



A Birding Interview with Steve N. G. Howell

A series of coincidences after college led Steve N. G. Howell to Mexico, where his adventures culminated 14 years later in the publication of the authoritative *Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Today, Howell is among the world's most experienced, knowledgeable, and passionate of birders. He is a tour leader with WINGS; a Research Associate at PRBO Conservation Science and the California Academy of Sciences; former book review editor of *Western Birds*; and an internationally renowned expert on Mexican birds, seabirds (especially gulls and tubenoses), and molt, as reflected in numerous publications on these topics. He received the ABA's Robert Ridgway Award in 2005 for publications in field ornithology.

In this no-holds-barred *Birding* interview, Howell reflects on Zen birding, ill-conceived species names, overdue species splits, wording and birding, and the pleasures of birds and tacos in a sunny country.

—Noah K. Strycker

Birding: What took you to Mexico and why do you keep going back?

Steve N. G. Howell: I think it was an old Mercedes bus from Brownsville, but it might have been a Volvo. I keep going back because Mexico is a great country full of birds. Did you know that Mexico ranks in the top 10 countries worldwide for biodiversity? And it has been ranked fourth in the world (behind Indonesia, Peru, and Brazil) for holding the highest number of Endemic Bird Areas! Yet there's still so much to learn, plus very friendly people (notwithstanding the paranoid U.S. media) and great food and culture, and it's warm and sunny a lot of the time. Where else in a day can you see Christmas Shearwater, California Towhee, Wood Sandpiper, South Polar Skua, Reddish Egret, and Belding's Yellowthroat, and then celebrate with fresh fish tacos and a fine tequila under the stars?

I particularly enjoy exposing other birders to Mexico, and seeing their excitement at discovering for themselves how great it is. It's also good to report that, compared to 30 years ago, there are a lot more Mexican birders, plus birding clubs in a number of the bigger cities, some international birding festivals, a lot more knowledgeable local guides, and overall a greater awareness of the environment.

Birding: How do you balance birding with your other interests?

SNGH: Birds and birding and words and wording are my two main interests, and I seem to find time for both, often in-

tertwining the two. They also combine nicely with interests in biogeography, butterflies, flyingfish (see aba.org/2012/07/digital-photography.html), and travel, so it all works out.

Birding: What is your next big project? Do you ever take a rest?

SNGH: I'm working with Will Russell and Ian Lewington on finishing up a book provisionally entitled *Rare Birds of North America*, which deals with species recorded on average five or fewer times a year north of Mexico. As well as listing or summarizing records and discussing identification criteria, we explore and discuss vagrancy patterns across different groups—fun stuff. And the plates by Ian are amazing.

After every big project (speaking of which, I recently finished a photographic guide to tubenoses of North America) there's always a period of recharging one's batteries. But I've found when working on enough things simultaneously there's rarely any real rest—and if you enjoy what you do, why rest?

Birding: Now that we have you on the phone, so to speak, would you share your thoughts about molt...

SNGH: Molt is an understudied subject, which means there's still so much to learn. The very day I received these interview questions I'd been examining museum specimens and had just figured out the molt strategy of Black Swift, which is wrong in the literature. Now I have a better understanding of how the appearance of Black Swift varies with age and sex. This knowledge also helps formulate ideas on how to identify and age/sex

some enigmatic swift species in South America. In other cases, simply knowing that molt does *not* help with an identification is useful. It's one less variable to wonder about, and birders often forget that the negative (what is a bird *not* doing?) can be as helpful as the positive. For a fuller commentary on molt, readers might consult my *Molt in North American Birds* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

Birding: ...taxonomy and nomenclature...

SNGH: Like the rabbit taxonomist who kept splitting hares, I find taxonomy fascinating. At the same time, I note that taxonomic lists and field guides are very different things, a point I and others put forth in our essay, "The Purpose of Field Guides: Taxonomy vs. Utility?" (*Birding*, November 2009, pp. 44–49). Decisions are based on information, and collecting information takes time. Any criticisms of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), meaning here the AOU's Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (North and Middle America), should be tempered with this caveat in mind. Publishing information takes even longer, especially in the so-called academic world where taxonomy can seem as much a political science as a biological science. Some splits have taken astonishingly long to become "officially" accepted,

such as Mexican Whip-poor-will or Tamaulipas Crow, which ought to be obvious to anyone with normal hearing and a basic grasp of biogeography; and many others remain.

