

Close Encounters

Douglas Chickering

There are birding moments out in the field that have a transcendent, almost metaphysical, quality to them. They turn into memories that are sharp, enduring, and incandescent. They are intensely private and communal simultaneously. Although infrequent, these moments are shared by all active birders; they are bright highlights in our lives. If you are in the field long enough and bird seriously enough, you will experience these close encounters. Like UFO sightings, birding close encounters can be described as being of three kinds.

Close Encounters of the First Kind

There are no banal birding experiences. Peering at raptorial specks in the sky holds some watchers in endless fascination. The same is true of picking through carpets of shorebirds or focusing on a tremor of movement deep in the underbrush. Each experience contains the potential for sudden, unexpected discovery. But a close encounter is always a particularly stellar event.

Many birds are wary of humans to a certain degree, and most spontaneously avoid human contact. Lois Cooper and I started that sunny May morning at the Grove at Salisbury State Beach. The migration had been building, and the winds the night before were steady and from the southwest. The Grove is a great migrant trap – a small mixed stand of trees and brush, near the ocean, stuck between the salt marshes and the dunes. I remember that the grove was pretty lively that morning with a good mixture of passerines. We walked our usual loop and found ourselves in the back northeast corner, when a bird flew into the sumac just to our right at eye level. It was not five feet away from us – a male Scarlet Tanager.

I have seen many paintings and photographs of birds. I have seen stuffed birds in a museum and even once visited those sad and confused birds in a well-intentioned and scientifically designed aviary. None of them had the true color of a bird in the wild; all were pale and sapped of vitality in comparison. In many cases the difference is subtle, but it is real. It is understandable why Van Gogh was driven mad in his attempt to duplicate the colors of nature. No matter how deep the genius or how varied the palette, no matter how good the lens or how expert the photographer, it is not possible to match the intensity and purity of the color of a tanager in the sun.

For those with a strong sense of color, there is a special, indescribable, almost sacred quality to the experience of seeing such colors as the rich yellow-turning-gold on the nape of a Prothonotary Warbler, or the ever-deepening orange on the breast of a Baltimore Oriole, or the shimmering, electric blue on the head of a Lazuli Bunting – and seeing them up close. There in the Grove on that morning was our Scarlet Tanager in the height of his manhood, all business and purpose, free and unfettered, fresh off the ocean, and heading home. There he was in his blazing red glory; the moment was endless and was over all too soon. To see a familiar bird, up close, to see its colors in all their glory, this is a Close Encounter of the First Kind.

Close Encounters of the Second Kind

There usually is a kind of lull during every long birding trip. Whether planned or unplanned, there seems to be a natural, unavoidable dead spot after the first rush of lifers found or missed. A pause to refresh and reassess. Lois and I were in just such a lull when we visited Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge for the second time during our Texas trip in 1999. We had arrived at the refuge near noon on a hot April day and had had lunch in the shade of a picnic area near the headquarters parking lot. After lunch we looked for another quiet place to sit in the shade, loaf the afternoon away, and see what birds came our way. We walked the Kiskadee trail and found such a place – a bench at the edge of a small, tepid, overgrown pond, with plenty of shade, and a view down into the stagnant shallow pool. The afternoon settled in over us in a dreamy, hot haze, as languid as bathwater. There was a light breeze rustling through the trees, and the only other sounds of the day were the distant squeaks and whistles from a persistent Great-tailed Grackle and the occasional, desultory call from the canopy directly over our heads: *kisk-a-dee...kisk-a-dee*. The afternoon drifted aimlessly into a kind of drowsiness, when abruptly we were startled from our torpor by something darting into our immediate presence at eye level – a hummingbird. Oblivious to our presence, it started to feed with a quick agility upon some red flowers in front of the bench, which we hadn't really noticed before. I recognized the hummingbird immediately: the flashing emerald back, the fanning tail that shone like burnished copper, the arresting coral bill with dark tip, and the rich buff belly. We sat motionless, holding our breaths, before I quietly said, "Buff-bellied Hummingbird." I spoke reluctantly, because I didn't want to break the spell, but I also wanted to make sure that Lois knew we were in the presence of a life bird.

The hummingbird flitted from flower to flower and even once hovered briefly right in front of us, as if puzzled by our presence. It fed with a quick determination, allowing us killer looks; then, in a blink, it was gone. It was an unforgettable moment, rare and fleeting – the close encounter with a life bird, a Close Encounter of the Second Kind.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

What I classify as a Close Encounter of the Third Kind is quite similar to the other two, but not the same. There is the same surprise, and the bird may be new or familiar; yet during this encounter there is a unique element to the experience. Difficult to describe, it is even difficult to comprehend. The experience is so sudden, so unexpected and eerie, that it leaves the observer with the uneasy feeling that perhaps it didn't happen at all.

