2
Wanton Freaks

Sometimes goldfinches one by one will drop
From low-hung branches; little space they stop;
But sip, and twitter, and their feathers sleek;
Then off at once, as in a wanton freak:
Or perhaps, to show their black, and golden wings,
Pausing upon their yellow flutterings.
–John Keats, "I Stood Tiptoe"

Having established the verb, and its subject, let's get to the modifiers: How does one bird? Where does one bird? When? In what condition? With what or whom?

Let's consider the last question first: a birder can obviously get along without equipment, but there are a few items that certainly make birding a whole lot easier. The first is a good pair of binoculars or a spotting scope, which will allow you to be distracted by birds over a mile away. Such devices are not strictly necessary for a birder, but a lack of them will limit you to observing birds that are large, close by, and in plain sight. Should you wish to examine a small bird perched thirty feet up in a broadleaf

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tree, or one particular shorebird in a large flock down the beach, the naked eye isn't going to do the job.

I should note that some birders eschew the eye altogether, preferring to bird by ear. Because many species have calls or songs that are at least as distinctive as their appearances, this method can be very effective, particularly if the bird in question is nocturnal or secretive in its habits. You can buy recordings of various birdcalls, but these will require no small amount of study if you want them to be as useful to you as a pair of binoculars. The auditory approach is also unwieldy in the field, as you can't easily flip through four hours of recorded chirps to find the bird you just heard, while a quick glance in a good field guide can immediately help with a visual identification. As a result, most birders I know use their ears to supplement their eyes, not to replace them.

The second item of birding equipment is a list. This can be a list of birds seen in a particular place (such as a yard, a park, or an official count area) or over a particular time (a twenty-four-hour period, a season, or a year), but the most common sort is the life list, a record of each different species of bird you have ever observed in the wild. Those birds on the list are commonly called "life birds" or "lifers," and knowing which lifers you have and which you don't have gives you two things: a sense of accomplishment and a clear knowledge of specific birds you can add to your tally. Let me be clear: it is perfectly fine to bird without such a list. I did so for more than twenty years. I found, however, that birding was more challenging and more interesting once I began listing. And why did I begin listing? I got item number three as a twenty-fifth birthday present.

This third item is Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds,* which, as any veteran birder knows, will help you

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identify what you're observing better than any other book, period. Peterson's "field mark" system is head, shoulders, solar plexus, and abdomen above any other means of identification. Some guides may have nice color photographs or flashier paintings than Peterson's, but they don't always help you put a name to what you're seeing. I know many birders who use other field guides, such as the Audubon Society's photographic guides, the National Geographic guide, or the beautifully painted, exhaustively detailed, but somewhat unwieldy Sibley guide. I own several of these myself, but when it comes to identifying birds in the field, I use them only as supplements to Peterson. They're a way of narrowing down a difficult ID by using multiple sources, just as a student of the Torah will often consult the commentaries of dozens of rabbinical scholars in order to help him understand a particular point—*but only after he reads the Torah itself.* There's a reason why the Peterson guide is called "The Birder's Bible."

The field mark system, in Peterson's own words, is "in a sense, a pictorial key based on readily noticed visual impressions." In other words, it points to the distinctive and observable features of each type of bird, rather than those anatomical differences that you might notice only through in-hand study or dissection. The Peterson guide's paintings of the various birds are composed specifically to "show field marks to best advantage," usually through careful positioning of the bird and an arrow or two pointing to the most important features. For the Eastern Bluebird, for instance, arrows indicate the bird's overall blue color and rusty red breast; if you note those two features, you've seen everything you need to see in order to identify *Sialia sialis.* Beside it in the guide is the Mountain Bluebird, whose pale blue belly is noted as a field mark, thereby showing the main difference in these two similar

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species. If you can observe and compare the field marks, you can identify the birds.

In his 1996 appreciation of Peterson's life, the *Washington Post*'s John Pancake noted that "he was often celebrated as a painter and illustrator, but the truth is that the illustrations aren't very good art." I would both agree and disagree; true, the paintings in the guide aren't of a kind with Leonardo's *Mona Lisa,* but they are of a kind with Leonardo's technical drawings, artwork that had a specific purpose: to clearly state to the observer the exact nature of what was being observed. Sir Christopher Wren's blueprints for Saint Paul's Cathedral may not have been good art in and of themselves, but the cathedral they helped build certainly qualifies. If you want to construct for yourself a knowledge of birds that will be a source of beauty and enjoyment to you, Peterson is the only architect that matters.

