

## Zen Birding

I try to make the pilgrimage once a year to Timberline Lodge on Oregon's Mount Hood. It is the only place in the Cascade Range where you can drive to the treeline on a paved road, so it is a good area to find montane species without having to invest a great deal of time and hiking effort. Lately it had seemed that birding time was very hard to come by. There were so many good spots I hadn't visited this year, or ever. I had plenty of other things I should have been doing, but this was the last week of clear calm weather before the autumn snows were due to begin.

I parked in the main lot and walked up the gravel road east of the lodge. Timberline Lodge itself is usually crawling with tourists and skiers, so I try to skirt the worst of the crowds. I continued up the mountain until I intersected the Pacific Crest Trail and then headed east, away from the lodge. Most pictures you see of Mount Hood show a beautiful snow-capped peak. But in the late summer and early autumn, when most of the snow is gone, the mountain reveals itself to be a big pile of gravel and fine volcanic ash. The landscape looks a lot like the surface of the moon, but with a few flowers and golden-mantled ground-squirrels thrown in.

Birds were not making themselves obvious that day. A few Savannah Sparrows were darting in and out of the sparse vegetation, and you could hear the occasional *caawp caawp* of a Common Raven. I was getting anxious. I didn't have much time to

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bird, and this was the only chance I had of finding Clark's Nutcrackers and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches for the rest of the year. And there should have been raptors moving. Where were the hawks?

Then I saw him. Just off the trail up ahead, with his back against a big rock. He gave the impression of age and wisdom, although his beard wasn't any grayer than mine. Despite the slight chill in the air,

he wore nothing but a loincloth and a Swarovski EL binocular. I had never seen him before, but I knew him.

"Hello, John," he said.

"How did you know I would be here today?" I asked.

"When the student is ready, the teacher will come."

"How should I address you? Shall I call you Master?"

"No, don't call me Master. Sibley gets ticked off if anyone else is called that. I'm just a Birder, like you. Have a seat."

I sat down beside the Birder, but I felt like I really should keep moving if I was going to find any birds that day.

I said to the Birder, "Have you seen anything good today? It seems really slow."

"There are always birds around, but you have to be open to seeing them," he answered.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I'm driven to bird. I'm obsessed with birds. How could I be more 'open to seeing them?'"

"You are driven to bird," he said, "but you do not fully experience the birding available at this moment. Our desire to see birds in the future, whether they be rarities or a certain number on a list, may distract us from the birds that are present now. Look at that Golden Eagle near the summit."

I raised my binocular to look at the bird, a mere speck in the distance. I could tell it was an eagle by its long wings, which it held flat. Finally the bird banked so I could see the golden feathers on the back of the neck.

"That eagle wasn't visible a minute ago," the Birder said, "and in another minute he will be out of sight again. But since we were in this spot at this time, birding in the moment, we were able to see that bird. Rarities do not appear because of our desire to see them. Rare birds, and birds of rare beauty, are always out there. Granted, we usually have to look at a lot of birds before we

find a rarity. For many, that means covering as much ground as possible. But in your haste, are you missing birds that are close by? If you take the time to look at every bird that is before you, do you not have just as good a chance at finding something different?"

I protested, "But I have so little time in the field. How am I going to find any birds if I don't cover lots of habitat?"

The Birder gave a knowing smile and continued. "Birding in the moment does not mean we have to spend 20 minutes appreciating every House Finch and Song Sparrow we find. But we should look at every bird in the flock to be certain there aren't other species among them. Rarities do not always stand out. You may have to scan an entire mudflat full of shorebirds to find the one Ruff. I'm not saying you can't actively seek out new birds. But don't let the birds that are 'possible' cause you to miss the birds that 'are'. Haven't you experienced times when birds actually found you?"

I immediately thought of an instance just a month before, when I saw my very first Black Swifts. There were two of them cruising a shopping center parking lot with a flock of Vaux's Swifts and Barn Swallows. I didn't have to hike to a remote mountain waterfall at dusk, or sit on a rocky sea cliff to find these birds. They simply appeared to me, flying between the parked cars and banking just over my head.

"I understand what you are saying," I said. "But are we powerless to determine our own birding fate? Don't we have some control?"

"Birding in the moment does not mean we must rely solely on blind luck," the Birder said. "We can study identification guides in advance so we recognize new birds when we see them. We can use our knowledge to seek out the best habitats for the current conditions. We can chase birds originally located by other birders. We have no control over the future, but we can prepare for some of its possibilities."