Lois and I were sitting on the bench in the Ralph Goodno Woods in Hellcat Wildlife Observation Area at Plum Island on a thoroughly pleasant summer afternoon. All that I remember about that afternoon is that there was no wind, there were no bugs, and practically no birds. We sat there luxuriating in the shade, when a form burst from the thickets in front of us, up toward the tree right above us. It was instantly recognized as a large bird, and as we stared, dumbfounded, a fully mature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron deftly landed on a branch of that tree, not eight feet

away. In most close encounters the bird is surprised at or unaware of our presence, but this had been clearly a deliberate act on the part of this heron. With motives we could only guess at, the bird had come in for a close look. It fixed on us a baleful, disapproving glare, and though I might be imagining it, I could feel a palpable sense of reproach from this bird. It was as if we had committed some unforgivable transgression, and the heron was there to confront us. Why was it there? Was it nesting nearby? We'll never know. The heron was silent and unafraid; it rocked lightly from side to side and bent its head lower in undisguised irritation. I was in awe at having such a fine bird so close, but also a little intimidated at its silent disapproval. I think I would have eventually surrendered to its hostile rebuke and left if the bird hadn't suddenly taken wing and disappeared.

There was another encounter, years ago, that left me with a decidedly different impression. Although I can't relate the exact date, I know it was in the spring and before the new parking lot had been installed at the Old Pines on Plum Island. I was at the Old Pines that morning and had followed the back trail, the one that was overgrown and closest to the road. I was looking for passerines, particularly warblers, when I met Barbara Drummond coming back up the trail. We stopped to exchange greetings and information. Both of us lamented the dearth of activity that May morning. Despite her unpromising report I continued down the trail, hoping to get lucky. In those days the trail was narrow, in places no wider than the back of your hand, and wound its way through sparse scrub forest to where the pine stand gave way to scrubby low trees and heavy brush. Not long after Barbara and I had parted company, I came upon a medium-sized cherry tree, ravaged by an infestation of small worms, which had in turn drawn in a dozen or so ravenous warblers. I remember that one was a beautifully plumaged Bay-breasted.

I took in the sight for a while, carefully scanning the tree and noting each bird that came into my binocular field. The notion slowly came upon me that, if I hurried, I would be able to catch up to Barbara and inform her of my discovery. She had mentioned wanting to find a Bay-breasted Warbler. I continued down the trail and picked up my pace, as I calculated that I was probably closer to the parking lot than she was. I was only vaguely aware of what was around me, as I concentrated on negotiating the winding trail. I crested one small rise and nearly blundered into an American Bittern standing in the middle of the path. It wasn't a yard away, and we were aware of one another at the same instant. We drew in a startled breath simultaneously, and I was instantly taken with its fear-filled gaze. Instinctively, the bittern drew itself up into its hiding posture: rising erect, beak stretching upward, body tense and slender, eyes fixed upon me. I looked into yellow eyes wide with fear and confusion and felt a growing regret pass over me. An endless moment hung suspended in time, as we silently regarded one another. And in that moment something unspoken, perhaps unknowable, passed between us. Something so fleeting and subtle I cannot adequately articulate its nature. I stared into the bittern's stricken gaze and was strangely aware of something – either a flicker of mutual connection or a wall of impenetrable misunderstanding. I shall never know which. The bittern could see that its usual defense wasn't working and wasn't about to work. I was so close,

and it was so exposed. So it slowly dipped into a crouch, pushed itself up into slow, lazy flight, and like an apparition disappeared over the trees, leaving me bewildered and breathless. I was appalled that I had inflicted such terror, and relieved that the bittern had escaped my harmless clutches. I shall never forget that moment or that bittern, and I suspect that bittern never forgot me.

I know that every serious birder will experience a Close Encounter of the First Kind from time to time. With some bold birds, like catbirds or kinglets, it occurs fairly often. It is the natural legacy and reward of constantly being in the field. Those of us who are lucky will experience a Close Encounter of the Second Kind. As for a Close Encounter of the Third Kind? I don't know. They are so ethereal and so deeply personal that one is uncertain whether they really did occur, or whether they were simply something originating from the deepest recesses of the mind. 🦶

Douglas Chickering has been an active birder since 1979, centered in Essex county. He works as a Manual Machinist for a medical device company in Burlington, MA. His address is 56 Cottage Road, Newbury, MA 01951, and e-mail address is dovekie@attbi.com. He wishes to thank Jim Berry for his assistance in preparing this article for publication.



AMERICAN BITTERN BY DAVID LARSON