ABOUT BOOKS

Putting Pen to Bird: Stalking the Wily Logcock with Bic and Word Processor

Mark Lynch

Birds of New England. Wayne R. Petersen and Roger Burrows. 2004. Lone Pine Publishing. Auburn, WA.

Going Wild: Adventures with Birds in the Suburban Wilderness. Robert Winkler. 2003. National Geographic. Washington, DC.

The Race to Save the Lord God Bird. Phillip Hoose. 2004. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York

Sick of Nature. David Gessner. 2004 . Dartmouth College Press. Hanover, NH.

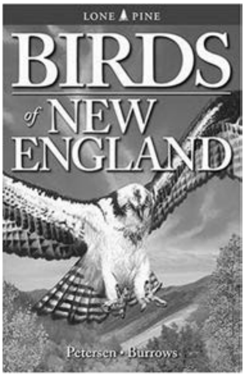
“Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them.” Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Original writing about the natural world is as rare as is clear writing about contemporary art. Both should be celebrated when they are chanced upon. Part of the challenge of “nature writing” today is that so much of it has come before, and so much of it is cranked out every year. Undisputed classics like *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston vie for precious shelf-space with more popular titles like *That Quail Robert* by Margaret Stanger. The “Natural History” section of your local chain bookstore will have *The Birds of Heaven* by Peter Matthiessen rubbing covers with *A Hummingbird At My House* by Arnette Heidcamp. There are so many “nature books” in print that it is difficult to create an original voice and to get that voice heard above the multitudes.

Birders are sometimes little help in this regard. In our bibliophilic birding circles it often seems that the majority of books we purchase are “where-to-find” guides, field guides, identification guides, or blow-by-blow guides to someone’s big year. In all these cases, the quality of the writing is of secondary importance to a simple recitation of the technical facts. After all, one does not curl up by a fireplace and drink deep of the literary joys of *The Sibley Guide To Birds.* In this review I will consider four very different recent examples of writing about birds and the natural world.

“Good things, when short, are twice as good.” Gracian.

Field guides are about the last place one would look for an interesting turn of the phrase or a bon mot. Brevity *in extremis* is the watch phrase of most field guides, the briefer the better for sales. Who wants to read when you’re in the field trying to separate a flitting fall Pine Warbler from a dashing Blackpoll? There’s no time! Field



guides are written to suit the manner in which many people bird. A few concise ID-clinching details about plumage, some words about distribution, and then: “move on!” Richard Pough, author of guides like the *Audubon Land Bird Guide*, was a master at using language concisely yet evocatively, so that his guides are among the most enjoyable to *read*. The new beginner’s guide to *Birds of New England* puts an even greater emphasis on the written content.

Each species is given a full page that is essentially divided into thirds. Some of the species choices are a bit odd for such a limited guide. Yellow Rail is given a full page, but Black Vulture is only mentioned as a “similar species” under Turkey Vulture. One-third of each page is a single illustration of that species. These are taken from a pool of illustrations owned by the publisher and are of extremely varying quality. As can be expected, the pictures of species that are notoriously tough to illustrate, like the *Calidris* shorebirds and *Empidonax* flycatchers, are very weak, sometimes poor, and even misleading. But other illustrations are good and look like they were based on mounted specimens or photographs of living birds. A casual perusal of *Birds of New England* by any competent birder will leave little doubt that this is the weakest part of this guide.

The bottom third of the page has a small New England range map and a summary of identification characteristics, as well as details on habitat, nesting, feeding, voice, and similar species. Most of this is clear and useful information, but it is fairly typical and breaks no new ground.

What is unique about this new guide is the hefty paragraph at the top of each page that tries to give the reader a genuine sense of the living bird behaving in its natural habitat. Under American Bittern, the mini-essay begins:

> The American Bittern’s mysterious booming call is as characteristic of a spring marsh as the sound of croaking frogs, winnowing snipes and nighttime showers (p. 90).

