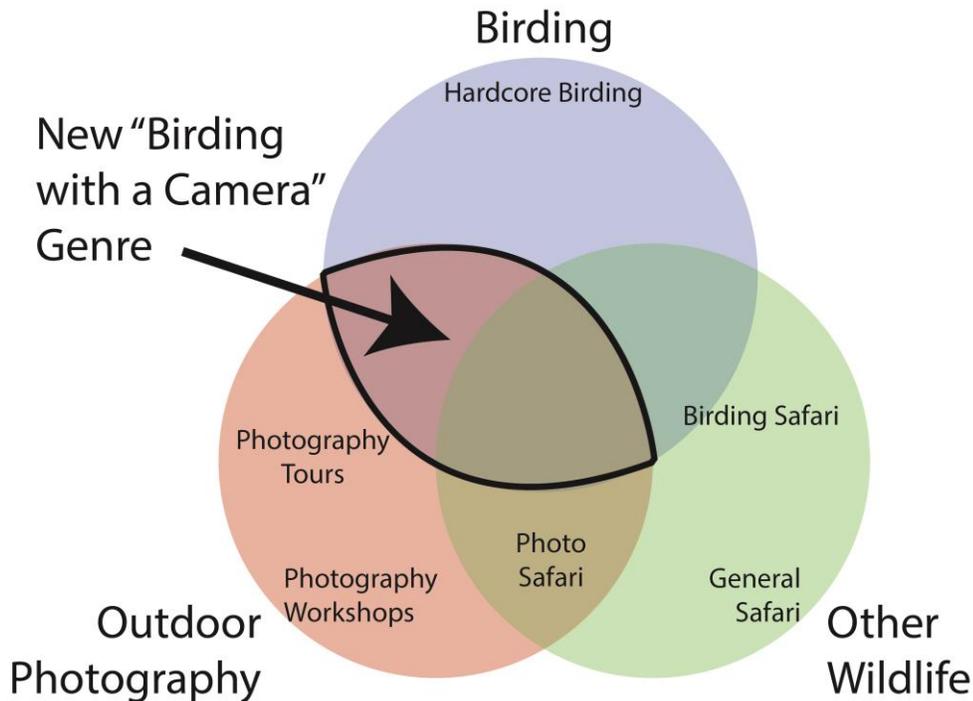


ARE BIRDERS HAVING AN IDENTITY CRISIS? The merging of photography and birding

Anyone who has gone out birding recently is sure to have noticed that birders increasingly use cameras in addition to, and sometimes as a replacement for, binoculars. Photographers are also spending more time observing birds and wildlife than they used to. Although the circumstantial evidence suggests a shift in focus within the hobby of birding, we at Tropical Birding wanted to come to a more empirical understanding of the shift, in order to best serve our clients. We did this by surveying thousands of people through our mailing lists and Facebook page (facebook.com/TropicalBirding/), and were elated to get several hundred responses detailing people's changing birding/wildlife watching/nature photography habits. The results left us amazed.

Let's start with a Venn diagram illustrating the interests of birding, wildlife-watching, and outdoor photography. Annotated on the diagram are the types of trips that cater to the various interests and their overlap-zones. Although Tropical Birding's current set of trips satisfies several sectors of the diverse interests groups, and we will always continue to cater to pure birders, which have been a key market of ours. We immediately noticed that there is NO type of trip that caters for people with near-equal interests in both birding and photography. Well, none until now! Tropical Birding has designed some trips to cater for the vacant 'Birding with a camera' (BwC) sweet spot!

