

Are Birds Spies?

Adventures in birdwatching

Jim Cory

It's about two hours since we left Chicago and Amtrak steward

Julio casts a cold eye on the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region*. The section on flycatchers is open to page 521 on the foldout table in front of me.

"You like birds?" Julio says, leaning in, scratch pad in hand, to take the dinner reservation.

I tell him that I do and explain that I'm headed for Silver City, New Mexico, specifically to look for some. He glances around the roomette, notes the one small bag.

"By yourself?"

I nod.

I can see his mind question: Why would anyone spend time walking around looking for birds, and moreover travel 2,000 miles to do that? I'm imagining that he's imagining what might make it an okay way to spend some time. I ask how long he's worked for Amtrak and he tells me he's been a steward on the Southwest Chief for twenty-two years, which I suppose is another way to say he's seen and heard everything at some point somewhere between Chicago and Los Angeles. The solitary birdwatcher in Room 5 of Car 0331 is minor fare compared to the geeks and freaks that come through.

"Birds, that is interesting," he says in the way that indicates it could actually be interesting but only with a lot of work.

"Now," he says, back from this mental detour, smile resuming, "will that dinner reservation be for 5:30, 6:30 or 7:30?"

In the bird world males stand out. That mostly means they're larger and/or more colorful. It enables them to attract a mate. Females are frequently drab. That's so they go unnoticed on the nest. While there are numerous exceptions, the rule generally holds true and things can get really radical when you're talking about certain species such as the vermillion flycatcher, found in Southwest Texas

and New Mexico. The head and breast of the male is a one-of-a-kind shade of red, with blackish brown on the wing and a masking band of identical black extending from the bill to back behind the eyes. The female has the same brown on head, wings and back, with a white breast brightening to buff, occasionally even a flash of red, on the belly. Unless you know what to look for, you could mistake her for a lot of things. A male vermillion, on the other hand, can't be anything else. Would I see some?

I came close on my first day. Early that afternoon I pulled the rented SUV into the parking lot of the visitor's center for Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, an hour south of Albuquerque. Outside, what looked like high-powered bumblebees flickered and whirred around a vertical red feeder suspended from the roof. Inside, using a glossy New Mexico Transportation map and a topographical display of the state set up as an exhibit, a roundish assertive person named Sherry ("First time? How long?") runs me through a list of all the places I need to see in eight days.

"Start with the Bosque Del Apache," Sherry says. She points to a green spot on the Transportation map. "It's right down the Interstate. The Bosque Del Apache has more birds than anywhere else in New Mexico. Of course you could also run into cougars. I wouldn't worry about that."

Sherry would give a cougar pause. She is short, solidly built, with a shade of brown hair that matches her glasses. She's probably in her fifties but the spirit is along the lines of someone mentally flown in from the hippie era. She proceeds to name, one after another, what she feels are the best parks in the state, and has, she says, sacked out in the cab of her truck in the parking lots of most of them.

"They got elk here," she says, pointing to a location on the Transportation map. She looks up. "Elk!"

I nod and ask about the hummingbirds outside. Sherry glances toward the window.

"Black-throated," she says. "Very aggressive."

I scribble.

Sherry follows my eyes wandering to the raptor on the wall with its wings spread.

“Swenson’s hawk. They live on prairie dogs. They used to be everywhere. Now there’s hardly any. But they’re bringing back the prairie dog and that’ll bring the hawks back.”

She launches into a description of the prairie dog reintroduction program, now underway in the state. Lots of detail about burrows, reproductive habits, predators besides Swenson’s hawk. She explains that if I’ve got extra time they have a list of the 200 best trails in the area at the public library at Show Low, an hour’s drive into Arizona. It’s worth the visit, in spite of the town having become “yuppiefied.”

When I was in my twenties and thirties I paid little more than polite attention to what anyone told me about anything. Not that I wasn’t curious. I just assumed there was some motive for their wanting to be helpful—attention, sex, a favor—or that such information, when volunteered, came with a condescending smack.

Besides, how could they know what I didn’t?

What changed that was a visit to a poet from Indiana. I happened to be in Indianapolis for work and called. He invited me over to talk about poetry. We soon wandered onto other topics. Two in particular: Prairie School architecture and Utopian communities. This poet, whose name is Jared Carter, knew the state’s history, geography, geology, architecture and assorted hot spots and had written a handsome coffee table book titled simply: *Indiana*. He suggested the Eugene Debs Museum in Terre Haute, the faux-Louis Sullivan bank in Poseyville, French Lick, for a view of the ballroom at the famous French Lick Resort Hotel, and sundry other places.