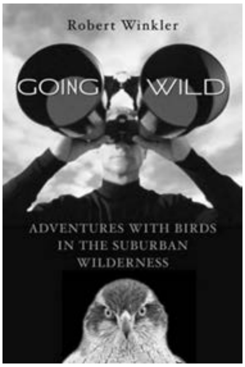
More than any laundry list of plumage details or notes about similar species, that one sentence conjures up a real field experience of an American Bittern. By balancing interesting writing with the necessary but dry descriptive details, *Birds Of New England* has created a unique field guide that does more than your typical Peterson or Sibley guide to make the bird “come alive” in a reader’s mind. Another example chosen at random:

> A Caspian Tern foraging for alewife and other small schooling fish is quite impressive. Flying high over open waters, the tern hovers, then suddenly folds its wings and plunges headfirst toward its target (p. 174).

Birds of New England is certainly a guide geared for novices, and the seasoned birder will find little of practical use in the book. That said, I have found myself time and again dipping into this handsome guide to simply enjoy the writing. When was the last time you could say that about a field guide? Now if they would only do something about those illustrations!

"Central to natural writing is a sense of wonder." Gabriele Lusser Rico.

Robert Winkler's collection of short essays in *Going Wild: Adventures With Birds in the Suburban Wilderness* is but the latest in a centuries' old natural history literary tradition of finding your wild muse in your own backyard. In the 18th century the Reverend Gilbert White (1720-93) wrote about his never-ending discoveries in his own local patch of England in *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne*. That book became a classic of natural history literature which is still in print, and still inspiring new readers. (I will review the latest edition in the next *Bird Observer*.) The implied theme of both Winkler's and White's books is that there is no need to travel to far-flung exotic lands to drink deep of nature's spectacles when there are wild wonders aplenty to ponder and explore in our own local green spaces.



Winkler's particular corner of the world is suburban Fairfield County in Connecticut, a short distance from New York City. Though the area is rife with SUVs and soccer moms, there are also green treasures tucked away among the sprawl, places like the Saugatuck Reservoir and the Upper and Lower Paugusset State Forest. Winkler's literary voice is that of the everyman explorer who treasures each outing and hike for what he can see and learn. In "A Golden-crowned Winter" he wonders how the tiny kinglets survive what has been a brutally cold season, and where they go at night to keep warm. In twilight he follows one bird deep into the forest.

> Then the kinglet dropped into view and came to the ground. It landed about 25 feet away, next to a grass- and fern-covered mound of tree roots jutting from the shoulder of the road. It was a male, and he called a couple of times before entering a narrow, shallow crevice between the edge of the mound and the surrounding snow. In a moment he came out, called one last time, and went back in. I never saw him leave (p. 30).

He continues to wait in the growing darkness, and still the kinglet does not come out. He trudges home and stays awake all night in anticipation of a predawn hike to watch the kinglet emerge. Back at the site and still in the dark, both physically and conceptually, he waits two hours but never sees that kinglet again. Have you ever put that much time and considerable effort into watching a single bird that was not a rarity?

Going Wild is a book filled with that kind of patient and careful observation of events that many hardcore birders would consider commonplace. Winkler writes about Barred Owls, Wild Turkeys, Northern Goshawks, and warbler migration, as well as common birding experiences like participating in a Big Day and finding a rarity. Through his unpretentious prose we see these birds and places with a fresh perspective, and perhaps even a bit of guilt at having all too quickly rushed by these wonders on our way to the next "good" bird.

> Quintessential creature of the night, the Barred Owl has a somber visage, mud brown puffy feathers spotted with white, a large round head and no apparent neck, a pale breast with blurry streaks, and a barred ruff (which gives the bird its name). The combined effect of these characteristics is a definite ghoulishness; the owl's retiring habits, noiseless flight, and macabre vocalization only add to its character. In the depths of the moon-drenched swamp, the Barred Owl is where it is meant to be (p. 158).

