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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



◀ **John Gale** has illustrated several major publications, including *Birds of East Africa* and *Birds of the Middle East*. He is currently illustrating *North Atlantic Seabirds: Albatrosses and Fulmarine Petrels*. Gale's extensive field studies at locations like South Georgia are captured in land and seascape oil paintings portraying birds in their environment (galleryofbirds.co.uk).



Bill Pranty's studies in Florida have added Egyptian Goose, Purple Swamphen, Nanday Parakeet, and Common Myna to the *ABA Checklist*. Pranty is chairman of the ABA Checklist Committee and the author of six books and numerous scientific papers. His list of birds photographed in Florida totals 449 species, most recently a stunning Silver-beaked Tanager at St. Petersburg. ▶



◀ Seabird expert **Robert L. Flood** has a special interest in Atlantic Ocean tubenoses, and is the creator and producer of the multimedia ID guides to North Atlantic seabirds (scillypelagics.com/MIDG.html). Flood co-rediscovered the New Zealand Storm-Petrel, found Australia's first Polynesian Storm-Petrel, and was ship's ornithologist on the *MV Explorer* in the Antarctic when it hit an iceberg and sank.



Rick Wright leads tours for VENT and serves as Book Review Editor at *Birding*. He lives in Bloomfield, New Jersey, with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their chocolate lab, Gellert. Wright's recent publications include the *ABA Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey*. ▶



◀ **Laura Erickson** is a bird watcher and, once again, a bird listener, from Duluth, Minnesota. She produces a daily radio program about birds, writes a column for *BirdWatching* magazine, and is author of the forthcoming *ABA Field Guide to Birds of Minnesota*. She was awarded the ABA Roger Tory Peterson Award in 2014.

Jim Wright is a nature writer, blogger, and photographer, as well as the birding columnist for a daily newspaper. He is the author of four coffee-table books about nature, two crime novels, several children's books, and assorted ghost stories. ▶



◀ **Joel Greenberg** works on natural resource-related issues in the Chicago area, where he holds positions with the Field Museum and the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum. Greenberg is the author of numerous articles and four books, and he co-wrote and co-produced the documentary film *From Billions to None: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction*.

Grant McCreary is a software developer who loves watching birds and reading about them. It's uncertain which one more. His passion for both led him to create The Birder's Library (birderslibrary.com), a website where he reviews bird books and other media. He lives in Cumming, Georgia, with his wife and two kids. ▶



◀ The photos and feature articles of **Sam Fried** have appeared in field guides, nature books, newspapers, and magazines worldwide, and he founded Flights of Fancy Adventures, LLC, a birding and natural history travel company. Fried's very first published article appeared in *Birding* more than 35 years ago!



Mia McPherson enjoyed film photography but when digital cameras were invented, her love for bird photography deepened because of the instant results she could obtain. McPherson got seriously passionate about bird photography while living in Florida, and after her move to the West in 2009 she has spent much of her time photographing birds in Utah and Montana. ▶



◀ After receiving a B.S. in Natural Resources-Wildlife Management from Ohio State University, **Ashli Gorbet** relocated to Albuquerque to explore the mountains of New Mexico. She serves as Secretary for Rio Grande Bird Research, Inc., is Secretary of the New Mexico Ornithological Society, and sits on the Steering Committee of the New Mexico Burrowing Owl Working Group.



DAY OF THE DEAD



Three *Birding* Reveries

Years ago I read an essay—I think it must have been by Lewis Thomas—on the ubiquity of death and moribundity in the world around us. Everything dies. Everything out there will die, or is in the process of dying right now.

Yet we tend not to notice.

Look outside your window right now. Or if you're outdoors (reading *Birding* on a tablet or smartphone?), look around. What do you see? Lots of living stuff, I'm guessing: trees and grass and flowers; some people, perhaps; birds, I hope; insects, of course; and more. All around us, we're surrounded by life.

It's a tribute to the human spirit that we see things that way. But it's a grand delusion, isn't it? Every tree, every bird, every one of us will die, sooner or later.

Here are three essays that affirm an unassailable truth: Birds die. We know that in some abstract sense; we all know the statistics about birds killed by cats, windows, wind turbines, hunting, development, climate change, and more. But that's not what these essays are about. Rather, they're about the actual lives (and deaths) of real birds.

Needless to say, each of the following essays fits into the bigger picture of bird conservation. And our essayists know that. Electrocutation, barbed wire, even mining claims—those things all take their toll on bird populations. But the focus here is on individual birds: a Great Horned Owl trapped in a drain pipe, a Barn Owl hung up on barbed wire, a pair of Bald Eagles electrocuted by power lines.

