and provincial level; they are often the ones who know bird distribution in their home state better than anyone. If list-

ing means knowledge, then it’s more than a game.

Birding: How many total ticks do you have in the ABA Area? Do you have any goals?

PL: As of December 2011, 17,915. But that total is not really why I do it—although I admit to having wondered if 20,000 is possible... Again, it’s more the fun and knowledge gained from exploring both the well-known *and* under-birded parts of North America. Actually, one goal I have is to go over 50% of every state’s, province’s, and territory’s list in the ABA Area. The real sticking points are going to be the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and St. Pierre and Miquelon!

Birding: Your name is widely associated with *Birding* magazine’s prominence and ascendance in the late 1980s and 1990s. How did you do it?

PL: I feel a bit odd trying to answer that question. But if people liked what they read in the pages of *Birding* during that period, it was mostly the result of all the great authors, photographers, reviewers, and editorial staff. I believed that the topics for which *Birding* could best fill a needed niche in North American field ornithology were identification, distribution, bird-finding, taxonomy, and book and product reviews, so I emphasized those.

Birding: What motivates you to seek rarities?

PL: Migration and vagrancy have been two topics that have always fascinated me, as well as the role weather plays in these phenomena. My favorite type of birding is to seek rarities and witness migration at places such as islands, peninsula tips, and isolated oases. Whether such sites are islands in the Bering Sea, lone ranch yards in Nevada or eastern New Mexico, shorelines on the Great Lakes, or peninsula tips in Nova Scotia or Newfoundland, they are all great. When I spend a couple days in poorly known southwestern Arizona (not too far from my home in San Diego), I do so at a string of some 10 to 15 isolated patches of trees (mostly around small towns and homesteads), lakes, and dairy slop ponds. Every time I step out of the car at the next spot, a new suite of birds—and possible surprises—beckons. It's like being a kid in a candy store.

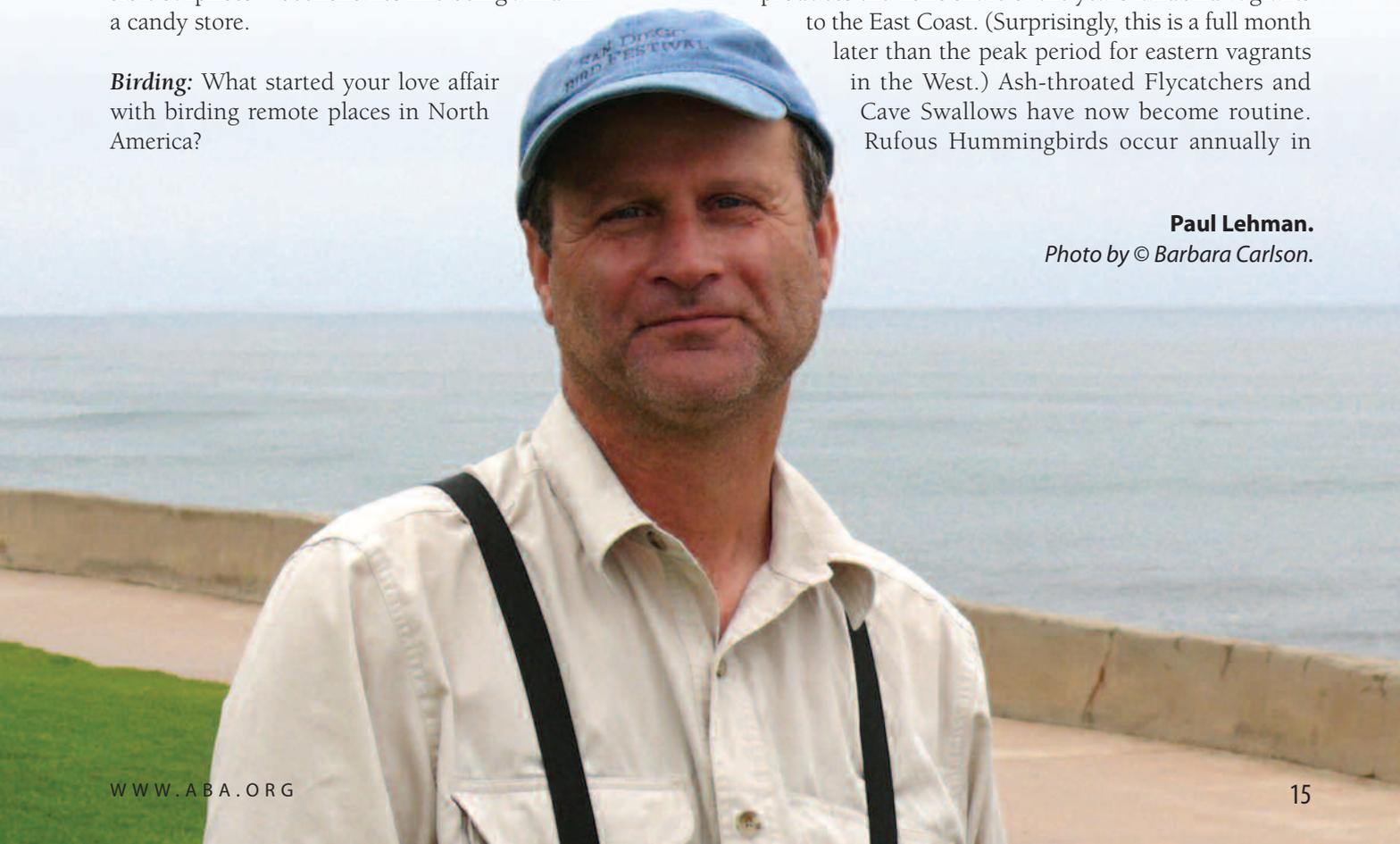
Birding: What started your love affair with birding remote places in North America?

