

2004 BIRDER OF THE YEAR • PHOTO SHOWCASE: BARROW, ALASKA

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BIRDING AT ITS BEST

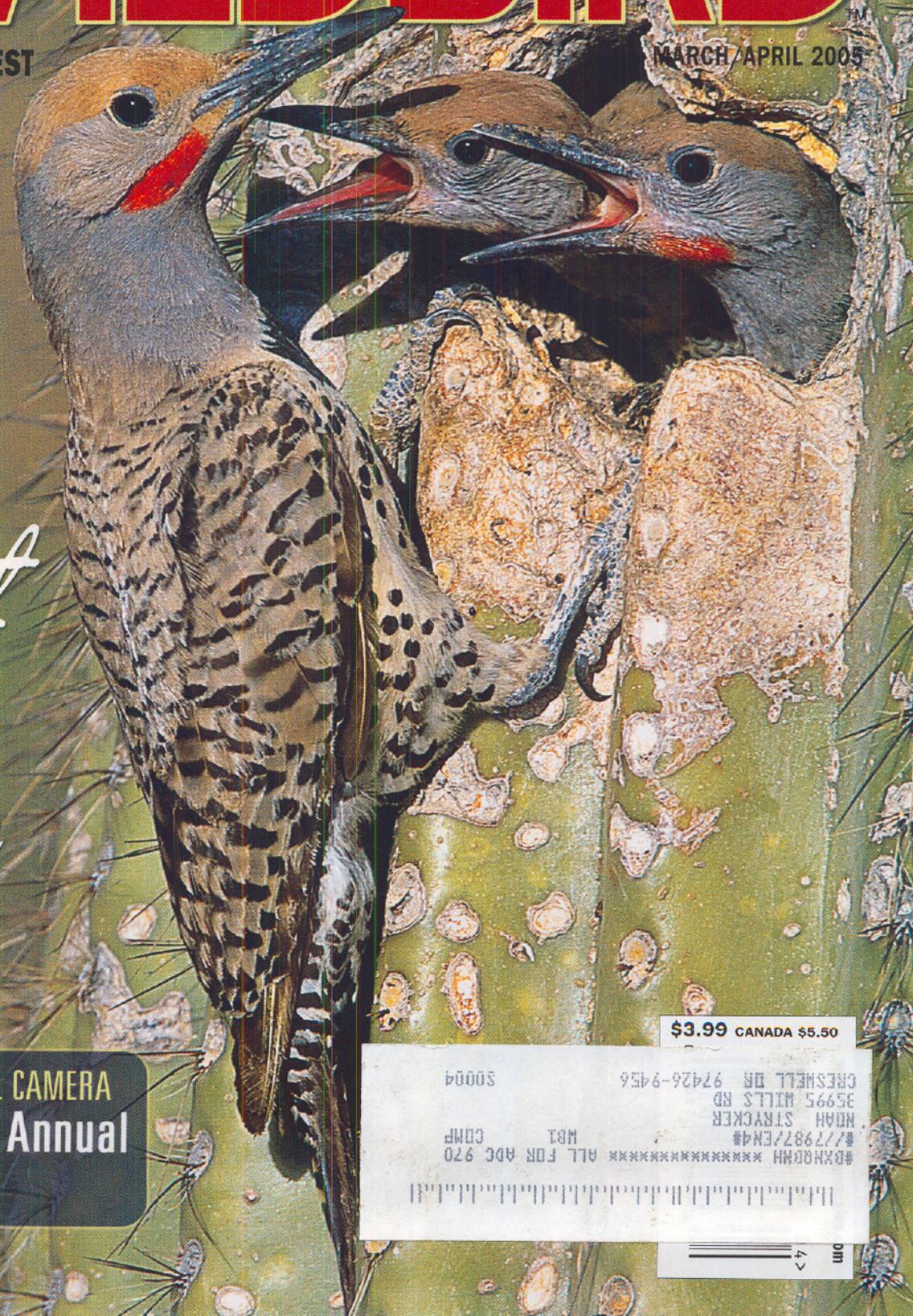
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Blind Date

A Spotted Towhee was the best blind date I ever had. We met on a crisp morning in May with the sun peeking over the hilltop at 10 o'clock. I had been shivering for more than an hour inside a plywood bird blind, hoping for some action. In an instant, the towhee and I sat beak to nose, scarcely 4 feet from each other. I squeezed the shutter, he burst into a trill, and that was it. He flew off. I had snagged an extraordinary photograph of this rather ordinary backyard bird—and all because of my bird blind.

