

# A potted history of the Neotropical Bird Club



**Chris Balchin**

*How did the Neotropical Bird Club start – and why? And what has it achieved in the 25 years of its existence? Neotropical Birding invited the man who has probably dedicated more of his life than anyone to helping the NBC to give his personal perspective on its story.*

For me, it all started in 1992 when fellow British birder Tim Marlow contacted me and asked: “Are you interested in starting a new club for the Neotropics based on the Oriental Bird Club?” Tim had been impressed by what the ‘OBC’ had achieved in promoting birds and bird conservation in Asia, and – along with his friend Guy Kirwan – was keen to do something equivalent for South and Central America, and the Caribbean. Tim’s suggestion fell on fertile ground. As a ‘world birder’, I had always been motivated by the belief that I should give something back to conservation as opposed to just adding ticks to my list. I had also had numerous conversations with other birders about whether any North Americans might be forming such an organisation.

The credit for starting the ball rolling goes to Guy, who struck up discussion with Tim while they were journeying aboard on an overnight bus between Quito and Guayaquil in Ecuador. By the time they arrived, the pair had galvanised themselves into forming a ‘club’ dedicated to the birds of the Neotropics. In July 1992, Tim, Jeff Blincow and I gathered at Guy’s house in Norwich, UK, to discuss how we might put the idea into practice. Between us we put together a list of people who might also be interested in establishing such an organisation and bounced around ideas

“I enjoyed my spell chairing NBC and am proud of what NBC has done for its members and conservation over the last 25 years. Well done to all involved and especially to David Fisher, Chris Collins and Chris Balchin for their unstinting service and to Guy Kirwan and James Lowen for continuing to deliver such great products. When I retire, I hope to return to Council!”  
Dave Capper, NBC chair 2001–03



**1** Chris Balchin’s notes of the meeting (Norwich, July 1992) where the first plans for the Neotropical Bird Club were put in place. (Chris was clearly the NBC’s natural secretary, right from the start! *Ed.*)

about what it might most usefully do (Fig. 1). To be frank, I am not sure if *any* of us really knew what we were getting into – but we had a great deal of enthusiasm and knew we could benefit from the experience of two existing organisations: the Oriental Bird Club (formed in 1984; see [orientalbirdclub.org](http://orientalbirdclub.org)) and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME, formed in 1978; [osme.org](http://osme.org)).

## Momentum gathers

So it came to pass that on a warm sunny day the ‘launch committee’ convened at 11h15 on 30 August 1992 in the ‘Old Warden’s Hut’ at Cley-next-the-sea, Norfolk, UK (Fig. 2). Those present were Jeff Blincow, Simon Cook, Jon Curson, Simon Fogg, Mark Golley, Nigel Goodgame, Guy Kirwan, Frank Lambert, Tim Marlow, John Mason and me. We agreed the name of the organisation – that bit was easy – and agreed to call our journal *Cotinga* (although *Crax* and *Tapaculo* ran it close). Given differences of opinion on what geographical coverage was intended by ‘the Neotropics’, we agreed to use the definition contained in *A dictionary of birds* (Campbell & Lack 1985), i.e.

Copy to: B. Green  
C. Green  
✓ J. Harrison  
✓ H. Kelsey  
✓ D. Fisher  
✓ D. Scott

C. Scott  
Harrison  
for Simon, Colley, Barclay  
Glasco  
SE11 5EL  
0453-840042

Subject	NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB	Page	1
		Date	3.9.92
		Author	S COOK
		Meeting No.	1

Held at THE OLD WARDENS HUT, CLEY. 11.15, 30.8.92

Present MARK GOLLEY SIMON FIDG  
JOHN HARRISON GUY KIDSON  
TIM HARLOW CHRIS BALCHIN  
NIGEL GOODGAME JEFF BLINCOW  
SIMON COOK

A list of names & addresses is at appendix 1.  
Present for part of the meeting: FRANK LAURENT  
JOHN CURSON

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Purpose INAUGURAL MEETING OF INTERESTED PARTIES

