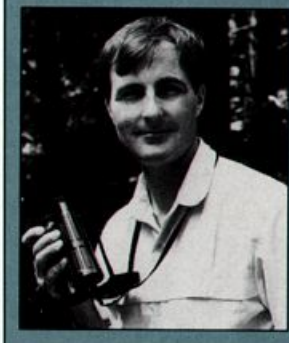
Pete Dunne

# AMERICAN BIRDING



# Victor's Camp

*Illustration by Keith Hansen*

**At Camp Chiricahua, birding *is* the norm. For a host of kids, some of whom may never have met another birder their own age, it is a place to hone skills, discover new and exotic species, and forge friendships that transcend distance and time.**

HIS NAME IS RIAS Escobedo, and he is walking down a canyon trail looking at his feet. There's nothing particularly notable about Rias's feet. They number precisely two, just about average. They're housed in running shoes, typical of young birders.

When minds are troubled, the way Rias's mind was now, it sometimes helps to look down at your feet, I don't know why this works. It just does. Sometimes I do it myself.

Today it was Rias's turn to seek solace in the rhythm of his feet. Without particularly seeing them, he watched the way they made long, scraping tracks through the veil of oak leaves; without much interest, he observed how the small sticks fled the rush of toes and how deeply buried rocks did not. These he kicked. Because they were insolent.

"Come on, Rias!" hailed the voice of the impatient, freckled, sandy-haired one that everyone called "Verdin."

"Yeah, come on Rias!" Hank, the dark-haired one who was Verdin's friend echoed.

"I. Am. Coming!" Rias shouted, putting more stride and less scrape in his step. He had a musical voice, made for poetry.

"Yo deseo tener un amigo like Verdin and Hank," he thought in a langauge that was as familiar to him as his feet. It was hard to be the youngest in the group of teenage boys, not to mention the shortest, which is almost as bad. It was hard to speak in English all the time, even through Rias's English was very good—for a twelve-year-old from Mexico.

But what was hardest was not knowing the birds of Los Estados Unidos as he did the birds in the Yucatan, his home, where his father, Alfonso Escobedo, was a great naturalist and certified official guide who led tours for Victor Emanuel, the camp's director.

"Ay! Verdin is like lightning, and the one called Andy knows everything! Even the names of the birds in scientific Latin!"

Even when Rias knew the bird (and many times he did, because the birds of the Yucatan and Arizona are often the same) it took time for him to recall the English name for it. Always he seemed slow and stupid (or so Rias thought).

It was *very* hard. What was maybe hardest was the feeling that Rias was letting his father down.

"Victor is my good friend, and he must understand how it is with the bird names," Rias thought. "But still, I will have to try very hard so that I do not cause shame to my father. . ." The "and so the other boys in Camp will like me" was so much more *felt* than *formulated* that it hardly deserves to be called an afterthought.

"Victor is my friend," he repeated, aloud, gaining assurance from the words, bringing his head up, ending the contemplation of feet. But unfor-

tunately Victor was an adult. "It would be good to have a friend at the camp the way Hank and Verdin are friends," he thought. "Maybe if I discovered a great bird, one that is *muy raro*, maybe then everyone will like me."

It might have made Rias feel better to know that many of the students attending Camp Chiricahua shared his anxieties. Most had traveled long distances to be in southeastern Arizona. Most were feeling their way among strangers, competing for acceptance among peers.

But the kids attending Camp Chiricahua had another thing in common. They were birders, bound by a common and consuming interest. Among the nine students on this year's roster were students who had started birding at the age of six and seven and those who started at thirteen or fourteen. But in most teenage circles, birding does not carry the same degree of social acceptance as cars and sports and having a good sound system. It is outside the norm, and therefore, a target for ridicule, at an age when the most important thing in the world is to be accepted.

But at Camp Chiricahua, birding *is* the norm. For a host of kids, some of whom may never have met another birder their own age, it is a place to hone skills, discover new and exotic species, and forge friendships that transcend distance and time.

Half-running, Rias caught up with Verdin (whose real name was Marshall) and Hank and the adult who was the leader (me).

"There," he shouted, pointing toward the stream bed and the bird that was foraging among the branches and roots. "A Painted Redstart."

"We already saw that," said Verdin—not to be nasty but because it was so.

"Yeah. We already saw that," Hank said—not to be nasty but because he was Marshall's friend.

"Oh," Rias said, watching the bird, a fiery torch—so colorful, so

animate that the beauty of it almost made up for not having found it first. "Have you found any trogons?" Rias asked, partly to make conversation, partly to document his interest.

"No," Verdin replied.

"Not yet," Hank corrected.

"Let's study this redstart for a minute," the leader (me) encouraged. "Look how it moves. Get a feel for its feeding technique. We'll compare it to the Hermit Thrush we saw earlier and to the Dusky-capped Flycatcher and then summarize the differences for the group during the discussion."

"This one moves quickly," Rias noted. "The thrush was slow."

"Do you think the two birds are eating the same things?"

"Probably not," Verdin interjected, looking around, hoping to bring the subject to a timely conclusion. Although Camp Chiricahua's focus is educational, it's tough holding to a curriculum when you're standing in the Elegant Trogon epicenter of the world and you haven't seen one yet.

"No way," Hank, who was just as hot to snag a trogon, agreed.

"No," Rias, who was very content to sit and watch the redstart, confirmed. Rias was a naturalist at heart.