I jotted all down, climbed in my rental car and drove north, south, east and west, from Evansville to Lafayette and back. It was everything he promised.

I excuse myself and ask to use the restroom. The last thing I see as I climb into the car is Sherry directing nectar through the spout

of a watering can into the top of the hummingbird feeder—in effect, pouring the drinks—while 20 tiny birds watch and wait.

Bosque Del Apache Wildlife Refuge, down the Interstate maybe 45 minutes, sits in the center of New Mexico, a vast wetlands penetrated and encircled by dirt roads. The ranger running the Visitor's Center hands me a map.

"Somebody's seen vermillion flycatchers right about here," he says. Does he possess psychic powers or did Sherry call ahead? He X's a spot in ballpoint on the paper map. "There's supposed to be a nest."

The Bosque attracts thousands of bird people in the course of a year. Its draw is mostly waterfowl and wading birds, including such lovelies as the white-faced ibis, the American avocet and the stilt, which is everything the name implies. Of course, a vermillion flycatcher makes any of these seem mere names on a checklist.

According to livescience.com, 60 million Americans identify themselves as birdwatchers and "birding" is among the most popular forms of outdoor activity. Of course if 60 million people were out in the woods with binoculars and spotter scopes, places like the Bosque Del Apache would feel like the Mall of America the week before Christmas.

Who or what exactly is a bird-watcher depends on how you define the term. Most self-described bird-watchers conduct their observations from the vicinity of a feeder where the political dynamics can fascinate—all the dominance behaviors you might've imagined as purely human are on display—but it's like fishing an overstocked trout pond.

Serious birders make up a tiny fraction of the 60 million. They tend to be pilgrims and they're almost always alone. Like David, the guy in a ranger suit and hat I met in Lassen National Park, in Northern California, a few years back. He comes marching up the trail with a tripod and scope on his shoulder, eyes darting back and forth from trail to trees, trees to trail.

“See anything interesting?”

“White-headed woodpecker.”

That pushed a button.

“Seriously? I’ve been trying to see those for a week,” he says. “I even played their call.” He whips a phone from his vest pocket and plays it.

Chid-it-it! Chid-it-it!

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

David’s not actually a ranger. He’s a retired middle-school science teacher who volunteers to talk about birds at public parks in different Western states.

I ask about warblers. He’s seen two species in Lassen: the yellow-rumped and the hermit.

What does the hermit look like?

“The males have yellow heads and black throats.”

Suddenly he squints at some willow shrubs on the bank of a creek emptying into the lake we’re standing 50 feet away from.

“There’s one now!”

David unlimbers his scope and has got it on the bird in about 10 seconds. I can’t even get it into my binoculars.

“They’re shy,” he says, as we part ways. “That’s why they call’em ‘hermit warblers.’”

In the woods, looking and waiting are pretty much the same thing. You look, waiting for something to happen; you wait, and while you wait, you look. When something does happen, the moment’s all that matters and getting to that moment is what all the energy’s about.

This state of mind is the common property of bird people. Encounter another bird person on a trail and mention that you’ve just seen a hooded merganser or an American Dipper and watch the nervous system dial itself up a few notches. A bird person with that kind of information can look exactly like someone who’s just been

given the wrong change and can't figure out what to do about it.

These people—myself included—are put off by most human company. Who goes to the woods to socialize? If anything, you're there for the exact opposite reason—to get away from people—or, like Thoreau, to meet yourself. But when you do encounter one of these out on a trail, it's often like walking up to a mirror. Chances are they're your age, your sex, wearing clothes lifted from your closet. Or if they're not any of that, it doesn't matter. They know what you know and they're out there trying to find out more. Mention to even the most taciturn that hummingbird nest you saw plastered to a branch or the eagle that snatched a fresh-caught trout from an osprey's talons—a mid-air theft over a lake I witnessed at Lassen—and they'll be chittering like sparrows.

There are also the few who, passed on a trail, can barely bring themselves to nod, as well as the type who get all competitive about their equipment, as if the more they spent on that scope, those hiking boots, these binoculars, the more seriously they're entitled to be taken.

