



ILLINOIS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

President's Message

I subscribe to at least 10 internet listservs devoted to birding, some local (like IBET), some regional and at least one national in scope. Reading one of them recently, I was struck by how frequently those who post use an email address directly connected to being a birder. One address in particular put it right out front, identifying the writer as *thepassionatebirder*. That got me thinking: Do non birding friends, spouses, children, co-workers, etc., view us as passionate about birding, or obsessive? And is there a difference? And how do our birding friends view us, and themselves? I know my wife Karen sometimes views me as just a wee bit obsessive when I try to explain why I still read the North Dakota listserv, since we haven't been there in 3+ years and have no immediate plans to return. I just tell her I love to read about those winter Gyrfalcons.

Obsessions are fascinating, albeit sometimes not very pleasant to those who associate with an obsessed person. But isn't the same thing true about a passion? We all know someone who is passionate about playing bridge, rooting for the Chicago Cubs or St. Louis Cardinals (there's an obsession for you!), visiting garage sales, or some other avocation. If that particular bug didn't bite you, it's tempting to scratch your head, and say "I just don't get it!" Like it or not, I do think that birders as a group would view the word obsessive as a pejorative. Even within the birding community, there are occasional sparring matches over the merits of 'listing' vs. not keeping a list, with salvos being fired suggesting a lack of merit to... whichever side of that fence you're on.

Since at least one person did self identify as a passionate birder in his/her email address, I made a cursory search to see whether any other individual birders used any form of the word obsession in their email address. I found none. This admittedly unscientific survey suggests we don't, as a group or individually, view ourselves as obsessive about birding.

Unfortunately, our self perception may be out of step with the general view. Soon, we will either enjoy (or cringe) at Steve Martin in the *Big Year* movie, described by *The Hollywood Reporter* as "...an allegory for the challenges each (of the rivals) faces in his own life." Then there's the recent column by Nathan Heller in the online magazine *Slate*, who theorizes that birding... "rose to popularity in the unrest of the nuclear era, and... points toward a looming fear of ecological apocalypse." Say what!! We bird to act out an allegory of our fear of a nuclear holocaust! Heller even manages to gratuitously interject the infamous Leopold and Loeb child killers into the column. It's pretty clear this columnist at least is firmly on the side of those in the non birding public who view us as obsessed.

Then there was *The (Manchester) Guardian* article in 2006 reporting on the death of Colin Watson, Britain's most notorious egg collector. Watson died falling from a larch tree while trying to reach a nest. First *The Guardian* describes him as "passionate" about his "hobby," who enjoyed birds as a boy. Happily, the article does eventually concede Watson wasn't just a boyhood bird watcher gone wrong. But I suspect they had to tiptoe very carefully around the suggestion that birders are obsessive, given the power and influence of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, with its 1 million plus members (200,000+ youth members). Though RSPB might not be too disturbed about being labeled as obsessive, since their stated goal is to "...speak out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment."

So the next time a non birding friend asks why you bird, just tell them it's a passion. Then offer to take them out in the field with you, so they can experience one of those WOW moments we all experience. Perhaps they'll become as passionate as you are.

— Robert Fisher, President

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