The Peterson guide is not merely a collection of bird pictures, however; there are also brief, pithy descriptions of the birds, with especially noteworthy field marks in italics. After a long day of slogging through the verbiage of Bryant or Shelley, there is something bracing about a no-nonsense piece of writing like this:

> NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD
> *Mimus polyglottos* 9–11″ (23–28 cm)
> Gray; slimmer, longer-tailed than Robin. Note the *large white patches* on the wings and tail, conspicuous in flight.

In three lines, Peterson gives you everything you need to recognize the bird: an economic miracle, especially for a birder.

Of course, being a birder, Peterson is occasionally prone to more descriptive prose, but it comes off as ef-

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fective—almost narrative, almost poetry. I think his word-picture of the Eastern Meadowlark would make a serviceable piece of free verse:

In grassy country,
a chunky brown bird flushes,
showing a conspicuous patch
of *white*
on each side
of its short wide tail.

Several rapid wingbeats
alternate
with short glides.

Should it perch on a post,
the glass reveals
a bright yellow breast
crossed by a
black V.

Walking,
it flicks its tail
open
and
shut.

It's minimal, but complete in its suggestion, like the work of Basho. Indeed, I can envision an entire series of haiku based on Peterson:

WHIP-POOR-WILL
flushed by day, the bird
flits away on rounded wings
like a large brown moth.

GREEN HERON
a small dark heron
that in flight looks crowlike (but
flies with bowed wingbeats).

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WILD TURKEY	BARN OWL
head naked; bluish	*white heart-shaped face*. A
with red wattles intensified	long-legged, knock-kneed, pale,
in male's display.	monkey-faced owl. *Dark eyes*.

And not a blithe spirit or a plashy brink to be seen.

The fourth thing a birder needs, at least some of the time, is a fellow birder.

Birding alone is peaceful, make no mistake, and a lone birder has the advantage of never having to debate whether the bird he has glimpsed is a Sharp-shinned Hawk or the similar but less common Cooper's Hawk—he can simply write down "Cooper's Hawk" on his life list and later dare anyone to deny it. Still, I have always enjoyed company when I am beating the bush for new lifers, and certainly there is no better way for a birder with a small-to-middling life list to see new species than to be taken around by a more experienced birder. My own growth from passive to active birder happened in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and it happened largely because of a fellow teacher named Mary Stevens.

Things began innocently enough. Soon after Mary and I discovered each other's interest in birds, I spotted a new life bird over Thanksgiving break. On our first day back, I sneaked into Mary's classroom before she arrived for first period and scrawled its name across her blackboard. She did the same to me after her next lifer, and the practice grew into a habit for us, a minor source of amusement that helped us prevent teaching from numbing our minds completely.

We did not, however, consider who else would be reading these messages. The first thing her Latin students saw that first Monday morning were the words "LITTLE

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BLUE HERON" in my distinctive all-caps handwriting. This alone might have passed unnoticed, but my own students were later treated to Mary's retaliatory "WILSON'S WARBLER," and then a rapid exchange of "YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER," "ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK," "PIPING PLOVER," and so on. Soon, tongues were wagging about our torrid and ongoing affair.

The fact that said affair was totally nonexistent didn't matter. The kids didn't know a heron from a '74 Volvo, and assumed we were writing each other cute little terms of endearment from our passionate encounters, which they no doubt imagined taking place in the teachers' lounge, and sounding something like this:

> HE: Oh, my little blue heron, how I have missed you!
> SHE: No more than I have missed you, black skimmer of my heart!
> HE: Am I still your piping plover, my darling?
> SHE: Oh, no one has ever ploved me the way you do, *mon cher avocet*!

I have only two comments to make on the subject of this fictitious dalliance:

First, were I to have an affair, WHICH I'M NOT, I would not do so with another teacher. I'd constantly fear having my grammar, social behaviors, and/or angle of approach scrupulously corrected, perhaps even repeatedly until I got it right. Worse, I myself might be the one spoiling the mood by answering my partner's breathy demands with "That's unclear. What is the antecedent of the pronoun 'it,' anyway? And can't you use a more specific verb than 'do' here?"