Sometimes these two types overlap. I'm thinking of the guy who, one April, set up a scope to watch baby Great Horned Owls in an abandoned squirrel's nest behind a pond at Tinnicum, a wildlife refuge across I-95 from the Philadelphia Airport. He had what looked like the Hubble Telescope set up on a tripod maybe 75 feet from the nest and a stone's throw from the trail. Let gravel rattle or a stick snap and he'd whirl, index to lips. *Shhhssssssshhhhhh!* Even if you came through without making a sound, the look was not friendly. Meanwhile Big Daddy owl was up there on a branch above the nest, waiting to descend on anyone who got close. Seventy-five feet was pushing it. You get the sense that no matter where he is or what he's doing, Hubble's a guy always pushing it. The world is his, not ours. I would like to report that just then a rotting tree limb descended on his head, or at least hit the Hubble, but in truth I left him scowling into his viewfinder for all the pleasure he might take there.

Back at the Bosque vehicles appear through a cloud of road

dust. A mirage? Getting closer, it looks like the parking lot at an Amish mud sale that somehow got baked, gentile side of the field, of course. RVs, SUVs, Honda Accords, Toyotas, a pickup truck or two, parked shoulder to shoulder. So are the people. They've fanned out on the rise just before the water's edge. It's Picket's Charge with spotter scopes. There are enough already so that newcomers merit barely a quick, hard glance.

I get out, scan the branches and turn to inspect the birder army. All I could see from where I stood, to crib a famous line from Edna Millay, was white males in fishing vests and camouflage jackets. Is this the very picture of much-vaunted privilege or just a bunch of guys with time on their hands? Both. What I notice is the head-gear. Half sport baseball caps, the rest are in this floppy khaki item shaped like something you'd wear while skippering a lobster boat.

I try to imagine myself in one. It's a strange thing the way that, at fifteen let's say, you see some item everyone's wearing—example: desert boots, circa 1968—and it's almost as if not having that will cause the world to end in whatever kind of colony collapse it eventually will end in. Fifty years on, the temptation to rush right out and order something like one of these lobster hats does not exist. Experience teaches that you need to be at least as careful about what you put on your head as you are about what you put in it. After fifty you can pretty much tromp around with your feet in old shoeboxes, like Howard Hughes, wear twine for a belt or stroll down the street in an accordion-pleated checkerboard skirt, no one is likely to pay much attention. But they will notice a hat.

The point was brought home once when I happened to overhear a conversation two middle-aged co-workers were having just over the cubicle wall at an office where I worked. It was 8:45 and they'd been going on animatedly for a few minutes when the conversation suddenly halted.

Fifteen seconds went by.

Then: “*What is that thing on her head?*”

I stood up to see, fast disappearing along the corridor, what had clearly begun as a beret but was now oversized, puffy and spangled in a manner that aspired to chic but failed, this perched on the head of a new hire anxious that her distinct fashion sense be known at once.

Someone pointed out to me that you should never wear a hat that has more personality than you do, and he proceeded to demonstrate by never wearing one at all.

As far as these khaki things with the brims that sort of flap down across the forehead, grow mosquito nets out the back, come with tumbling sun flaps for neck protection, and likely include other features known only to those who wear them, I wouldn't don a thing like that even if my head were in danger of turning into a clambake.

But here in the Bosque today these folks had flycatchers, not fashion, on their minds. They peered into scopes and scanned the canopy. Not seeing anything, they scowled and scanned again. The scanning and scowling went on and eventually you could pick up that vibe whereby collective impatience is about to morph into low-level hysteria. Once a crowd gets worked up, things can pretty much go anywhere and that's never a good direction.

One autumn a few years back in Cape May, New Jersey, I came on a gathering smaller in number but similar in spirit. They stood poised on the boardwalk, a dozen strong, ten or twenty thousand dollars worth of cameras, scopes and binoculars aimed at a single exhausted Pine Warbler. The bird was trying to down as many seeds as its stomach could hold before the next leg of its transcontinental migration trip. The birders, meanwhile, moved in like meth-addled paparazzi. They grimaced and leaned, strained and snapped. *Click! Click! Click!*

What, I am thinking, if these Bosque birders actually locate the vermillions? Imagine the sudden stampede for choice observation spots, the lemming-like rush into the waters of the swamp. Shouting matches erupt and escalate into shoving matches. In some people, birds bring out the inner landlord, in others the Black Friday shopper.

