

BOOK REVIEW: *The Search for the Pink-Headed Duck*

by Mark Lynch

The Search for the Pink-Headed Duck by Rory Nugent. 1991. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 222 pages, 1 map, 8 pages of photographs. \$19.95.

Many years ago I was hiking along a trail in the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica when I met an American birding group on their way out. I asked one of the birders what they had seen. Of course the Resplendent Quetzal was mentioned, but when I pressed him for details of other species seen, the birder was at a loss. There were a lot of "ticks," but only the most obvious came to mind. After all, the birder confessed, they had come to Monteverde for one afternoon to tick off a set of birds, and then it was off to a new location and a new list. "Sort of the 'if this is Tuesday, that must be an Orange-Bellied Trogon' syndrome," I thought to myself. It was then that I began to have serious doubts about how birders see the world.

We are all familiar with this attitude. Birders choose where they travel based on the species present in that location. Usually the areas that offer the greatest number of species to tick off in the shortest amount of time are the most popular. The visiting birder's interaction with the indigenous peoples is usually of the most utilitarian kind. We talk to a precious few hotel clerks, guides, drivers, and local experts who know the location of a rarity. Occasionally we might have a "colorful" moment with a native if it does not interfere with the next twitch. Once in a country, we zip madly around eventually leaving exhausted but with a fattened life list. Many times we also depart with little genuine understanding of the people in whose country we have just made an ass of ourselves. We project an attitude that the world is our playground to use as we see fit, and nonbirders better make way.

The Search for the Pink-Headed Duck is the perfect antidote to this birder's malaise. Rory Nugent, modest adventurer and master raconteur, decided to leave his life in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and go to India to search for the thought-to-be extinct Pink-Headed Duck (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*). Now, Rory is no stranger to doing unusual things in out-of-the-way places, having sailed solo across the Atlantic Ocean four and one half times (therein lies a tale) and searched for the legendary beast M'koo-m'bembe in the Congo (he is currently writing the story of that bizarre adventure). He is also an enthusiastic birder, having developed a thirst for the avian pursuit on Martha's Vineyard several decades ago.

The last authenticated sighting of this duck was from the Darbhanga area of Bihar, in northeastern India along the Nepal border, in June 1935. Could the duck survive anywhere in this most populous of countries? Well, you could sit in your armchair and wonder all you want, but the only way to really find out whether the duck is still extant is to go and look for yourself. Can you imagine

most birders you know giving up months of valuable birding time in a search for a single species that they probably will not see in an area they know nothing about? Rory was not backed by the National Geographic Society, nor did he have any contacts to bring him to the prime areas, and it goes without saying that he was not interested in racking up 300 species in three weeks. He was totally on his own from day one. Through his book, Rory Nugent comes across to the reader simply as an extremely curious fellow who follows his inclinations into all sorts of strange situations. Basically, he takes the time to let himself be led in unforeseen directions when the opportunities present themselves.

Where would you start looking for a supposedly extinct duck in India? Rory starts by hanging around the famous waterfowl markets of Calcutta passing out color xeroxes of the duck and simply asking the locals if they had seen any Pink-Headed Ducks lately. After a couple of weeks of this, the workers in the market ceased thinking that Rory is a very dangerous lunatic and began presenting him with a variety of birds with dyed and spray-painted pink heads.

Only hours later another pink bird is laid at my feet. Fluorescent overspray dapples the sandals of the eager seller, Amrik, a young man who usually peddles screwdrivers and wrenches near the bus stop. What attracts me to Amrik, besides his winning smile, is his capacity for lying. He swears that he has just scooped the bird from the river, insisting that the coloring of all Indian birds comes off when touched by foreigners.

"It's your white skin crying for color," he tells me, gently stroking the bird.

When I point out that he's holding not a duck but a red turtledove, he quickly corrects me: "It may look like a biki (Dove) now, but it was a duck" (p. 11).

