

IT'S FOR THE BIRDS

Chit Chat Club 1991

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A few years ago in a lodge near the foot of Mt. Mckinley about 100 miles from the nearest paved road in Denali National Park, Alaska, I had an experience that epitomizes the current craze in bird watching. A very distinguished gentleman was monopolizing the only phone, speaking in a loud voice he was inquiring as to the identity and number of the birds in his auditor's apparently even more remote neighborhood. He had arrived at the lodge on the same bus that I had the day before and at breakfast he informed me proudly and matter-of-factly that he had "done" the birds in Denali the previous afternoon and he was ready to move on. Even given the fact that the sun finally set at that latitude at around 11PM and that it never

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really got dark, It would have been impossible to see every bird in that magnificent mountain and tundra environment in just a few hours. Though any normal person having spent thousands of dollars to get there would feel constrained to spend some time walking about or hiking to savor the scenery around the highest mountain in North America. Normal people like to enjoy the abundance and marvelous variety of mammalian animal life: moose, bear, reindeer, wolves marmots, etc. that Alaska provides. Bird watchers are a different breed. If it is not a bird, they are not interested. My new Alaskan acquaintance, a true Type A fanatic, was ready and anxious to move on, in a hurry to find the next new bird to add to his life list.

It is estimated that some 2 million people in the US regularly put themselves out to observe avifauna. These bird watchers for the most part, are no fanatics but may spend upwards of \$1000 to equip themselves to do it properly. Binoculars, telescopes, bird manuals and special clothing may be the order

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of the day. Classes, tours, magazines, bird feeders and seed and one to one instruction are other ways for the bird watcher to spend money, which they do, probably tens of millions each year.

What is it that makes bird watching so compelling to so many people? Like many human activities this hobby has many aspects to it. For starters, it is a reflection I think, of a society that sees its natural environment under threat. In California where the human population has doubled in the past thirty years, fields, forests, marshlands are disappearing at an alarming rate, and with subdivisions springing up where meadowlarks and bluebirds once sang, means that finding them has become harder. And being rarer the wild bird has become more valuable. Wild things are becoming extinct at an alarming rate as deliberate human predation is being replaced by environmental degradation. Dutch sailors killed off the dodo bird for food on the island of Mauritius over a period of just a

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few years in the 17 C. This giant flightless bird in the pigeon family is known now only from descriptions in old books and as a skeleton in museums. Icelandic egg hunters killed off the Great Auk in the 19C. No one alive remembers the passenger pigeon, used for food, target practice and fertilizer. The last known survivor finally died in the St. Louis Zoo in the 1914. It had been so numerous that flights of this bird literally blotted out the sun for hours as they passed over ornithologist John J. Audubon 's head as he observed them along the Mississippi in the early 1800's. The California condor, the largest bird in North America along with the dramatically beautiful whooping crane, in populations now down to critical numbers were decimated by hunting and habitat destruction have been saved so far, only through herculean efforts.

Wild birds are relatively high up on the food chain. Their diets are often very specialized and as a result, they are very susceptible to environmental change. The example of the DDT

effect on the brown pelican is a well-known example. In the laudable attempt to eliminate malaria by killing off the anopheles mosquito, DDT led to excessive fragility of pelican eggs as fish the staple of the pelican diet became contaminated with the pesticide which washed into the ocean. Pelican as well as other fish-eating bird populations alarmingly deteriorated. The pelicans and ospreys were saved by the prompt banning of DDT here, but unfortunately it continues to be used elsewhere in the world. The magnificent gigantic ivory billed wood pecker is gone forever as old growth forests upon which it depends, was eliminated in its native habitat in the American south and Caribbean. This beautiful and dramatic bird was the size of a small turkey. It could only live in old growth dying pine trees and cypresses. It is thought that a few years ago it was spotted in Louisiana and then again in Cuba but their continued existence has never been confirmed. All of this is grist for the bird watching fraternity. One may be the

last to ever see a particular bird. Birders often travel tremendous distances and spend many days to find and observe that *rara avis*, a bird that no one else has seen or perhaps will ever see. I will not soon forget the thrill of seeing one of the few California condors left in the wild. After driving over rough back roads for several days in the desolate hills of Ventura County, I finally saw this soaring beast. It seemed like a dark gigantic prehistoric pterodactyl as it swooped silently over our heads with its great black-fingered wings. For what seemed like an hour but was no longer than a few seconds, he hung there motionless in the wind 100 feet over our heads before silently drifting off over those dry yellow hills to look for his next meal. It was an exciting experience that only a few people have ever duplicated.