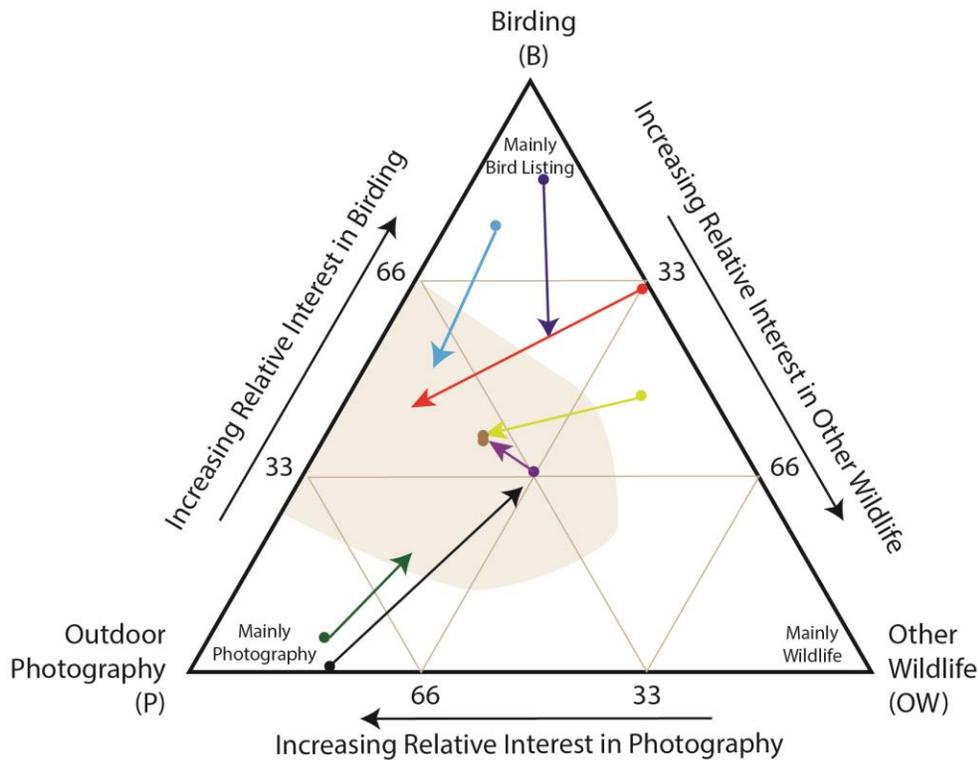
Overlapping Interests and Corresponding Tours



Changing Interests of Tropical Birding Guides

We also surveyed our guides and trip leaders to see how their relative interests had changed in the last decade. They are all still very keen birders, and enjoy guiding pure birding tours, as well as photography trips and relaxed custom tours. But when they are enjoying nature on their own dime, you can see in the triangular graph below that their relative interests have converged into the birding/photography sweet spot (the shaded zone). With the new 'Birding with a Camera' tours we have designed, the guides can now serve the interests of clients who have the same core passions for both birding and photography.