Sherry had circled a spot on the map that's about 30 miles west of Silver City and right before you get to a nowhere little town called Cliff, New Mexico. The way she described it, someone had shoe-horned a wildlife refuge into the space between two ranches along land bisecting the Gila River.

A day later I'm driving down first one gravel road and then another and turn onto what is not so much a road as an unnecessarily wide path. No gravel left, just dust. I follow it along the Gila to a donut turnaround shaded by willows. A gate that resembles something used to control the movement of cattle in a slaughterhouse provides admission. This device has two parallel chutes, with room for one person to pass. I think: this must be to keep people from grazing animals back here. Every rule has a reason.

Past the gate there's a meadow opening right on the river's edge, complete with raccoon tracks. It's April. The temperature's warm one day, cold the next. The trees have yet to fully leaf out, leaving a window of two or three weeks in which birds in spring plumage are easily viewed.

I spot movement but, as I focus, what comes into view is an undistinguished medium-sized bird with brownish markings that seem vaguely familiar. There is the line extending back from the eye, like a waxwing, and the hint of red on the belly. I watch for a minute or two and resume walking.

The trail picks up about 50 feet past the turnout and runs along the left of the river, between the Gila—moving deep and green over rocks and logs at this bend—and a canyon wall, into dense woods. The air smells of skunk cabbage, boxwood and the river. There are shrubs and knee-high flowering weeds. A thick stalk lifts a thistle bloom a few inches higher than the rest and a mourning cloak, then a black swallowtail, rests on the flower. Its texture calls to mind an HIV virus photographed under an electron microscope displayed in the examining room of my doctor's office. It went up on the wall one day two decades ago, in the middle of the AIDS epidemic, and never came down.

The color of the flower, though, is hardly morose. Magenta, shot through with light. I worked in an office once where a woman made the point of wearing something magenta every day. Tuesday, magenta scarf. Thursday, magenta sweater. Soon enough she was called Magenta.

A mile or so in and it occurs to me that it'd be damned difficult to scramble up that canyon wall if something threatening appears. I'm not talking about a pissed-off rancher bearing arms or the local *squadrusti*. If it's close enough, a black bear encountered in the woods feels like someone's pointing a Glock at your head. Everything else instantly irrelevant. You may think a bear's just an overgrown setter until you encounter one when there's no one else around.

And then there're lions. I scan the top of the canyon wall thinking: what if a cougar's face is there staring back? In fact, I'd be lucky to see the cat before it landed on my neck.

Right now I'd almost, just this once, welcome the loud, dumb-downed drone of some homo sapien voices. But no one's here. And suddenly scat, right in the middle of the trail, a big nasty pile topped with berry seeds like some kind of Dairy Queen for coprophagics. It could be a cow flop, if there were cows back here. More likely, given the seeds, this mess is everything that was on yesterday's black bear menu. Okay, that's it.

The SUV sits under the willow where I parked it, take-out coffee in the cup holder. Cold, but a kick. A spotted brown horse at the top of the hill shakes its tail and neighs. Time to leave?

In the branches a stone's throw from the rental car something moves. I get the binoculars on it and recognize the same bird I saw coming in. Black eye and bill, gray head and back, yellow underparts. Same bird, though now I notice a splash of faint red on the belly. The bird launches itself into the air, executes several hairpin turns and lands on the same place on the same branch. Fly wings twitch from its bill. It launches again, snagging a second mayfly. *Vermillion?*

Field guides can add another pound to the bird bag but there

will always come a point when you need to know. If she's here, an hour after I parked, that means there's a nest. And if there's a nest, there's a mate. A swift adjustment of binoculars brings a separate portion of the tree into focus. Ten feet away from her, glowing like a tiny meteor, the red-and-black jewel.

I came back the next day to find the riverbank littered with 30 smashed beer cans. But it didn't matter. I was able to spend an entire afternoon watching the flycatchers feed.

When you see a bird you know, and you're seeing it for the first

time, nerves you weren't aware you had start to sputter. It's like celebrity spotting in a bathhouse. Oh my God, can you believe it? "Hope is the thing with feathers," Dickinson wrote, invoking one of her greatest metaphors and, for all her fellow bird people, something that's literally true as well. The idea of bird watching is predicated on hope, which is belief married to a wish. On the other hand, if you don't know a yellow warbler from a loose canary, all it is is yellow. It could be any kind of anything.