Details/Action. If Any	When By Whom
1. <u>Election of Meeting Chairman &amp; Secretary</u> Chairman : MG Meeting Secretary: SC Proposed by those present, seconded by JB.	
2. <u>Statement of aims of the Club</u> After a welcome by the Chairman, it was agreed to adopt the same aims as the Oriental Bird Club and to apply them to the Neotropical region.	
3. <u>Proposals for posts of other officers</u> ✓ Club Chairman : Martin Kelsey Hon Treasurer : SC (proposal accepted) Membership Secretary : MG (proposal accepted) Hon Secretary : CB (proposal accepted) Bulletin Editor : Journal Editor : decision held over	

GK 12/4

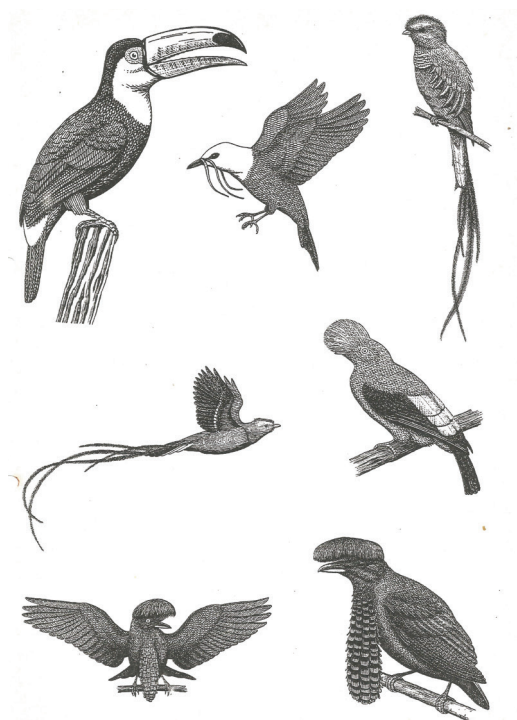
**2** Official note of the August 1992 meeting that established the launch committee for the Neotropical Bird Club.

Mexico, Central America, South America and its associated islands and the Caribbean.

We also divvied out key responsibilities – including to people not present! Martin Kelsey was elected as chairman, Simon Cook as treasurer and Nigel Goodgame as membership secretary; I became secretary (a role I was to subsequently hold for a total of 17 years... and counting!). Jeff Blincow assumed the role of production & art editor, David Wege became senior editor of whatever publication we would produce. Mark Golley took charge of fundraising and publicity – immediately introducing a ‘founder membership’ scheme whereby new members would pay membership to cover the costs of the organisation’s first year. In a little over two hours, we concluded the meeting, leaving with the enthusiasm to make the club happen, and a lengthy ‘to-do’ list...

## Becoming real

We soon produced the first NBC flyer, which promoted the founder membership scheme. (I recall many excursions for vagrant birds across the UK where I took the opportunity to slip this promotional material under the windscreen wipers of my fellow twitchers.) Jeff Blincow presented



**3** Never-previously-published candidate logos for the Neotropical Bird Club (Jeff Blincow).

the launch committee with a number of designs for the NBC logo, including those in Fig. 3. These featured a variety of charismatic Neotropical species including Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus*, Long-wattled Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus penduliger*, Resplendent Quetzal *Pharomachrus mocinno*, Three-wattled Bellbird *Procnias tricarunculatus* and Toco Toucan *Ramphastos toco*. From this wealth of artistic talent, we ended up choosing Jeff’s Three-wattled Bellbird – which remains as the NBC logo today (despite a very brief change to another design!). For more on this spectacular cotinga, see Graeme Green’s article on page 57.

By late 1993, the launch committee had expanded to include Barnaby Briggs, Colin Bushell

“I’m so thankful and proud of the Neotropical Bird Club for what has achieved during these 25 years for bird research and conservation in the Americas. The articles in *Cotinga*’s 40 issues – being published in English, Spanish or Portuguese – are easily accessible to Latin American researchers.”

