

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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Birders tend to spend a lot of time comparing past with present. The care with which we preserve records of our observations, and our ongoing interest in the records collected by others, are illustrated in every issue of *The Kingbird*. This diligence is proof of our interest in history. The articles in the present issue treat disparate subjects, but they share an unmistakable sense of historical curiosity.

David Seyler has seen Black Terns diminish as breeders in New York State, but he raises the possibility that this trend is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Will Yandik explores the fascinating topic of how our attitudes toward wild organisms have changed over the last century—and also whether our laws and regulations have remained consistent with our changing attitudes. In contrast to these articles, which are built upon a confident understanding of past events, Don Windsor's contribution underscores just how rapidly our knowledge of even the simplest ornithological facts diminishes as one pushes the inquiry much beyond the recent past.

We live in an age of rapid environmental change, but it is helpful to be reminded (as I was by all three of the articles mentioned above) of the changes that our region has already experienced. Whereas we know so frustratingly little about New York's birds even a century and a half ago, future students will know a lot about the birds we are seeing today. Consider that NYSOA's annual waterfowl count, presented in this issue by Bryan Swift, has now completed half a century of historical documentation. Fifty years of duck counting has produced a lot of columns of numbers, but there are stories here as well. One of the numbers tabulated in 2004 (1,214 Gadwalls in Region 10) caught my eye because I read it around the time I also read J. P. Giraud's vivid account of what was for him then a great novelty on Long Island's Great South Bay:

In this vicinity, the Gadwall is quite rare. My first acquaintance with this bird was in 1834, while pursuing my favorite amusement of water fowl shooting in the celebrated South Bay. It was flying alone, seemingly wandering about as if in search of companions. It passed and repassed several times outside of my decoys, without approaching within gunshot, but sufficiently near to excite in me a desire for having a better opportunity to examine it. I concealed myself with great care, hoping that it would approach within shooting distance, as I was induced to believe that it would, from the desire it exhibited to join the motley flock which my 'decoys' represented; but as it advanced, it appeared to see that all was not right, and at the moment when my hopes were the brightest, it quickly changed its course, and alighted on a marsh about a half mile from me. I gave quick pursuit, and after wading through the

tall grass and mud, discovered it sitting on a bog, pluming and dressing its feathers, unconscious of its impending fate. Its perfectly neat appearance so engaged my attention, that I forgot that a gun was in my possession, until it took to wing, when the desire to obtain it returned, and I brought it down. On taking it up, although proud of this valuable acquisition to my collection, I could not forbear feeling that Nature had been robbed of one of her greatest ornaments. I have since killed a few along the south shore of Long Island.

—*Birds of Long Island* (1844)

One of Giraud's great virtues is his ornithological accuracy. His expressiveness in conveying the attitudes of his day is no less remarkable. Although his diction tends to denote birds as commodities, the broader spirit of his prose betrays a recognition of birds as worthy ends in themselves. Thus, among the many things that have changed during the history of New York ornithology, at least this poignant, conflicted sense of what birds mean to us remains hauntingly constant.