Taking an adult who knows nothing about the woods into the woods is like dragging a ten-year-old who can't stand music to hear *Gotterdammerung*. The most you can hope for is polite attention.

On a road trip I once suggested to a friend from Queens that we stop at a particular spot behind the Penn State College reservoir and go hiking. He was agreeable.

"Waxwings!" I said as a half-dozen flew into a tree overhead.

He gave them a quick glance.

"Mountain laurel," I said, as we passed thick clumps of the state flower, then in bloom.

"Umhhmmm," he grunted.

We climbed another hundred feet. Something that sounded like a snare drum stuffed with feathers exploded into the air and took off on a diagonal.

"Ruffed grouse!"

He nodded, not looking.

In 45 minutes the face was bored and the pace lagging. We went back to the car.

Native Americans understood the woods as a universe bristling with information. We descendants of the people who degraded their cultures and drove them from their lands come into a forest to amuse ourselves, when we come at all. We come mostly like the tourist who knows enough to know that it's worth his while to be there, but not much more than that.

What does the tourist do?

He documents.

"Did you get good photos?"

That's one of the two questions people almost always ask. When I say that no, I did not, that I've never carried a camera into the woods, they look at me as if I they'd just spotted shit on my shoes. They can, up to a point, imagine seeking out the unseen bird, but to do so without photographing it makes no sense.

I explain that I can barely manage binoculars, forget any kind of high tech camera, and that if I dragged a \$2000 Leica or \$700 scope along with me, these'd be broken, lost or destroyed in no time.

In truth I have no desire to photograph what I see. Beyond writing a bird's name in a pocket notebook, the idea of documenting what I've been lucky enough to stumble on seems pointless. Looking at pictures or video is interesting but not like chancing on birds in the wild. Photography only tells me what someone else has seen. The experience of seeking and finding something you find only by chance is its own reward, and to photograph birds is a separate and more deliberate procedure.

Besides, there's something in the compulsion to photograph nature that reduces the experience to a commodity. What were all those bird people in the Bosque hoping to come away with? An award-winning picture of a vermilion flycatcher (male)? Suppose they did? Then what?

The picture you take is essentially a souvenir and like most

sooner or later gets thrown out. The image recorded in the brain somewhere stays put.

Kenneth Rexroth captures it well in his poem, “GIC-to-HAR.” That title would mystify many today, when printed encyclopedias have been relegated to thrift shop basements. Years ago, it indicated the way that the 32 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica were alphabetically organized.

In the poem Rexroth recalls “Coming home from swimming/ In Ten Mile Creek” on an early summer evening, age unstated but implied to be about twelve, when

in a sycamore in front of a ruined farmhouse...
a song of incredible purity and joy,
My first rose-breasted grosbeak...

That gets it exactly right. You’re immobilized, enthralled, even frantic.

I encountered the same bird, at about the same age. There was, first, the song: a rolling series of figures in short notes, organized in beginning/middle/end form. This casual but earnest piece of communication burst suddenly from among all the familiar swamp sounds of the day—wind, water, ducks, red-winged blackbirds—and leaped immediately to distinction. I looked around. There it perched, 30 feet away, in the only tree that grew from a small, mossy island enveloped by streams. The roseate shield of the breast, the pale, oversized bill resembling garden shears, the black on white patterning, all of it vivid, all familiar. I knew it from the shabby mimicry on the second floor of the Stamford Museum and Nature Center, located in the middle among various display cases featuring glass-eyed cadavers set in dioramas consisting of painted backdrops or three-dimensional props (marshy muskrat den, shellacked tree trunk featuring woodpecker hole). Someone forty would quickly have spotted the bobcat’s buckshot-nibbled ear, the mountain goat’s missing hoof, etc. and dismissed this spurious tableau. On the other

hand, if you were ten these were anything but dull and dusty baubles locked behind glass. They were a Promised Land.

Fifteen years after that sighting, I saw my second. This was in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. I was out on a trail with a friend who'd heard, probably more than one time in that long inebriated weekend, my rose-breasted grosbeak story.

"Jim, do you think we'll see one?" he said.

Extremely unlikely, I told him.

"Look!" he said, an instant later.

