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IT SEEMS TO ME, with apologies to Herman Hesse, that human lives are trapped between apposing poles. We aspire to freedom, but crave security. We work toward what is right and good, but our feet invariably wander off the path of righteousness and into the tangles.

My regard for birds has also been this way, two-sided. On the one hand, the appeal of birds is aesthetic and emotional. It puts the “wow” in cardinals, and the “Isn’t that sweet?” in a chick-a-dee-dee-dee. The other side of my focus is acquisitive and analytical. It imparts significance to things like anchor-shaped patterns on scapulars, and it prompts me to stand in 103°F. heat in search of some bird whose only real appeal is that I’ve never seen it before.

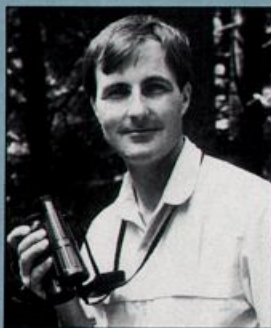
Aesthetic appeal; analytical/acquisitive interest—the yin and yang of birding. In my life, they are represented by two experiences. The first I dubbed the Spring of Discovery; the second, the Autumn of Mastery. Neither event, I am inclined to believe, could be replicated today.

The Spring of Discovery occurred in May 1962. I was 12 and enjoying ill health, which means I was *supposed* to be quietly convalescing from minor surgery. Instead, I was busy running around my backyard, trying to gain fragmentary glimpses of tiny treetop birds.

My parents’ yard was pretty typical of suburbia—a postage-stamp patch of grass ringed by trees. I’d started

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



Wonder and Mastery

*Illustration
by Keith Hansen*

watching birds at the age of seven and I’d seen a lot of good birds in that backyard. Blue Jays of the brassy voices; nesting Brown Thrashers that went right for your nose; Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, and a tidy swarm of robin nestlings whose forsaken lives begged saving. Oh, I was one hot-shot backyard birder, all right. The best in the neighborhood.

But whatever my assumed proficiency, I had no sense of migration, no grasp of the biannual drama that carried discovery to every suburban doorstep. That all changed in 1962. That’s what the Spring of Discovery was all about.

I guess I conned Mom into letting me sit outside. I guess I was bored with whatever school assignments I’d been saddled with, and looked up at the tops of the oaks, and seen all the activity up there.

I guess I must have sprint...that is, limped painfully...into the house. And picked up my father’s 6 × 30 binoculars, and the National Geographic Society’s book about song and garden birds that served as my field guide.

I can stop guessing at this point. I *know* what happened next. My eyes grew wide with discovery, and a host of memories poured in. Thirty years later I can still recall each vivid encounter.

There was the zebra-striped warbler that moved like a nuthatch, and the white-bottomed one whose back—when you finally got to see the



a morning so cool it brought a jacket out of the closet, I grabbed my binoculars and went into the woods, to a brushy clearing surrounded by second growth forest that bordered a lake. I staked out a spot in the center of the clearing, vowing to “learn ’em or die.” The outcome, for the first hour or so, was not certain.

All around the clearing, little green birds flickered and danced. Dozens of them. Scores! They almost never sat in the open. They never

took perches for long. And every time my binoculars were brought to bear, some sixth sense seemed to warn the birds that their identities were in jeopardy. They reacted by boring little warbler-sized holes into the foliage.

As minutes passed and my angst mounted, the “Confusing” Fall Warblers became those “Frustrating” Fall Warblers, and then those “Damned” Fall Warblers. But just when my pique was reaching its peak, I chanced to see an immature Magnolia Warbler—and the kaleidoscope stopped shifting.

In many respects, it was like all the rest of the birds in the clearing. Just another green and yellow bird with wing-bars and white in the tail. But there was something different about its chest. The chest had a pale gray band across it—like the critter had been tie-died or something.

The band wasn’t as sharply defined as wing-bars and tail spots, those little building blocks of identification I had come to count on. It was subtle, the mere shadow of a field mark. But it was discernible, and it differentiat-

back—was the even color of cool, green jade. There were yellow-bellied ones with necklaces and yellow-bellied ones without necklaces, and there was one, one absolutely, unbelievably beautiful-beyond-expression ONE whose throat was the color of flame trapped in amber.

