

BOOK REVIEW: *THE FEATHER QUEST*

by John Kricher

The Feather Quest by Pete Dunne, photographs by Linda Dunne, New York: Dutton. 1992. 355 pages with index, 16-page inset of color photographs, \$25 (hardcover).

Pete Dunne's articulate, often insightful, and usually witty articles populate virtually all of the nation's birding magazines, and as such, this former director of the Cape May Bird Observatory is well known to birders throughout the country. In the spirit of Peterson and Fisher's *Wild America* and Edwin Way Teale's classic four season (e.g., *North With The Spring*) books, Dunne, along with his photographer wife Linda, traversed much of North America, mostly within one year, to chronicle birds and birders.

In twenty-one chapters the Dunnes take their readers from Whippany, New Jersey, where Pete recalls his first childhood birding experiences (a bit of a sentimental journey), to end in, of all places, Baldwin City, Kansas, where they participate in a Christmas Bird Count (CBC). In choosing Baldwin City, I could not help but wonder if Pete simply closed his eyes and had Linda riffle the pages of the voluminous CBC issue of *American Birds*, his finger by chance stopping at the page with Baldwin City. Baldwin City? Perhaps it was chosen for its location smack dab in the center of North America. In between, the Dunnes visited many of the most spectacular birding areas: Point Pelee, Everglades National Park, Churchill, southeast Arizona, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento Valley, Pawnee Grasslands, and Attu. Their timing was good to say the least. They traversed the Gulf Coast and moved north to Point Pelee at the height of spring migration, and they were at Hawk Mountain for the annual raptor migration. Any birder would kill for a chance to follow their itinerary.

Pete's purpose seems to be both to capture vignettes about birding and birders, and to present birding as a philosophical, almost moralistic, endeavor, presumably because of how it enables one to appreciate the natural world and the need for conservation. He basically succeeds at both objectives, and the book generally makes for fast, enjoyable reading. Dunne delivers numerous pointed messages about the conservation movement, both its successes and frustrations of recent years, each skillfully interspersed among his accounts of the journey. However, I have my doubts about whether this book will eventually come to be regarded as a classic, among the genre of Peterson and Fisher and the Teale volumes. I was expecting Pete to be more consistently witty and less preachy. I was disappointed. I was expecting Pete to present his fondness for birding rather like that of one lover for another, a passionate, steamy affair of the heart. I was disappointed. Instead, Pete seems overly reverential, kind of like

one of the faithful trying to describe his love for God. He claims to "touch the infinite" at Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and later becomes somewhat emotionally overwhelmed at the vast numbers of geese in the air ("a storm of wings") at Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge. I expected Pete to display his characteristic strong opinions, a trait I greatly admire in his writings. I was disappointed. In the Attu chapter, otherwise very well written, there is no mention of the extensive, senseless collecting of rarities (for museum "trophies") that has routinely occurred there in recent years. The penultimate chapter, subtitled "Pilgrimage," is exactly that: a rainy day trip to Old Lyme, Connecticut, where we learn that Pete really likes and greatly admires Roger Tory Peterson. Don't we all?

Although I had my disappointments with *Feather Quest*, I nonetheless found it hard to put down, and I recommend it. Dunne is most talented at writing dialogue and description. I particularly enjoyed his account of how he sized up a group of birders on an observation tower searching at the limit of spotting scope resolution for distant flamingos at Everglades National Park, and how these other birders, in turn, sized him up. I liked reading about his futile search for a vagrant Ross's Gull at some sewage pools in Baltimore. Any birder who has ever chased and missed, and I guess that includes just about all of us, will easily relate to Pete's gamble and subsequent frustration. New Englanders will particularly enjoy Dunne's description of an early morning winter breakfast at a diner near Newburyport, where, over a dish of runny eggs, Pete muses about the past glories of Ludlow Griscom. The chapter describing the New Jersey big day that has expanded to become the World Series of Birding (Dunne's idea and promotional scheme) is a gem. In these accounts, where Dunne describes the sociology of modern birding, he is at his best.

This is not a profound book, but rather a book to make you feel good about birding and birders. It is entertaining and satisfies the voyeuristic urges all of us have in wanting to know what other birders have seen, and compare their luck afield with our own. Reading *Feather Quest* will make you want to reach for your binos and go in quest of feathers.

JOHN KRICHER is professor of biology at Wheaton College and the author of several books about nature. A frequent contributor to *Bird Observer*, he also serves on the Bird Observer board of directors and as department head for feature articles and field notes. His most recent book is *First Guide to Seashores*, published by Houghton Mifflin.