



picking a bird brain

Charles Scarborough puts
a fresh face on an
age-old pastime

BY CORY BORDONARO

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILL GRAVLEE

Charles Scarborough always has a pair of binoculars in his car. As a medical student, he also often carries a pair in his briefcase, ready for a bird sighting at any moment.

Charles Scarborough has always been a little top-heavy. Born into the 99th percentile for his head size, he earned the nickname “E.T.” during his middle school years. When he went out for the football team, coaches had to order him a special helmet to accommodate his oversized skull.

He may have been teased on the football field, but in the classroom, Scarborough turned heads for different reasons. On March 14, 2001, he made history at Brookstone High School in Columbus, Ga., by reciting 256 digits of the number pi from memory.

Now Scarborough, 23, is a second-year medical student in Augusta, Ga., where his mind swells with the influx of new information as he prepares for a future in hands-on healthcare. In a few years

Scarborough may be a doctor, but he’ll always have a bird brain.

“Bird watchers are doctors of sorts. They get all this information: a little visual, a little bit of audio, maybe a silhouette, a little flight pattern. They get all this information and then they try and make a diagnosis,” says friend and fellow birder, Matt West.

Birding, similar to his field of study, provides Scarborough a way to braid his loves together. He has a communicable zeal for birding, according to family and friends. He is also an odd person, according to cousin, Bart Scarborough, and it is his eccentric personality that makes him such an interesting young birder. He started bird-watching during hunting trips with his father, but it wasn’t until high school when Scarborough took an ornithology course that his interest was

formalized.

“The best way to learn birds is to be around someone that knows more than you,” Scarborough says of his beginning birding days. For Scarborough, that person was Sam Pate, his teacher at Brookstone who seldom taught from inside the classroom. Pate often took his students on field trips to observe birds and encouraged them to participate in the Christmas Bird Count based out of Eufala, Ala. Pate’s passion for birds was contagious and his class changed a lot of lives, according to West.

Scarborough’s life changed when he caught the contagion and made it into his own. Now, he is the one spreading the bird bug. “The typical bird-watcher is a 60 year-old woman, but Charles definitely has an enthusiasm that is infectious,” says Chris McClure, former

roommate and fellow birder.

Scarborough was the driving force behind several group birding adventures during college at the University of Georgia. The first was a trip to Big Bend National Park in Texas. Four adventure-seeking, bird-loving guys drove west in search of the painted bunting. The first sighting of the spectacularly colored songbird initiated a unique response, luckily caught on video. Behind the lens, Scarborough excitedly exclaims, "Holy cannoli boys? Is this it? Is this real?"

Scarborough and his friends were also looking for elf owls – a bird that they were told could be identified by its call that resembled the sound of child's laughter. Sound asleep in their tent one night, the guys heard the tell-tale laugh, quickly awoke and sprinted through the campground in their boxers and boots to shine a spotlight up into the trees. That week in Texas, the group saw 119 different species, including the elf owl which they fortunately caught on tape.

Technology always plays a role in Scarborough's birding adventures. In addition to binoculars and a state-of-the-art camera, he carries an iPod with a recording of every bird in North America. The iPod has revolutionized Scarborough's birding experience. He carries portable speakers, listening to sound clips to familiarize himself with his target bird. Sometimes Scarborough may imitate the sound by pishing.

With his extraordinary scope of cognizance, Scarborough can emulate about 10 bird calls and identify 250 to 300 more by ear. Memorizing the calls by cadence, Scarborough has used mnemonics to learn various bird calls. For instance, the painted bunting sings a song that sounds like "graffiti, graffiti spaghetti for two."

"It becomes the soundtrack of life," he says, explaining that he never stops listening for birds. His eyes are constantly scanning the sky and trees for feathered friends.

Scarborough is interested in both the aesthetic and biological aspects of birds. Along with his studies of the human body, he has learned quite a bit about the physical makeup of birds that he says

"allows them to be way more metabolically awesome than we are."

On a medical mission with the Samaritan's Purse to Africa last summer, Scarborough worked each day in a hospital with orthopedic surgery patients. Always carrying a notepad to record observations throughout the day, Scarborough's eyes would often wander out the hospital windows. "I'd act like I was taking notes on the patient if I saw birds out the window," he admits. "Don't tell Samaritan's Purse."

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This was not the only time that Scarborough's curiosity got the best of him. He once illegally crossed the Mexican border while chasing a grey hawk. Additionally, last summer, on a trip through the Pacific Northwest, Scarborough and West went in pursuit of the red-billed pigeon -- a chase that took a dangerous turn when they found themselves without direction in the desert heat for several hours.

While Scarborough would go birding alone, he prefers the company of small groups, even if that means he's more likely to get himself into a less-than-ideal situation. "I like people a lot more than birds," he says. "It's about the experience."

Even for a bird-head like Scarborough, that's a no-brainer.

you shot the bird photo of the month



PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTEEN MCCORD

A baby screech owl at Monteen McCord's rehabilitation facility in Canton, Ga.

how great thou art sketch of the month



Submitted by Mat Barber Kennedy of Chicago, Ill., this stork was drawn while on a trip to India.