But second, and more importantly, were I to have an affair, WHICH I'M STILL NOT, I would unquestionably

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compare my lover to something—anything—that did not have a needle-shaped bill, gnarly meter-long green-gray legs, and breath with the aroma of a thousand dead raw bullfrogs.

Having a fellow birder in the field is even more important when one's beloved, like my wife, is not a birder. Nonbirders do not see birds in quite the way we do. While I may need a field guide to help me nail down a bird's species, I am, through long practice, almost always able to recognize the basic family—whether it is a songbird, or a vulture, or a heron, say. My wife, in her own words, divides all birds into two categories: "Duck" and "Not A Duck." There have been many times, however, when I have wished she could learn to appreciate the beauty and variety of birds, perhaps in the same way she appreciates the nuances of poetry.

English majors are much like birders; where one has a shelf full of field guides, the other has a dozen different Norton Anthologies. (I am both, which means that I have no shelf space at all.) But I hold out some hope that Kelly is not as immune to the pleasures of birding as she may pretend to be. I came home one evening to find her glowing with excitement over a bird she had encountered, and whose basic field marks she'd even noticed.

"The kids were playing on the slide and I was sitting on the front steps, reading," she said breathlessly, "and this hummingbird flew right up to me!"

"Wow," I said, in complete sincerity.

"It just hovered there, and kind of looked at me. It was green and white, and it just looked at me, and I didn't want to move, because I didn't want to scare it off or anything, but it flew down to where I couldn't see it because

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my book was in the way. But I could actually feel the wind from its wings on my leg!"

This last was delivered with such a shine in her eyes that it felt almost like a religious confession, and I realized that I had been selling Kelly short. For a long time, I had assumed that she found birds simply too mundane to care about, and that the only way a bird would impress her would be by winning a Nobel prize, marrying David Duchovny, or growing to a height of fifty feet and attacking downtown Tokyo. But now I realized that what gave her an interest in birds, this time at least, was quite simply proximity.

I grew up in a house where bird books were easy to find, and both sets of grandparents had them in quantity as well. When I was a toddler, my parents hung over my crib a mobile with small, brightly colored birds made of vinyl-covered cotton dangling above me. In fact, one of my mother's favorite stories is the one about the time she walked in on me and discovered that I had pulled the mobile down and was snapping the birds off it one by one, calmly identifying them as I worked: "This is a CARDINAL (yank) and this is a BLUE JAY (yank) and this is a GOLDFINCH (yank) . . ."

Birds were near me when I was young, and I was comforted by them, so I kept an eye out for them on trees, lawns, and feeders. Eventually I decided to seek them out on purpose. I wanted to have, and still want to have, the same kind of close encounter Kelly had with her hummingbird: to see the bird, to know the bird, and to feel its life against my skin.

A closer encounter with birds was exactly what Mary Stevens offered me once she found out that I was inter-

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ested in them. She asked me to help her on a Christmas bird count organized by Raven Rock State Park outside Lillington, North Carolina. I took her up on the offer, and on the morning of that first count we wandered far afield in Harnett County, happily mistaking birds for other birds until the light got better, and generally wasting an entire morning of potential Christmas shopping. Until that trip, I had never known the fun of birding with a partner; well, honestly, it wasn't so much a sense of fun as a sense of relief.

I should explain that. Many birders are a bit embarrassed about the way we act. We do not really *choose* to stop paying attention to the road so we can pin down the underside markings of a passing hawk, or make a *conscious* judgment that the kids will be fine on top of the jungle gym while we inspect the shrubbery for towhees; it just happens to us. Unfortunately, these actions are often condemned by a society which neither knows nor understands the peculiar passions burning in the hearts of birders, who suffer in silent misery.

When I'm suffering, though, I'm pretty vocal about it, and I usually manage to inflict a certain degree of misery on those around me. My friends and family have suffered for me on many occasions, but surely the worst thing I have ever done to my loved ones is to dabble in golf. Not because I'm that bad a golfer—I don't hit the ball hard enough to be dangerous—but because a golf course is one of the prime places to spot birds. The varied terrain of most courses is a lure for birds of forest, grass, marsh, and, as I can attest, sand and water. The first Black-and-White Warbler I ever saw flew to the ground not ten feet from me as I searched gingerly among the pine needles for an errant three-iron shot on Southwick Golf Course near Saxapahaw, North Carolina; my reliable left-handed

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slice has also helped me put two species of kinglet, a flycatcher, and an oriole on my life list. The payback for this bounty, however, is unrelenting abuse from my golfing partners.