The redstart moved off and we moved up Cave Creek Canyon. There were two other groups conducting similar surveys in other habitats. After lunch, the teams would gather and read off the birds they'd seen with special emphasis given to behavior, habitat, and aspects of natural history that surpass simple bird-listing.

Afternoons were free—to rest, to bird on your own, to work up field notes or sketches. . .or maybe throw the frisbee or go swimming. In the evenings, there might be owling or a night drive in search of desert creatures who cheat the heat by wedding their lives to the stars—whip scorpions and tarantulas, Poorwills and Lesser Nighthawks; black-tailed jackrabbits and jumping mice.

After the dishes are done, after the flames in the fire pit have turned to coals, there are marshmallows toasted and stories told. Little by little, by expressed opinion, by unveiled feeling, students come to know each other—appreciate each others' skills and overlook small failings. They become friends.

The story that best expresses the essence of Camp Chiricahua and what it means to young birders, comes from Victor. On the last day of the very first camp in 1986, Victor

was driving one of the students to the airport when the fellow turned and said: "I don't know how to thank you for this. I'd just about given up trying to find another birder my own age. Now, I have birding friends my own age all over the country."

This is a super club of keen, young birders whose bond was forged at a camp in Arizona. Their home turf is a continent. Their forte is a precocial intimacy with North America's birds, and their medium is a national network of "chums." The force of this friendship is destined to change the face of birding in North America in ways that even those who are privileged enough to be involved with Camp Chiricahua cannot begin to perceive.

Rias, Hank, Marshall, and their leader (me) paused at a point where the trail runs up against the north wall of the canyon, at a time when the sun was beginning to peer down on the tops of trees. There were birds about, hidden on the hillside, foraging overhead. A bit of pishing got their attention. A bout of "squeaking," whipped them into a frenzy.

In no time at all there was a snarling pack of Bridled Titmice, Black-throated Gray Warblers, and several kamikaze Brown Creepers looking for the cause of all the commotion. Suddenly, a large, dark bird—almost the size of a Cooper's Hawk, but *not* a Cooper's Hawk, came barreling in from the right burying itself in a leafy maze.

"Thatlookedlikeatrogon," the leader (me) spat from between squeaks—not raising his binoculars, not wanting to break the spell that bound the bird to its branch. He was pretty confident it *was* a trogon. Although it occurred to him that he'd never had an *Elegant* Trogon come in to squeaking before.

"It *is* a trogon," Hank fairly shouted.

"Where?" said Verdin.

"Where?" said Rias.

"Screeee-chuck," said the bird. "Scree-chuck "

"Wow," the leader (who, I am ashamed to say, was me) thought. "I've never heard a trogon vocalize like that before. We must be near a nest or something."

"I've *got it!*" Verdin shouted. "Thanks, Hank!"

"Where?" Rias pleaded.

"It's. . ." but it wasn't. The bird left, flying back up the canyon—a tube shaped trogon the color of leaves in shadow. Hank and Marshall were beaming. Rias was crushed. It's one thing to be youngest but to be trogonless, too. . .

We closed on the bird again, drawn by its curious call, but once again Rias couldn't locate it before it flew. Hank and Verdin couldn't either, as they pursued the bird up the creek with Rias and the leader (me) close behind.

"There it is," Hank said, pointing.

"O.K., I see it," said the leader. "Rias, you can't see it from over there. Come over here and stand in front of me," he commanded. "Now, see that branch going over the stream? Go all the way out to the point where.."

"Oh!" Rias exclaimed, and no saint who has ever witnessed a miracle could have said it better. "I see it. Oh, it's beautiful!"

He *did* see it, and his description could not have been more apt. It *was* beautiful. A great, green trogon with a gentle face, a *dark* (sob) bill, a dark intelligent eye, and a dark, dark *blue* tail that *narrowed toward the tip "Beautiful"*... and utterly inconsistent with an identification of *Elegant* Trogon.

The bird was not long on patience. Rias's look was brief. But when he turned to face his companions, there was no doubt his was an expression of a person who had just seen a *very special bird.*

"Way to go, Rias!" Verdin said.

"Yeah, way to go!" Hank echoed.

Rias beamed.

The guy who was impersonating a leader didn't say anything immediately. He was suffering a neurological meltdown and was busy sorting through the smoking rubble of his cerebral cortex, trying to get to the bottom of the disturbance. A number of nagging contradictions were vying for his attention, and they all had to do with the trogon he had never really taken time to study.

A loud commotion brought heads around. There, coming up the trail, was Bob Morse, author of "Mystery Bird of the Chiricahuas—the status of Eared Trogons," and Cave Creek's avian custodian.

Very suddenly the person who was the leader (and, who I am very sorry to admit, was me) thought he knew *precisely* why Bob was running. Not surprisingly, it too had to do with the trogon.

About two hours later, Rias, Hank and Verdin were walking quickly down the trail chattering about the morning's events. Their leader, who was walking not quite as quickly, was staring down at his feet. There was nothing particularly notable about his feet. They numbered precisely two, which was, coincidentally, the same number of trogon species that Rias and his friends had seen that morning. *This* is well above average—even for birders who have been to Cave Creek many times.

Without particularly seeing them, the leader ( who was not feeling very well) watched the way his feet made long, scraping tracks through the veil of oak leaves; without much interest, he observed how the small sticks fled the rush of toes and how deeply buried rocks did not. These he kicked. Because it felt good.

*—Pete Dunne is the author of* Tales of a Low-Rent Birder, *coauthor of* Hawks in Flight, *and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society*