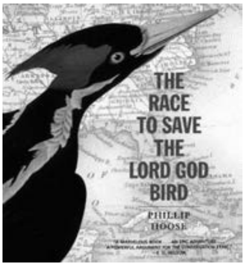
In this day of X-treme sports and easy travel, there is a surfeit of books about complicated trips to exotic lands in search of rare birds, animals, or peoples. I do enjoy reading those adventure-packed books and articles, but like an adrenalin rush, the pleasure is short-lived and does not affect the way I live day to day. What is rare is a book that will teach you how to better see and appreciate what is in front of your nose, and *Going Wild* is one of those books.

"Nature is always hinting at us. It hints over and over again. And suddenly we take the hint." Robert Frost.

Chroniclers of ornithological history have long sought literary inspiration in the stories of avian extinction. Like some kind of environmental Shakespearean tragedy, these extinction tales are filled with elements of human frailty, greed, stupidity, sadness, loss, and a gloomy sense of inevitability. Each avian extinction that has occurred in recent human history can be read as a morality play with feathers. Early books like James C. Greenway's *Extinct and Vanishing Birds of the World* took a simple "Dragnet" approach and, for the most part, consisted of "just the facts." Later writers like Errol Fuller, author of books on extinct birds as well as single volumes on the Great Auk and the Dodo, have made a career of detailing every single bit of human memorabilia left of an extinct bird species. In his wonderful *Hope Is The Thing With Feathers*, poet Christopher Cokinos chronicled his search for meaning and redemption while making pilgrimages to the scenes from which the birds vanished forever. It is interesting that, as our wholesale rearranging of the planet's ecosystems has increased at a furious pace, so has our production of, and interest in, books about extinction. You think we would have learned those lessons by now.

Phillip Hoose's *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* has done something which seemed well-nigh impossible. Hoose's book has brought fresh insights into the oft-told story of the decline and probable extinction of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus imperialis*). I say "probable" because Hoose's book is one of the first to detail the discovery and continued search for the Ivory-bill in Cuba, as well as the most recent efforts to search for this Holy Grail species in America. *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* is all the more extraordinary because it is written for that toughest of reading audiences known as "young adults."

What makes *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* such a successful accounting of the sad ending of this magnificent woodpecker is that Hoose focuses on the human element of this ecological cautionary tale. In most cases of extinction there are two sides to the equation: the life history of the doomed birds on one side, and the lives of the humans who caused the extinction on the other side. Sometimes the stories of the few people who tried to save the bird are also a vital part of the tale. James Tanner, the biologist and conservationist who spent years of his life trying to document and save the last remaining Ivory-bills, becomes a genuine tragic hero in Hoose's book. Tragic because, in the end, unassailable forces of world history and American capitalism overwhelm Tanner's best efforts to save the last remaining tracts of habitat for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Through Hoose's writing we also get to know lesser-known, but nonetheless interesting, characters in the Ivory-bill story, such as the men who hunted Ivory-bills for specimens for museums, or the German prisoners of war who cut down the last of the forest habitat. We also learn about the local warden of the Singer Refuge: J.J. Kuhn. Here in the Ivory-bill's last stand, Kuhn accompanies and guides Tanner on many of his trips and looks after the birds when Tanner is not there. Kuhn's rugged features can be seen in the only film ever made of a young Ivory-billed Woodpecker, as the fledgling nicknamed "Sonny Boy" is shown perched atop his head. Some people are continuing the fight for preservation today. Giraldo Alayon, a Cuban biologist who has seen the Ivory-bill, is recognized by Hoose as the heir to James Tanner's passion.



> The Ivory-bill is a messenger of the old days from the great forest that covered our land. It is a link between the people of North America and Cuba. It lives between science and magic. (Geraldo Alayon , p. 135).