I have gone to great lengths for great photographs—traveled far and wide, slithered in cow dung, waded through army ant swarms, endured sweltering heat and numbing cold. The truth is, some of my best images depict common species, captured in the relative luxury of a blind just a few feet from the back porch.

The inspiration of a permanent blind came to me one blistering day while I squatted on an upturned plastic bucket underneath a camouflage plastic tarp, in which I had snipped a hole for my camera lens. I had plenty of time to contemplate my discomfort and hadn't seen so much as a feather in hours.

I conceived a wooden building roughly the size and shape of a deluxe outhouse. It would have windows big enough for a peeping camera lens and keep me and my equipment snug in any weather.

I already knew where to put it: an open area at the edge of a pasture next to an overgrown fence line. A brushy willow tree would provide ample cover.

The whole project took \$160 and two days of casual labor to finish. The foundation consisted of old cinder blocks to support a 4x6-foot floor, built of pressure-treated 2x6-inch boards to resist the Oregon damp. I raised frame walls built of 2x4-inch boards on front and back. For the



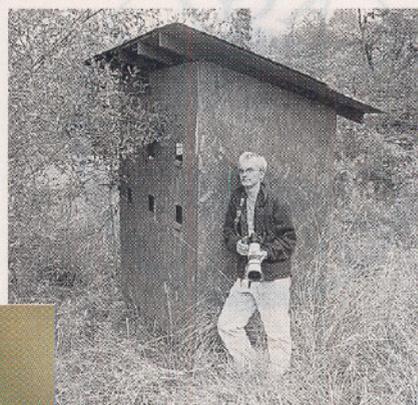
NOAH STROCKER

outer skin, I used the cheapest 4x8-foot paneling available (1/8-inch chipboard) and slathered it with redwood-colored stain. I cut eight 6x6-inch observation ports and lined the bottom of each with closed-cell pipe insulation as a padded camera rest. Cheap asphalt shingles covered the roof. Feeders dangled in strategic locations. As the *piece de resistance*, I "planted" bare branches in the ground near the windows so birds could pose for portraits.

Now all I had to do was wait for the birds to show up. They did—that very day.

From the outset, the blind was a bonanza. It blasted my backyard photography to unprecedented heights and gave me a new outlook on bird behavior. Hidden from view, I became intimately acquainted with my backyard friends. As I watched, camera lens pointed, the birds flocked to me: Black-headed Grosbeaks, Dark-eyed Juncos, Purple Finches, Song Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Black-capped Chickadees, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Steller's Jays, Spotted Towhees, American Goldfinches, Golden-crowned Sparrows, Pine Siskins and Rufous Hummingbirds.

Birds lined up for seed like supermodels on a catwalk. They fought over prime positions. Some odd ones showed up, including a partial albino junco and a finch with growths on its feet. A Northern Pygmy-Owl, lured by my call, sat in the willow tree



COURTESY OF BOB KEEFER

on a scenic fall afternoon.

I tried things that failed miserably. I installed a birdhouse near the blind and chickadees nested in it, but I never captured them on film. I hung a suet feeder to attract woodpeckers, but Steller's Jays cleaned me out. I balanced an upside-down 5-gallon water jug on a stepladder

so that it would drip into an aluminum pie plate, but it never worked and the birds wisely ignored it.

Before long, the pictures from my blind started to look strangely similar—my fault. I never changed the perches, and the same branches crept into every image; the same old birds, too. Eventually, I exhausted the possibilities and moved on.

To be honest, the blind was never the same after the deer took over. Young bucks raided the place at night, knocked over the feeders, snarfed the seed, broke the perches and left mayhem. Raccoons took up residence under the floor. Wasps built nests on the ceiling. The squirrels didn't help matters when they chewed through the birdseed storage bin.

It just goes to show that all good things must come to an end—that blind, this column.

And One More Thing

You find a lot of old coots, crazy loons and odd ducks when you run a marathon—and those are just the runners! In the four marathons that I've finished, I discovered that a little light birding eases the pain. During the 2004 Portland (Oregon) marathon, I counted 18 species, including Rock Pigeon, American Crow, European Starling and unidentified gulls. Are you a marathon birder? Email me: birdboy@bkipix.com. **wb**