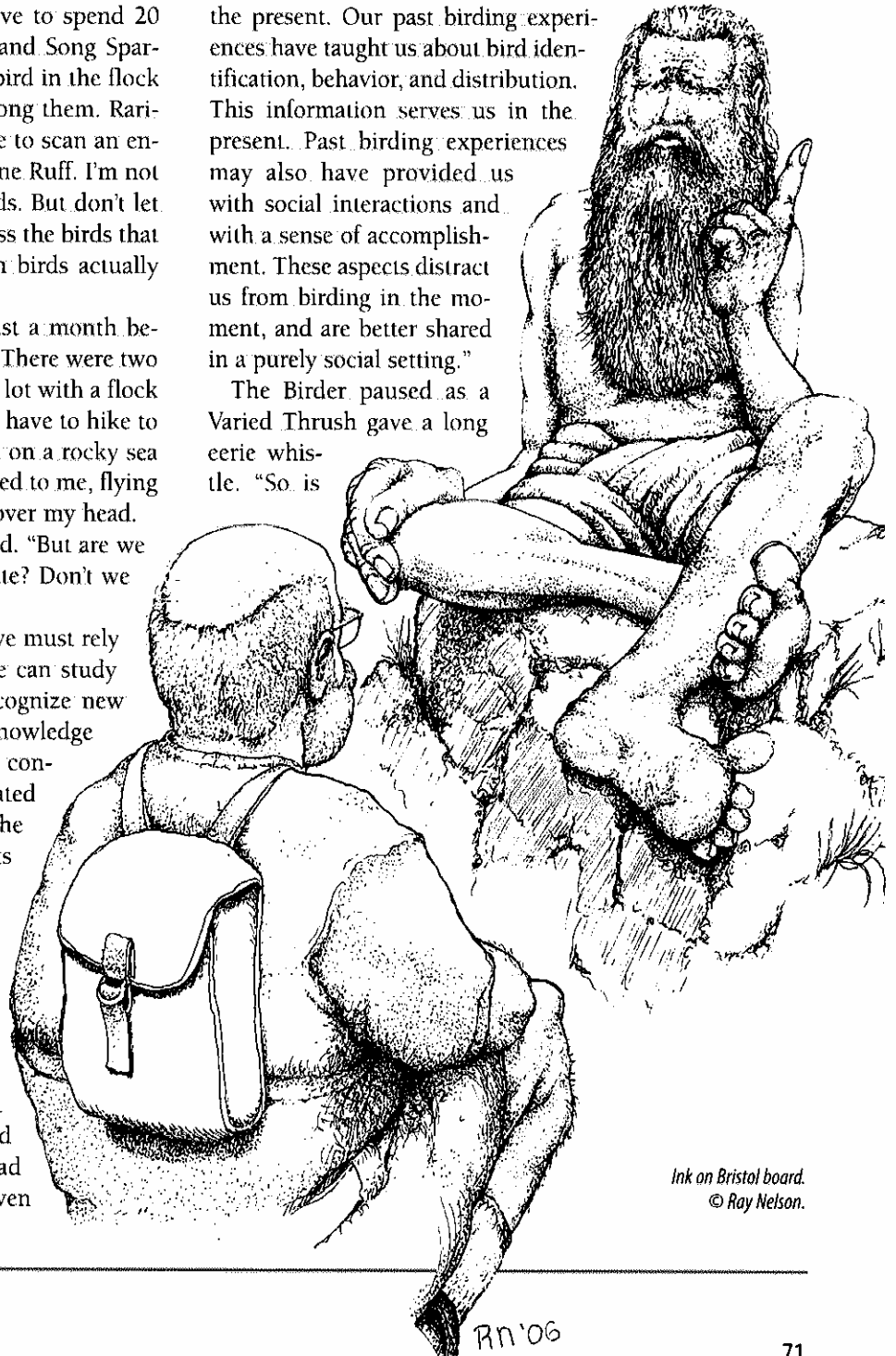
It was then I finally noticed that we were sitting at the end of a small ridge that created an updraft as the wind blew over it. Two Common Ravens rode the updraft along the ridge and passed over our heads. They were soon followed by a Red-tailed Hawk, and then a Prairie Falcon. As we sat enjoying the modest raptor flight, I noticed that a few Golden-crowned Sparrows had joined the Savannah Sparrows. At any given

moment, you might look around this sparse habitat and detect no birds. But if you waited a minute or two, something would reveal itself to you.

