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**W**HEN I WAS LITTLE, all the neighborhood kids used to sit on our front steps and listen for the two sounds that would spark a summer evening. The first was the jingle of the ice cream truck; the second was the sputter of the DDT-fogger.

The ice cream truck usually arrived first and we'd fight for the privilege of squandering our allowances on smoking popsicles and vanilla ice cream covered in dye-colored grit. The fogger usually arrived just before dark, just before the Wood Thrush, singing vespers, retired for the night. Popsicles in hand, we'd chase the fogger down the street, running in and out of the chemical cloud, laughing all the way.

It was harmless, after all. Grownups told us this; the government, too! We were children. We accepted the wisdom of grownups and governments on faith.

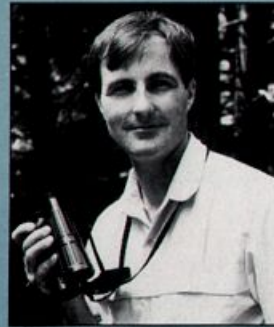
"There. Above the trees," Linda directed, bringing her binoculars to bear.

We saw them immediately, a weary string of birds holding just above the trees.

"Or-i-ols," Judy Toups pronounced; studying the slim, icterid lines; dragging out the syllables the way folks who live in Mississippi do. "Orchard Orioles," I added, noting the burnt-orange plumage ignited by a rising sun. "And a Northern," Linda amended, picking the trailing odd bird out of the flock. "GoO-Oood," Judy intoned, assessing both Linda's skills

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## AMERICAN BIRDING



### Vespers for a Fallout

*Illustration  
by Keith Hansen*

and our fortune.

Behind the first group of birds was another, this one comprised of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, wings flashing silver-dollar-sized patches of white. Mixed in were Scarlet Tanagers, unmistakable at any distance. A wave of Eastern Kingbirds followed, blunt-headed birds whose fluttery wing beats make them look like they are perpetually trying to catch up.

Then another flock of orioles sprinkled with tanagers; then tanagers sprinkled with orioles. Another. Another. More kingbirds. More orioles. Fallout on the Mississippi Coast.

We'd been birding the Gulf coast for a week, hoping, praying for the great precipitation of wings that birders dream of. Praying for a second chance.

"You should have been here Thursday," Judy had announced

upon our Saturday arrival. "THOUSANDS," of birds she pronounced, letting the syllables climb in measure with the flight. "Thousands," she repeated, expressing both the wonder and injustice of it all.

Yes, the second Thursday in April had proven to be a magical day all right; the day would undoubtedly be recalled and heralded in the pages of *American Birds*.

"What's the weather picture look like?" I asked, trying not to sound too hopeful, and fooling no one. "There's supposed to be another cold front coming through," Judy guardedly advised. "But not until later in the

week. We'll keep an eye on the weather maps and play it by ear."

Front or no front, there would still be birds to enjoy, of course. Resident species like Swainson's Warbler and Swallow-tailed Kites—birds that a couple of vagabond birders from New Jersey would thrill to see. And there would be migrants, too. Birds traveling northbound on the Yucatan Express—the cuckoos, flycatchers, thrushes, vireos, warblers, tanagers, grosbeaks and orioles—that vault the Gulf of Mexico every spring. But without a cold front and its daunting



wall of rain, the mass of migrating birds would overshoot the coast and forage inland.

This is why every spring birders from Texas to the Tortugas watch the weather maps and pray for rain. We prayed too, and watched as the jagged-toothed line marked with a capital "H" marched down from Canada on the Sunday evening news. We cheered as the advancing line cleared the Dakotas on Monday and held our breaths as it plunged into neighboring Arkansas on Tuesday.

But by Wednesday, the front crept no closer than northern Mississippi. The system was losing steam and a typically diffident weatherman changed his earlier forecast from "rain Thursday," to "chance of showers in the northern part of the state." It sure sounded as though the system was going to stall.

Judy was vexed. Linda and I were bummed.

Sure enough, Thursday dawned uneventfully sunny, or as Judy put it: "There is nothing more boring than a blue sky." We skipped the news that night, opting instead to eat out at a neat little hole-in-the-wall ribs place; we smothered our disappointment

with barbecue sauce and a few beers.

On the way home, it started to sprinkle. Then it started to rain. Then it started to pour—so hard, in fact, that the windshield wipers bowed under the strain. It poured so much that by the time we got back to our hotel we didn't park the car so much as dock it.

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## **Beneath a dark, directionless sky, weary birds were fighting for their lives and many were losing.**

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The storms continued off and on all night, filling our room with lightning flashes and our dreams with sweet anticipation. Just offshore, over the stormy Gulf of Mexico, a drama was unfolding. Beneath a dark, directionless sky, weary birds were fighting for their lives and many were losing.

The story of the great masses of

migrating birds that carpet the Gulf Coast has a tragic side, an irony that taints every fallout. The conditions that produce masses of birds for birders brings disaster for the birds themselves. When the great storms lash out across the Gulf of Mexico, birds die. The coastal fallouts birders dream of are comprised of weary survivors.

