

# Birding

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# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



◀ North Carolina-based **H. Douglas Pratt** is a renowned expert on Hawaiian birds, but birders know him better as an illustrator for the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Pratt is a Fellow of the American Ornithological Society and longtime ABA member, currently revising his guide to the birds of Hawaii and the tropical Pacific.

**Diana Doyle** was Department Editor of *Birding's* "Tools of the Trade" column from 2011 to 2016. She has also written conservation and bird behavior articles for *BirdWatching*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and the ornithological societies of Minnesota and Florida. Look for forthcoming articles on Doyle's recent experiences birding the Appalachian Trail. ▶



◀ **Ioana Seritan** is Interpretive Specialist at San Francisco's Aquarium of the Bay, and Associate Editor of *Birding*. Her first adventures with the ABA were the 2012 and 2013 Young Birder of the Year contests. Since then, she has loved attending Camp Colorado, editing this magazine, and bringing you "Milestones."

**Rick Wright**, Book Review Editor at *Birding*, writes and reads obsessively about birds, birding, and birders—not necessarily in that order. Wright lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their lab, Gellert. His upcoming VENT tours include birds-and-art excursions to Venice, Provence, Burgundy, Tuscany, Catalonia, Poland, Brandenburg, Salzburg, and Guatemala. ▶



◀ **Kate Garchinsky** illustrates bird and nature books. Her debut picture book, *The Secret Life of the Red Fox*, was released in 2017 to critical acclaim. Forthcoming book projects focus on bats, skunks, and Ospreys. Garchinsky is the recipient of a Don and Virginia Eckelberry Fellowship for nature artists. See her work at [KateGarchinsky.com](http://KateGarchinsky.com).

**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. ▶



◀ **Ted Floyd** proudly serves as Editor of *Birding* and as Managing Editor of *North American Birds*. Floyd is the author of hundreds of articles on various topics and of several bird books, including the forthcoming *How to Know the Birds* (National Geographic). He loves birds because they are surprising.

A native of Vancouver, Washington, **Beth Guldseth** is a retired children's librarian. She was a long-time contributor to Noteworthy Books for Children and Teens (Library of Congress), Capital Choices best books list, and Notable Children's Books (American Library Association). Guldseth and her husband, Frank, live in Tucson, Arizona, enjoying the birds and the weather. ▶



◀ **Dennis Paulson** retired a decade ago after a career of university teaching and research, and it didn't take him long to discover that "retirement" had to have quotes. On the heels of his field guides to North American odonates, Paulson is working on two more dragonfly books—one a natural history, the other a guide book for Costa Rica.

# Look Again

*Thoughts on not seeing the obvious*

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First things first. Where are we? Answer: Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, Utah. Next question: What's the date? Answer: October 3, 2017. We've said it hundreds of time before, we'll say it hundreds of time more: Location and date are two of the most important field marks. Before you start looking at carpal bars and translucent remiges and such, know where you are and what the date is. Otherwise, you'll go down the rabbit hole of Roseate Terns and whatnot.

There are no Roseate Terns at the Great Salt Lake, not in October, not ever.

There aren't all that many terns, period, at the Great Salt Lake. Our only choices, really, are Black Tern (highly distinctive, doesn't match these birds at all), Caspian Tern (bill, plumage, and heft are all wrong), and Forster's (fairly common here)

and Common (rare) terns. By process of elimination, we've gotten to Forster's and Common. We're assuming, by the way, that we can all agree that this photo depicts terns. These aren't gulls or tropicbirds or White-tailed Kites.

Sometimes terns sit dumbly on sand spits and buoys, but not these two. They're doing something. The bird in flight is feeding the perched bird. On the bird in flight, note the silvery wings, black cap, and orangey feet and bill—all typical of adult Forster's Tern. On the perched bird, note the cinnamon tones above and the "eye patch"—good for juvenile Forster's.

The date is a bit odd. Well, the staff at Bear River had drained several units of the refuge during the normal nesting season, likely causing some of the birds to attempt a later second nesting. The refuge's Clark's and Western grebes also nested later than usual in 2017. Is it in some sense "cheating" to have that

**Featured Photo—October 3, 2017. Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, Utah. Photo by © Mia McPherson.**





knowledge? Not at all. Ecological context is critical to bird identification (not to mention bird appreciation). Talk to refuge staff. Talk to humans in general. They'll tell you stuff like, "Forster's Terns nested later than usual this year." Field guides are wonderful, but nothing beats learning from other birders.

Hold on a sec. There's another possible interpretation. In preparing this note, we talked to bird ID expert Tom Johnson, who reminded us that juvenile terns sometimes follow adults well after fledging. It's possible these birds nested quite a bit earlier in the season—and perhaps not at Bear River at all. Talk to the refuge staff, but also talk to Tom. In any event, we've got an adult Forster's Tern feeding a fish to a juvenile of the same species.

What about the third bird?

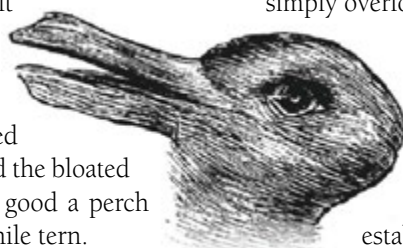
Terns can be tricky to ID. They fly around, they shimmer in the heat waves, they all look alike. Coots, however, are ridiculously easy to identify. There are two species in the ABA Area, and they never co-occur. If you are in Hawaii, you're looking at a Hawaiian Coot. If you're anywhere else, you're looking at an American Coot. (Okay, Eurasian Coot, an ABA Code 5 Species, is a remote

possibility. Emphasis on remote.)

