

Pete Dunne



Homecoming, Coon Ridge

The personal bond between a mentor and his pupil is still very much a part of birding. This is what it takes to make a birder and imbue him with the wisdom and ethics of the tribe.

THERE WAS ONE CAR IN THE LOT, about right for midweek and south winds. Come the weekend or a cold front, and late-arriving hawk watchers find themselves parking up on the grass. I pulled in and parked, slipped into a day pack, and with no more than a momentary glance back

down the lane, I started for the trail head that leads to the crest of the ridge.

How many times did I stand in this lot, waiting for the man in the fire-engine red jeep to draw to a stop?

I don't know. Dozens of times. Scores.

How many times did I jump to the passenger door, eager to fall under the spell of his words, eager to "get up top," and stand, next to the Master, while the river of raptors flowed around us?

It's impossible to say. The particulars have been eroded by time. His



The birders' secret is out: the magnitude of Coon Ridge's hawk flights. The ridge is part of the same endless ridge that Hawk Mountain Sanctuary straddles . . . and the history of Coon Ridge is just as proud. Photograph/Pete Dunne.

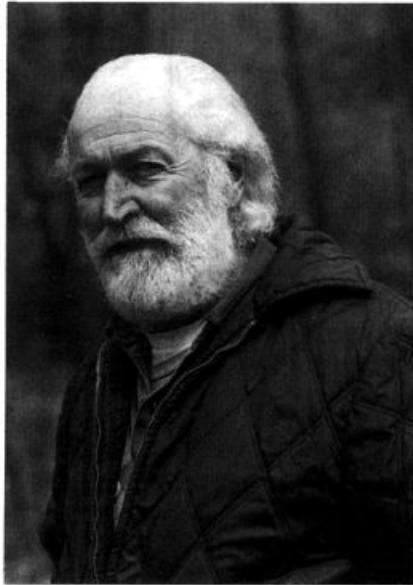
words and the birds and great moments that marked the path of my discovery—and our friendship—have run together in a blur. What I recall is his hawklike visage. A flowing mane of hair and a billowing beard and eyes that never admitted that there was such a thing as age. But most of all, I remember his voice. It was sonorous and deep; rising and falling with a tumble of words that flowed like water.

Long an insider's secret, Raccoon Ridge, or Coon Ridge, has slipped its gag. Its location and fame as an autumn hawk watch site have fallen into the pool of common knowledge. No, the place is not Hawk Mountain—not in elevation, not in popularity, not even in the magnitude of its hawk flights. But the great wall of stone that supports Coon is the same endless ridge that the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary straddles. And the history of Coon Ridge is just as proud, almost as long and . . .

It was a SECRET! A secret known only to the members of the venerable Urner Ornithological Club and a handful of carefully chosen confederates. Even the name of the place was chosen to confound hawk shooters, and the shroud of secrecy surrounding the location of Coon survived long after the guns were silenced. In time, the secret took on the character of a barrier, a threshold. To be ken to Coon was to be a member of North Jersey birding's inner circle, to be a member of the clan. And before Donald Heintzelman spilled the gruel in his *Autumn Hawk Flights*; before the publication of Bill Boyle's *Bird Finding in New Jersey*, there was only one way to cross the threshold. Someone in the inner circle had to reach out and usher you across.

Somberly hooded juncos fled the road. The mountain laurels whispered among themselves and drew back. A mourning cloak butterfly that had survived the season's first hard frost reeled drunkenly through the trees. I considered taking the short cut, for old time's sake, but kept to the road instead. The short cut was for younger men.

"Four hundred years old if it's a day," Floyd would intone as his spunky jeep bounced and churned up the path, navigating switchbacks and sidestepping rocks that reach for the oil pans. "Four hundred years, this



Floyd P. Wolfarth—steady, unwavering, larger than life. Photograph/Leonard Lee Rue III.

road. Built by hand. Ah, those were real men in those days." By which he meant that their like are not to be found today.

No, they don't build men like those old Dutch copper miners who once hauled ox carts of ore over the Kaiser road. And they don't build 'em like the old teamster from Nutley, New Jersey, Floyd P. Wolfarth, a man who knew Charles Urner and Lee Edwards and was a founding member of the Urner Ornithological Club. *Floyd Wolfarth*, who saw ten thousand Pintails in Hatfield Swamp . . . picked a Mew Gull out of thin air at Newburyport, Mass . . . founded the Boonton Christmas Bird Count . . . and who birded with "The Great Man," with Roger Tory Peterson, in the Hackensack Meadows before half the birders alive today were sucking bottles of formula. Floyd Wolfarth.

The road gets steeper after the first switchback, the rocks bolder. The rain has knocked the color out of the hillsides. Only the poplar leaves still hold their branches, crowning the hillsides with molten gold. The oak leaves have shivered their way to the ground, covering Kaiser road with a coarse brown shroud. They are slippery, the footing treacherous. Gravity sucks on the heels of boots, making calves twitch. Soon the twitch will become an ache and then an agony.

There was a time when I used to climb this track in something under

30 minutes. My record was 18 and I ran. But that was before the invention of cholesterol—during an age when knees bent without protest. It was long ago. Now, more than ever, I listen for the rumble of Floyd's jeep coming up from behind. But that is a sound these Kittatinny hillsides have not heard for quite some time. And will never hear again.

Several months ago, in June, in the shadow of another wall of stone, this one in Portal, Arizona, it was my privilege to help Victor Emanuel with his Camp Chiricahua—a birding camp for high school age students. Every day was filled with discovery. Every night was an occasion for spirited conversation. And on those long drives connecting southeastern Arizona's scattered hot spots, the essence of birding was held to the light and every facet discussed. Somewhere along the line, we stumbled upon the word that drew so much of birding into focus for us—a single catalytic word. That word is "tribal." Birding is tribal.

