

The Teenaged Birder Syndrome

by Cin-Ty Lee

I began birding at age eleven. Every day since then has been the pits because being a teenager and a birder at the same time is one harrowing experience.

While most teenagers are out partying, playing ball, cruising, or hanging out, I am out birding. What teenager in his (or her) right mind would be caught dead peering through binoculars and making weird bird calls?

...in high school, my nicknames were "birdman" and "the cuckoo bird."

Birding just isn't "hip" or "cool." As a birder in high school, my nicknames were "birdman" and "the cuckoo bird."

But fortunately I met two other teenaged birders to reassure my birding identity. We looked at ourselves as a kind of support group; this helped a lot. No longer did the parade of ridicule and guffaws bother me. Had these non-birding jesters seen a Blue-footed Booby? I think not. Case settled.

But being ostracized by my peers does not come close to equalling other problems I faced. For one thing, cops sometimes suspect teenagers. And with birders, they can be humorless. I have been pulled over several times while driving to a birding spot before dawn. As soon as the policeman sees optical equipment in the back seat, my car receives a royal search!

I tell the officer I am just bird-watching, but he usually doesn't

buy my story. Why should he? Having long hair (or sometimes no hair at all), wearing tie-dye and an ear-ring, and listening to Led Zeppelin, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Aerosmith makes me a prime suspect for all crimes. (*Editor's note: according to a June 3, 1994, article in The Boston Globe, Steve Tyler of Aerosmith is a birder. So is Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones. Surprised?*)

I even get suspicious stares from adult birders.

There are more problems! It is bad enough having my Mom and Dad tell me what clothes to wear and to get a decent haircut. But the worst is that they are the dreaded NON-BIRDERS. They cannot understand how people can just look at birds for the whole day and not get bored out of their minds.

I confess that since I became a birder, I have made my parents' lives hard. Before I could drive, I was always begging my Mom or Dad to wake up before sunrise and drop me off at some sewage pond or drainage ditch. When they picked me up, I usually stank up the car and received a horrible scolding.

We often go to Arizona to see family and friends. On one of those trips, on the way back home to Riverside, CA, I asked, "By the way, Dad, can we swing by the Salton Sea?" After explaining that I have been doing all my homework and getting good grades, my Dad finally agreed. We stopped at the Whitewater River Delta, which was closed to vehicles at the time.

Then my "little" brother, who is twice my size, wielded his iron fist. The ultimatum: be back in thirty minutes—or else! I did

not want to find out what "or else" meant, so I ran full speed in 110-degree July weather. I had five minutes to look for birds before I had to run back, "or else." I returned looking I had just run the San Francisco Marathon.

The past year, I have been living as a college student in Berkeley, CA. My life as teenaged birder is pretty much the same. I have no car unless I borrow one from a friend. But after seeing where I go on my birding jaunts, they all hide their cars from me. It's frustrating to hear that there is a Mongolian Plover just two hours away—and have no way to get there!

When my long-awaited eighteenth birthday arrived, I did not sense any magical turning point in my life. I still looked like a troublemaker to every cop, jogger, and teacher. I still had no adult privileges (like renting a car). About the only change in my life was becoming ripe and ready for the draft. Yahoo!

These are the frustrations and symptoms of a poor guy with the Teenaged Birder Syndrome. It might explain why teenaged (and younger) birders are so scarce. As I near my twentieth birthday, I am just beginning to feel like an adult. But for all those other young'uns who still have a long way to go, don't despair: being a young birder is an adventure that's worth all the frustration.

About the author:

Cin-ty Lee, 20, is a junior-year Geology/Geophysics major at the University of California at Berkeley. He has birded both near his home in Riverside, CA, and in Taiwan.