

50 Years of Carolina Birding — A Retrospective

BOB HOLMES

This year, 1993 marks my 50th year of birding in North Carolina. Because this 50 year period has seen a number of changes in bird distribution and populations as well as in birding and birders in this state, I felt that a review of some of these changes might be of interest to those readers of *The Chat* who have been involved in birding for a shorter period of time. My approach to the hobby has been that of an amateur. Thus, some of the following comments and sometimes anecdotal observations may be inexact. They will have to be forgiven as prattle from a member of the bifocal, hearing-aid generation whose primary involvement in science has been the medical profession.

Birding

First, some reflections on birding itself. It may be difficult to envision the dramatic increase in human mobility that has taken place over recent decades. Before the 1950s automobile ownership was not universal as it seems to be today, certainly not before the age of college graduation. This tended to limit many of us to birding in our own locality. The idea of crossing the length of the state to "chase" a rare bird was an unheard-of impracticality. I recall riding passenger trains from my home in Mount Olive as a means of transportation to bird counts in Wilmington and Greensboro. For many years a large percentage of the information on eastern North Carolina birds came from excursions to the area by the Brimleys and others and from various wildlife refuge wardens. The important point to be made from this is that many later findings about birds in the east, especially in regard to seasonal distribution of birds, that were interpreted as changes were not true changes but actually represented a more accurate picture of long standing patterns. For instance, I know from personal observations that some species, including Great Egret (*Casmerodius alba*) and Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*), were more common winter birds on our coast than described in the 1942 edition of *Birds of North Carolina* (Pearson, Brimley and Brimley), although the two species named in this example seem to have continued to increase. Of course, the problem of differentiating real changes in bird populations from apparent changes resulting from improved information that comes from better coverage of an area by birders is not limited to eastern North Carolina.

In addition to improved mobility afforded birders and an increase in the numbers of birders, these past fifty years have provided a wonderful improvement in the tools at our disposal. One must examine a copy of an early edition of the Peterson field guide, with its mostly black and white drawings, to appreciate its evolution into the array of excellent field guides now available. The improvement in optics has been equally striking. Coated lenses did not become available to the non-military until the end of World War II, and most binoculars tended to have narrow objective lenses, 8x25 and 8x30 being the more common dimensions. Among the more welcome developments has been the replacement of shotguns by cameras with telephoto lenses for the verification of rare findings. My interest in birding came at the end of the

shotgun era, and many of us were adept at making study skins of collected birds.

I do not recall when I first saw my first spotting scope, but I do know that for some time I was the only one in my group of birding friends who had a telescope of any description. It was an old brass pull-out type. To support and steady the telescope I trimmed and carried a hardwood sapling about six feet long with a fork at its tip, in which I couched the scope after sticking the end of this monopod into the ground. It pivoted about as well as modern tripods, was much lighter, was less expensive and doubled as a deterrent to the occasional dog that challenged this suspicious person.

Taxonomic Changes

Another change I might touch on is the lumping and splitting of various species of birds. A review of this subject would be too involved for this writing. I will mention just two examples. Formerly, the "Myrtle Warbler" (*Dendroica coronata*), which has been renamed Yellow-rumped Warbler, was separated from "Audubon's Warbler" (*Dendroica auduboni*). The Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax trailli trailli*) has been split into Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax trailli*) and Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax alnorum*). Somehow I would still like to think of the "Ipswich Sparrow" as a separate species rather than as a subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*).

Then there's the matter of changes in the common names of various species. I am afraid that for me a Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) will always be a Hudsonian Curlew, a Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) always a Whistling Swan, and a Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) always a Man-o'-War-bird. Happily, the pendulum has been known to swing as in the case of the Bachman's Sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*) which was transiently called "Pinewoods Sparrow". One does not have to be a taxonomist to agree with the indication for such long overdue changes as from "Wood Ibis" to Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*).

