

Further Afield

Robert Harlan

3361 Columbia Woods Dr. Apt. F, Norton, OH 44203

kiskadee96@hotmail.com

Sometimes, late at night, I sit contemplatively in my favorite silk smoking jacket, feet propped snugly, Honduran Robusto cigar in hand, and my faithful hound Wagtail Junior resting languorously by my side. As the last dying embers of what once was a glorious conflagration pop and sizzle in their final, irrevocable demise, the hearth in the Great Room of stately Ohio Cardinal Manor emits its crowning, lugubrious glow, and all is still. I swirl the residual traces of aged Cuban rum in the bottom of my glass, and hearken back to 1999, when I began to write these columns: days when men were men, women were women, and long-tailed ducks were oldsquaws. I hearken back to a series of promises I made to myself regarding the intended course and scope of my efforts. Some promises have been realized; but others, many others, have been left bitterly unfulfilled. I weep a silent tear.

When I began, I promised myself I would never use foppish or dandified language, with words such as “languorous”, “lugubrious”, and “hearken” being strictly forbidden. I have lived up to that promise, at least until very recently. I promised myself I would avoid lofty-sounding and needlessly high-handed technical jargon, and always write sensibly, appealing to communal interests; my majestic Ivy League education and controlling interests in the fabulous new *Hotel Pretensia*, and in the delightful bistro, *The Snobbery*, notwithstanding. Although these details might lead some readers to believe that I have a Donald Trump-esque ego, I simply must disagree—in fact, I like to think that I’m just a little bit better than that.

I also promised never to let my writing fall prey to trendy and banal words and phrases, such as “queue,” “blog,” or “back in the day.” And also “bling-bling,” “do the math,” and “the usual suspects.” And also “déjà vu all over again,” “win-win situation,” and “old school.” And, most especially, the vile and odious “diva.” And also “delightful bistro.” I promised never, *ever*, to write from the perspective of a bird, as if this hasn’t already been beaten to death, and as if one could ever *truly* aspire to fathom the innermost hopes and dreams of, say, a razorbill, or a smew.

I promised myself I would always attempt to be timely; to be entertaining (at least on a “what the heck is he talking about” level); to be historically accurate; to be provocative (at least on a “why doesn’t he just shut up already” level); and to be far-reaching. I would not strictly limit my ramblings to Ohio; occasionally, I would wander further afield when events warranted. Considering the roll call of rarities this past winter in Texas, events have certainly warranted. And so we dedicate this column to our recent January trip to Texas. I like Texas. Let’s wander aimlessly, being sure to close every gate behind us.

You should also like Texas. It’s large—quite large, actually—extending about as far from east to west as from Boston to Chicago, and north to south as from Nashville to Key West. It boasts (much boasting is done in Texas) at least 11 natural or ecological regions, ranging from the eastern Pineywoods, the Coastal Plain, the South Texas Brush Country (including the lower Rio Grande Valley), and west to the Trans-Pecos region, home of the Davis Mountains, Big Bend National Park, Judge Roy Bean’s Jersey Lily saloon, and the moderately mysterious yet strangely marketable Marfa Ghost Lights. If you happen to be in west Texas, a stop at the official Marfa Ghost Lights rest area on U.S. Highway 90 between the towns of Alpine and Marfa is worth a few moments of your time. This observation post provides an excellent vantage to scan for these seemingly inexplicable desert lights, or, perhaps more entertainingly, to observe other rest-stoppers as they mysteriously and indiscriminately identify distant car headlights as mysterious ghost lights. But be sure to wait for night, so the lights stand out; otherwise, you’ll only see the rest area, which, while frightening enough, is not nearly as spooky as the Ghost Lights.

There are also many birds in Texas, as might be expected given the girth of the state and the variety of habitats present. The new 2004 edition of *The Texas Ornithological Society Handbook of Texas Birds* lists 623 species accepted for the state by the Texas Bird Records Committee, which happens to be over 200 more than the 412 accepted for Ohio by the Ohio Bird Records Committee. Actually, it’s a fairly routine task to find more birds in Texas *in one year* than have *ever* been seen in Ohio. Bummer for us. A 1999 bird checklist for tiny Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, the 2088-acre treasure near Alamo, Texas, boasts 396 species. For those keeping score, that’s 396 species in Santa Ana’s 2088 acres, versus 412 in Ohio’s 26 million acres. Hey, that’s not fair.

Texas is also full of interesting people. Once, on an earlier trip, we met a nice man, apparently the caretaker, at the thirsty and bedraggled Imperial Reservoir, not far from Fort Stockton, but nearer to nowhere. He could have charged us a modest admission fee to bird the area, but didn’t; I suspect this was because we listened politely to his discourse on the resurgence of the Republic of Texas as an independent nation. I half-hoped he would hum a few bars of *Bonnie Blue Flag*, or hoist his hat in a rousing “Huzzah!” for Civil War General John Bell Hood’s Texas Brigade, but such was not to be. Even so, I had to respect the man for his independent thinking. I too dally with independent thought—but only rarely, and only with my wife’s permission.

At this point, I should confess that although I enjoy travel within the U.S., I’m not much of a world traveler. Language difficulties give me fits; I speak only passable English, and less than passable Latin. Like many other impressionable youngsters, I was convinced to study Latin in school. I’ve forgotten exactly why, but presumably it had something to do with the Latin instructor needing to keep her job, a position she had seemingly held, based on her profoundly advanced maturity, since the time of the Caesars. In retrospect, I should have taken Spanish or French, but I took Latin; I probably would have benefited just as much by taking Amalekite or Minoan, but apparently those classes were unavailable for lack of contemporary instructors.