As one can gather, the thrill of the chase in pursuit of the unusual bird is a major attraction for the true birder. And nothing quite matches the disappointment when as is often the

case, that hunt is unsuccessful. Sidney Greenstreet, that great character actor, said it about his search for rare and valuable statue of a bird in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. When having failed in his quest after at least 3 murders over 10 years, he was confronted with the choice of giving up the chase for the elusive bejeweled bird or giving up his loyal gunsel, Wilmer. Wilmer, as he said, he considered his own son, but he could: "always get another son, but there was only one Maltese Falcon!". Birding publications are filled with ads to exotic places where the rare and unusual bird can be found and I confess having answered a few. Several years ago in the foothills of the Andes in a rainforest in Ecuador, I and a colleague had succumbed. We were on the track of the rare cock-of-the rock, like the dodo, an unusual bird in the pigeon family. Its range is very restricted and that only a few people had ever seen outside a museum case. In an Indian village well off the main road, we found a guide who promised results. At

three in the morning we met two other birders as crazy as we were, and in a steady drizzle we made our way up a muddy track into the jungle in our rented 4-wheel drive. It was not long before we were all out of the jeep to extricate it from a deep rut that we had slid into in that pitch darkness. This was repeated at least three more times; once actually after a wheel rolling over my binoculars which had inexplicably fallen out into the mud. The mud was soft and my expensive Leitz Tri-Novids survived, but the case still bears traces of the Andes. After what seemed forever, grinding slowly and painfully up that dark muddy mountain we came to a halt. Our Inca guide pointed his flashlight up into the black sky and gave a low whistle. A grey shape flapped through the column of light and was gone. That, he said proudly was an unexpected treat. It was an oil bird ! I suppose I can take credit for seeing it and add it to my life-list, if actually kept one, but I honestly did not see anything resembling a bird. I had never heard of an oil bird. Later I

learned that this bird known only in the Andes, and related to a whippoorwill, is the only bird known to navigate and find food in the dead of night using ultrasonic guidance like a bat. But no matter, we then started out on foot for the cock-of-the-rock. I won't bore you about sliding down muddy slopes into rushing streams or pulling up on exposed tree roots on narrow ledges with the aid of flashlights. We finally halted, facing a jungle cliff face covered with giant 3 foot wide philodendron leaves. As dawn was just breaking, José pointed to the dense greenery about thirty feet ahead of us. A crimson flash and then another and then another appeared and just as rapidly disappeared and were replaced by others: the cocks-of-the-rock ! We had about 5 minutes to see these unlikely foot long birds with unique brilliant crimson crested heads red bodies and black wings popping in and out of that dense jungle. This was the lek, the night roosting place for that flock of birds. The rising sun then actually came into view into that narrow

canyon, and almost on cue with a massive fluttering and flash of color and the birds were gone. There must have been about 100 birds suddenly flying off to who knows where, disappearing in an instant. The experience was over. In the light, the trip back was an anticlimax. we had been incredibly energized. I finally got a closer look at the bird a few years later on a trip to Japan where a pair was resident in the aviary of the Tokyo Zoo. Somehow it was not the same.

To anyone looking at birds they can be confusing and their activities mystifying. Certain birds are loners, others occur only in large or small flocks. Some are found only on the ground where others high in trees. Whether in snow, in deserts, at sea or in treetops however, they are always hungry and looking for food. Birds have a high metabolism rate maintaining around 101 degree body temperature as anyone who has felt under the feathers of a chicken or canary can attest. Birds' energy demands require constant fuel. That food is remarkably varied between species. Sea birds survive on fish or

surface insects while predators kill other birds or small mammals for food. Most common birds eat seeds or insects while humming birds derive their energy from the sugar in flower nectar. Each species of birds finds an ecological niche for survival. And survive they do through various and special anatomic adaptations. The most obvious example is the size and shapes of the beaks of shore birds. As many as 10 different species can be found on a single stretch of beach, as a result. The stilt's long needle bill can pick insects off of the surface of the water. The avocet with a long upturned bill sweeps the water for swimming insect larvae. The sandpiper with a short bill runs after small crabs from the wet sand while bills of increasing length enable dowitchers, yellow legs whimbrels and curlews to obtain living food probing at progressively deeper levels in the sand. The heron with a dagger for a bill spears swimming fish. Besides relying on specialized food, through various mechanisms birds are able maintain stable body temperature over wide climatic extremes. Penguins in Antarctica standing on ice in howling winter

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storms at 100 below zero in winter months of darkness maintain the same body temperature as the tropical hummingbird in sweltering jungle heat. All birds are insulated from their environment by feathers each controlled by minute skin muscles, which loose or dense allow for body heat stability. However, it is simply amazing to observe ducks and penguins standing or swimming exposed to ice and freezing water for days or weeks at a time keeping warm as circulation is maintained in the bare skin of their legs and feet. Their adaptive mechanism is remarkable.