HOW THE TROPICAL BIRDING PRO GUIDES HAVE CHANGED FOCUS IN TEN YEARS

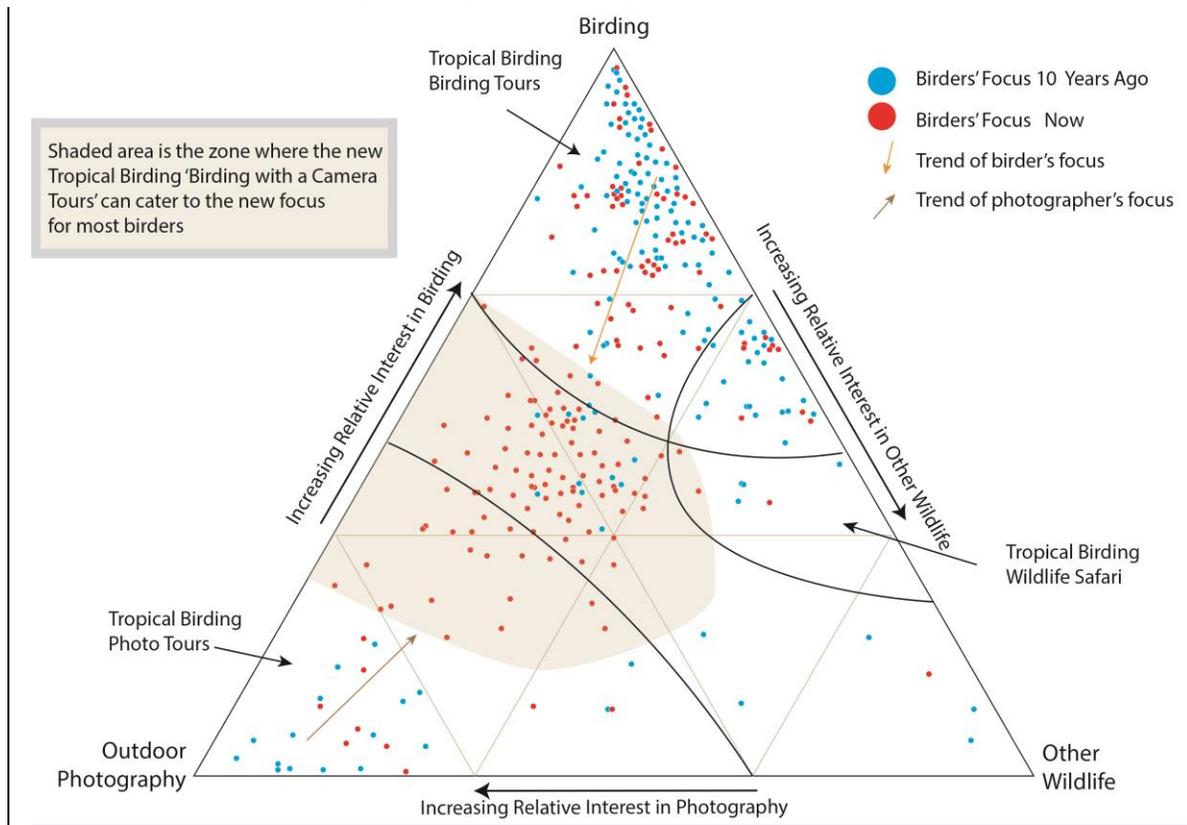


	Iain	Keith	Ken	Pablo	Charley	Nick	George	Andres
B-P-OW Before	66/0/33	50/10/40	40/35/25	5/70/25	85/5/10	70/20/10	0/80/20	33/33/34
B-P-OW Now	45/45/10	40/40/20	38/38/24	20/60/20	60/20/20	50/40/10	33/33/34	40/40/20

It's Not Just the Tropical Birding Guides Whose Interests are Changing

With responses from over 200 Tropical Birding clients and contacts, we plotted the 10-year change within the broader birding community. Take a look at the triangular graph below where you can see the main shift in focus for respondents: from 2008 in blue (mostly strictly birding, though some pure photographers as well), to 2018 in red (a birding/photography hybrid). Again, there has been a shift into the sweet spot.

HOW THE BIRDING COMMUNITY HAS CHANGED FOCUS IN TEN YEARS



There Has Been a Paradigm Shift in the Way We Bird, but We are Still Birders

There has been an undeniable shift in focus for at least 40% of birders, who are now including photography as a vital component of their birding. This is not necessarily an attempt to get publication-quality photos, but rather a way of preserving a birding experience, perhaps to share it on social media, and for many, to aid in the identification of tricky species or to document rarities. Birders take photographs with a variety of equipment, including digi-scoping adaptors, point-and-shoots, micro four-thirds and SLRs with whooping great lenses. But the camera is now a vital tool in their arsenal, even as seeing and enjoying birds remains the most important element of their hobby.

A Birder's Increased Interest in Photography Can Increase Their Interest in Other Wildlife.

On tour, we have also noticed that birders now frequently pay more attention to other wildlife than they did in the past. Perhaps this is best illustrated in a country like Madagascar. Our tours here a decade ago

focused on the endemic birds. Now, although we still see exactly the same number of bird species on tour, because folks are carrying cameras, they also want to see and photograph as many chameleons, leaf-tailed geckos, and lemurs as possible. The camera seems to have been the catalytic tool in expanding their interest in other wildlife.

Can we turn photographers into birders?

Could the photography portal be used to grow the birding community? Absolutely! Rather than venting angst at crowds of photographers at popular birding locations, we birders should be reaching out to help photographers who are struggling with identification and birding basics. Someone with a passing interest in the “pretty little birds” that they are photographing needs as much encouragement as a budding teen birder, and is no less deserving of our attention.