"Jeez, Cashwell, will you *hit* the damn ball?" is the most frequent comment, usually heard while I stand over my ball, shading my eyes, peering into the stygian darkness of the forest primeval, wondering if that bird in the underbrush is a new and unusual species, like maybe a King Penguin. "It's a *bird*, dammit! There's plenty of 'em out in the parking lot!" It's ironic, of course, to get this treatment from friends who go ballistic if they hear you confuse one Pink Floyd song with another, but birders seem to attract more verbal abuse than your typical hobbyist, and those of us who bird begin to feel a tad isolated, like, say, the Man in the Iron Mask.

It is thus something of a relief to discover that you are not a freak, that others have borne your burden, too, that there exist intelligent people who are also wandering around wet fields at the crack of dawn with dog-eared field guides crushed against the granola bars in their pockets. That discovery in itself is a great feeling, but to be *invited* to share the experience, the intimate communion with nature, the uncertain probing of strange forests, the damp squelching noises coming from your shoes—this is true bliss.

Mary and I became regular partners on Raven Rock's counts, though we made a somewhat unlikely looking team; she stands almost a foot shorter than I, and she weighs less than half what I do. Nonetheless, while my students usually cooperated with my disciplinary demands only because they felt guilty about having gotten away with so much already, Mary's students feared her the way

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the turkey fears cranberry sauce. She has a sharp tongue and a savage sense of irony, and she holds a grudge in roughly the same way a wolverine grips a rabbit by the throat; I, on the other hand, am inclined to speak no hyperbole whatsoever, take everything literally, and am the soul of cooperation with all humanity. Despite these contrasts, we made a good team, because Mary was (and still is) far more knowledgeable than I about birds' calls and habitats, but I was at least as good as she at spotting them in the first place. If I could find them for her, she could identify them for me: a symbiotic relationship, something any naturalist can appreciate. She and I ventured out into Harnett County some half-dozen times, during spring counts and Christmas counts, accompanied by various friends and associates, through forest, fen, and pasture, and never once did I make fun of her for being the kind of small woman who drives a pickup truck bigger than her whole yard. I didn't feel that would lead to a productive count.

I now live in rural Virginia, far away from Harnett County, but still I feel the flocking instinct, that drive to join with others of one's kind that is observed not only in many species of birds, but in humans as well. That this drive is felt especially deeply by birders is only logical. Thus, when I moved from one school to another, I also moved from one birding partner to another—several others, in fact.

I can no longer recall exactly when it was that I discovered the truth about Tom Parker: not only that he, like me, wrestles verbs for a living at Woodberry Forest School, but that he, like me, is inclined to spend long hours staring at birds. Once we had discovered our mutual interest, we started telling one another about our re-

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cent sightings: "Did you see that Belted Kingfisher on the wires over the pond down near the end of Route 230?" "I was driving in today, and a Cooper's Hawk went right over the road and into a flock of Starlings!" "Ever see any of those Wild Turkeys down by the river?" It was a comfortable topic, unrelated to the demands of our teaching loads, and we explored it happily. When Tom asked me to come by his house, though, I sensed a new dimension in our friendship—you don't invite just *anyone* to come examine your new night heron carving, you know.

Tom collects woodcarvings of birds; not hunting decoys, but actual statuary. His most recent prize was a gorgeous carving of a Black-crowned Night Heron, one only about a quarter the size of the actual bird, but still pretty spectacular. A chunky, pearl-gray and black wader with blood-red eyes and two long white plumes sweeping back from its head is noteworthy even when it's only seven or eight inches high. Tom's face had an earnest glow as I examined the carving; he looked almost like Radar O'Reilly showing off a prized pet. The room was full of other small statues, too: ducks and songbirds, certainly, but mostly waders, plovers, sandpipers, and herons. I got the distinct feeling that, when Tom's at the beach, his wife and son must have to keep him focused on where he's walking in order to prevent him from stumbling into the surf. (It's a phenomenon I'm familiar with.) This was more than a look at artwork, however beautiful; it was a look into the soul of the collector as well. I felt as though I'd been offered a glimpse into a colleague's private world, and frankly, I was a bit apprehensive. What could I offer in response to this?