In order to split something, the AOU says: "We need published data." Others would reply: "Why?" In cases where taxa are morphologically, vocally, and often ecologically obviously distinct, to deny this is surely counterproductive to both ornithology and conservation. Isn't it most sensible to treat such taxa as subspecies until proved innocent seems contrary to a basic tenet of the U.S. Constitution. Thus, "we the thinking birder" should split Eastern and Western Marsh Wrens or Eastern and Western Warbling Vireos or any number of things that clearly qualify as good species. To spend time on painful elaboration of the obvious, in some cases where data have even been published (for example, Marsh Wrens), seems a rather inefficient use of everyone's time. There are plenty of cases about which we don't know enough, and surely those cases are more deserving

of further study. If the AOU disagrees, the burden of proof should lie with them to publish long, statistically overburdened papers arguing that such-and-such are *not* good species.

Inconsistency is also something that puzzles many birders. Why is the American Black Duck a "good" species but Mexi-



Steve N. G. Howell kicks up his forever-sandaled heels near his home in Bolinas, California.
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On New Zealand's Campbell Island, the interviewee contemplates a nesting Southern Royal Albatross. Photo by © Dan Brown.



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can Duck not? Why split Hermit and Townsend's warblers but not Myrtle and Audubon's? Answer: because somebody once pronounced it to be so, not because it is necessarily true. As the late Allan R. Phillips once observed, the birds decide the reproductive isolation, not people. For humans, everything comes down to a matter of opinion. A line always has to be drawn: DNA or no DNA. Birders should realize that the AOU is only human, and the organization simply offers opinions, not proclaims laws; nobody is obliged to follow them.

A common complaint is that the AOU has a poor record on user-friendly English names. We already have countless unhelpful names; for example, Ring-necked Duck and even Song Sparrow—other sparrows don't sing? For better or worse, though, these names are enshrined and serve their purpose for communication. But why add more? In particular, retaining the unmodified English name for one member of a newly split species-pair, at least when one or both species are migratory and can occur together, contravenes any definition of common sense. Witness, for example, the ill-conceived names in the (long overdue) "Winter Wren"—"Pacific Wren" split. I've never seen a Pacific Wren in the Pacific Ocean, and I've done hundreds of pelagic trips. Wouldn't Eastern Winter Wren and Western Winter Wren (and, yes, no hyphens) make a lot more sense, not to mention showing consideration for anyone using the vast body of literature published throughout North America (where "Winter Wren" has long been used for both species) or anyone birding in the field (say, in Colorado, far from the Pacific, where both taxa have been reported)?

Birders may be surprised to learn that not all members of the AOU committee

are professional taxonomists or even ornithologists, which isn't a criticism. It simply reinforces that any thinking person can read the literature and make informed decisions. Being a voluntary body means that committee members may have difficulty finding time to read the ever-growing corpus of taxonomic literature. In this regard, birders can help. If you think something should be split, and if you care and have the time, you can synthesize the literature and present a well-argued case to the AOU. To their credit, they accept proposals from anyone, and they might be grateful that you've done a lot of "their" work for them. In the meantime, we could all accept that if the world were perfect we wouldn't be in it.

Birding: ...gull identification...

SNGH: Basically, there are two kinds of birders: those who have difficulty identifying gulls and those who lie about it. Some may even view gull identification as oxymoronic, although most gulls can be identified with some practice. But, being humans, we focus on exceptions, the oddballs, and get caught up trying to name them—hence, frustration. Yes, gulls can be very challenging, but when I look at a flock of gulls and see some I can't certainly name (which happens frequently, by the way), it's refreshing to be humbled by my ignorance, not frustrating. Think of gulls as the ultimate vehicle for Zen birding and accept that some will not be identifiable. Let them go, relax, and move on to ones you can identify.

Birding: ...young birders...

SNGH: As we're running out of time, or, more accurately, space, I'll be brief with these last answers. I've learned that young birders often know the field guides better than I do, and the best things to teach them may be to observe critically, to question, to seek truth, and, most important, to have fun while birding.

Birding: ...bird books and book reviews...
SNGH: Books should be written by people with knowledge of their subject and an ability to communicate clearly. Book reviewers should be knowledgeable and able to point out cons as well as pros. Given these criteria, perhaps a quarter of published bird books and reviews could be considered a misuse of paper, space, and everyone's time.

I also have an observation about books that might fall under your next question. Many birders I know balk at

paying \$30 or \$45 for a bird book full of color images. Yet these selfsame people happily—and frequently—spend that much on a single meal or even a bottle of wine at a restaurant. A book, in contrast, can last a lifetime and would seem a far better investment. Publishing is not a cost-free exercise, no more so than buying and preparing food, but if people choose to spend their money on (often overpriced and often mediocre) food, the least they can do is desist from complaining about the price of books.

Birding: ...and birding pet peeves?
SNGH: Beyond the comparison between books and food, I don't know that I really have any. But I do find that many birders take things rather seriously, which they're obviously welcome to do. Yet it is quite possible to watch birds, see lots of new birds, learn about them and their world—and have fun doing it. If you don't enjoy looking at gulls, don't do it. Young or old, we can watch birds to whatever degree gives us pleasure, and not judge others for being different.

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