Finally, Hoose captures the horrible sense of wonder and hopelessness that conservationists felt when they knew they were witnessing extinction. Artist Don Eckleberry travels to the Singer Tract to record the last woodpecker:

> With too little light left to sketch, Eckleberry just watched, awestruck, until dark. He felt like he was staring at eternity. The single unmated female was all that remained of the Lord God bird that had commanded America's great swamp forests for thousands of years. She was the sole known remainder of a life form that had predated Columbus, or Christ, or even Native Americans. The arrow-like flight, the two-note whacks that echoed through gloomy forests, the ability to peel entire trees — all that was left of these ancient behaviors was right before his eyes (pp. 130-1).

The Race to Save the Lord God Bird is a handsome, well-designed book. Small maps in the corner of each chapter trace the ever-shrinking range of the woodpecker, and these are collected at the end of the book. Numerous sidebars entice the reader into various digressions on related topics. The book is well illustrated, mostly with photographs, some of which I had not seen before. There is also a glossary, a chronological summary of the Ivory-bill's extinction and a detailed chapter-by-chapter section on sources. Phillip Hoose is to be commended for writing a book geared for an audience (young adults) often ignored by natural history writers. Adult readers will also find *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* one of the best-written accounts of the human side of the tragedy of extinction.

"If I had to give young writers advice, I would say don't listen to writers talking about writing or themselves." Lillian Hellman.

Writing about writing can be an enterprise fraught with pitfalls. If the author is not astute, then the piece can become overtly self-conscious and preciously clever. Though it is sometimes interesting to learn what goes through an author's mind while creating, as a reader it can often seem that all this self-referential prose is a style of last resort for an author who has run out of ideas.

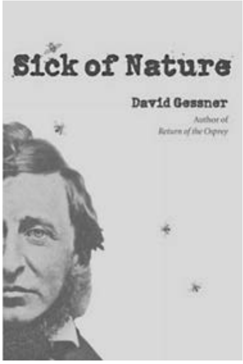
Which is why I am happy to report that most of the pieces in *Sick of Nature*, the latest collection of short essays by David Gessner, avoid the obvious and trite, and further establish Gessner's reputation as one of the most accomplished writers of what is labeled "creative nonfiction."

Gessner is best known by the birding set as the author of *Return of the Osprey*, his memoir of coming to terms with his father's death while closely observing nesting Ospreys on Cape Cod. "Sick of Nature," the essay that kicks off this current collection, focuses on David's reaction to the wee modicum of fame he gets for writing that book. He rapidly becomes pigeonholed by his audience as a "nature writer," and David reacts the way countless artists have before him at being so simply categorized: he loathes the title and all it represents.

> And then there was this: With only a couple of obvious exceptions, the modern nature writer is most often praised for his or her "restrained" voice. Restrained as in shackles, it seemed to me. "Quietly subversive," is the phrase usually tossed out by critics when referring to nature writing. Well, while I sit here carving out my quietly subversive prose, the bulldozers down the street at Stone's bluff are loudly subverting the soil. Hollowing out the Cape just as the beetles hollow out our beams (p. 7).

Gessner's malaise is a dead-on criticism of much of what passes for "nature writing" today: terribly well-intentioned, humorless, impotent, and typically avoiding the rowdy and loud. Gessner imagines throwing a "kegger" for some of the great nature writers like Beston, Aldo Leopold, Thoreau, and Rachel Carson, and then imagines the tone of the party as reeking of deadly and boring earnestness. Gessner longs to talk about the breadth of the human experience of nature including our more Dionysian impulses. He wants to create writing that would joyfully talk about being drunk while surrounded by nature, having sex, and "that most underrated aspect of nature appreciation: pissing outside. He makes good on this desire with an entire piece on that activity in the great outdoors called "Marking My Territory." What Gessner seeks is to be considered simply a writer first and foremost, and when writing about the natural world, to rebel against all expectations.