Changes in Distribution and Numbers

Now to proceed with mentioning some of the more dramatic shifts in bird distribution and changes in abundance that have taken place within the past half century. Certainly, no new ornithological observations will appear here. But, again, I hope to touch on some of the highlights that may not be appreciated by those who have been birding in North Carolina for a shorter period of time and to further impress upon others the dynamic status of bird populations and distributions. The recent surge of interest in pelagic birds has produced a profusion of new data; but the data were scant on these birds (especially the families Procellariidae and Hydrobatidae) in the Carolina offshore waters prior to about fifteen years ago. It would be presumptuous to say that the expansion of our knowledge regarding the distribution of these species reflects any actual change.

The most dramatic saga of this era, and one familiar to each of us, is that which we might speak of as the ebb and flow of the "DDT birds", particularly the Brown Pelican (*Pelicanus occidentalis*), the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*),

the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). Of these, it is my impression that the Brown Pelican's rebound has been the most striking and the Peregrine's the least so. Before DDT, wintering Bald Eagles could be found readily almost anywhere along the coast. I have no memory of the Peregrine Falcons having ever been common here in the first place.

Although bird protection laws existed much earlier than 50 years ago, the full resurgence of the terns and wading birds, following their decimation by the millinery trade, was still underway at least through the fifties. The stories of the Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) and the White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) are a bit more complicated in that these species have shown a true northward extension of their breeding ranges since the mid-fifties, along with increases (transiently?) in their overall numbers.

How many generations into the future will it be before we again witness a two-continent range extension without the assistance of Man, as in the case of the Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), which found its way to North Carolina in 1956?

On the less happy side is the alarming diminution in numbers of Anseriformes, including the fairly recent precipitous decrease in the population of migratory Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) in eastern North Carolina. The Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) responding to habitat improvement and legal protection, represents a shining exception to this sorry picture.

The Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), formerly rare in the Carolinas, has become a regular winter resident along the entire length of the coast beginning in the 1980s and is increasing in numbers. The winter population of Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) continues to increase, with flocks numbering in the thousands now being a common sight along the coast. In addition, this species is now being reported frequently during both winter and summer in the Piedmont and is even being seen in the mountains. There are now breeding reports of Double-crested Cormorants from Jordan Lake.

Several gull species have undergone striking seasonal and populational changes. The Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) was a winter Outer Banks specialty until it began expanding its range in the early 1950s. By 1973, it had become a breeding bird in North Carolina, and now may be found regularly year-round in the lower portions of the larger rivers as well as along the coast, where its winter population increase has been explosive. There are now scattered reports of this species in the Piedmont. Within the past ten years the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) has become a regular winter species, at least along the Dare County coast, before which time it was considered very rare. Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) were not known to nest in North Carolina until 1962. Over recent years its numbers, and to an even greater extent the numbers of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), have markedly increased—especially during the winter months. Also impressive has been the westward extension of these two species within the Carolinas.

There was what appeared to be an extension of the breeding range of the Common Ground-Dove (*Columbina passerina*) as far north as Carteret County during the 1970s. Since that time, the species has again become rare in southeastern North Carolina.

The Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*), formerly not known to breed east of the inner coastal plains, is now being found as a breeder in the pine plantations as far east as the Croatan Forest. Another caprimulgid, the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) has shown a progressive decrease in numbers, at least in eastern North Carolina.

The plight of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) has had a place on center stage; but numbers of the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) have also decreased, this being especially apparent in the wintering population. Conversely, the adaptability and improving status of the Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) has been a pleasure to witness.

In 1952 I saw my first Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) nest—at Cape Lookout. Prior to that time the species was known only as a very common migrant. Since the fifties their breeding range has extended centrally from both the east and west to include the Piedmont and Coastal Plains of the Carolinas.

The Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) seems to have vanished from the Carolinas. From my reading I get the feeling that this range shrinkage was already underway more than fifty years ago. Over a more recent period of time, the breeding range of the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) has extended southeastward to include the entire Coastal Plain of North Carolina.