"Do you ever get lonely up here on the mountain?" I asked the Birder.

"Birding with others is a source of great joy," he said. "But birding with a group brings the risk of reminiscence, and our desire to reminisce distracts us from the present. Our past birding experiences have taught us about bird identification, behavior, and distribution. This information serves us in the present. Past birding experiences may also have provided us with social interactions and with a sense of accomplishment. These aspects distract us from birding in the moment, and are better shared in a purely social setting."

The Birder paused as a Varied Thrush gave a long eerie whistle. "So is



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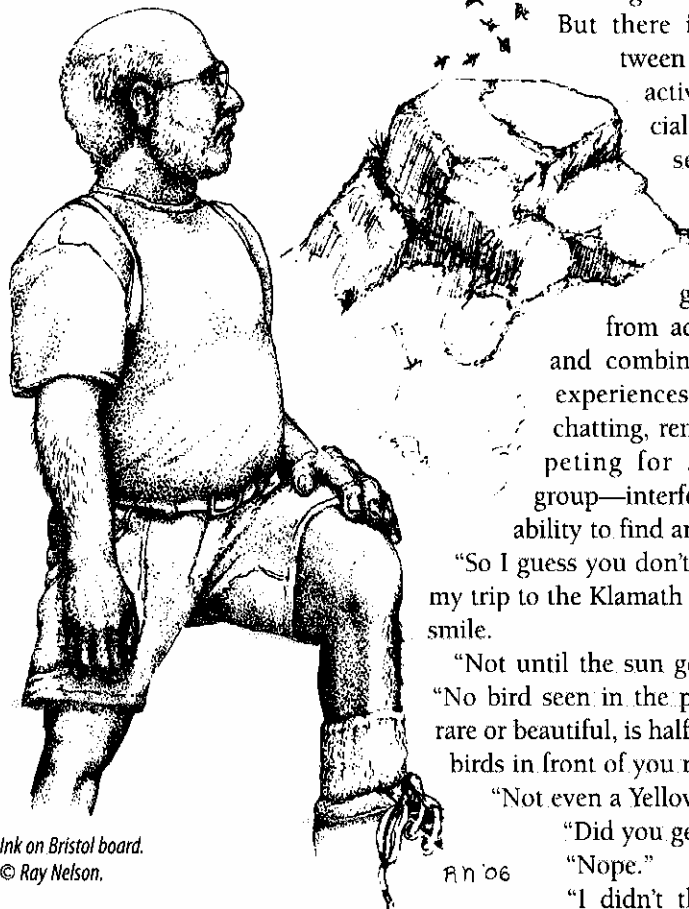
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birding a social activity? Yes. But there is a difference between engaging in a social activity and merely socializing. The tasks of seeking out, studying, and identifying birds can be easier with a group. We all benefit from additional eyes, ears, and combined knowledge and experiences. But socializing—chatting, reminiscing, and competing for status within the group—interferes with the group's ability to find and study birds.

"So I guess you don't want to hear about my trip to the Klamath Basin," I said with a smile.

"Not until the sun goes down," he said. "No bird seen in the past, no matter how rare or beautiful, is half as interesting as the birds in front of you right now."

"Not even a Yellow Rail?"

"Did you get a Yellow Rail?"

"Nope."

"I didn't think so. Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

Actually, it was time for me to head home. I stood up and brushed the dust from my jeans. "Thank you for your help today," I said. "Any last words of advice?"

The Birder spent a few moments watching a small flock of American Crows play tag with a pair of ravens. Finally, he turned to me and spoke. "Every bird you see is a gift. Each one offers you beauty, the opportunity to learn something new, and maybe even a tick on the life list. Luck will always play a part in birding, no matter how much skill and knowledge you gain. So appreciate birds in the here and now, for this moment in time is the only one that exists."

His words gradually soaked into my brain as I stood there in silence. The drive to find new birds was still there, but the sense of panic was gone. I smiled at the Birder and turned to go. I could tell he was listening to some Red-breasted Nuthatches that were calling nearby, so I didn't say anything more.

I started back down the trail toward the lodge, raising little puffs of ash with each step. I turned to wave to the Birder one more time, but he was gone.

Suddenly, from over the ridge, a flock of 100 Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches appeared. They landed where the Birder and I had been sitting, scratched around in the grit for a few seconds, and then took off again, vanishing behind the next rise. There for a moment, then gone again.