

OTHER

Behind the Binoculars: Interviews with Acclaimed Birdwatchers

By Mark Avery, and Keith Betton. 2015. Pelagic Publishing, PO Box 725, Exeter, UK, EX1 9QU. 158 pages, 69.99 GBP, Paper.

This book is a collection of interviews by two renowned British birders of themselves and 20 other birders (Chris Packham, Phil Hollom, Stuart Winter, Lee Evans, Steve Gantlett, Mark Cocker, Ian Wallace, Andy Clements, Mike Clarke, Debbie Pain, Keith Betton, Roger Riddington, Ian Newton, Steph Tyler, Mark Avery, Stephen Moss, Alan Davies, Ruth Miller, Rebecca Nason and Robert Gillmor). The authors looked for a diversity of people born between 1930 to 1980. Note there are only three women. My casual observation is that I have seen a lower percentage of women when birding in the UK. In North America it is balanced.

While they tried for diversity the first thing I noticed was all these hot-shot birders started before the age of 10. The older people often said they were loners and many said they were “closet” naturalists as birding was not approved by their peers. While a couple were rudely rebuffed by older birders, a number were fortunate to find mentors who boosted both their skills and their scientific purpose. One sad point arose. If I was to offer a ten year old boy a drive to the woods today I would be in deep trouble. My friend Dennis Rupert and I took out three young boys, with enlightened parents, and all grew to be great teenage birders. This ability to teach, encourage and guide the young is now sadly lost. In a similar vein these folks wandered alone, unsupervised,

through woods, along reservoirs and over heaths, on foot or bike. Would parents let their children roam like this today?

Fortunately in 1965 the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) – the UK’s premier wildlife organization started the Young Ornithologists Club or YOC to promote and help young naturalists. A lot of the birders in this book became members and benefited greatly from its programs. This helped fill in the loss of the freedoms noted above.

Before reading this book you need to understand the term “twitcher.” In North America I have heard these people called “(tick) lister” or “combat birder.” These are highly competitive people who try to see as many bird species in a given area or time period as possible (causing the participant to “twitch” in excitement. While all birders list to some extent, this is more akin to an aggressive numbers game. Twitchers do contribute to ornithology by finding rare birds and changes in ranges, but their input is small. While I will make an effort to see a rarity (like the Little Egret in Ottawa, 2015) I am not really a lister. On retirement I found I had not updated my life list for 40 years. However I am not as anti-twitcher as Ian Wallace who concluded it was “sheer nonsense.”

A good portion of the interviewees have seriously “twitched” for at least some time, before moving on. The race to find and see rarities has provided some amazing records for the UK bird list. Out of the 598 species of birds on the British list as of 7 February 2015, 288 are marked as rare vagrants – that is almost 50%. Many of the interviewees now question the consumption of resources and wonder if there is a better use of funds (for conservation) than twitching.

I was amazed by the talent these people brought to the UK scene. Many are writers of books, reports and scientific papers. Others are artists or photographers. All have played important roles in national, regional or local societies. Their collective contribution to British environmental cause is enormous.

The oldest person interviewed was Phil Hollom, famous as the co-author of a *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* in 1954 (along with Roger Tory Peterson and Guy Mountfort). This became the standard field guide to British and European birds. It is now in its sixth edition. Sadly he died, the last of the renowned trio, in 2014 at the age of 102.

One of the interviewer’s questions is who would you like to meet. In my case it would be the artist Robert Gillmor. I have admired his art for years and have

copies of his prints, and he comes across as an interesting and thoroughly likeable man. His comments exude a charm that comes from experience, reason and balance. Fittingly the book’s cover is a print of “Turnstones” by Gillmor.

The two authors are themselves in the elite of UK birdwatchers and they interview each other. Keith Betton is a trainer and consultant who has held executive positions in British Trust for Ornithology, RSPB and African Bird Club. He has an amazing life list of 7500 (the world record is 9000 +). Dr. Mark Avery is an author and wildlife campaigner who has devoted many years to the RSPB. The authors add their last thoughts which echoed the mental review of most interviewees. It gave me much to think about as I plodded out the muddy paths to census reeling flocks of shorebirds – or is that waders?

For me this was a nostalgic book. I related closely to many of the stories, particularly by the older people. It was a fun book to read and should appeal to all avid birdwatchers. So take it to the cottage and curl up by the fire when the rain is heavy and enjoy.

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