

—Bob Ford & Paul J. Baicich

Post-pandemic Prognostications: What do we want to be?

*There is nothing permanent
except change.*

—Heraclitus of Ephesus
(c. 535–473 BC)

The events of the past year and a half make clear that when we look back, the experience will be seen as marking a turning point in our history and our behavior. The year 2020 was particularly remarkable, with the start of a global pandemic, severe economic distress, calls for social justice, and deepening political divisions. Another simultaneous shock to us as bird enthusiasts was the documentation of three billion birds lost from our birdlife over the past 50 years. And that loss seemed to be only the tip of the biodiversity iceberg; independent studies from around the world are documenting insect population declines and the degradation of ecosystem integrity. From the Arctic to the Amazon, in whatever ecosystem you visit in our hemisphere, the signs are everywhere. While these trials have already exhausted many observers, we realize that conversation, combined with action, must continue. Indeed, we actually see new opportunities

opening before us here at home.

These upheavals may actually serve to shift us from a familiar “business as usual” into a long-lasting “new normal.” Pundits and scholars alike are predicting more stay-at-home telework hours, less business travel, more virtual meetings, changes to educational practice, and more. However, exactly what the new normal will look like and the extent to which we change our “way of doing business” is as yet unknown. The relevancy of wildlife engagement and bird conservation in the new normal is also just starting to be revealed. Again, there is a foundation for hope and potential.

Since the crises of 2020 challenged our nation’s social fabric, it’s important that we recognize the foundational thread of bird concerns that exist within that fabric. In these unique times, people quickly responded by spending more time in the local outdoors, and, for many, this has sparked a renewed interest in birds and wildlife, from their backyards to expansive public lands.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption in our lives, yet even in a

situation of near-forced isolation, people have turned to their immediate and nearby outdoors. Local garden stores, plant nurseries, and national chains could not keep up with the demand for plants as people landscaped their yards for birds and other wildlife. When our fellow citizens were not leaving their homes to “find nature,” they attempted to draw nature to themselves and their yards with all-season bird feeding, birdbaths, and more. The backyard feeding-station has filled a role as new entertainment—for adults and youth alike—during hours when they might have otherwise been at work or in their classrooms. A new “discovery” began.

What we actually *do* with that “discovery” is the issue at hand.

Fortunately, and beyond that initial curiosity, many people turned in large numbers to record-keeping and citizen science. The number of backyard contributions to eBird skyrocketed during the first spring and summer of the pandemic. Other online data tools, such as iNaturalist, grew. Meanwhile, many people were heartened by the lowest air pollution rates in decades in many large urban areas, thanks to decreased air and vehicle travel. Optimism grew for revival in beach-nesting bird populations as many beaches closed to the public.

By default, the pandemic has introduced a swath of the Ameri-

can public to our birdlife. And if we wish to grow the appreciation and conservation of birds among more of them, it will have to begin with “where they are at” as a people. And right now, they are still at their homes, and, figuratively, just crawling out. If they reside in urban areas, or where the cities blend into the suburbs, they will first be attracted to the local birdlife: backyard, waterfronts, rooftops, and local parks. There is so much to learn, with the issues of local habitats, window-glass, the importance of insects in the avian food chain, and predators (feline and otherwise). A new curious bird-constituency will have to start “someplace,” and a small army of bird educator/conservationists will need to be ready to supply the information. (Online involvement will help but will never be enough.) Depending on location and opportunity, these will simply have to include people of color—often and regrettably absent from our ranks.

The issues can broaden into bird-safe building standards, bird-city designation, nest-box projects, and bird-friendly food sourcing. Eventually, and if done right, this can lead to serious and wholistic bird engagement. Rural Americans may be more drawn to a unique birdlife outside their door—at “edges” and farm fields—even appreciating aspects of such bird-conservation policy

as those in the Farm Bill. And everyone—eventually—could adopt a bird-oriented approach to use of wasteful plastics. In this last case, local conservation even connects with our ocean-and-island birds. Moreover, the cause of bird study and bird conservation can easily be addressed as we Americans continue to ask questions while we shop—questions about bird-compatible coffee, rice, cork, olive oil, seafood, and bread, for starters, and our plastic packaging, for sure!

As a new cohort of bird watchers appears—and it surely will after the pandemic—we will have the opportunity to check our competence in identifying the field marks of ducks, hawks, shorebirds, flycatchers, and thrushes, but also our ability to identify the hallmarks of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the Duck Stamp, and the aforementioned Farm Bill. Not only should we know the fundamentals separating cranes and herons, but we should also be able to differentiate state and federal bird-management responsibilities.

While deep divisions across the country may appear to obstruct a common view on some environmental concerns, from the use of public lands to pesticides, from fisheries management to livestock grazing, and on different interpre-

tations for the hope—or the illusion—of “green energy,” the birds might still connect us all: rural, suburban, urban, Black, white, Latino, Asian, male, female. Some of this involves a constructive exchange between bird watchers and hunters, potentially resolving different approaches to wildlife management and conservation. But what is missing right now is the readiness—and the dedicated people—to take on the broadened bird-oriented messaging across those preconceived “divides.”

And, as social justice concerns present an opportunity for serious change, we bird watchers and bird conservationists have yet to decide exactly how to fit in. At least we are realizing that these pressing issues of the moment are not independent of bird study and bird conservation. Already, state and federal conservation agencies, a field traditionally dominated by white males, having made initial advances on gender issues, are becoming increasingly aware of racial inequities within the workforce. Nevertheless, many people of color still have reason to be nervous and uneasy while outdoors. A welcoming and aware bird-watching community has only begun to understand and change those circumstances.

We will have to think hard about making new appeals and reaching new audiences in ways we have not pursued before. We will

have to think about transitioning people from a new interest in the backyard bird-garden and feeding station to local projects that will lead to broader bird appreciation and conservation. We will have to consider making “volunteering for our birds and people” a standard expectation for everyone carrying binoculars. In the process, we should adopt our own bird-version of the mission of our colleagues at the Trust for Public Land: to ensure that wherever you live, you have safe and easy access “to a quality park within a 10-minute walk of home.”

As the pandemic subsides and the economy slowly recovers, as more of us can travel and visit parks, refuges, forests, and bird festivals, there will be a new social “normal,” but it will only be better in the arena of bird watching, bird study, and bird conservation if we plan now and if we are deliberate in recrafting that coming new normal.

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