

Rarity Envy

John Nelson

Retirement can offer the leisure to contemplate all sorts of deeply intriguing questions. When I retired, I considered this one: what can I do to enhance my reputation as a birder? To answer the question, I sought guidance from my birding betters, eavesdropped on birders' gossip, and consulted several books, including Mark Cocker's *Birders* and Mark Obmascik's *The Big Year*, which examine status within the birding community. My research led to a clear conclusion and plan. To rise within the unofficial hierarchy of birders, to gain the respect, the gratitude, and, yes, the awe of my fellows, I needed to accomplish two things: (1) establish my credibility as a reliable reporter of bird findings and (2) find rare birds.

The first goal seemed easy enough to attain. Reporting bird sightings is not like reporting on the intricacies of Iraqi political parties or the deliberations involved in picking a Pope. The process is fairly simple. Do some homework. Go out in the field. Observe carefully. Be precise and accurate in reporting what you see and hear. Resist hyperbole. Control your imagination. Don't make up field marks or entire birds. In short, don't lie. If you lack the moral fiber to refrain from lying, be pragmatic. The literature on birding offers many sad cautionary tales of depraved status-seekers who've tried to beat the system with dubious sightings. Repeatedly reporting rare birds that no one else ever sees is not an effective strategy for winning your peers' admiration. I think I've met the minimum standards for credibility, but it feels like a modest accomplishment.

The second challenge, finding rare birds, proved more daunting. I worked hard. I studied and annotated my Sibley until it disintegrated. I listened to tapes, perused rare-bird web sites, subscribed to *Bird Observer*. I learned what was rare, where, and what wasn't. I chose role models, rarity-finders extraordinaire, and tried to mimic them. I spent countless hours on the shores, along meadows, and in the woodlands of Massachusetts. Yes, I found some good birds, a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron here, a Black-headed Gull there—and I *re-found* some rarities that others found first—but nothing spectacular on my own, nothing genuinely rare. I began to despair.

Then, with the lightbulb inspiration of genius, the idea struck me. Many birders were dependable reporters. A more select but still substantial number had discovered rarities. I would excel, I would achieve distinction by *never* finding a rare bird. I wouldn't resort to deception or malingering. I'd try my damndest to come upon the lost and vagrant. I'd seek them out relentlessly, but I'd be guaranteed to come up short. Other birders would come to count on me. My reputation would precede me. Now, several years later, I believe I've earned the acknowledgement I crave. My track record speaks for itself. All that remains is to spread the word to my birding compatriots. That's you.

A caveat. To be truthful, the record is not wholly unblemished. Serendipity has cursed me. I've found a few rare birds, through no fault of my own. First, that Lazuli

Bunting I reported from the Gulf coast. True, the bird made the Texas RBA; it was 600 miles out of its range. But that was in my first year of birding, when I could barely tell a vireo from a Veery. It was my wife Mary who actually found the bird. She noted every field mark. It took me five minutes to get on it. When she asked me what it was, I didn't have the foggiest. I'd studied only those birds I thought we might find. O.K., so I figured it out, but what else looks like a Lazuli Bunting? How much blame do I deserve?

Then there was that Black-and-white Warbler. I'd been birding for two years. I was hoping for an ant-tanager. How was I to know that it was the third or fourth record ever on Tobago? Was it my fault that the sighting sent our local guide into a whirling calypso of life-bird celebration? All I did was hear the squeaky wheel and point.

Mrs. Hume's Pheasant, spotted last year, was the most garish blemish. I didn't expect to find the bird. I knew I didn't deserve it. I gazed out the window of a slowly moving van. The bird was there; the bird was gone. It took no skill to ID it. The thing was enormous, with a rich reddish chestnut body, big white wing bars, and a silvery tail two feet long. Why didn't the guide find it? In all his trips to Southeast Asia, he'd never seen one; of all the birds in Thailand, it was the one he most desperately wanted to see. Why wasn't it spotted by someone else in our group? There were thirteen of them, some crazed to see this bird, and every single one dipped. Herein we see the cosmic but commonplace injustice of birding. Despite his grief, the guide graciously defended me when several disgruntled dippers in the other van insinuated that what I'd really seen was a not very similar Red Junglefowl. "Why would Nelson lie about finding this bird? He knows he's ruining his reputation." Fortunately, these lapses all occurred in far-off foreign lands: Thailand, Tobago, Texas. Within the borders of my home state my record remains virginal.

To what, you may wonder, do I attribute my success at not finding rarities? A prerequisite is an absence of God-given talent. I look out across the ocean and see water and sky. The Prodigy beside me sees a speck. Ten minutes later I perceive what might be a speck. The Prodigy is rattling off field marks. It's a dark juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger, and it's whining. Aberrants like this guy, with X-ray vision and preternatural hearing, are the Ella Fitzgeralds, the Madame Curies, the Shaquille O'Neals of the birdfinding world. The rest of us are the sing-in-the-shower, calculator-dependent, double-dribblers. I take no pride in my deficiencies: all credit goes to the Creator. Native inability, though useful, is also overrated among the factors involved in missing rarities. Let's say that this Prodigy finds a Pacific Golden Plover, a first state record, at Plum Island. Is it because he can see seventeen long-winged angels jitterbugging on the head of a pin at 800 yards? No. He knows that the bird might show up here. He knows its field marks, its habits. He looks at every bird that resembles it.