Tours That Cater for Birding With a Camera: Is This for You?

Imagine dawn in the Australian bush. You are with a small group on a Tropical Birding BwC tour. Everyone has binoculars, and is carrying a camera; although they range from point-and-shoots to big-lens SLRs. It is still twilight, but the dawn chorus is amazing and your guide is calling out what is around. The regulars, such as Noisy Friarbird, Pied Butcherbird, and Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike are all singing. But she also hears a distant call of the Painted Honeyeater, so you go after the rare bird immediately and get some great views, plus noisy record shots. A mixed flock moves through, and you see most things and get a couple of good photos of Rufous Whistler and Jacky Winter. The light improves and a Spotted Pardalote calls nearby. The guide knows that if she works it, all the clients will get fantastic shots of this snappy-looking bird, so the focus changes immediately. She says “guys, this is a tiny bird, but it will probably come in really close when I ‘pish’. It is most likely to settle on these branches at eye-level so get ready for that, and I suggest you set your depth-of-field to be between f5.6 and f8 so you get a good out-of-focus background.” The bird duly arrives and everyone gets cracking photos. Meanwhile, the guide has noticed a group of Little Lorikeets high in some tall eucalypts, so she puts the spotting scope on them and explains that the backlighting is so terrible it is best to probably just get good looks at these temperamental little parrots, as we might not see them again on tour. “But be quick guys” she says, “I hear a Crested Shrike-Tit singing nearby and we are going to want to see and photograph that baby”. Sound appealing? It certainly does to us.

Where does Birding with a Camera fit?

There will always be pure birders that are not interested in anything other than birding. And our dedicated birding tours will continue to cater to this core interest group. But we also see a need for a new product line to provide for the many folks whose interests have shifted; not shifted much, but enough to make a difference in the way they want to watch bird, and the way that they travel. Pure birders can celebrate this development, as it means that camera-toting birders are less likely to sign up for a strictly birding itinerary, preferring our ‘Birding with a Camera’ products. Other companies resistant to the changing nature of birding will claim that they have been serving the best interests of birders with a photography bent for years. But that is doubtful. Eight years ago we noticed tension between pure birders and folks that wanted to spend a lot of time photographing while birding. We committed to creating specialist bird photography tours. This served to keep both factions much happier, as we were able to satisfy the photographers away from the ‘pure birding’ tours. In doing so we made all participants more satisfied and gave those with a blossoming interest a new space. We soon realized the need to divide our photography trips into pure photography – for the dedicated bird photographer, where the shot is all that counts, and more opportunistic photography trips, with a greater travel experience component. Now we are again at a juncture where many birders want the very best of both worlds.

Birders that love photography want to be on a trip where they get to see lots of birds, and take loads of photos. They want a guide who is top-notch, who knows the vocalizations, taxonomy and identifying features. But they also want a guide who knows how to photograph birds, understands lighting, camera gear and can teach basic photo processing. If you have found yourself at the back of the line in a birding group, feeling guilty about trying to get that shot or not wanting to hold the group up, then maybe you no longer belong on a pure birding tour (although Tropical Birding will always continue to service that important market), and would do much better surrounded by like-minded hybrid birder-photographers.

This new genre of trips is going to be branded 'Birding with a Camera' or BwC tours. We will begin slowly by offering around a dozen destinations, and will add more as demand increases for this type of trip. The initial BwC destinations include Southeast Brazil, Northern Peru, Southern Ecuador, Northern Ecuador, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, Namibia and Botswana, Northern India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Ethiopia, USA West-west Warbler migration, the Upper Texas Coast and Alaska.

When compared to the over 150 pure birding, other photography and natural history trips we run every year, this may not seem like a massive change for Tropical Birding. But we feel that it will result in a significant change in satisfaction for the increasing number of people that love birding with a camera. It is clear to us that many in the bird tourism industry are out of sync with their clients' interests. So if the last tour you did just didn't tick all the satisfaction boxes, then why not join us on a BwC tour if your interests in birding have shifted that way?

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