

# Meet an Iowa Birder — Ann Barker

Mary Lou Petersen

Ann Barker, who lives in Davenport, Iowa, is one of Scott County's best birders and has one of the best auditory memories of bird song of anyone I know. Ann did not have much exposure to natural history as a youngster. She was a city girl, born on 30 April 1946 and raised in Des Moines, Iowa. As Ann grew up, her parents, grandparents, and close role models lacked any particular interest in birds or nature-based activities, so she wasn't encouraged in that area. But Ann, a friendly, outgoing, and active girl, did have a keen interest in science.

Ann enrolled in an honors program at the University of Iowa where she received her B.A., both Cum Laude and With Honors, and an M.A. in audiology. She is licensed as an audiologist in Iowa and Illinois, and has practiced audiology for thirty-two years. For the past twenty-two years she has been in private practice and is now a part owner of Audiology Consultants, P.C. Ann's interest in and understanding of sound certainly is a factor in her excellence in birding. Ann's pet peeve in birding is that we do not use sonograms more. Ann says, "Learning to read sonograms is easy and, once accomplished, a person can tell infinitely more about a bird's song or call than any written characterization." She adds that with her eyes closed, she can now do just about as well in Britain as in Iowa identifying spring birds.

Ann and her former husband of 28 years, Bill Barker, shared many birding experiences over the years, and continue to trade birding stories and memories. In 1980, Ann and Bill took a course at



*Ann on Ross Silcock's pelagic trip near Pitt Island, New Zealand in November 2001. Photo by Kay A. Niyo.*

the Putnam Museum taught by Peter Petersen. They had developed a curiosity about wildlife and the environment and wanted to learn more about local bird species. The course opened their eyes to birding and they were soon rarely without binoculars, a Robbins' guide, and Pete Petersen's *A Field List of the Birds of the Quad City Region*. Their first few years as birders were spent learning the birds and wildlife of Iowa, then surrounding states and areas, and then more distant parts of the United States. Lane bird-finding guides were added to their ever expanding bookshelves devoted to birds. As Ann will tell anyone, the primary appeal of birding for her has been that she is constantly learning. "This goes far beyond ornithology to include botany, entomology, herpetology, psychology, acoustics, geology, geography, and many other branches of science."

Ann does not describe herself as an ardent "lister." She is more interested in learning groups of birds in depth, although her life list stands at 924. During the last ten years or so, she has become increasingly fascinated with international travel in search of birds. Ann has not traveled to the tropics where a lister could check off two or three hundred species in a trip. Ann loves Great Britain, and especially Scotland. She has developed a special interest in European birds. Through travel to different parts of Europe, she has gained a good appreciation for western Palearctic species. She has traveled in the Bering Sea and Siberia, Russia, Arctic Norway and Finland, Alaska, the Falklands and South Georgia, Antarctic waters, and most recently New Zealand with Ross Silcock's group. As far as travel goes, Ann says she is just beginning.

Ann's affinity for far northern species is at the heart of one of her most thrilling experiences while bird watching. As many birders do during a long winter, she, Bill, and a Texas friend traveled to Duluth, Minnesota to look for birds forced down from the northern tundra and taiga. She had learned that there was a gray phase Gyrfalcon in the Duluth/Superior region — the primary reason for their trip there. The bird had been reported to be chasing pigeons. After hours of looking for the Gyrfalcon, they spotted it on the edge of a grain elevator in Superior, Wisconsin. They crossed over into Wisconsin and parked by a field adjacent to the elevator. Walking across the field they kicked up a ring-necked pheasant. As Ann tells it, "The pheasant flushed noisily from only a few feet ahead of us. Before we knew it, the Gyrfalcon was in a full stoop right over our heads. He narrowly missed the ever-so-fortunate pheasant, and we watched in awe as he pulled out of the stoop and flew rapidly away. It all



happened almost in the blinking of an eye, but the sight of that magnificent bird in action so very close to us is something I shall never forget."

Ann has had a rich history of service to birders, birding organizations, and conservation efforts. She is past president of both the Iowa Ornithologists' Union and the Quad City Audubon Society. She was president of the IOU from 1991–1995, and previously she had been IOU secretary from 1986–1990. She was secretary, vice-president, and president of the Quad City Audubon Society, serving from 1985–1990. She is the compiler of the Iowa Spring Bird Count and Spring Bird Count Editor for *Iowa Bird Life*. She has participated in Christmas bird counts, spring bird counts, breeding bird surveys, Breeding Bird Atlas work, frog and toad surveys, and crane counts. She has led field trips with Quad City Audubon. She is currently the Membership Committee chair of the Quad City Audubon. She has assisted with ringing Barn Owls and Hen Harriers in Scotland. She has volunteered at the Visitor's Centre and led guided walks for the Royal Society for the Protection of Bird Reserve on the Isle of Islay in Scotland. She has also volunteered for the Field Centre of the Islay Natural History Museum.

Ann wrote an article about Pete Peterson for *Iowa Bird Life* titled "Meet an Iowa Ornithologist: Peter C. Petersen," Vol. 56, Winter 1986. This article was adapted by Mark Stegmaier and Ann and appeared in *The Iowan*, Winter Issue, 1986.

Ann's interests are not limited to her work, travel, and birding. She is an Elder at First Presbyterian Church in Davenport. She serves on the Church Government and Stewardship committees, and as music librarian. Singing has been an avid lifelong interest for Ann. She sings in the Sanctuary Choir and the 20-voice Chamber Chorale, as well as occasional small groups. The First Presbyterian Church's music program is perhaps the best church music program in the Quad Cities. The choir has sung with the Quad City Symphony on a number of occasions.

Ann has become involved in the community of her "second home," the Isle of Islay in Scotland's Inner Hebrides, which she visits each year. She facilitated a partnership between the Church of Scotland parish church there and her own church in Davenport. In July 2001, she helped organize a journey by a group of twelve members of Davenport's First Presbyterian Church to Islay as a part of that relationship.

Ann has had a long-standing interest in Gordon Setters and has owned several of the breed. After the relatively close loss of two of her setters, she acquired Jazz. I remember this dog as a young, energetic,

and vivacious pup who has grown into a mature, mannerly American Kennel Club champion. Jazz is now a ten-year-old much loved companion.

Ann is, as Bob Cecil put it to me, "one of the most truly classy individuals I have ever met." She is strong and courageous. Ann was diagnosed with breast cancer in January 2002. She e-mailed me in February that she was to have her first chemotherapy session on a Wednesday and hoped to go looking for a reported Iceland Gull on Thursday.

Ann credits Pete Petersen as the most influential person in her development as a birder. She says, "He not only taught me the basics of birding, he answered any and every question I had along the way with infinite patience. He consistently encouraged me to contribute by volunteering my efforts in counts, surveys, and organizational participation. He broadened my interest beyond birds to conservation and the environment. I could not have had a better mentor."

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