Several of the essays in this collection take you into the neurotic world of the mind of the author. "Bigger than Shakespeare," or "How I Weathered the Perfect



Storm," is a very funny account of Gessner's jealously imagined competition with Sebastian Junger, whom he aptly titles "The Perfect Author." Many essays have nothing to do with the environment or the natural world at all. "Benediction" recalls the flawed English Literature professor who inspired Gessner. "Ultimate Glory" is an overlong memoir about David's participation on a local Ultimate Frisbee team, much to the shock of family and friends. Though Gessner tries mightily to get the reader to understand his unflagging passion for this fringe sport, it is one of the least successful works in this collection. "Punctured Pastoral" is a thoughtful piece about what happens to Gessner's isolationist idealism espoused by writers like Thoreau after the mind-numbing events of 9/11. *Sick of Nature* concludes with the long essay "Howling with the Trickster: A Wild Memoir" that reveals the writer at the top of his game as he seamlessly dovetails the story of his family's move to Cambridge with exploration of the life of urban coyotes. Like the Osprey in his previous book, the coyote becomes a metaphor for a life in flux and the healing power of the wild aspects of our surroundings.

Often thoughtful and thought-provoking, sometimes hilarious or downright rowdy, *Sick of Nature* is an always lively showcase of writing by an author who defies easy categorization.

"It took me fifteen years to discover that I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous." Robert Benchley.

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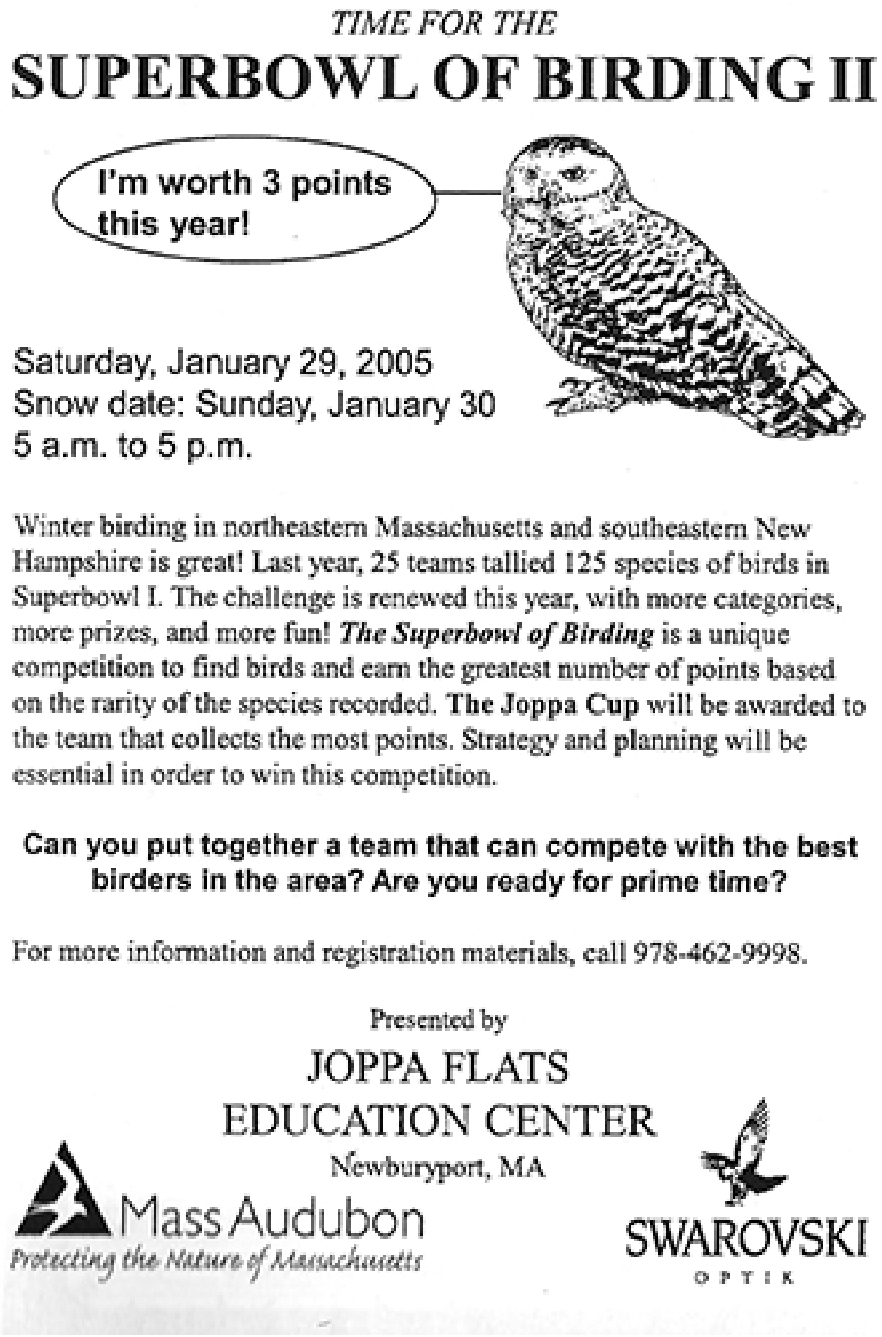

