

GREG HANISEK (that's *the* Greg Hanisek — captain of the winningest team on the World Series of Birding) laughed with the rest and then silenced the assembly with a glance.

"Well," he began, pausing, catching my eye. "The coldest I've ever been while birding was at..."

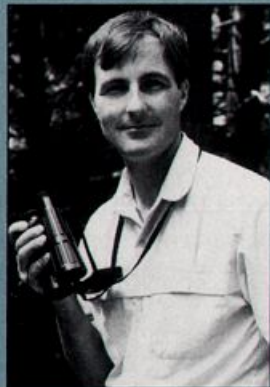
And I knew *precisely* what spot on a cold planet held this distinction for Greg. Could conjure up every angle in four dimensions. Could recall the wind that cut through an expedition-grade parka like it was fashioned out of cheesecloth. Feel the salt spray that seared the flesh off noses and cheeks. It was 15 years ago but even so my body shivers at the memory of it — of cold so unspeakably cold that a carelessly drawn breath sent icy drills deep into the roots of old fillings and noses ran like tap water.

Cold so *cold* that later, in bed, with a belly full of good New England chowder and a head filled with fresh memories, your entire body itched beneath the blankets. And it is this, not the snores of your companions, not the couple in the next room, that keep you from falling asleep. The itch...and the memories of your first winter birding trip to:

"...Newburyport/Cape Ann," Greg asserted. "You remember, Pete?"

Oh you bet your duo-therms, Greg ol'buddy. I'll be cold in the grave before I forget *that* day. It was

Pete Dunne
**AMERICAN
BIRDING**



**Recalling
Mecca—Trying
to Catch an
Echo**

*Illustration
by Keith Hansen*

February and we were standing on a seawall. (No, not *the* seawall. Another. But I'll get to that.) The temperature was minus five and the winds strong enough to drive the Hesperus through a keyhole. We were struggling to stand, struggling to keep our tripods from blowing away, and in our spare time struggling to identify little black things bobbing at the limit of conjecture.

We finally decided that they were birds, and that living was better than dying, so we left.

Greg and I were part of an *ad hoc* assemblage of Urner Club members — Howard (the judge) Drinkwater, Floyd P. Wolfarth, Jack Padelino, Jim Zamos. We were engaged in what is and has long been a winter tradition among birders within a day's drive

of the Chowder Coast — a winter birding trip to New England. This was my first. And, as poor fortune had it, it was two years too late. The Ross' Gull had come and gone. I'd missed it.

But Newburyport's fame antedates the Ross' Gull. And for years, veteran birders had travelled there to get their minimal yearly allotment of cold-weather birds. And untested, young newcomers tagged along to pick up a host of life birds, wonderful birds! Birds like:

Barrow's Goldeneye, the prize buried somewhere in the mound of ducks floating in the chop of the

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Merrimack River.

"Look for the white crescent. Yes sir, *that's* the mark you want."

"Uh, huh. How about an all yellow bill?"

"On the drake? Never! Only on the hen."

"Got a hen."

"What!"

Glaucous and Iceland gulls, snow-colored immatures and ice-mantled adults.

"The size, Howard, look at the size. Why that bird could eat an Iceland Gull!"

"I *am* looking at the size, your Laridship. And I am also looking at an all black bill which, in case you have forgotten, is not typical of a young Glaucous."

"Black bill?! Why Howard, that bill's pink."

"Hey! Will you two guys cut it out. You're lookin' in different directions."

Black-headed and Little gulls, Newburyport specialties, the birds that separate the gull mavens from the boys.

"How about that bird on the left, Floyd?"

"What bird!?"

"The third one from the left. It seems to be standing a little taller than the rest."

"Wellll, I don't know. It's tricky. Bird could be standing on a piece of ice; standing just a little closer than the rest. But it bears watching. Yes sir, it's..."

"*Head's up!*"

"Yes sir. *Ridibundus* for sure. *That* was a good pick!"

