

Watching The Birdwatcher

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

Stereotypes are interesting if somewhat deceiving. We have them for practically every group that inhabits this world of ours. For example, picture Miss Quigly, the local librarian. Chances are you *knew* she was a fiftyish spinster with a #2 pencil poking out of her tight little topknot even before you laid eyes on her. The local biker club is naturally made up of long haired guys with leather jackets and tattoos of "Mom" on their muscular biceps. But pity we, the poor birdwatchers. For our stereotype is just as misleading.

Perhaps it's the fact that we call ourselves "birdwatchers" rather than ornithologists that causes the problem, that leads many non-birders to view us as wimps. Caricatures certainly haven't helped. I can't count the number of cartoons I've seen portraying the birdwatcher as a gangling, knobby-kneed boy scout wielding field glasses and a spiral notebook. (The type of guy who always gets sand kicked in his face at the

beach.)

In truth this image couldn't be more fallacious. Of course, there are all types of bird watchers as there are all types of people. But the serious birders invest tremendous amounts of energy and vitality into their pursuit. If the particular species they are stalking nests high in the mountains, they hike. If they long to record the "yank-yank" of a white-breasted nuthatch, they may tumble out of bed before dawn, robust and ready — even on a Sunday. Now to me, that's no wimp!

What is the driving passion which lures thousands of men and women to the meadows, forests, mountains and shores? What keeps their interest "high" despite the ridicule doled out by those who insist bird-watching is for sissies? It's an interesting question.

To find the answer we must at least discover a basic understanding of the concept behind birding: how it evolved, what it is and what it does for its disciples.

First of all, birdwatching is not a new pastime. Fact is, we know that the earliest American birders were the Indians. Though these forerunners did not maintain records like we do today, it is believed that they had great expertise as observers. Joseph Kastner, author of *A World of Watchers*, refers to the tendency of various tribes to name birds after certain physical or behavioral characteristics. For example, he mentions the Malecite Indians of New Brunswick who named the spotted sandpiper "nan a-mik-tcus" or "rocks its rump," which is just what the piper does. The spruce grouse was named "ses-e-ga-tig-hes," or the "bird that picks at the buds of evergreens and weeps." The latter bears reference to both the bird's eating habits and the peculiar reddish-colored skin surrounding its eyes.

Early white settlers were also birdwatchers, but with a difference. They exhibited a more analytical interest in birding and birds. Rather than a mere descriptive interest, they kept records, made lists, involved themselves perhaps more with the interrelationships between birds and their natural surroundings. Though there is hardly a one of us who doesn't quickly link giants like Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon to the world of birding, we tend to overlook so many, many others. Among these was an American physician and naturalist, Benjamin Smith Barton (1766-1815), who not only wrote the first American elementary botany text but made a concise listing of some

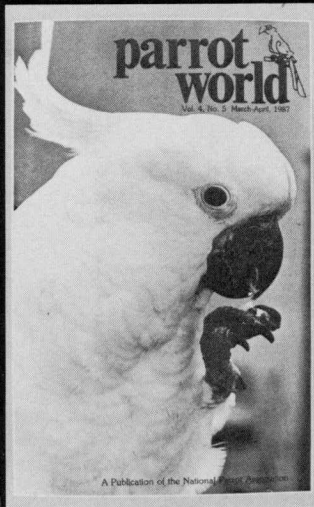
200 birds and conceived several terms which birders today continually make reference to. Then, there was William Bartram (1739-1823), creator of *Catalogue of Birds of North America*. This text did much more than list species. It noted migration dates, nesting habits and songs. It also expressed Bartram's personal preference for studying "live" birds in the field rather than dead specimens, as was the general European custom. Bartram was an undeniable influence on Alexander Wilson who created a masterful work entitled *American Ornithology* (a work which for decades served as the foundation for all bird study in America).

It would take more than a single article to explore the impact these several men and their colleagues had upon our modern day pastime of birdwatching. And even with their guidelines we would find arguments concerning the actual purpose for birding as we know it today. There would be debate as to whether birding should be classified a sport, a study, an avocation, a career. There would be suggestions that it signifies little more than an escape valve from the high pressure lifestyles we lead. But I maintain that the best definition we can ascribe to this pursuit be that birding is actually a sensory involvement as unique to each of us as our fingerprints. For some, birding encompasses the indescribable thrill of being able to identify a songster by its chorus. To others it may be the gleeful knowledge that they were first in their bird group to spot and identify a truly rare specimen. Then there are the people who regard birdwatching as a critical key in conservation programs. They are the ones who dedicate time and efforts to meticulous tabulations — counts that will show which way a particular species is going — either up or down in numbers.

Birdwatching is really all of these things and more. It is an academic workout and an athletic drill. It allows a person to flex the muscles in his head and the muscles in his legs simultaneously. And, when it comes right down to the nitty gritty, birding provides life-enriching experiences. It converts a simple walk around the block into a fascinating nature study program.

No, we're never going to change the minds of skeptics. There will always be that group who'll think our birding the sport of sissies. But let them hold tight to their silly stereotypes. Birders *see* and *bear* what others only dream about. They soar with eagles and sing with the nightingale. ●

If you love parrots ...
You'll love Parrot World!



Join us and receive a year's subscription to our fact-filled bi-monthly magazine. All about Parrots, Macaws, Cockatoos, Conures and more. Expert tips on breeding, nutrition, taming training, health care, Q's & A's, classifieds, D.V.M. and bird-boarding referrals, shows, book reviews. DISCOUNT BOOK CLUB, PARROT'S PANTRY, annual photo contest. Only \$17 yearly. (Canada \$19. Foreign \$29 - U.S. funds only).

**National
Parrot Association**

8 No. Hoffman, Dept. W, Hauppauge, N.Y. 11788

Aviculturist Estate for Sale

Finest Bird Farm



CUSTOM 8 YEAR OLD 2,600 SQUARE FOOT HOME. DOUBLE DOOR, FORMAL ENTRY AND DINING ROOM. SPACIOUS COUNTRY KITCHEN AND PANTRY. MASSIVE FAMILY ROOM AND FIREPLACE. FULLY SEPARATE LAUNDRY ROOM AND 3 CAR GARAGE. FULL MASTER SUITE WITH SUNKEN TUB.

85 Custom (4' x 12' x 8') all steel aviaries on concrete floors for easy upkeep. Exterior wall completely stuccoed to blend with house and property. All flights have fully automatic waters, metal feeders and secured saftyflight walkway. Automatic night lights and security lighting system provides after dark access to flights.



Located in Orange County's exclusive City of Yorba Linda, CA and fully sanctioned for its present use. This fully landscaped estate sized property has every amenity the modern aviculturist could want. Stock and inventory also for sale.

\$335,000

Offered Exclusively through
Owner-Operators
Finest W. and Winnie Van
(714) 524-9653