

Volunteers and Research

Birders' Exchange Grassroots Work to Protect Neotropical Birds

by Susan Story Galt

Since 1990, Birders' Exchange has been collecting new and used birding equipment and distributing it to bird conservationists and environmental educators working in Latin America and the Caribbean to conserve Neotropical migrant and resident birds. Founded by the Manomet Center for Conservation Science in Massachusetts, the program has been run since 1996 by the American Birding Association (ABA).

Operating as a cooperative network of birders across North America, birding and conservation groups, and private corporations, the Birders' Exchange (BEX) matches equipment and educational materials with local scientists and educators, who in turn use them

in a wide variety of ways, from community outreach and educational programs for school children to conducting scientific research. Since 1990, more than 1,800 binoculars, 1,025 field guides, 275 backpacks, 150 cameras, 200 scopes, and 150 tripods have been sent to more than [350 programs] in every country south of the U.S. border.

There are several ways to help Birders' Exchange:

- Donate items—Among the items needed are binoculars, digital cameras, tripods, field guides to North American or Neotropical birds, ornithology texts, laptop computers, and backpacks. Items may be new or used; equipment should be in good working order.
- Financial donation—This can help cover shipping costs or help purchase specialized equipment or books.
- Sponsor an equipment drive in your area or recruit an organization to become an official sponsor of Birders' Exchange Promotion.
- Act as a courier for equipment if you are traveling to Latin America or the Caribbean. BEX will mail the equipment to you, provide you with full customs documentation, and usually will arrange an airport meeting at your destination country, although sometimes a courier is asked to go to the project location.

The program's success is evident in the dramatic increase in requests for equipment each year since its inception. According to Elissa LaVoie, BEX Education Coordinator, "With the amount of requests we are receiving and the amount of equipment we are sending, we are in desperate need of more donations of waterproof optics in good working condition, tripods, and digital cameras."

According to LaVoie, in addition to coordinating equipment exchange, BEX is working on several other educational projects. Among them are:

- A project to translate and publish a Spanish-language version of *A Neotropical Companion: An Introduction to the Animals, Plants, and Ecosystems of the New World Tropics*, by John Kricher, scheduled for publication at the end of 2005. BEX will donate copies of the book, previously published only in English and Japanese, to those working in education and bird conservation in neotropical areas.
- Production of a BEX video in Spanish, "Pájaros: Un Tesoro Que Compartimos" ("Birds: A Shared Treasure"), to be used as another of BEX's Spanish language educational tools.

BEX also facilitated a partnership between ABA/BEX and Massachusetts Audubon for collaborative efforts in an international intern program. Through this program, two interns from Panama and Brazil spent a month in the U.S. in 2005.

Birders' Exchange activities have included donations of binoculars for educating children in local schools in Peru and conducting bird education workshops for Nicaraguan teachers, providing equipment for a field ornithologist working to stop illegal bird trafficking in Mexico, and providing basic equipment for collecting biological data in many countries. These and many other activities support the conservation of birds and bird habitat in basic ways.

It is sometimes hard to imagine how one person can make a difference, but Birders' Exchange is showing birders in North America how that is possible. For more information on how you can help Birders' Exchange, contact Elissa LaVoie, Education Coordinator/BEX, at the American Birding Association, (800) 850-2473, or visit the BEX Web site, www.americanbirding.org/bex.