Northern Shrike on the wire; Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspurs on the rooftops; kittiwake on the horizon; and "Dirty-necked" Grebe in the surf.

"A what?"

"Holboell's!"

"Holboell's?"

"He means Red-necked."

"Red-necked indeed! Why, that bird is an aristocrat You call that

fine *Podiceps* a Red-necked Grebe!? Why Charles Urner is spinning in his grave. A thousand revolutions a minute. Red-necked Grebe *indeed!*"

And of course, the bird that is the unspoken objective of every pilgrimage to Newburyport. The great, white owl.

"Stop."

"Stop?"

"Yes...STOP!"

But stopping on a half-inch of fresh, glaze ice is not something done on command. There are certain laws governing bodies in mo-

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tion. And how they tend to stay in motion. Unless some outside force (like friction or gravity or a snowbank) works against them. And as all present tried mightily to keep the bird in sight, the large white lump of snow with the golden, cat-like gaze watched as our vehicle spun lazy doughnuts down the toboggan chute that was the road out to Plum Island. The bird's disinterest suggested that it happened all the time.

These are all the regular good birds of Newburyport. All the Saturday Birds. And then, on Sunday (as tradition has it) the road show moves on to Cape Ann, Halibut Point, Andrews Point, Gloucester. Then home. In traffic. In good weather if you are lucky. In poor weather if you are not. But that's just part of the adventure. Part of what makes the annual trip to the Chowder Coast so special. The birds. The camaraderie. The adversity. All the

elements make a winter trip to Newburyport one of birding's greatest rituals.

And to these attributes you can add one more feather in Newburyport's cap. The one thousands of birders witnessed. The one I've been leading up to.

The one I missed.

In 1975, I was very much a birder. But I was like the majority of birders in North America. Unaligned. Unincorporated. Outside the birding infrastructure. Just a twenty-three-year-old with a pair of binoculars, a field guide, and a passion.

There was no regular delivery of *American Birds* in my mail box. Sad to say I'd never heard of the publication. There was no monthly meeting of the Urner Club etched on my calendar. I'd never heard of that either. There wasn't even a birding companion, not then, not yet. Birding was something I just did.

But I didn't entirely miss out on birding's pivotal event. By accident and chance I was brushed by the gull that galvanized North American birding. It happened, oddly enough, in a house in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey.

I was jobbing as a carpet mechanic (the best use a degree in political science was ever put to) and this job was a small one, just one room. The house was typical of the area. Big. Settled. Tasteful. Full of furniture — heavy furniture. Two things about the job were atypical.

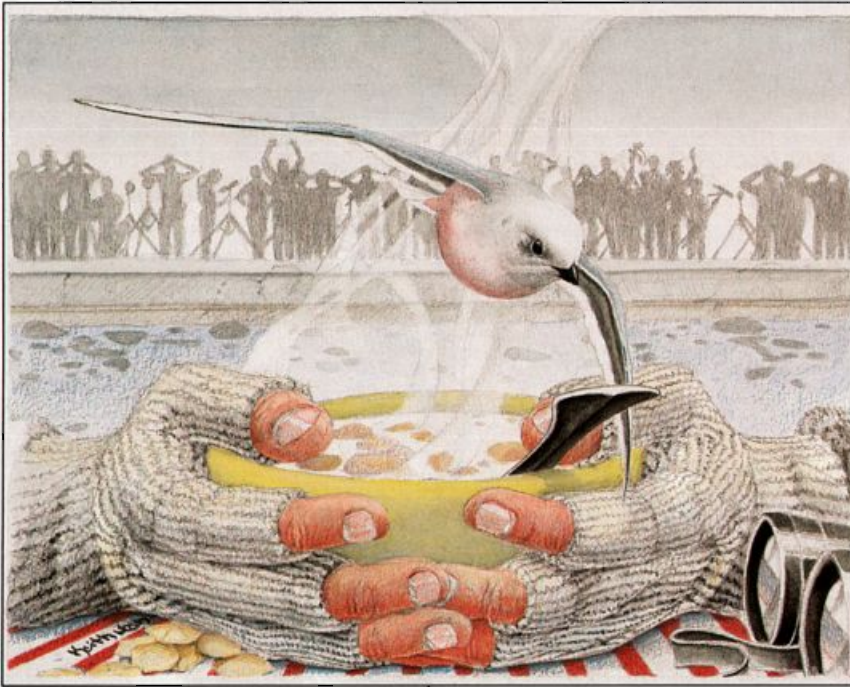
One, the owner was a birder and there to prove it was a Balscope Senior straddling a pile of gear assembled at the door.