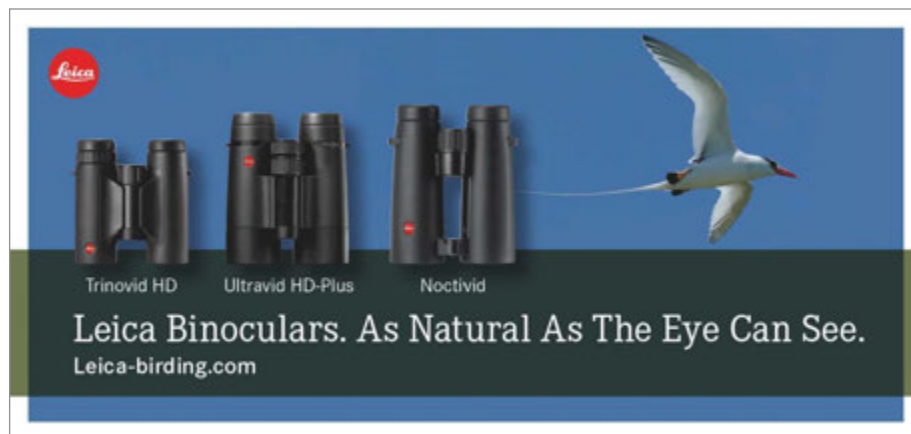
You *do* see the coot, yes? It's just sitting there, or bobbing there, upside down, dead as a doornail, patently obvious. The whitish bill is sticking out of the water beneath the adult tern's feet; the distinctive toes—lobed and puke-green—are splayed out to the right; and the bloated venter provides as good a perch as any for the juvenile tern.

One moment, it's just a blob of obsidian or something, the next moment, a coot. This is a bit like the famous old German woodcut of the rabbit... until it's a duck. But maybe that's not

the right analogy. In the rabbit-duck illusion, we all notice *something*. Most people see the rabbit first, but the two of us, birders like you, first saw the duck. In the case of the coot, though, did you simply overlook it altogether?



One of the most tortured discoveries in the history of science was that of the planet Neptune. Its existence had long been established by theory. That's because the weird orbit of Uranus requires a Neptune-like object to be out there. But nobody had ever seen Neptune, except indirectly via its gravitational influence on Uranus.



The eventual discovery of Neptune—the direct, observational discovery of the planet, that is—was a point of epic controversy. Both the British and the French claimed priority, and you know how Anglo-Franco relations were in the 19th century. Neurotic, to say the least.

The British and the French still haven't

worked this one out! But it doesn't matter. Here's the deal. In what has to be the eeriest coincidence in all of science, the planet Neptune was in conjunction with the much larger, closer, and brighter planet Jupiter on those exact same nights in the early winter of 1613 that the Italian Galileo Galilei was putting the finish-

ing touches on the greatest revolution in human history. Galileo's scope was a piece of crap by Swarovski standards, but strong enough to have picked out Neptune as it passed by Jupiter.

Galileo just didn't notice it.

Nope, that's not right, either. We haven't gotten to the most surreal part of the story. Galileo *did* see Neptune, more than two centuries before its definitive and disputed discovery. It's in his notebook, for all the world to see. (Back to birding for a moment: Even in this world of eBird apps and rare bird text alerts, it's a splendid idea to keep a field notebook. You never know when you'll change the world forever.)

The question of whether Galileo knew it was a planet remains unresolved. Re-

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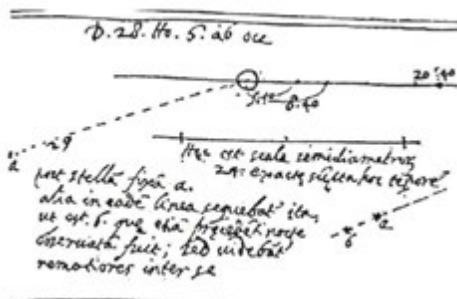
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This entry from Galileo's notebook shows the position of the planet Neptune. But did Galileo know what he had observed?

ardless, nobody else realized till centuries later that Neptune had been recorded in the great astronomer's field notebook.

Birding, nature study, and life in general are, or ought to be, exhilarating. There is so much out there to discover. Go find stuff. Notice things. If someone shows you a photo of terns, look further. Perhaps the prospect of discovering a dead coot doesn't thrill you, but what about the chance to espy a glorious alternate adult male Painted Bunting (tinyurl.com/PABU-surprise)? The French may not have discovered Neptune, but one of their most brilliant put it well: *Dans les champs de l'observation le hasard ne favorise que les esprits prepares.*

# FEATURED PHOTO

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The  
brilliant  
answer is  
always...



We all know that location and date are important in bird identification. So we'll tell you that this photo is from the Great Salt Lake in the early autumn of 2017. Here's another clue, a biggie: Depicted in the photo is a species that is one of the easiest to identify in the ABA Area.

• Read **Ted Floyd and Mia McPherson's analysis of the Featured Photo**, beginning on p. 68 of this issue.



What are others saying about these mystery birds? Join the online discussion, hosted at The ABA Blog and still ongoing: [publications.aba.org](http://publications.aba.org)