Nancy Hilgert de Benavides, NBC patron



COTINGA 1: Contents	
1 Editorial	
5 Club News	
8 Neotropical News	
15 Feature: Black-crowned Night Heron, Pale-legged and Black-crowned Night Heron	Jon Curson
20 Feature: The specific status of Black-faced Antshrike in Middle America	Steve Howell
25 Neotropical Notebook	
30 Focus On: Ochre-bellied Dove ( <i>Leptotila ochraceiventris</i> )	Brinkley Best
35 White-tailed Shrike-tyrant ( <i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i> )	Nick Knaflitz
38 Photo Spot: Andean Parrot ( <i>Myiopsitta monachus</i> )	Barry Triggs
39 Feature: Laguna Colorado and Eduardo Avaroa National Reserve, Bolivia	Rob Martin and Andrew Kelly
42 Feature: The conservation of the Santa Feiglass Cuckoo?	Thomas Yallop
45 Reviews	
46 General	

#### 4 The contents page for Cotinga 1 and Cotinga 2.

(responsible for arranging speaker meetings), Graeme Green, Mark Pearman, Chris Sharpe, Joe Tobias and Rob Williams. We had accumulated 173 'Founder Members'. We were all set.

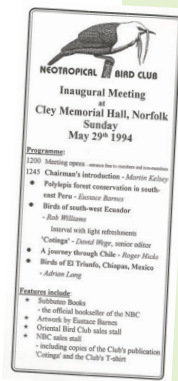
## Go live

In February 1994 we published the first edition of *Cotinga* – 60 pages that included articles on birds as diverse as Junco Grebe *Podiceps taczanowskii*, Ochre-bellied Dove *Leptotila ochraceiventris*, White-tailed Shrike-Tyrant *Agriornis albicauda*, Black-faced Antthrush *Formicarius analis* and Black-crested Warbler *Myiothlypis nigrocristata* (Fig. 4). The issue also made clear the NBC's aim – "to foster an interest in the birds of the Neotropics amongst bird-watchers [sic] throughout the world and increase their awareness of the importance of support for conservation in the region" – and our objectives.

The issue included a tribute to Ted Parker III, the brilliant American field birder, who had sadly been killed in a plane crash in the previous August. A pioneer of modern Neotropical ornithology, Ted had been a major advocate of the NBC during its early development. In the inaugural *Cotinga* editorial, David Wege wrote that: "It is hoped that the NBC through the publication of *Cotinga* can in some small way start to redress this loss, but perhaps more importantly help to carry on what Ted did best – to fire and nurture an enthusiasm in all things Neotropical amongst anyone with their ears and eyes open and willing to listen and learn" (Wege 1994).

## Meetings and gatherings

We held our first members' meeting at Cley-next-the-sea, Norfolk, in May 1994 (Figs. 5–6). This was an auspicious event, not least because it was used to launch the book *New World Warblers* by Jon Curson *et al.* (1994). We also raised funds by selling our first merchandise, a t-shirt featuring Clive



## KEY FIGURES IN THE NBC, 1994–2019

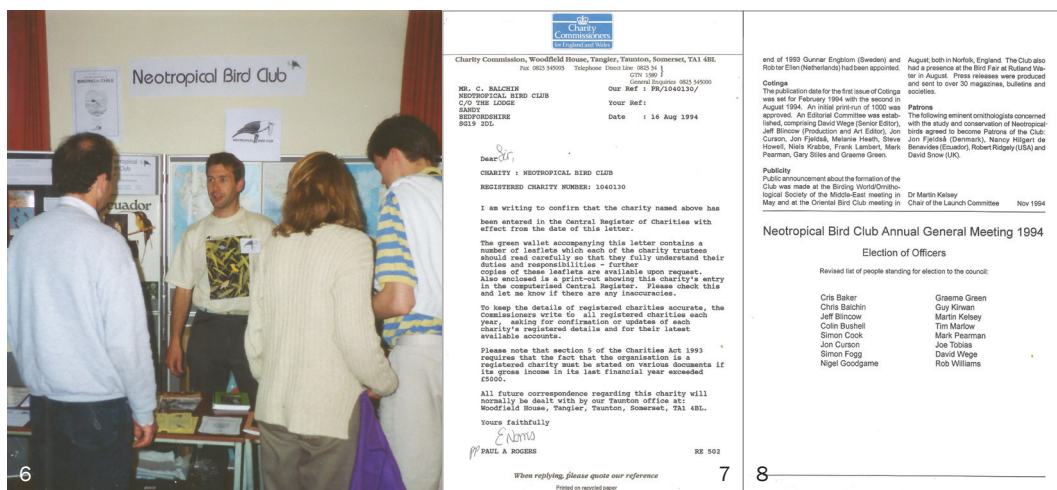
**Chairs** Martin Kelsey (1992–97), Rob Williams (1997–2001), Dave Capper (2001–03), Carl Downing (2003–09), David Fisher (2009–11, 2015–) and Chris Balchin (2011–15). **Secretary** Chris Balchin (1992–2005, 2015–), Trevor Warren (2005–09), Megan Crewe (2009–10) and Gordon Ellis (2009–15). **Treasurer** Simon Cook (1992–93), Nigel Goodgame (1993–98) and Chris Collins (1998–). **Vice-chair** Andy Mitchell (1998) and Dave Capper (1999–2000).