It was called the Blackburnian Warbler. That one was my favorite. There were other birds, too. Baltimore Orioles that glowed like a peeled orange crayon, Scarlet Tanagers that blazed within their leafy confines like fanned charcoal in a patio grill. There was also one beautiful black-and-white bird whose bill was chalk-colored and whose chest bore a crimson bib.

That was the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. That one was my favorite, too.

Bird song played no part in the Spring of Discovery, although certainly birds were just as vocal in 1962 as they are today. I wasn’t interested in song; I was captivated by color.

It is also interesting to note that the flood of birds was not fallout dependent. The number and diversity was as constant as a shifting kaleidoscope. Morning or afternoon, I could pass my eyes through the flood and reap a harvest of WONDER. And I did. That was the Spring of Discovery. It spanned two weeks and lasted a lifetime. There have been many moments of discovery since then, but no time when *wonder* has so dominated my world.

The Autumn of Mastery came a little over a decade later. I was just out of college, jobbing as a carpet mechanic, and had once again discovered the lure of birds. But something in my regard was different. Something had changed. I wasn’t merely interested in seeing and enjoying birds—not exactly. What I was really interested in was seeking out birds that I had never seen before, and pinning names to them.

I was also frustrated and angry. Frustrated because the plumages of the “confusing fall warblers” were all so *confusing*. Angry because my marginal field identification skills were holding me back, preventing me from seeing the subtle distinctions that would add species to my list.

So one day in early September, on

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ed the bird from all the rest. The question was, *was* it a field mark?

I looked at the plate in the book. And there it was! The tell-tale mark. The tie-dyed warbler—immature Magnolia.

"*Gotcha*," I whispered, and it came out a hiss. "Got you." That's all it took. One catalytic bird, to serve as a measure of comparison for all the rest. Gradually, one by cryptic one, the other denizens of the glen surrendered their identities—Chestnut-sided Warblers (without chestnut sides); Yellow Warblers (that weren't!); Bay-breasted Warblers (*sans* bay). One by one I gathered them with my skills.

There is something interesting about the phrase "got you." It denotes possession, and possession is a form of control.

I didn't consciously realize this at the time. It wasn't, in fact, until years later that I was able to put the acquisitive side of birding into perspective. The catalyst was a work of fantasy written by Ursula LeGuin, part of the Earthsea Cycle. In this epic, LeGuin describes an elemental language, the language of the Beginning. In this language, all things are known by their true names. The language is secret, of course—known only to dragons and the odd wizard or two—and this is good. Why? Because anyone who knows the language and the true name of a thing has mastery over that thing. They control it.

That's what I was doing during the Autumn of Mastery. I was pinning names to birds and making them mine. For most of my adult birding life, my focus has been the naming and claiming of birds...and the acquisition of greater skills to apply to these ambitions.

The Spring of Discovery and the Autumn of Mastery—pivotal events that anchored my perspective and my life. Maybe other birders know a similar development; maybe not. But one thing I do know: Were I growing up in Whippany, New Jer-

sey, today, it is unlikely that I would have the benefit of those experiences to anchor the poles of my life.

Why? Because now, in spring, there is no river of birds sweeping through the trees around my parents' house. There is not even a steady stream. What passes in May is hardly a trickle. The swarm of treetop birds who snared me in a net of color and *wonder* during the Spring of Discovery are a vestige of what they once were, and easily overlooked.

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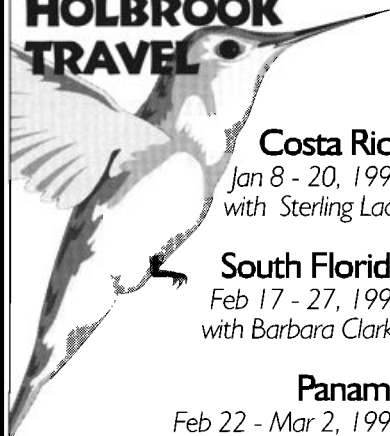
The clutch of confusing fall warblers that offered direct comparison and ushered in the Age of Mastery, too, are a shadow of their former abundance. In fact, I have never again seen so many assembled in the clearing by the lake as I did that day. And if I were now growing up in northern New Jersey, and there was no Spring of Discovery or Autumn of Mastery, I wonder where else I would have planted the poles that define my life, and what sort of life this would have defined.

But even more, it prompts me to wonder what this means to birding's future, if those growing up today can find no wonder and will never know mastery. ➤

—*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.*

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