These stories aren't particularly happy. And yet their ultimate message is powerful and positive: *Birding* is most meaningful, *birding* is most transformative, *birding* is most worthwhile when our focus is on the actual objects of our devotion, living, dying, and dead.

—Ed.



Lake Tohopekaliga,
Kissimmee, Osceola
County, Florida;
January 29, 2012.
Photo by © Sam Fried.



The two huge birds, identically dressed with pure white heads and tails on opposite

ends of a dark brown body, the female larger than the male, circled low over the pond, seemingly searching for fish. Each made several passes with no success, but perhaps a prospective piscine luncheon was not the only thing on their menu.

The pair of Bald Eagles gracefully gained altitude with deep strokes of their broad wings and soon were flying in tandem only a few feet apart. Matching wing-beat for wing-beat, the birds effortlessly gained altitude, circling higher and higher in shifting patterns that would rival an Olympic synchronized swim team. Up and up they soared, until I wasn't sure if I was watching them or a wisp of mile-high cloud. This being Florida in December, I hoped to witness one of the world's most spectacular flying courtship displays, but the eagles chose another time, another place for their aerial love-making. Every mating season, in an elegant bonding ritual, each pair of Bald Eagles flies high into the sky, locks talons and spirals downward together, cartwheeling in a free fall toward earth, safely separating at the last instant.



The other day I saw a sight that made me ill. It was a Barn Owl hung up on a barbed wire fence on the south side of Montana's Centennial Valley. I'd never seen a Barn Owl here, and both range maps I checked said they are rare to this area. To see the bird in such a predicament was shocking and gut-wrenching. I could see that the owl was alive. It moved some.

As soon as we saw it, my friend Ron Dudley and I stopped, took a few photos, and then hurried over to where the Barn Owl was to try to get it untangled from the barbed wire. I hoped it would be easy to get the owl free, but it wasn't. We knew we had to be careful for the owl—and for us. We both had gloves, so that helped. And we had a few tools. The wire cutters were dull, though, and it was very hard to cut through the barbed wire.

I held the owl's feet and talons while Ron tried to cut the damn wire. We probably spent 45 minutes trying to get the bird free, and when we did there was still a 9–12-inch section of barbed wire attached to the owl's wing. We wrapped the owl in a towel to see if we could get that section out without hurting the owl any more than it already was. The owl opened its bill but did not attempt to bite either of us—though it did get a good grip on Ron's glove.

I can't get over how light the owl was while I was holding it away from the wire cutters.

We decided at that point to wrap the owl up and head to where we could get a cell signal to try to find a rescue or rehab group. We were willing to drive anywhere to save the owl.

A car was coming from the east. It slowed down and stopped, and we were amazed to see that it was being

driven by none other than Bill West, the manager of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge!

There couldn't have been a better person to show up on that lonely stretch of road than Bill. Ron and Bill were able to remove the wire from the Barn Owl's wing, and then we wrapped the owl up in Bill's jacket. Bill had been heading east to Dillon for a meeting, but he said he guessed his plans had changed. He took the owl and headed toward I-15. As an afterthought, he said that, when he got a cell signal, he would send someone from the refuge to repair the fence.

Later in the day we found out that Bill was going to turn the owl over to the staff of the Humane Society in Dillon, who would then drive up to Whitehall to meet staff with the Montana Raptor Conservation Center, who in turn would take the bird to a facility in Bozeman. All I could think about was the owl caught in the barbed wire, and how I hoped it would make it. I remembered how I held it and saw into those ebony eyes. It still makes me want to cry.

This makes two owls I have seen hung up on barbed wire, a Burrowing Owl in Utah and the Barn Owl here in Montana. And I once saw a little brown bat caught up in barbed wire, also in the Centennial Valley. Can I say loud enough that I *hate* barbed wire?

EPILOGUE

In the weeks after the Barn Owl was rescued, it spent time being rehabilitated at the Montana Raptor Conservation Center in Bozeman, Montana, first in a small flight cage where it ate on its own and then in a larger flight cage in preparation for release. It was monitored carefully, and its wounds healed. Eventually the staff were confident about the owl's health, and it was taken to the Lower Lake area of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Montana, and released.

Life is good. It can also be sad and perplexing but still good.



Barbed OWL

South
Valley Road,
Centennial
Valley, Montana;
September 9,
2015. Photo by ©
Mia McPherson.

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