**Council and launch committee** Chris Balchin (1992–2005, 2007–), Jeff Blincow (1992–95), Colin Bushell (1992–96), Simon Cook (1992–97), Jon Curson (1992–96), Simon Fogg (1992–97), Mark Golley (1992–93), Nigel Goodgame (1992–2004), Graeme Green (1992–2000), Guy Kirwan (1992–2004), Frank Lambert (1992–94), Tim Marlow (1992–2000), the late John Mason (1992–97), Mark Pearman (1992–95), Roberto Philips (1992), Chris Sharpe (1992–94, 2016–18), David Wege (1992–96), Rob Williams (1992–2002, 2016–), Nancy Hilgert de Benavides (1993), Barnaby Briggs (1993–94), Joe Tobias (1993–97), Cris Baker (1994–97), Natasha White (1995–97), Wendy Balchin (1996), Dave Gandy (1996–97), Ian Henshaw (1996–2002), Geoff McMullan (1996–97), Rick Simpson (1996–97), Chris Collins (1997–), James Lowen (1997–2008), Andy Mitchell (1996–2006), Carl Downing (1998–), David Fisher (1998–), the late Juan Mazar Barnett (1998–2002), Tom Stuart (1998–), Dave Capper (2001–04), the late Richard Ffrench (2001–02), Sue Johns (2001–06), Corinne Kennedy (2002), Keith Beswick (2003–05), Brian Cox (2003–12), Trevor Warren (2003–09, 2013–15), Thomas Donegan (2004–08), Patrick Warwick (2004–05), Jenny Arias (2006–09), Charles Wilkins (2006–), Megan Crewe (2007–13), Diego Cisneros-Heredia (2008–11), Gordon Ellis (2008–18), Stuart Elsom (2008–11), Martin Fowle (2008–11), Jez Bird (2010–16), Alex Lees (2010–18), Rob Martin (2012–13), Graham Ekins (2013–15), Roberta Goodall (2013–), Manuel Sanchez (2013–), Mike Dawson (2016–) and John Thirtle (2016–).

**Others** There are also many people who have not served on Council or the launch committee, but who have made major contributions to the running of the club. We particularly thank Janette Rowland for looking after the club finances, Anna Hughes for support at the Birdfair and Raymond Jeffers for his advice and fundraising.

**5** Flyer for the inaugural NBC meeting at Cley-next-the-sea, UK, in May 1994.





- 6 (A youthful-looking) Chris Balchin at the first NBC meeting at Cley-next-the-sea, UK, in May 1994 (Jeff Blincow).
- 7 Approval of the UK Charities Commission for the establishment of the Neotropical Bird Club.
- 8 The first official Council of the newly established Neotropical Bird Club – taken from the trustees report to the first AGM in November 1994.

Byers' painting of manakins which had adorned the cover of *Cotinga* 1. The record for that meeting noted more than 150 attendees and sales of 50-plus t-shirts and numerous copies of *New World Warblers*.

We were already spreading the word far and wide. The previous year, I had represented the fledgling NBC at the British Birdwatching Fair ('Birdfair'), sharing a stand with the West African Ornithology Society (which was later subsumed into the African Bird Club). In 1996 the NBC attended the Birdfair in our own right and with our own stand. We have been present ever since, handing out hot-off-the-press publications and nattering about all things Neotropical with perhaps tens of thousands of visitors over the years.

We also took pains to promote the NBC in the Neotropical region. I have a special memory from December 1994, when Rob Williams and I visited Loja in southern Ecuador. I took the opportunity

to distribute NBC flyers and car stickers to local birders, including those from Fundación Arcoiris Ecuador, and to young British conservationists running a project called 'Parrots in Peril'. I was a passenger in car travelling to Zamora when the driver excitedly pointed at the car in front of us, which was proudly sporting a car sticker.