Two, the owner wanted that carpet down as fast as possible and let the devil take the botched seams because he wanted out of there. He wanted out of there NOW. *He* was going to *Newburyport*.

Why?

Well. Hadn't I heard?

No. I hadn't heard. Heard what?



Heard about the...
ROSS' GULL!...*Ross' Gull!* "Have you heard! They found a *Ross' Gull!*..."

"WHAT!"

"You heard me, a *Ross' Gull!*"

"WHERE!?"

"At Newburyport, Massachusetts."

"WHEN?"

The name had wings. The name was a pink bullet, a shock heard round the world. It made zinging noises as it traveled along phone lines. In towns all across North America, bells rang deep into the night.

"Hello, Jim (hello Allan...hello Joe...hello Nancy...hello Davis...hello Frank...) This is Noble (is Kenn...is Loretta...is Rich...is John...is Susan...is Roger). Sorry to wake you but..."

And all across the continent, the daily pattern of lives hit a seawall. A thousand mothers-in-law were laid to rest that first week; pink flu decimated the ranks of professionals. Long and carefully planned parties were canceled, and marriages went to the ropes, (some, maybe all the way to the mat) but at least to the ropes as the birding half broke away to join the fracas down east.

Twenty-four hours after it was sighted, there wasn't one state or Canadian province that wasn't privy to the news. The tendrils of birding's grapevine carried it to every birding corner. And in Newburyport, Massachusetts, residents stared in disbelief as their winter tranquility was interrupted by several thousand ardent birders all searching for some lipstick-colored sea gull.

It made the national papers. It made *Time* magazine. The story of the greatest spontaneous mass assemblage of birders in North American history! And something happened there, at Newburyport, something very special; something very timely. At Newburyport, Massachusetts, a pink bullet was fired into a critical mass and it struck a chord that started a chain reaction. Suddenly, North America's birders were brought to understand a latent fact — something that had been hidden away in the vastness of a continent.

From the seawall at Newburyport, North American birding looked up and down their bundled ranks and discovered that they were many. They were *many!*

And birders have never forgotten it.

"Huh," I said, to the home owner in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, mentally leafing through the plates of a Robbins field guide and coming up with an illustration of a small gull flying down in the corner of one page.

"Isn't that the gull that nests in Siberia?" I asked, trying to sound more erudite than I was.

Yes it was, the man said, smiling.

"Where's Newburyport?" I wanted to know. And although I gained an answer, his expression told me that I'd clearly lost whatever standing that my guess about the origins of *Ross' Gull* had gained.

No, I didn't chase the gull. The idea never even occurred to me. But at the same time that birders all across the country were learning that they were many, I was learning the same thing. In fact, from the narrow perspective afforded by my personal experience, the world population of birders had doubled. It had gone from one (me), to two (me and the guy set to hot foot it to Newburyport). The population has been climbing ever since.

And as often as my schedule lets me, I make a winter pilgrimage to Newburyport/Cape Ann, to Mecca. To brave the cold, to savor the chowder, to be with special friends, and to see birds whose likes are few and far between closer to home. These are all the things that make birding, at Newburyport and elsewhere, so special.

Of course, the chowder's not quite as good in most other places.

And not a trip goes by that I do not make a special point of standing on the seawall, (no, not the one where Greg Hanisek and I nearly froze to death) *the* seawall. To pay homage to the site of the shock heard around the world. And maybe to hope for an echo. ■

—New Jersey Audubon Society
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