The argument goes on as to whether present day birds derive from reptiles or whether they are their own distinct evolutionary line.

Could cold-blooded reptiles evolve into warm blooded birds? The earliest feathered animal known is the fossilized archeopterix which was flightless, had clawed fore limbs and dinosaur-like teeth.

Feathers seem to be derived from scales that survive on many birds' legs. By being warm blooded has enabled birds to inhabit every part of the globe, unlike reptiles. They occur and seem to

flourish in every environment under every condition. All to the delight of the birder who can enjoy bird watching wherever he goes with a minimum of equipment. All the birder really needs is an interest. Of course a good pair of binoculars helps as well as a \$10 field manual for reference. Probably no hobby except perhaps jogging, requires less. This in no implies that bird watching is easy. It is exceedingly difficult. Birds are most often small. They can move very fast such that mere glimpse is frequently all that one gets. They appear and seemingly disappear unpredictably not only during the day but over the course of a week. Birds can appear in one season and not in the next as migratory populations fluctuate. Even when present they can be hard to identify. The brown creeper looks exactly like the tree bark over which it looks for small insects. The marsh wren seems to make a habit of loudly squawking but never showing himself while the bittern stands erect and still, appearing and acting exactly like the yellow and brown reeds where he spends his time. The small and relatively common hermit warbler

with bright yellow markings like most warblers spends its time so high in the trees that most birders have never seen it. The dipper walks under water looking under stones in rushing mountain streams and as a result I never saw one until last year. Against the background of trees any bird can be hard to see much less identified. Birds that one might expect to see may not appear where previously they might have been common. Similarly there is always the possibility of seeing the unexpected There may be many causes for this but that remains a major source of interest as well as frustration for the birder. In San Francisco the local Audubon Society maintains a rare bird alert accessible by telephone. This bird alert exists over much of the country and when some rarity is spotted hundreds soon hear of it and crowds may appear with their telescopes, binoculars and bird books. For a real rarity birders will literally fly to see it, sometimes across the country, making a good newspaper story.

Rarities are one thing but even common bird populations often are not stable for a variety reasons. The house finch populations in the East are now being decimated by an epidemic eye infection. West Nile virus has killed off thousands of crows as well as a few people. Climatic changes ever so slight, can affect bird population. Nothing indicates climatic warming to me more than the changing population of birds on Long Island where I grew up. For example, when I was a boy the cardinal was an exotic, seen only in the South where I used to spend my summers. Now it is a year-long resident in New England where it was previously never seen, while the blue jay previously common has now largely retreated to Canada. The semi tropical ibis has now invaded Northern California as well as the East Coast. Climate however, cannot explain migration the most common cause of bird appearance and disappearance: bird migration. Nor can anyone fully explain how birds manage it. Severe weather does not prevent seed or berry eaters from finding food nor is it water or temperature. Cardinals flourish in bone-dry and hot Baja California

as well as in the snow in the East. Birds will migrate north in the summer and south in the winter along the west coast of North America for no reason that is apparent. Along the Mediterranean certain shore birds migrate seasonally from east to west and back, again for no obvious reason. As basic as it is, migration itself is not all that predictable. Spring migrant warblers coming north from Central and South America may get confused and instead of heading up the East Coast as usual, certain individuals end up here, blown by unfavorable winds or whatever. On a pelagic bird watching trip a few years ago, 5 miles off the coast of Monterey and the nearest tree, a tired tiny yellow magnolia warbler weighing no more than a few ounces landed on our boat to rest. This insect eating perching bird was fully 3000 miles from its destination in the Amazon jungle of South America. After a few minutes it was off, driven by the same primeval genetic encoding to migrate that drove his ancestors and would drive his descendants whatever the cost.

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Birds, dynamic relics of a primordial age both delight and inspire on many levels and I can only suggest the pleasure that watching them provides me. May I recommend it to all of you?