It took me a while, but I thought of something. Tom was still birding passively, as I once had: examining whatever happened to be around him, but not really seeking it

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out. He had never been on a count, or even done much active birding in the sense of going for walks or drives with the specific purpose of seeing birds. I might not know any more about birds than he, but I could at least give him a reason to go out and look for them. If I were to play Virgil to his Dante, or at least Mary to his Pete, I might be able to return the gift of trust he had given me. I told him we were going birding.

We agreed to meet at 6:30 on a Tuesday morning, a bit after sunrise, but still early enough for frost to be on the grass in the shady spots of the athletic fields. It was mid-March, the heart of our spring break, so we would be free to spend the morning digging up whatever we could on Woodberry Forest's sprawling grounds. Moreover, they were grounds about which I knew little at the time, but which Tom, as a fifteen-year veteran of the school, knew quite well. It seemed like another good, symbiotic partnership: I could offer knowledge of the birds, Tom could offer knowledge of the terrain.

This last was important because Woodberry's terrain is both plentiful and immensely varied, including as it does not only the parklike campus and the homes and yards of faculty members, but over a thousand acres of fields, woods, ponds, pastures, hedgerows, barnyards, and hills, including a stretch of the Rapidan River and a nine-hole golf course. Other than beach and mountainside, it's got pretty much every habitat a Virginia bird could want. Where does one start with such a smorgasbord? Thinking of early-morning duck sightings with Mary, I suggested that we march down the long hill from the main buildings toward what some call a water hazard. (Since it's technically not on the golf course, and sits behind a fence, I'm inclined to call it a pond not a hazard, but then again, anyone who hooks the ball off the second tee is going to get

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wet.) Even from far up the hill, we could see that there were birds on the water, and after a few moments, we could hear the brazen honks of a flock of geese.

Technically, the term should be "a *gaggle* of geese," for geese are one of the many birds whose aggregations are subject to what James Lipton refers to as "terms of venery." According to Lipton's classic *An Exaltation of Larks,* the huntsmen of medieval times went to great lengths to create descriptive and exclusive terms for groupings of any bird or beast they might be pursuing; thus, the word "venery" is simply the Anglicized version of the French *venerie* (to hunt), and not some sort of pun related to syphilis.* Terms of venery like "a school of fish" or "a pride of lions" are so well known as to pass more or less unnoticed, but any lover of language must take delight in the images of birds assembled not in flocks, but in far more subtle, precise, and descriptive terms:

a charm of finches
a tidings of magpies
a descent of woodpeckers
a mustering of storks
a parliament of owls
a host of sparrows
a siege of herons
an unkindness of ravens
a cast of hawks
an ostentation of peacocks
a murder of crows
a walk of snipe

The terms listed above are all established, in some cases from centuries ago, but Lipton should also be given credit for his creativity in adding to the list; anyone who has ever birded for even a moment can delight in the

*Of course, given that "venery" stems originally from the Latin *venari* (to hunt), "venereal" from *Venus* (Roman goddess of love) and "venerate" from *venerari* (to worship), the potential for rude and even blasphemous puns is immense.

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thought of seeing a *shimmer* of hummingbirds or a *scold* of jays or (my favorite) a *gatling* of woodpeckers. Only in a few cases do I feel the need to comment further on Lipton's vigorous contributions to our language:

First, I must take issue with his creation of the term "a clutter of starlings," not because I find it at all inaccurate or ugly, but because the existing term is so spectacularly apt: a *murmuration* of starlings. Those who have seen a large group of starlings taking off from a field can attest to the shiver of sound produced by countless primary feathers beating against the air; sometimes the vibrations can even be felt. Luckily, we have an elegant solution available: like geese, who form a *gaggle* on water and a *skein* in the air, starlings can be assigned to a *clutter* on the ground and to a *murmuration* when in flight.

Second, I would like to suggest a term for a bird left high and dry by the venereal linguists of the Middle Ages. Lipton rightly points out that the fifteenth-century technical term for swans is "singularly colorless for so inviting a subject," being simply "an Herde of Swannys." Even spelled "herd," it hasn't got a lot of zing to it, nor does the more recent "wedge of swans" seem much of an improvement. I would instead propose a term which I think is distinctive and appropriate, and which makes reference to another classic work of literature: a *trumpet* of swans. There is, after all, an entire species known as the trumpeter swan, and I can think of no better way to honor birder-author E.B. White than to appropriate for official use the title of his book *The Trumpet of the Swan.*

Finally, I must quote a passage of Lipton's regarding a term I had never seen or heard before reading his book:

> A MUTATION OF THRUSHES
>
> A Mutacyon of threstyllys *in the* Porkington MS. *On June 1, 1867, a letter from William Dodgson in* Science Gossip *provided*

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the "recognized fact amongst naturalists that thrushes acquire new legs, and cast the old ones when about ten years old."