I was so sure he was pulling my leg that for a moment I refused to. Then I did. There on a birch branch, almost right over our heads, was the triangular pink shield. Black head cocked, the bird gave us the once-over for a good 30 seconds and flew.

People have looked at, wondered about, and named birds for as long as written records exist, and surely before that. The Romans looked at birds enough to have a term for those considered uncommon—*rara avis*. But they also named them and studied their movements, specifically flight patterns, as well as sounds, in an attempt to discern divine messaging. This was a process known as "taking the auspices" of the gods. This (says Wikipedia) came down through various Mediterranean cultures, beginning at least with the Egyptians and later the Greeks in the figure of Calchas, a seer whose gift for interpreting bird flight was reportedly received from Apollo. (Later, the contours and distortions of a sacrificial victim's liver were considered a more accurate or telling forecast in looking for signs of divine will.)

If the gods exist, the Stoics argued, then they care about humans and if they care, they communicate. Birds were the medium. Some—ravens, crows and owls—transmitted divine omens by their cries. Others (vultures and eagles) by movements. A few, including what the Romans called *picus martius*—the black woodpecker—provided information by both their sound and movements. According to legend Picus, the genus for woodpecker, was the name of a hand-

some Latin king who spurned the love of Circe. The vindictive goddess of magic turned him into a bird.

It required a legend for the Romans to explain *Picus martius*, the black woodpecker known to ornithology as *Dryocopus martius*. It ranges across Europe, including Italy and Spain. The bird has a North American cousin, the Pileated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*. They're both about 20 inches long. A pileated woodpecker landed on an elm in our yard when I was growing up. Duck-sized and all business, it hammered and slashed at the trunk, ignoring the clutch of little primates that watched. My sister felt an uncontrollable urge to contact the Audubon Society with her discovery and the call, once placed, calmed her.

Fast-forward two decades to a time—mid-thirties—when my fascination with birds seemed to have faded. Now architecture and utopian communities obsessed. I had lucked onto a book called *The Communistic Societies of America* by the nineteenth-century American journalist Charles Nordhoff (published in 1876 and still in print) and wanted to know what had become of the communistic societies. My mission was to find out.

Not long after, I was taking a walk one morning in New Harmony, Indiana, making notes and soaking up the Utopian vibe when right about in the center of a good-sized lawn I noticed something unusual. About every 30 seconds an object, vividly red and shaped like a detached mustache, rose a few inches above the ground line and then dropped to disappear back into the grass. Back and forth flashed the red mustache.

It could only be one thing.

A crest.

I came closer. The crest reemerged, swinging like a clock pendulum. At 35 feet I realized why the bird didn't simply fly away. Greed inspires its own special bravery. The woodpecker was tearing into a stump. Cut to ground level and left to rot, the stump was alive with panicking carpenter ants. The pileated was trying to get as many down as it could before my presence became an actual threat.

The head came up again and paused. A single yellow eye with black in its center took my measure. After a few long seconds the stabbing and smashing and tongue-flicking orgy resumed. If birds are the messengers of the gods, perhaps they have other, additional duties. Soon enough, my trips to the woods resumed.

In the mid-1960s, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso went to visit W.H. Auden at Oxford.

“Are birds spies?” Corso asked the senior poet.

“Of course not,” Auden insisted. “Who would they report to?”

“To the trees, of course,” Ginsberg said.

Actually birds *are* spies. They don’t report to the trees but to each other. It’s why the first thing you learn in the woods, if you hope to see birds or anything else, is silence. Watching from branch and treetop, they know everything that goes on there, much like the residents of any crowded block of Philly row homes where “the street has eyes.”

Watching is a kind of control. You can feel their attention to your movements. In a way, bird watching is a metaphorical two-way mirror: we’re looking at ourselves (what we want to see) while birds watch us. And you may think that the motivation for each action is easily separated: we watch from curiosity, they watch to apprehend danger. But their motives, never that cut-and-dried, are often complex, and only explainable, on one level, by a fact we often refuse to acknowledge: that every creature among the higher orders of animals has a personality which includes a range of characteristics, some more pronounced than others.

In the woods most birds stay safely out of the way of human trespassers but sometimes they’re interested in the fact that you’re interested. Walking a trail north of Lake Superior once a gray jay alighted on a branch an arm’s distance, made some frantic kind of noise and stared. Up there they call it the “camp robber” for its habit of snatching campsite scraps. A guess is my gray jay expected a handout.

