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# NATURE LIBRARY

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## ALBERTA BIRD RECORD

A.O.R.C., 3426 Lane Crescent S.W.,  
Calgary, Alberta. T3E 5X2 \$10. per year.

Alberta Bird Record is a seasonal (quarterly) journal of field ornithology in Alberta. The province is divided into eleven reporting zones from which summaries are received for Winter (Dec. - Feb.), Spring (March - May), Summer (June - July) and Fall (Aug. - Nov.). Articles on migration trends, unusual behaviours, identification problems, current species' status, etc. are also published. Sample copies may be requested from ABR (c/o Federation of Alberta Naturalists) at the above address.

## A WORLD OF WATCHERS

JOSEPH KASTNER. 1986. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 241 pp. Bibliography, index. 19 black-and-white illustrations, 10 colour, from the work of Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Hardcover \$36.75.

In *A Species of Eternity* (1977), Kastner gave a fine account of some 18th - and 19th-century naturalists who discovered and catalogued the New World's abundant natural riches. Now, in an equally handsome, gracefully-written and well-researched companion volume, he narrows his focus and expands his time frame

to give, in the pertinent words of the cover blurb, "an informal history of the American passion for birds — from its scientific beginnings to the great birding boom of today."

The book opens with a nod to the Indians, who, despite their manifest perceptiveness, fail to qualify "in modern terms" as birders, according to Kastner, because they didn't keep lists. Perfunctory too is the author's treatment of such pre-1850 luminaries as Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon and Thomas Nuttall; they were given their due in the earlier book.

The first and perhaps most exciting of the three major periods of American birding, Kastner says, is the Bairdian Era, which began in the 1850s. Spencer Fullerton Baird was an orderly, reliable, highly conscientious man and from his youth a compulsive list-maker. From his office in the fledgling Smithsonian Institution, he organized scientific expeditions which, as adjuncts to military excursions, crisscrossed the Americas. Some of these parties were sent into the unexplored American West — where Indians were often less than hospitable — in order to map possible routes for a transcontinental railway. The soldiers were encouraged to study the natural history and collect specimens. The Army's medical corps, with its scientific background, was ideally suited to this pursuit. Several Army medics under Baird's direction became

bulwarks in American ornithology: Coues, Hammond, Xantus, Bendire are names familiar to anyone who has looked carefully at a modern bird guide.

Baird was thus able to incorporate the findings of his "missionaries" into a five-volume landmark work on ornithology of which he was senior author. The work refined the life-history approach to species accounts and set new standards of exactitude and conciseness in ornithological writing. Kastner credits Baird with having "organized the science of ornithology and, as a by-product, the disciplines of birding."

Another important organizer of the time was William Brewster, co-founder of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, which in 1876 began publishing the first periodical devoted wholly to birds. A contemporary, the aforementioned Elliott Coues, a man of prodigious accomplishment and prickly character, wrote a field guide which was one of a handful of works that "changed everything for American birders." Cumbersome as the guide seems today, it nonetheless made bird identification more efficient than it was before.

The second major period in the history of American birding is that of the Audubon Society with the great strides it made in popularizing bird watching and in spreading the gospel of bird protection. The first Society was formed in 1886. The first issue of Audubon magazine warned of the possibility of the extirpation of wild birds and, in another article, extolled the virtues of hawks, which were then generally regarded as vermin. Audubon societies were instrumental in the successful crusade against the fashion for adorning women's hats with bird plumes. They also recruited wardens to protect birds and, by appealing to the average rather than the expert birder, found support from a wide cross-section of the public — in contrast to the uppercrust, male-dominated organizations prevalent till about 1900.

The third period of U.S. birding history is that of the modern field guide, initiated in 1934 by the publication of Roger Tory Peterson's first book. The simplicity and ingenuity of the Peterson system helped make birds identifiable for millions of people who had never before been able to tell a cardinal from a catbird. And now, with improved optical equipment, commercially available bird-sound recordings, specialized publications, mountains of bird literature, and a community of thousands of dedicated birders across the continent, it is indeed true, as Kastner quotes author Christopher Leahy's statement that "a 'serious' birdwatcher today could easily instruct an 'ornithologist' of 150 years ago."

More important than birders' expertise is the fact that they now constitute "the largest, most insistent and often the most vociferous group of conservationists Constantly outdoors, disciplined to make specific and repeated observations and records, they are immediately sensitive to changes in the environment and through their network are able to confirm any wide harm that man may be doing to it."

Kastner relates his history with economy and grace. He sharply delineates the key characters, bringing them to life. His writing is rich in incident and anecdote, and his emphasis is always on people — what they saw, how they felt, how they banded together.

He tells of the House Sparrow controversy, the stories of the major bird clubs and publications, the role of women as educators and crusaders, the furor resulting from pressure to halt the "collecting" of specimens, Margaret Morse Nice and her celebrated Song Sparrow studies, and the tales of many individuals, some famous, some obscure, whose lives were touched in profound ways by birds.

Kastner offers many reasons why people watch birds and how they acquired "that



gentle obsession." He quotes conservationist Joseph Hickey, whose memorable definition of birding was "a mild paralysis of the central nervous system which can be cured only by rising at dawn and sitting in a bog." But what makes a good bird student? In the chapter on Nice, Kastner writes: "'A necessary condition for success,' she said, citing an English observer, 'is a continuous sympathetic observation of an animal under as natural conditions as possible. To some degree, one must transfer oneself into the animal's situation and' — here she gets about as close to the soul of birding as almost anyone can — 'inwardly take part in its behavior.'"

The Fuertes illustrations are striking, especially the ten watercolours, which are richly reproduced on glossy stock. Three line drawings, however, are incorrectly labelled in an index; indeed the book as a whole would have benefited from the services of a capable proofreader. But *Watchers* is a splendid example of quality bookmaking and it deserves a wide readership. How nice if it were to inspire a Canadian counterpart! For every Baird, Coues, Brewster and Bent active in the U.S., there was a Taverner, Macoun, Dionne and Seton working here, and their accomplishments are equally worthy of celebration. — Reviewed by *Bob Kohlmeier*, R.R. 5, G.B. 75, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7K 3J8



*Watching the 19000 swans at Goose Lake*

*Gary W. Seib*