I don't have anything especially clever or worthwhile to say about this except that (a) I love the term and plan to use it at every opportunity, and (b) I have the distinct feeling someone has been pulling someone else's leg, regardless of when it was acquired.

As we can see from even our very language, the flocking instinct is such a part of a bird's makeup that it should come as no surprise to learn that there is a similar instinct in birders. It was that, I suppose, that drove me to find another person with whom to bird, and though I am never averse to doing so alone, I must admit that birding in company has a certain inherent energy; somehow you feel as if you're actively *doing* something, rather than just goofing off and staring at the trees.

That energy, moreover, has begun to spread: since our morning's exertions, Tom and I have discovered other faculty members and students who share our interest in birds. So what do we call this group? Clearly such an aggregation requires its own term of venery: a *guide* of birders? A *listing* of birders? These would work well enough, but frankly, I think the only appropriate term for a group of academics with binoculars around their necks is a *school of birders,* but that's just my opinion, and it's merely one of a host. Or a flock. Or a covey. Or a clutter.

The first avian sound I ever heard with Tom Parker was the chaotic honking of a gaggle of geese, but the most important to me, by far, was the clear *to-wink* of the Rufous-sided Towhee we heard a bit later that morning.

We were strolling down a muddy farm road when I caught a glimpse of white tail spots as the bird ducked into a stand of running cedar. I said, "Oh! Towhee," or

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something equally innocuous, to which Tom immediately cried "Where?!" with a bit more enthusiasm than I'd expected. He explained that despite a wealth of shrubbery around his house, he'd never had a towhee come visit, nor had he managed to spot one skulking in the dead leaves before.

I brought the walk to a halt for several minutes as we stooped and stretched and wandered along the cedar for a while, occasionally inspiring the bird to give a *to-wink* to prove he was still there. Finally he gave up and exposed himself on an outer branch for a moment: white breast and belly, rusty-red sides, black back and head, set off by brilliant red eyes. Satisfied that we'd seen him, he darted back into the undergrowth. I think I may have been happier than Tom that our pursuit of the bird had been successful, because I was on the way to paying Mary Stevens back: for the first time, I'd helped someone else get a lifer of his own.

And that, perhaps more than anything else, is what I love about birding in company: everybody wins. In July of 2000, I took a guided birding trip through the Meadows of Cape May, New Jersey. There were roughly twenty of us on the tour, varying in experience from expert to tenderfoot, and we had logged forty species in just under two hours. Our guides had helped us nail down a number of birds, including a Least Bittern, a diminutive wading bird that I wouldn't have spotted for myself with a seeing-eye dog and a GPS readout, but they weren't the ones who spied the weird bird flying in over the pond to the west—that honor fell to me.

I didn't know what it was, mind you, but I could see that it was a small sandpiper with an unusually long bill. "What's that coming over the water?" I cried. "Is it a Snipe?" It was moving at a good clip, and I had trouble

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keeping it fixed in my binoculars. My Aunt Linda, however, was also along for the day, and though she is a less active birder than I, she has a talent for patiently keeping her eye on a bird, even in flight. I lost sight of it several times, but with Linda's help, I was always able to find it again, noting as I did that it had a large triangular white patch on its rump. I called the field mark out even as Linda called out the bird's location over the water, and eventually Karl, one of our guides, found it in his glasses and cried, "Short-billed Dowitcher!" A quick look in my Peterson guide confirmed it (and showed that the bird's unusually long bill was short only in comparison to that of the Long-billed Dowitcher). We had another lifer, for me, for Linda, and for several others in the group. I could take pride in having spotted it first, but I couldn't take the bird away from anyone else who'd seen it.

It's a small act of kindness, helping someone get a new life-list bird, but such are the acts we remember long after we've forgotten who won the golf match, or the bridge game, or the coin toss. Like the list itself, it's the accumulation of the acts that matters, not the smallness of the individual components. If Saint Peter really is keeping a list of all our worldly actions, he of all people should appreciate a lifer shared.