Realizing that this plan was getting him nowhere, Mr. Nugent then latches on to the idea that the duck may yet survive in the large, remote, and unpopulated areas of the Brahmaputra River, which runs along India's border with Tibet and Bangladesh. This area is not only closed to outsiders but is generally off limits to residents of southern India as well. In order to enter the area, a person must obtain an elusive permit from New Delhi. Shrugging off the initial denials from various officials, Rory persists in the face of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy and keeps pushing his request papers slowly along, a task worthy of Sisyphus. This tortuous process takes months and tremendous patience, all of which Mr. Nugent bears with unusual common sense and good humor.

Waiting for the papers, Rory visits Sikkim, where Tibetan nationals attempt to smuggle him across the border to document nuclear waste dumping by the Chinese. Here he also manages to wrestle with the impenetrable Giant Rhododendron forest, wanders into the Valley of Bliss, witnesses some mystical

phenomena, and keeps an eye out for the Abominable Snowman. In Darjeeling, Rory becomes involved with the shadowy Gurkha National Liberation Front. Through all these digressions, he never wavers in his obsessive search for the duck in question. All of these events are described in plainspoken and good-natured prose. Rory Nugent is by no means some macho Indiana Jones wannabe, but a sincerely interested and involved traveler to the far-flung areas of the globe. Early into the book, you begin to really like this guy who seems to combine a common-sense point of view with a habit of landing in some of the most unusual situations possible.

The centerpiece of the book is his trip down the mighty Brahmaputra River where he paddles a thirteen-foot skiff, christened the Lahey-Lahey, from Burma to Bangladesh with Shankar, an acquaintance he meets in a bookstore. Maps of this little known area are useless. The process known as river braiding changes the river's configurations on an almost daily basis as vast deposits of sediment from the Himalayas create and destroy islands and bars overnight. Crocodiles are a real and ever-present danger, and the travelers are haunted by persistent stories of ruthless river pirates. Amazingly, all the while, Rory searches doggedly for the Pink-Headed Duck in the vast untouched marshes along the river.

As we paddle through a string of midstream islands, we happen upon a kingdom of ducks. Swimming in the calm water, protected from the wind and safe from shore predators, are thousands upon thousands of waterfowl. Flocks of Spotbills and Little Grebes arch their necks as we coast by. At the edge of a flock a lookout squawks the alarm. At once there's the frantic tumult of wings and the soft patter of webbed feet racing across the water's surface. The ducks lift off, row after row, perfectly choreographed, their fluttering mass obscuring the sun. Like a pesky insect, we move through the flocks, watching the dance again and again.

I see splashes of emerald, red and blue feathers, plenty of downy white, and lots of speckles, but not one flash of sunset pink. Once, an odd duck in a flock of pochards catches my eye. Back paddling, I spin the Lahey-Lahey around and use the push pole to head for the duck, only to discover that it's a widgeon preening its dull, brownish-pink feathers (p. 153).

Suffice it to say that all of this makes for a ripping yarn in the great quest/adventure tradition. What is unique about the tale, however, is Rory Nugent's writing that combines an eye for detail with genuine humor. Furthermore, there is an engaging sense of place and people in this book. There are no grand pronouncements on the fate of India, but rather a series of fascinating and intimate sketches on a personal scale of an area of the world

most of us know little about. A key to the success of the writing is that Mr. Nugent never loses his humble perspective that he is a mere foreigner in an unfamiliar and complex culture. Finally, this is a great birding book. That passionate search for the big rarity is something all of us can identify with. In this book we find the thrill, taken to its most rewarding extreme, that one feels finding a Terek Sandpiper in the salt pans or spotting a Black-Capped Petrel during a hurricane .

MARK LYNCH is a relentless birder who also happens to be a teacher/docent at the Worcester Art Museum, an ecological monitor at the new Broad Meadow Brook Audubon Sanctuary in Worcester, and the host of *Inquiry*, a talk show of the arts and sciences on radio station WICN. He interviewed Rory Nugent on that show.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR CANADA GOOSE PROJECT

The Atlantic Flyway is sponsoring a study of migrant and resident Canada Geese. From Prince Edward Island to South Carolina, Canada Geese have been marked with flexible white or yellow neckbands. Volunteers are desperately needed to make observations throughout the flyway. If you are interested in becoming an observer, please call Jay Hestbeck at 413-545-4889, or write to:

Massachusetts Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit
204 Holdsworth Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003.