

Some aspects of birding not always environmentally friendly, professor says

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Once upon a trash heap dreary, while he wandered, weak and weary, University of Illinois English professor and birding enthusiast Spencer Schaffner raised his binoculars, focused and had a eureka moment.

In his sights, not a raven, nor even the Tamaulipas crow, a once-common inhabitant of the Brownsville, Texas, city dump. Rather, Schaffner identified the rarely spotted fowl irony.

The U. of I. professor, who also watches and studies bird-watchers, suggests that the popular pastime known as competitive birding - that is, participation in various types of activities based around the goal of identifying and/or listing the greatest number of avian species - may not be as eco-friendly as it purports to be.

Schaffner makes his case in an essay titled "Environmental Sporting: Birding at Superfund Sites, Landfills and Sewage Ponds." The essay appears in the August issue of the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*.

"This article describes birding as an example of what I call environmental sporting, an ostensibly green category of sport that relies on both environmental protection and degradation," he notes in the essay's abstract.

In the article, Schaffner considers three forms of competitive birding that typically entail excursions to polluted landscapes:

- the World Series of Birding, which takes place each May near Environmental Protection Agency Superfund sites in New Jersey and is sponsored by the state's Audubon Society.
- "big-year birding," which typically includes visits to landfills in an effort to track the greatest number of species in a defined region over the course of a year.
- the practice known as listing, or maintaining an ongoing list of sighted species, including those that populate sewage ponds.

Schaffner notes that competitive birding became popular in the United States in the 1950s, evolving out of what he calls the "automotive-hobby culture," in which enthusiasts were motivated as much by their sense of adventure and ready access to large sedans and cheap gas as they were by an interest in tracking their feathered friends.

"Part of the thrill was driving around the country in automobiles," Schaffner said. "Competitive birders log many hours in their cars. Some even fly to spot a single species of bird."

However, competitive birding was a direct outgrowth of the more genteel pastime of bird-watching, which Schaffner said dates to the late 19th century.

"There's a long history of strong connections between bird-watching - even competitive birding - and environmentalism and the protection of bird species," he said. "Bird-watching was invented or mass-marketed with the invention of field guides as a way to end the plume trade and save birds at the end of the 19th century."

Schaffner said an association with "green" philosophies and a commitment to conservation continues today in many bird-watching and

birding circles.

"There's still an ongoing tradition of bird-watching that's very connected to larger ecosystems and the environment. Many bird-watchers are not just looking at birds, but paying attention to everything, including climate change and all aspects of ecology.

"But specifically, with these competitive birding practices like the World Series of birding, or some forms of the listing, there's this kind of contradictory discounting of that larger environmentalist ethic."

Nonetheless, he added, "it's not a simple thesis to say, 'Birding has gone wrong.' "

"But what I would say is that we tend to think getting out there in the outdoors and doing things that I'm calling environmental sport is part of saving the planet. It's considered part of being green and caring about nature."

The rub, he said, is that "a lot of the environments we do that in are altered, manufactured, human-modified places. And a lot of the stuff we do isn't necessarily in the best interest of those ideas of conservation."

One such human-modified spot popular among birders is the Montlake Landfill in Seattle. The landfill is no longer active; several years ago, it was covered with a thin layer of top soil and officially renamed the Union Bay Natural Area. Although it now looks and functions like an average city park, Schaffner said the fill "poses significant dangers to the environment of (the adjacent) Lake Washington ... in the form of lateral peat movement, and toxic leachate has surfaced as an ongoing concern."

Sewage ponds, another frequent birding destination, also tend to be saturated with toxins.

"Sludge at sewage treatment plants is a problem that not many people know about," Schaffner said. "It seems like a really great solution. We used to dump our sewage in lakes and rivers. Now we treat it and put it on our fields and use it to grow food. It sounds perfect, but unfortunately, a lot of that sludge has residues from industrial sites and hospitals."

As a result, the recycled waste is laced with toxic chemicals and heavy metals, he said.

Because many of the birds found at these sites may appear to be unaffected by the toxins - in part, Schaffner believes, because some may just be passing through on migration routes - birders obsessed with tracking and listing tend to ignore the darker side of those environments that lurk below the surface.

"So, these forms of competitive birding have this way, I think, of keeping the whole system moving and helping us to think, "Oh, you know what ... The EPA is doing a great job, and sewage treatment is better than what we used to have. And I'm glad this landfill is covered over and it looks like a park now.'

"But by going there, it's a way of making light of what are some serious environmental concerns."

In addition, he said, activities such as the World Series of Birding come across as environmentally friendly events because participants raise money for ecologically minded organizations. However, the event receives generous sponsorships from corporations ranging from binocular manufacturers to power companies. Ironically, many of these corporate sponsors are also major polluters, he said.

"I think there could be more activist, environmentalist instantiations of

the sport of birding."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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