Which brings me to a quality far more important in not finding birds: ignorance. But how, you may ask, can I claim ignorance after I've studied so hard, ravaged my Sibley, surfed through Surfbirds, led field trips, participated in Birdathons and CBCs?

The key is to be ignorant in very particular ways at the moment of truth. Take, for example, the Common Greenshank I didn't find at Buzzards Bay. I saw the bird. I saw its greenish shanks. Its bill was slightly upturned; it was about the same size as the larger of the yellowlegs around it. But could a juvenile yellowlegs have pale greenish legs? I had no idea. I also had no scope, no field guide, and no camera. The bird flew off. I heard it call. What do Greenshanks sound like? No clue. I rushed back to my car and tore through my Sibley. David hadn't been kind enough to illustrate the bird, but he'd included a brief text. Did my bird show an entirely white rump in flight? Don't ask me. Yellowlegs, in all plumages, have yellow legs, but maybe the light was playing tricks. Such selective ignorance has enabled me to unidentify a whole slew of rarities. What distinguishes a female Black-headed Grosbeak from an immature male Rose-breasted Grosbeak? What does a Sedge Wren sound like? I could go on, but why bother? It's essential not to know these things.

Ignorance is necessary but not sufficient. It is, as Oscar Wilde observed, a fragile flower. Ignorance can lose its bloom, wither, and die, or it can fail you at crucial moments, without laziness to nurture and sustain it. And it's not enough to embrace laziness occasionally, to be fickle or erratic as its caretaker. You must cultivate your laziness until it becomes a mindset, a habitual disposition to take certain things for granted, make reasonable assumptions, ignore remote possibilities. Oh, there's a field full of Canada Geese. Oh, I see twenty-three Glossy Ibises. Oh, I don't feel like sorting through all those gulls. Oh, a small shearwater; it's a Manx. Thus have I succeeded in not finding Barnacle Goose, White-faced Ibis, Black-tailed Gull, and Audubon's Shearwater in Massachusetts. It helps if the laziness is physical as well as mental. Why didn't I have my scope and Sibley when I didn't find the Common Greenshank? Both too damn heavy, that's why.

The crowning moment of my laziness came one bright, sunny day in late July 2004, as I was blissfully birding by bicycle on the flat, cyclist-friendly roads of Martha's Vineyard. Across a field at Katama Farm I saw a smallish falcon hovering in the distance. "Kestrel," I said to myself and pedaled on, with my binoculars safely stowed in my backpack. "Same kestrel," I said as I passed the bird again, a little closer this time, an hour later. "Harassed by swallows. Looks a little hefty. Must be good eating here." I take almost equal pride in the moment when I stopped to scope a shorebird on Plum Island — year bird, I concluded, with some delight — an hour before the Prodigy saw it.

A retroactive caveat. At the risk of sullyng my reputation as an honest reporter, I confess that several incidents narrated in the previous paragraphs did not in fact take place. With my friend Susan Hedman, I did cycle across Martha's Vineyard, and we did see a falcon in a field, but that was several weeks after, not several weeks before Vern Laux identified the bird as a Red-footed Falcon. And I didn't scope a plover an hour before Rick Heil identified it as a Pacific Golden Plover. But if I had, I guarantee you I would have ticked it off as an American Golden Plover, and I swear on a stack of multicultural religious texts that I would have thought "kestrel" and merrily continued on past Katama Farm.

Some might argue that my appeal for recognition as a rarity-misser is nothing more than an apology for mediocrity. After all, anyone can succeed at not finding birds. You don't even have to be a birder. And I could respond by pointing out, as some have, that unless we cherish the mediocrity in our midst, democracy cannot continue to flourish. But I'm not willing to concede that I'm merely middling. Yes, I'm ignorant, lazy, and optically challenged, but I'm no slacker. I don't dwell beside a computer screen waiting for someone to report a rarity so I can leap from my chair and chase it. I go out in the field and look for hard birds, yet I aspire not to find or identify them. That's not mediocrity. It's Zen.

Others might protest that my approach to the issue of reputation is too narrow. One could also, so they say, get the respect of birders by devoting oneself to the welfare of birds, contributing to ornithological knowledge, finding where birds breed, documenting changes in their numbers and ranges, striving to protect or restore their habitats. Yes, one could do these things, but that sounds a lot like work. It also seems like unnecessary work, since in most cases the very people who display such devotion have already solidified their reputations by finding numerous rarities.

Finally, some might raise a philosophical objection. If I didn't see a bird, how do I know it was there? The answer is simple: I'm in contact with a spirit. Some know her as Avis or Brid or Phoenix. To me she's simply the Goddess. She doesn't predestine bird sightings. She doesn't reward diligence or punish laziness. She keeps a list. I call it my "potential life list" — it includes every wild bird in whose presence I've been, every bird I've heard or seen or could have seen if I were paying better attention, whether I identified the bird or not. She's got a list for you too. Someday, the Goddess promises, She'll reveal my whole list. When She does, each bird will appear before my eyes, in a rapture of field marks, and I'll know what it is. First I have to die. 🦋

John Nelson, a resident of Gloucester, is a retired English professor who can often be found in the field not finding rare birds.



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