I have had a loggerhead shrike trail me through the Southern California desert, saguaro by saguaro, like a store detective. I have had a yellow-rumped warbler, male, fly from tree to tree to get my attention, until suddenly landing in the dirt at my feet to perform, in Scheherazade style, a series of elaborate tail-dragged-in-the-dust dances, whether to distract me from a nearby nest or merely to entertain me, I have no clue.

I thought, and books tell me so, that the only sound a cardinal makes is its crude “chip! chip!” noise, but I was proved wrong in a Florida forest when a male followed me for a mile or so. Where the trail emerged into a clearing, the bird opened up with a rhapsody, complex and of considerable length. For exactly whose benefit I wonder.

Sometimes motives are clearer. In Arizona once, I stopped to get a better view of the single black-and-white form I had just seen moving in undulant flight across the road and when I got out to see where it went what confronted me was a crew of five acorn woodpeckers, perched on the cross beam of a telephone pole. They watched for about 10 seconds before sending up an enraged and hysterical cacophony.

Their message: *get the fuck out!*

I did. Not because I was afraid of them but because I respect what they are and where they are. I’m the intruder, but a polite intruder.

On hearing that I was going to be in Nevada, a contractor named Ed who was fitting out a room on top of my house with cabinets and a closet, immediately suggested a trip to the Great Basin for the specific purpose of viewing the Bristlecone pines, among the oldest living things on earth. The like-minded Ed is forever taking off for remote Western locations. It’s not so much about birds as simply being there.

When I got back and explained where I’d been, people would ask:

“What’s there?”

“Bristlecone pines.”

“Is that rare or something?”

“Actually they’re the oldest living trees.”

“I see.”

Pause.

“Did you go by yourself?”

That’s the other question, besides the one about the camera, that people always ask. The answer will confirm the received notion that esoteric interests and an anti-social temperament are inextricable. Which, maybe they are?

No one I know or have met who goes to the woods looking for birds, or just to be there, ever asks that question. Either they assume I went alone, or that if someone came along, that was not the point of the trip and hardly worth discussing.

Ed, for instance, would never have asked. He goes hiking alone all the time and knows what’s worth seeing.

The bristlecone pines, on some otherwise bereft ridges, huddle up there like a coven of witches. Think driftwood, large scale. All gnarled and nasty, growing up out of ground that looks as if it hasn’t tasted water since the Basques passed through on their way to the Gold Rush. They grow so slowly they actually look dead. They flourish at just below the tree line, that place on the trail where most of the vegetation is already behind you and the sound of the wind, roaming without impediment, is an eerie and continuous whistle, solitude’s one-note sonata.

Going alone means traveling in the best possible company. For two reasons. The first is that there’s no one pulling all your energies into small talk, gratuitous observations, worries about whether or not the car will be broken into, etc. Solo, there’s the chance I can focus on nothing but the here-and-now. Solo, my unaccompanied thoughts arrive in places they would otherwise not venture. Solo, I know my limitations, and more especially my strengths.

The second is that, separate and apart from your knowledge

of what goes on there, wilderness exerts a dynamic pull on the mind, hauling it toward some more humble place. What we most often think of as “silence” is the absence of human noise and, in the woods, silence has a permanence interrupted only occasionally by a thunderstorm, a limb falling, a bird cry. The woods is theater, a show that rolls on forever. Its silence has a way of placating old demons by assuring the hiker that the concerns of the human world—whether the break-up you’re in the middle of or the military coup somewhere on the other side of the planet—are ephemeral. The smells in that place assure me that decay itself has benign purpose. Why else would it be so fragrant?

But the greatest reward lies not in finding what you came to see but in seeing what you never expected to find. The most extraordinary things appear without warning. On that same trip to New Mexico, I was moving on a trail that took me into the higher reaches of a rocky plateau and then down again, following a stream through a boulder-strewn rock bed. Something small and dark moved among the lower branches of the pines, dropped via strange miniature acrobatics branch to branch, flitted to the ground and, after no more than five seconds, zipped back up into the shrubbery.

A warbler of some kind, the shape of which, with its long tail, looked a lot like a redstart, but the coloration of which—black, white and rose-colored red—was nothing like an American redstart and...