PL: Maybe it's the enjoyment of birding obscure spots and hoping that doing so might contribute new information and further understanding of North American bird distribution and changing bird populations. But I also enjoy birding familiar places “close to home.” Some birders may be under the mistaken impression that they cannot discover much or make valuable new contributions if they live in heavily birded areas. Far from the truth. Here are two examples:

I lived in Cape May for 14 years, drawn by the migration spectacle there. Of course, Cape May is the antithesis of what one thinks of as “under-birded.” Yet, I initially found that many folks were only going to the same four or five spots, and for good reason. Those places were excellent! But instead of being the tenth birder to check the same bush, a number of us did extra exploring and “discovered” all sorts of new places, even at Cape May. Also, as recently as the mid-1990s, only a relatively small number of observers knew about “late-autumn rarity season” in the East—the latter part of October and much of November, when many western and other strays occur. Most birders had quit checking migrant traps after warbler migration petered out in October. But during the latter 1990s, we demonstrated that this one-month period produces the lion's share of the year's landbird vagrants to the East Coast. (Surprisingly, this is a full month later than the peak period for eastern vagrants in the West.) Ash-throated Flycatchers and Cave Swallows have now become routine. Rufous Hummingbirds occur annually in

Paul Lehman.

Photo by © Barbara Carlson.



small numbers, and, each year, several other western hummingbird species stray east to the Atlantic Seaboard. We also helped document that huge waves of regular, short-distance landbird migrants occur in late October and early November. It was also critical for us to learn what types of weather events trigger such flights and vagrant surges.

The other example comes from here in San Diego, where I moved in early 2008. This has been a heavily birded area for at least four decades. Perhaps some people thought it had already seen its heyday, given that so many initial discoveries were “behind us” and that the crush of humanity that is southern California had taken its toll on some former birding hotspots, now ruined. However, most birding was taking place only at refuges, sanctuaries, public parks, cemeteries, and picturesque forests and coastlines. With only a handful of exceptions, most birders were ignoring well-vegetated neighborhoods, condo complexes, and some additional “less-aesthetic” locations. We’re changing that, and are turning up a very impressive selection and number of additional scarce migrants, vagrants, and normally rare wintering species in sometimes unprecedented numbers. [He’s not kidding! See *North American Birds*, vol. 65, no. 2, p. 342 (2011)—*Editor*]

There are countless other well-birded urban and suburban regions of North America that also await such exploration and discoveries.

Birding: Why is Gambell such a special spot?

PL: There is something about being at the “end of the world” that makes for very interesting birding, including bizarre migration events and lots of lost vagrants. I love the feeling, while walking around, of never really knowing what next “mega” or other interesting find might pop up. I especially like birding at Gambell, as well as on other Bering Sea islands, in the (formerly) under-appreciated *autumn*. The birding is a bit tougher and less predictable than in the more heavily birded spring, but, with all those young birds of the year making their first migration, the number of both regular migrants and vagrants is often higher, and the chances for true mega-rarities—from both Asia and mainland North America—are better. The same is true at many other far-flung spots that are at or near the “end of the line” for many migrants.

Birding: How can birders increase their chances of find-

ing rarities?

PL: By being able to recognize the characters that make for a good migrant trap, knowing when to look for what species (in other words, learning status and distribution), and studying what sorts of weather conditions are best for producing migrant fallouts and rarities.

Birding: You’re a weather junkie, aren’t you?

PL: Yeah. I’ve even been accused of watching reruns of *The Weather Channel*.

Birding: Is there a bright side of internet birding? What are the benefits, and what is the dark side?

PL: The internet has certainly been an incredible boon to birders and birding for countless reasons. I surf the internet for birding information for far too much time each day, just like everyone else. Many citizen-science projects that use the internet, such as eBird, have the long-term potential of being extremely valuable resources. But the instant posting of unvetted news and information comes with serious accuracy issues. There is a lot of chaff out there with the wheat. Of course there have always been accuracy problems, but now there is even less vetting before material becomes widely disseminated.

I’m afraid that the immediacy of the internet has led us, as a community, to become sloppier. Written documentation appears to be a declining practice. Not only do many birders need to be more careful with what they post—and be readily willing to retract misinformation later on—but we should all be more circumspect about what we read. Everyone makes mistakes in the field—misidentifications, inaccurate counts, and so forth. Reports of rare and unseasonal species by observers who did not appreciate *at the time of the sighting* that the bird was unusual are particularly prone to error. Some projects, such as eBird, try to minimize the inaccuracies through regional review. But in all such cases, the review is only as good as the filters and reviewers that are used. Many of the inaccuracies that I fear will (permanently?) creep into our birding databases are *not* those which involve the more easy-to-spot misidentified mega-rarities. Rather, they involve the less-obvious errors, such as the inaccurate high or low counts, slightly early or late dates or other unseasonal occurrences, and species that are just slightly out of range or habitat.

One way to minimize such errors: Yep, learn status and distribution!