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# W

hen *WildBird* asked me to come up with 20 ideas, events, products and influences that have changed the face of birding during the last 20 years or so, I thought I'd have a hard time mustering a quorum. In the end, I had to pare my entries to the requisite number. ♦ So many things have changed. So much that we regard as the birding landscape would have been alien to an earlier generation of birders. ♦ Twenty years ago, nobody breathed the word "digital scope." Today, this digital photography system seems

to be on every other birder's lips. Twenty years ago, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was synonymous with loss. Now it's a byword for hope. ♦ Some of my choices are slam-dunk selections. Some might seem more obscure, even obtuse. Everyone sees the world with different eyes. Feel free to disagree with or affirm my choices, starting with...

## 1 The death of Roger Tory Peterson

On July 28, 1996, birding's beginning ended. The man whose 1934 field guide made birdwatching a populist pursuit died on the eve of finishing the fifth edition of his famous book.

While it is not fair to say that Roger invented birding, he did—for much of his life—dominate it. His death ushered in an array of worthy successors including Jon Dunn, Kenn Kaufman and David Sibley who, by dint of their plurality, underline Roger's singularity.

## 2 The Zeiss 7x42 Classic binocular

The history of birding is the history of optics, and as optics improved, so did our ability to perceive birds. In the early 1980s, most of the Young Turks in birding had 10x40 (usually Zeiss) binoculars. The optics were sharp, rugged and sexy, and everybody seemed willing to overlook the fact that they had a shallow depth of field and a critical focus.

In the mid-80s, Zeiss introduced the 7x42 Classic. It was as forgiving and user-friendly as the ol' 10x40 was not. Because of this, it was possible to do something that earlier generations of birders never dreamed of: identify fast-flying songbirds at close quarters.

You want proof? Open the *Sibley Guide to Birds*. Note the illustrations of warblers in flight. Even genius needs a catalytic boost, and in the hands of David Sibley, the 7x42 was that catalyst.

Certainly there were other commendable binoculars on the market during the '80s and '90s. Some now match and even surpass the performance of the 7x42 Classic, but this was the glass that brought the frontier into focus.

## 3 Black-oil sunflower seed

In the '70s, there was only sunflower seed. It came in a zebra-striped shell.

Then the market was seduced by the dark side. Birders discovered that the smaller, thinner-shelled black-oil sunflower seed was pretty nearly the universal solvent when it came to attracting birds to feeders.

In the '90s, "black-oil sun" became the cash crop of bird specialty stores. It soon caught the attention of large retail chains that knew nothing about birds but could identify a growing market. If someone wants to know why Wal-Mart is so deep in the birdfeeding business, you can say "because the bird business is booming" and be correct. Unless you mention the catalytic influence of black-oil sunflower, you'd be telling only half of the story.

## 4 China

You might wonder why a civilization that has been around for several thousand years made my list. The answer is optics. China's industrial and marketing revolution has flooded the birding market with affordable roof-prism binoculars.

tourism along the way. The idea has been successfully emulated in many states (see *WildBird's* November/December 2005 issue for a roundup of new trails).

## 12 World Series of Birding

As the founder (and 23-year veteran) of North America's first birding competition, this entry is most certainly tarnished by personal bias. Nevertheless, the success of the event—measured in terms of generating publicity, partnerships and funding for conservation groups—has led to similar competitions, resulted in many millions of dollars raised and provided a stable source of funding for participating conservation organizations.

This reference would not be complete without acknowledging the father of the World Series. Long Point Bird Observatory's Bailey Birdathon first linked the institution of the 24-hour Big Day to money pledged per species, thus creating a fund-raiser.

## 13 David Sibley

The birder/artist whose *Sibley Guide to Birds* raised the ceiling on bird identification.

## 14 Kenn Kaufman

The birder/writer whose intelligent, utilitarian, field guide opens the front door to the next generation of English- and Spanish-speaking birders.

## 15 Bogen's Manfrotto tripod

The functional foundation of high magnification is precisely the foundation, the tripod, upon which spotting scopes rest. In the early '80s, there were lightweight tripods, stable tripods, smoothly functional tripods and inexpensive tripods. Almost none combined all of these attributes.

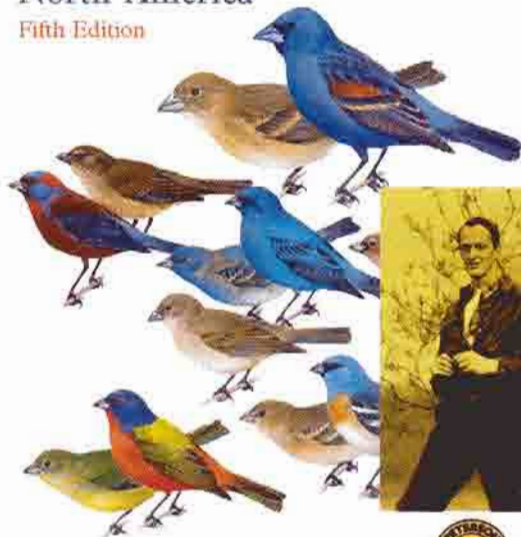
Then came the "Bogen tripod" with its smooth-panning micro-fluid head de-

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## Roger Tory Peterson

Roger Tory Peterson (inset) revolutionized North American birding with his field guides, and his 1996 death marked the end of birding's infancy.

signed for video cameras. Suddenly birders could pan and follow birds in flight with 30-power, even 40-power, spotting scopes and not have the image compromised by concentration-canceling skips and jerks.

In 1990, David Sibley and I were in Texas doing field work on what would ultimately be the book *The Wind Masters*. I watched David pick up a small bird (longspur?) in flight through a Questar spotting scope and follow it with ease.

At the time, I remember thinking, "I'm witnessing a revolution in birding." Never had the opportunity to write about the incident until now, thanks to...

## 16 WildBird

Growing market. Growing interest. Growing product lines. Growing knowledge base. Somebody had to take this somewhat-

closeted avocational interest (meaning birding) and go newsstand with it. That somebody was *WildBird* in June 1987.

## 17 European influence

For years, businesses have asked me to tell them where I think the birding business is heading. "See what they're doing in Britain," I tell them. "In two years, we'll be doing it here."

This formula is not absolute. Some trends, manners and product do not cross "the pond" easily, well or at all, but nobody can or should deny the influence that European and particularly British birders have on birding here.

From the terms that we use to the focus that we bring upon birds, expatriates like Guy McCaskie and Steve Howell have left indelible marks on North American birding, as have assorted specialty field guides written by European birders.

## 18 Kowa TSN spotting scopes

In 1983, there were two kinds of spotting-scope users: Questar owners and Bushnell Spacemaster owners who envied them. I'm not saying the Spacemaster wasn't a serviceable instrument; it was. It just didn't offer the image that the \$2,500 Questars offered then and that spotting-scope owners take for granted today.

In 1984, Kowa began selling its 77mm TSN scopes in the United States, putting Questar performance in a utilitarian package at a price that didn't mean enlisting the services of a mortgage company. In two years, just about everyone had retired their Spacemasters and started using this pioneer in the big objective spotting scope line.

There are plenty of high-performance scopes on the market now, and most are superlative. I give Kowa credit for being first.

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