In the weeks before their cross-Gulf journey, migrating songbirds prepare by feeding voraciously, putting on fat, the fuel that they will consume during their flight. Cargo restrictions are severe for birds whose weight is measured in grams. Fully loaded, a Hooded Warbler may top out at 13 grams—one-third of which is fuel. It is enough to see them across the Gulf under normal, favorable conditions. But there is little excess to spare.

Every evening, from late March until early May, North America's long-distance migrants initiate their great leaps of faith. Despite the hardship and the risk, bird migration is a strategy for survival. It permits many kinds of birds to distribute themselves across northern reaches of the planet at a time when winter's retreat creates an abundance of food and

space. Then, when winter begins closing its fist over the land, migration offers birds a means of escape.

Leveling out at 2000–4000 feet, the migrating birds travel all night, navigating like all great voyagers by the stars. If their fortune holds, they will reach the United States mainland by noon. There they will seek out the habitat that meets their peculiar needs to rest and feed.

But often things do not go well. As all great voyagers know, great gains are bought at great risk. Cold fronts pushing offshore greet birds with a wall of clouds. Rain drags at their wings. Head winds slow their progress, adding hours to the flight, wasting fuel.

When the last of their fat reserve is spent, as the birds begin to metabolize the muscle tissue that holds them aloft, they weaken and lose altitude. Soon, only desperation keeps them above the reach of the waves.

They pile up along the beaches and outlying islands of the Gulf: Ship, Horn, Round, Petit Bois, and Dauphin Islands—birds whose wings could carry them so far and no farther. They swarm over offshore oil rigs and lite on passing ships and crowd suburban yards. There are mornings, a few each spring, when coastal residents wake to find their yards festooned with brightly colored birds, weary pilgrims who leaped blindly into the night hoping to find a dawn.

For 30 minutes we watched as flock after straggling flock labored across the woodland clearing, putting distance between them and the Gulf of Mexico. The terrible night was over; the aquatic hurdle vaulted.

“Lets get over to Ansley,” Judy coached. “If it’s good here, it will be great over there.” Ansley is a chenier: a wooded hummock surrounded by open marsh; a migrant trap of the first magnitude.

We parked right on the road. Without hesitation (or insect repellent) we entered the finger of trees

reaching out into open marsh and what we discovered was a surprise—but hardly a disappointment. Yes, there were grosbeaks, tanagers and orioles at Ansley, but not in the saturation numbers we’d expected. The treasure of Ansley was measured in the number of thrushes seeking sanctuary beneath the trees. Dozens of thrushes. Scores! The woodland was alive with these denizens of the forest floor.

Prominent in the ranks were burley Wood Thrushes—birds whose evening song was as much a part of summer as popsicles, pop flies and chasing the mosquito commission’s

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fogging truck down the street. Also racing beneath the chenier were other thrushes—slighter and slimmer and Veerys, darker and secretive, and Swainson’s.

The game in Mississippi is to pan through the Swainson’s Thrushes and find the gremlin Gray-cheeked, a thrush disguised as a shadow. Thank God birding is not a spectator sport. If it were, we would have drawn the laughter of the gallery trying to sneak up on birds whose evasive skill borders on artistry. Every bird we approached responded by stalking directly away, avoiding sunlight with a finesse that would make any vampire proud to be an understudy.

Coincidentally, running interference for the birds was a host of winged vampires—mosquitos—who quickly ascertained that birders in pursuit of a “possible Gray-cheeked Thrush” are easy marks.

By the time the game was over and

the chenier covered end to end, we had collectively banked what even the stingiest among us would call two and a half countable Gray-cheeks (out of approximately 70 Veerys as many Wood Thrushes, and two dozen Swainson’s—more thrushes than I had even seen in one place at one time). But the real winners in the event were the mosquitos who drew first blood and last and may have collectively banked as much as a quart and a half.

We didn’t grudge the loss of vital fluids. Mosquitos come with the turf, are part of a functioning, natural environment. Take away the mosquitos, take away the insects, and starving birds have no recourse but to starve. A corner of the world as globally significant to migrating birds as the Mississippi coast is worth a few mosquito bites.

We had almost reached Judy’s car before we heard the sound of an approaching vehicle—a truck of some sort that sounded like it was running on about half its cylinders.

It was a sound that was vaguely familiar. A sound linked to memories of popsicles and pop flies. But before memory could index it, the truck came into view—a country mosquito truck, spraying the chenier with a chemical mist, killing insects in a strip of woods that only serves to house mosquitos—and preserve the lives of migrating birds.

For just a moment I thought I heard, once again, the song of the Wood Thrush singing vespers in my parents back yard. But it’s certain I was mistaken. It’s been many years since Wood Thrushes sang there. And the birds foraging in Ansley, on the coast of Mississippi, were certainly too weary and too hungry for song.

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, and coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*