The well recognized decrease in Loggerhead Shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*) seems to have been most drastic in the early 1980s.

Almost across the board decreases in the numbers of neotropical migrants is one of the stories of the hour, and unfortunately, is not a problem peculiar to the Carolinas. This development is too complicated to be detailed in this space. Among this group of birds, the most intriguing history is that of the Bachman's Warbler (*Vermivora bachmanii*), which was rediscovered near Charleston during the late 1940s only to disappear once more. I suspect the explanation of its fate is multifactoral. Northern Orioles (*Icterus galbula*) were chiefly known as migrants east of the mountains, but have become regular wintering birds since the late 1940s and occasional breeders since the 1950s. Blue Grosbeaks (*Guiraca caerulea*) seem to have become more common; but Painted Buntings (*Passerina ciris*) are more difficult to find now, in contrast to perhaps 25 years ago. This condition is undoubtedly related to increasing development of their coastal habitat.

These fifty years have seen an amazing increase in the numbers of Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) regardless of the season. Fortunately, we no longer have to expend any effort to determine whether we are seeing a "Purple Grackle" versus and "Bronzed Grackle" versus a "Florida Grackle" as we once did.

House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), formerly a prominent part of the avifauna of every yard and small town street, are now much less common. I suspect there are reasons for this change in addition to the decreased availability of horse manure and the incursion of House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) which have been postulated as explanations.

A "finch year", in which we see unusually large numbers of finches coming south, may be a phenomenon of the past. It was not until the early 1950s, however, that these winter emigrations included large numbers of Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*).

Birding Personalities

In conclusion I would like to mention four birders from this era who deserve special recognition. Perhaps there are others who are equally noteworthy, but these are four people I am privileged to have known personally.

First, C.S. Brimley. Although we remember Mr. C.S. as an ornithologist or birder, the scope of his knowledge of natural history in general was impressive. He was a soft-spoken gentleman who was able to tolerate and encourage a novice birder and, on the other hand, had little patience with reports he considered unreliable—to the extent of once completely disqualifying a Christmas Count that he felt contained too many highly unlikely species of birds. His response to questions was prompt and thoughtful, always in the form of handwritten postal cards. He was the oracle.

A similar person, of a bit later vintage, was E.B. Chamberlain. Mr. Chamberlain was a reserved but warm individual with a great sense of humor, all of which tended to conceal his depth of knowledge in various areas of natural history in general as well as of birds in particular. His contributions to birding in the Carolinas went far beyond his having co-authored *South Carolina Bird Life*.

The third person I shall name is the other co-author of *South Carolina Bird Life*, Alex Sprunt, Jr. Not only was Mr. Sprunt known for his writing and his work with the National Audubon Society, but also he was especially impressive in the field identification of birds. He was a young birder's idol, whom I often thought of as our southern Ludlow Griscom.

Finally, there was Edna L. Appleberry, who, though quite different from the above personalities, deserves special mention when one thinks of those who contributed to Carolina birding from the 1940s to the 1960s. Mrs Appleberry never pretended to be an ornithologist or even an eminent birder. She was, however, the equivalent of a one-person ornithological chamber of commerce for southeastern North Carolina. It was partly due to her effort that a greatly improved knowledge and appreciation of birds in this area has come about. Mrs. Appleberry and her wonderfully tolerant husband, Cecil, are also remembered for having helped and encouraged a number of youths who are now outstanding birders.

Certainly the next fifty years of Carolina birding will produce as many interesting developments and changes as have the last fifty. There will surely be as many challenges for the birds and the birders. I do hope that the baton being passed to the new generation of birders will carry with it the immense pleasure that birding has afforded me and my generation.

Appreciation is expressed to John Fussell for his review of this paper. Any errors, however, are attributable to the author.

4003 Trent Pines Drive, New Bern, NC 28862