And I whipped the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region* out of the bird bag and was able to quickly identify the painted redstart. The vermillion flycatcher I knew of, and always wanted to see. The painted redstart? Total stranger.

The long double-decker train lumbered up to the Albuquerque train station right on schedule, which is to say at about 11:45, shuddered a time or two and halted. Doors slid open and small steel steps dropped to the platform. Julio in Amtrak hat, white shirt and Navy pants, a suitcase gripped in each hand, stepped briskly down the steps and onto the platform before setting the suitcases down, at

which point he turned to offer an arm to an old woman with a cane. There weren't many getting off. He didn't appear to remember me when I showed him my ticket but in a minute I stowed my big bag in the luggage rack by the bathrooms and climbed the narrow stairs to the sleeping car's second floor.

It's hard to imagine any room smaller than what Amtrak calls a "roomette." Even with only a duffel bag and a cloth sack of snacks it's tight. Space takes on a different value when you have so little. On the other hand, if you're in there by yourself, the sense of privacy makes it seem like a room at the Plaza. You can draw a curtain across the door, fasten it with Velcro, and be completely alone to watch the world pass.

A moment later the knock came.

"So, my friend, how are the birds in New Mexico?"

It's always hard to know if people are taking a polite interest in what you do because it's their job to be personable or because they're genuinely curious. I'm past the point of caring either way, but I didn't want to blow off Julio so I pulled out my notebook which, I told him, listed twenty-two species I'd never seen before in the eight days since I'd originally arrived in Albuquerque. That seemed to intrigue him so I flipped open the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region* to point out, among the color plates, the vermillion flycatcher, the painted redstart, the red crossbill, and the stilt. I leave it at that because I can tell by the way he nods that this is just about the right amount of information either way. Oh, he says, what time would you like to eat: 5:30, 6:30 or 7:30?

In early May, moving east on the rails in Colorado, the sun sets in the hour and a half between Trinidad and La Junta, which is when many people choose to have dinner. Once it does Julio comes by preparing the beds. In the corridors you can hear compartment doors rolling back and forth continuously. He tells the people who ask that he likes to get the beds made up early so that he himself can be in bed and asleep no later than 10:15, a subtle signal that after that hour he is not looking to be disturbed.

With the beds made up, passengers draw the curtains and soon enough the car is dark. They're done for the day and done for the night. The only sound is the rhythm of the train moving on tracks, a not overly loud mechanical rolling and shaking that anyone soon gets used to and which induces the most prolonged and restful sleep.

When the lights in the roomette snap out, the dark outside is darker than the dark inside. What you see from the window is wholly black, impenetrable. Soon enough the eye adjusts. Two or three lights in a distant farmhouse wink, blink, and disappear. Now the edge of some town, which then becomes Main Street, storefronts under streetlights, silhouettes receding. The moon emerges from behind clouds and follows the train for a good long while.

A few years ago I was climbing up a rocky canyon on a trail to an oasis in the Southern California desert. I was more interested in seeing what an actual oasis looked like than anything else, including birds, though if I spotted something more exotic than a cactus wren moving among boulders, that would've been the icing. But getting there was harder than it appeared on the map, though it was often downhill. In the distance I could see the oasis, and it looked, well, just like an oasis. Towering date palms rising up off a rock-strewn slope wedged between denuded hills, a small, clear stream, its edges lush with vegetation, somehow flowing through a few hundred feet of rock before disappearing back into the earth. Coming back was harder than getting in and at a certain point you stop looking—for lizards or birds or anything—and focus on lifting first one leg, then the next, and on breathing. Up one slope, then down, up again. Suddenly the question: how much longer can I do this? In five years will I be able to climb 7,000 feet without having a heart attack? In ten years will I lose my balance jumping across rocks and fall, breaking a leg? There may be ten good years left, I think, or there may be two. It could all end tomorrow.

Exactly then, approaching from the other direction, heading for the oasis, came two people who, to judge by the look of them, had to be in their mid-eighties. Their movements, however, belied

their appearance. In each hand was one of those poles that look like ski poles, a slender walking stick really, and using these the octogenarians propelled themselves along rather rapidly. A good word for the way they moved would be striding. I stepped aside and they greeted me and waved as they whipped past on their way to the date palms and the water. "You will do this as long as you want to do it," I thought. It is in the nature of a question to contain its own answer.