Back in the nineties, birders could also act as walking billboards for the NBC, by wearing Club clothing. We built on the success of the first NBC t-shirt by producing new designs each year (Fig. 9). These were eagerly awaited and sold well, raising important funds for the NBC. Somewhere around the turn of the millennium, bird-design t-shirts seemed to go out of fashion. Sadly they are no longer economic to produce. The NBC is enormously grateful to the various artists who produced these designs for us – and I lament their demise.

## Corporates, charity and credibility

Alongside founder members, we also sought 'corporate supporters' (originally known as 'corporate sponsors') to boost finances and make a clear connection between the worlds of commerce and conservation. Although we got nowhere with some big corporations, other companies were pleased to support us. *Cotinga* 1 featured full-page advertisements for BirdQuest, Subbuteo Natural History Books, VIREO (remember them?!) and Ornitholidays. The NBC is enormously grateful

"As nominated Chairperson, I approached possible patrons. David Snow immediately responded positively. I think that he would have been hugely proud of the NBC's achievements. Bob Ridgely was also delighted to become a patron. His initial response spoke volumes: "How come it's you Brits that come up with these great ideas?"

Martin Kelsey, NBC chair 1992–97





9 Sample NBC t-shirts on sale in the 1990s (Chris Balchin).

to the long list of corporate supporters over the subsequent 25 years.

One vital bit of bureaucracy involved establishing the NBC as a registered charity. UK rules governing the operation and conduct of charities are very strict and a number of conditions must be met. But by becoming a non-profit organisation, we avoided the need to run the NBC as a public or private limited company, which would have been unsustainable. To this end, we were required to form a committee of trustees (formally known as ‘Council’) and produce a constitution (which we based on that of the Oriental Bird Club). This was submitted to the UK Charities Commission and, after what seemed like ages although in reality was only a few months, we were granted charitable status on 16 August 1994 (Fig. 7).

To give the NBC further credibility, eminent ornithologists concerned with the study and conservation of Neotropical birds were invited to become patrons. Jon Fjeldså, Nancy Hilgert de Benevides, Robert Ridgely and David Snow helped us in this way; so too would Ted Parker III had his untimely death not intervened. *Cotinga 2* was the first to mark their support.

On 19 November 1994 the NBC held its first Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Ealing town hall, London, UK. The ‘launch committee’ was stood down and replaced by first the first formally elected Council (Fig. 8). We were now officially the Neotropical Bird Club.

## Conservation Awards Programme

Conservation has been integral to the NBC since the outset. Indeed, the word ‘conservation’ appears not once but six times in the NBC’s initial aim and objectives as published in *Cotinga 1*. We have

## THE COTINGA ‘ART GALLERY’

The cover painting for *Cotinga 1* – which depicted three genera of manakins – was by artist Clive Byers and reproduced courtesy of Graeme Green. Paintings have subsequently graced the front cover of each of the 40 volumes of *Cotinga* since – and the cover of *Cotinga 41*, produced alongside *Neotropical Birding 25*, comprises a collage of them. For this, we are very grateful to a series of talented artists from around the world. In order of first contribution, these are: Clive Byers, Jon Fjeldså, Lyn Wells, David Beadle, John P. O’Neill, Sophie Webb, Eustace Barnes, Kester Wilson, J. Searight, Aldo Chiappe, Pedro Regalado Ruiz, Eduardo Parentoni Brettas, Andrew C. Vallely, Jaime A. Chaves, Oscar Tintaya, Barry Kent MacKay, Richard Johnson, Pat Latas, José Merizio, John Gale, Chris Lodge, Rafael Dutra, Luis G. Pagano, Jen Brunfield, Tomasz Cofta, David Tomb, Erin Johnson and Gonzalo Iván Nazati Velia.

long made it a priority to give financial support to activities directed at conserving Neotropical birds, particularly those considered globally threatened given that these represent the most urgent conservation priorities. In 1996 we announced our first conservation award (*Cotinga 6*: 13–15), a grant to fund survey work in *Polylepis* woodland at Abra Malaga in Cuzco, Peru, home of Royal Cinclodes *Cinclodes aricomae* and White-browed Tit-Spinetail *Leptasthenura xenothorax*.