Think about it. Birders form a separate society, a subculture, a tribe, and a society erects barriers between those who share a common interest and those who do not. This barrier is enforced by an esoteric language, patterns of interactions, and modes of dress.

Birding has its own mores (like its fundamental ethic of honesty). It has its rituals like the Big Day and the Christmas Bird Count. But more than these, birding enjoys one key attribute that is eminently tribal. Birding reveres its elders—the lore masters, the great teachers.

The role of mentors in birding society is fundamental. Many if not most birders can trace their interest and their development to one person who took them under a wing, who taught them the skills and the lore, who initiated them into the fabric of birding society. This mentor and pupil bond is key to birding. Maybe irreplaceable.

The jeep would grind to a halt where the road crossed the AT. Floyd would amble to the rear of the car and draw forth his gear with the care of a surgeon laying out his instruments. He ambled more than walked (though Floyd always insisted that it was a "limp.")

"An old injury," he'd explain. "A



Pete Dunne and friend on Coon Ridge.
Photograph/Tom Laura.

tendon crushed by a thousand [sometimes "ten thousand"] pounds ["tons?"] of steel" that had somehow fallen from the bed of his truck. Floyd was never one to let something like particulars stand in the way of a good story.

Binoculars in one hand; stuffed owl and lounge chair in the other, he'd "limp" his way toward the spot on the ridge that was his by right of deference. Then, unfettered of his burdens, he'd draw himself erect and face the wind.

"Ah," he would pronounce. "This is magnificent". "MAGnificent," he'd repeat and his voice was so full of command that even God in Heaven probably glanced down to see what He'd done that had impressed old Wolfarth so deeply.

"They'll be coming beak to tail on this wind," Floyd promised. "Beak to tail." Then, having said all that needed to be said, he'd walk the piece of carrion he charitably called a stuffed owl down to a carefully hidden pole and battle heroically to lever his lure aloft. Sometimes Floyd won, sometimes the owl, and in retrospect, it occurs to me that the only thing that could constantly get the better of Floyd in a war of wills was that decrepit bird.

It was the Boy Scouts of America that turned Floyd's mind and many other young minds toward the natural world and to birding. This was the Boy Scouts that taught woodcraft, and chivalry. This was the Boy Scouts of Ernest Thompson Seton. And this was a long time ago.

And birders of that age were also brought to the wonder of birds in grammar schools—through teachers who had love and wisdom to spare;

through bread crumbs scattered on window sills and later, through leaflets sent through the mail by the National Audubon Society.

But this is 1990. The ranks of Boy Scouts have thinned. Children go home right after school and they are ordered to stay there. The world is no longer safe. Woodlands are places of menace.

More and more, new birders seem drawn from the ranks of colleges. Mentors are college profs or, experienced birders who teach adult education courses. And the last two decades have seen the growth of professional mentors; —hyper-skilled field birders who carry the banners of birding tour companies and the admiration of all who follow them. Their skills are the stuff of legend and their followers recount their exploits with pride.

Having battled the elements to a near draw, Wolfarth would return to his mount and pin his eyes to the sky. The great Kittatinny Ridge had been

"Watch the bird," he'd command. "Watch-it! This," he'd rumble, "is going to be something GOOD!"

brushed by his gaze (and 300,000 years of ice, wind and rain) so long that the peaks had been eroded to bumps—bumps with names like "The Nob," "Catfish," and "Stigs." No hawk could remain anonymous for long when Wolfarth scanned the skies.

Distant Red-tailed Hawks flashed secret signals that only his eyes could discern. Cooper's Hawks whose tails failed to pass muster were too ashamed to show their faces when Floyd stood at his post. And when that oh-so-insignificant black dot would appear on the horizon—so far away that lesser eyes dismissed it as "only another Turkey Vulture," it was Wolfarth who brought us to attention.

"Watch this bird," he'd command. "Watch-it!" "This," he'd rumble, "is

going to be something GOOD!"

In this age of video, and magazines, and newsletters and bird finders' guides and hotlines and computer bulletin boards, the personal bond that forms between a mentor and his pupil is still very much a part of birding. It takes a special person. It takes a bond. It takes a pair. *This* is what it takes to make a birder and imbue them with the wisdom and ethics of the tribe.

And then one day, the bond is broken. And every birder becomes a vessel of the past and an emissary to the future. Thus is our tradition preserved.

The bird, when I finally saw it, was close but the angle was poor—head on, eye level. A stealthy raptor that deflected all mortal efforts to pin a name upon it.

But something about this bird makes you hold your glass on it long after the point of comfort. There was something about it that makes your throat close, that shuts out the world so that all reality draws down to two points and a single line. The bird was like the man who used to stand on this ridge beside me—steady, unwavering, larger than life.

"Watch this bird," a voice buried deep in my conscious counseled. "Watch this bird. This is going to be something good."

"I'm watching it, Floyd," I thought "Big. Am I right?"

"Yes, big."

"Holds the ridge like it was bolted there."

"Uh huh."

"I think you've got it. Yes, sir," the echo of an echo of a voice shouted from some unbridgeable distance "Had it all the way."

Which is flattering but not quite true. It's more accurate to say I had it half way.

And the bird, the young Golden Eagle, left the ridge, taking a course that offered easier passage. I left too, but before I did, I ambled a little way down the north slope. There a stone's throw from the place where Wolfarth once held forth, there is a tiny cairn made of Kittatinny stone, and a hand-made, wooden cross. As has become my habit, I added another stone to the pile. Then started on down. ■

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