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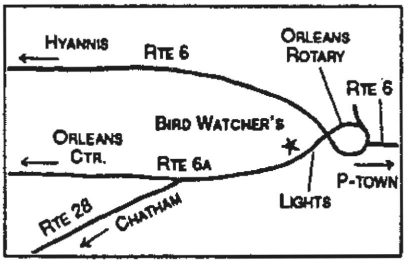

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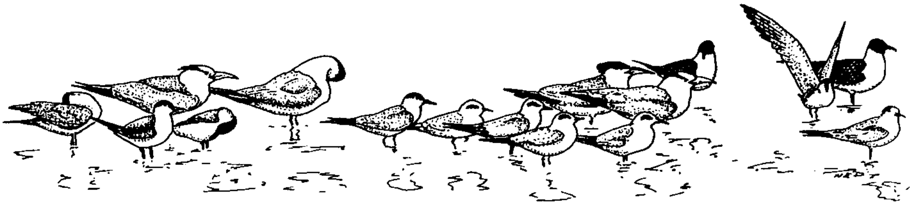

WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR.

Bulletin of the Essex County Ornithological Club, 1931

A SEASHORE SURPRISE

A. P. STUBBS

We were crossing the narrow spit of land that makes the westerly side of the "Basin" at Plum Island (the Basin cuts a notch in the northerly end of the Island, opens into the Merrimac and is nearly dry at low tide) when, on a flat stretch of sand that had been evidently washed and leveled by the high tides of early spring, a bird dropped down and began to pick up something. It was not more than thirty yards from us but nearly against the sinking western sun.

First impressions registered "Grackle" but it was not black, second thought said "Thrasher" but it was not brown, Catbird would be too small and when it flew a flash of white in the wings spelled something still different.

Fortunately the bird flew to the veranda rail of a nearby cottage, thereby coming into better light and still within easy range of our glasses. Our previous guesses were confirmed and we were able to call it a Mockingbird. It flew again, alighting on a clothesline post, presenting another fine view, finally dropping out of sight in the plum-bush scrub nearby.

Plum Island is sand dune country; to the east is the Atlantic Ocean, to the west tide ditches and wide stretches of salt marsh. The vegetation of the island is mainly short scrubby brush broken by patches of scanty grass. Wild plum bushes make up most of the woody growth giving the long narrow island its name. These bushes were in full bloom at the time of our visit.

Just why a Mockingbird shoud pick such a desolate stopping place is somewhat of a puzzle.

Date of occurrence May 20, 1931.

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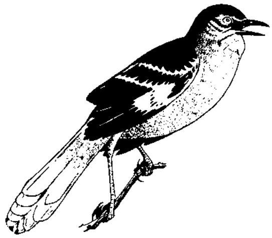

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD BY ANON.