From this inaugural award, we have greatly expanded the scheme, increasing both the number of grants given and their value. To date what has become known as the NBC Conservation Awards Programme has allocated grants totalling £188,000 (US\$250,000) to projects across 20 countries. A useful summary of the programme, including its impact on bird conservation and legacy, during the years 2001–2010 was published in *Neotropical Birding 12* (Stuart *et al.* 2013), and an article on developments since is in the offing.

The Conservation Awards Programme has evolved greatly over the past 23 years. It is worth detailing the fine tuning of the current process, so that readers can understand how carefully the NBC funds conservation. All applications are initially assessed for suitability to ensure that they are compatible with the NBC constitution. Eligible applications are sent to an assessment sub-committee plus additional reviewers with expertise in a particular aspect of the application. Each reviewer scores the application against a suite of categories (e.g. conservation value, methodology and value to the local community). The sub-committee select the applications that they feel



10 A selection of *Cotinga* covers.





## NBC CORPORATE SUPPORTERS/SPONSORS

The following have participated in the NBC Corporate Supporter or Corporate Sponsor schemes at some point since 1994. Our gratitude goes to them all plus other companies that have helped us considerably! Our thanks to Birding Brazil Tours, Birdfinders, Birding Ecotours, Birding North Peru, BirdQuest, Canopy Family, Ecuador Experience, El Septimo Paraíso, Geodyssey, Green Tours – Peru, In Focus, Kolibri Expeditions, Limosa, Lynx Edicions, Manu Expeditions, Napo Wildlife Center, Naturetrek, Ornitholidays, Rockjumper Birding Tours, Serra dos Tucanos, Subbuteo Natural History Books Ltd, Sunbird, Swarovski Optik Ltd, VIREO and Wildwings.

deserve a grant and recommends them to the NBC Council which then determines which to fund.

Running such a programme has required an immense amount of effort from a large number of individuals over the years – and the Club is grateful to them all. I congratulate every single recipient of a NBC Conservation Award.

## Publications

*Cotinga* has gone from strength to strength since its launch issue. For the first 15 years, we published two volumes per year – but have since moved to a single ‘bumper’ volume. *Cotinga* has evolved from what was initially predominantly a ‘birding’ magazine into a peer-reviewed and highly regarded ornithological journal where, to quote the editorial guidelines, “the accent... is on new distributional and temporal information, including new country records, new data concerning biology, particularly breeding, and novel interpretations concerning taxonomy, particularly descriptions of new taxa”. It has become a platform for upcoming ornithologists to publish their findings; many authors have become key figures in conservation in the Neotropical region. This is important stuff for which we must thank, above all, the four individuals who have served as Senior and/or Managing Editors (in chronological order): David Wege, Guy Kirwan, George Wallace and Juan Freile.

The transition of *Cotinga*’s focus from birding to ornithology created space for the NBC to produce *Neotropical Birding*. First published in 2006 and moving to two issues per year in 2009, ‘NB’ is explicitly and unashamedly ‘the birding magazine of the Neotropical Bird Club’. For many

people, *Neotropical Birding* has become the NBC’s flagship, and members are highly complimentary of it. For this thanks are due to those who have taken the editorial helm: David Fisher, Chris Collins, James Lowen, Nacho Areta, Guy Kirwan and Chris Sharpe.

## The next 25 years?

Now looking to the future, what are my hopes for the NBC? Where would I, personally, like the NBC to be in 2044, when, all being well, it will celebrate its 50th anniversary?

Firstly, I hope that the NBC will still be transmitting its core message – that of the importance of encouraging enthusiasm in the interest and conservation of Neotropical birds and their habitats. Secondly, I hope that we will have smashed the threshold of donating US\$1 million to the region through our Conservation Awards Programme. Thirdly, I hope that the NBC becomes based in and run from the Neotropics: although I firmly believe in what we do, I am constantly conscious that the organisation is currently external to the region that we serve.

One thing is for sure there will always be species and habitats in the Neotropics that are under threat – the consequences of competing priorities between the environment and humanity. Until or unless this changes, there will always be a need for the NBC.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Jeff Blinco for permission to reproduce his logo designs and photograph, and all those listed in the sidebar as having played a role in the running of the NBC. I thank the NBC patrons and former chairs for offering messages celebrating our 25th anniversary.

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