

# PETE'S TIPS: Bad Vibrations

BY PETE DUNNE

Imagine that quality—the level of detail you perceive when looking through a spotting scope or binocular—is determined by two things: raw optical performance and the stability of your instrument. The quality of your instrument is fixed. You get what you pay for, and now you've got what you got. But your ability to maintain a stable image varies, often in response to conditions and how you compensate for them.

Wind is the great enemy of spotting scopes, causing scopes and tripods to vibrate and image quality to degrade. You can reduce wind-induced vibration by using a heavier tripod or affixing weight (like a daypack) to the tripod. Some tripod models have hooks on the bottom of the center spoke for this very reason. But often the easiest thing to do is get out of the wind.

Look around. See if there is any windbreak available. Trees, bushes, sea walls, your car...anything that will buffer you. If you are standing on an elevated observation platform or a mountain ridge, move to the lee (downwind) side. Winds striking a vertical surface are slowed and deflected upward as a slower-moving column of air, which in turn deflects winds striking it. The protection is not absolute, but at least you are not subjected to the full force of the wind.

If you can't get out of the wind, try trimming sail. A tripod fully extended is more vulnerable to vibration than one retracted. Set your unextended tripod on the ground. Sit. If you need elevation, try placing the tripod on the hood of your sedan. Cars are heavier and more stable than tripods. If you have a mini-van, try positioning your vehicle so you can sit inside and peer through an open side-door.

Keeping binoculars stable starts in the store. In the hands of most people, roof prism binoculars are generally more stable, as the design compels users to keep their elbows close to their body (and not out to the sides like a pair of wings). But even porro prism users can cut down on hand shake (wind-induced or no) by holding the instrument as if you intend to use it with just one hand, then using the other hand and arm as a monopod. Rest your binocular on the tips of the fingers of your non-focusing hand, keeping your elbow planted firmly against your body. Try it. It works. I know one tour leader who works the brim of his baseball cap between the binocular and his hand for a little added stability.

One last vibration-dampening suggestion: On pelagic trips, boat captains often keep their engines running, sending image-distorting vibrations up through the deck...to your feet, legs, body, arms. Try loosening or unlocking your knees. Vibration carries best in bone-to-bone articulation. By letting your muscles carry your weight, you buffer the point of contact.

One final thought. Higher magnifications are more prone to vibration-induced distortion than low power. Just another reason to love 7x binoculars, and maybe a good reason to consider including a zoom or fixed 20x eyepiece in your optical arsenal.

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## SAUCE FOR THE GANDER

### Birding and Relationships

BY ROBERT BOWLING

Why do people become birders? Why does it develop into a passion for so many? As I ponder these questions, I realize that it's not always just about the birds, it's about the enriching friendships we develop and how these transform our lives.

Our friends Bud and Bonnie come to mind. Their love of birding started with a casual interest in backyard birds, which they enjoyed watching with an old pair of Sears binoculars. They were familiar with the Cardinals, Blue Jays, and other common and distinctively plumaged birds that frequented their backyard feeder, but there were others that went unnamed. Curious, they purchased a Peterson, and a whole new realm opened to them.

How thrilled they were when, with the aid of their new field guide, they identified their first new bird: the Brown-headed Cowbird. Wow! It was exciting and empowering to place a name on an unknown creature. Suddenly there were so many puzzles to conquer, so many mysteries to unveil. Soon, other local birds were added to their list, and the list grew.

Before long, the supply of new birds locally diminished, and the excitement of new horizons appeared. It was the same desire that drove the pioneer wagons westward.

Bud and Bonnie joined us on a multi-county birding trip in our home area of the mid-Hudson valley in upstate New York. It was a cool and cloudy day in early March, but the kindness of the birders we met left a warm and lasting impression. We drove to Chet's house, where he scoped a Great Horned Owl on its nest, then on to Barbara's to see a flock of Redpolls; after stops at several ponds, we ended the day with several other friendly birders who had converged to see Short-eared Owls patrol the early evening skies over the wildflower fields of the abandoned Galevale Airport.

I recently asked Bud what drives his passion for birding. "It's the colors," he said. "If they were all shades of brown and gray, I don't think it would hold my interest." The thought hit home for me. In a world of computer gray and cubicle blue, the radiant, iridescent, living colors of our little neighbors brighten and enrich our lives.

But I think that for Bud and Bonnie, and for many of the rest of us, there's more to it than that. Before they became birders, Bud sang in a quartet for 28 years, and Bonnie was active in her church's social events. Although they shared somewhat in each other's interests, they never felt that the other's love was their own. Birding, though, was something they both really enjoyed—together. It was a new way to share feelings and experiences. These would become memories that could be recalled and retold, letting them experience again the joys, frustrations, and friendships that they had forged together. Birding can be about much more than the birds; it can become a way to strengthen the connections we feel to each other.