

It's . . . a Bird
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Megadeath, in moderation

Consider the upside of mass extinction. Not looney-toon extremist *mass* mass extinction. But only as much, let's say, as President Clinton would be for if he wanted me to like him. Upsidewise appreciation might begin with the natural history of my lawn, a simplified story because North America admits only one species of that lawn's dominant life form, the starling. The backyard science of Europe, by contrast, groans under 103 starling species.

But what exactly is the point of the other 102? One's posture anti- or pro-planet-historical biocalamity will depend on whether one regards nature as a film strip (a nostalgic snooze in biology class) or an exam—whether one worries about how many things will be on the final.

Uncle Milty and Uncle Steve

My birdwatching baseline is Milton Berle: knobby-kneed Uncle Milty in baggy shorts and pith helmet, swishing a butterfly net, squatting to binocularize shrubbery or décolletage pointblank, lipping after tufted titmice and the yellow-bellied sapsucker. Steve Kress, local ornithology lecturer, belongs to a different comedic tradition: the deadpan. (As in, "Road kill doesn't count. A sighting doesn't count unless it's twitching.") Uncle Steve's ad-libs are strong, but some of his prepared material . . . *That guy throwing rocks at shorebirds? He left no tern unstoned* . . . predates the rim-shot. When Uncle Steve announces the return of the warblers—"the most exciting time of the year"—he does not, for some reason, sound like a dork. I, too, warm to these 3-ounce dynamos winging usward from the subtropical Americas, though not nearly enough to learn which is which. Three dozen local warbler species is 35 too many.

Chips passing in the night

How's this for a contest: Pick a number; biggest one wins. What sounds like an ethnic joke—the Polish Arithmetic Derby—is the scoring regime of competitive birdwatching. My view of the Sapsuckers, a crack local bird-squad, was formerly obscured by the Yankees, Knicks, and Rangers. (The glamour of professional bowling would have sufficed). Advised by the world's leading—perhaps only—authority on the sounds of nocturnal

migration, they scan the night sky to put thrilling runs of unanswered points on the birdwatching scoreboard. Opponents thus sapsucked can only smile, like any good sports being shafted on the honor system.

Dorky bird names

Blue-faced booby, chuck-will's-widow, fulvous whistling duck, Hudsonian godwit, grebe, dickcissel (save that one for study hall attendance sheet), brown noddy, melodious grassquit, masked lovebird, greater prairie chicken, smew, tufted titmouse, worm-eating warbler, rufous-sided towhee—and, of course, yellow-bellied sapsucker.

Most embarrassing family name: *turdidae*; as in, American Robin, *turdus migratorius*.

Cool bird names

Sharp-shinned hawk, canvasback, frigatebird, laughing gull, Cooper's hawk, night heron, merlin, Mississippi kite, saw-whet owl, storm petrel, tyrant flycatcher, gyrfalcon, sea eagle, black rail, shrike.

Families of insect eaters best suited to Greek dynastic tragedy

Empidonax. Tyrannidae.

On denoting

Novices shiver on a bluff above Lake Ontario. They have assembled to watch dots, whose spring migration is at its height and setting cunning philosophical traps. “Golden eagle,” an expert says and points. “Two o'clock.” A thing high, distant, and dot-like. Someone scrupulous of fact and grammar might perhaps admit, “I see the bird to which you refer,” and could conscientiously underbid even that: “I see . . . a bird.” In what sense, after all, did *I* see an *eagle*? Much of modern philosophy could be reconstructed around this example.

Pensées

THE HUMAN MALE has evolved to propagate confident misinformation. But the biology of a birdwatching novice is not his destiny. He can abdicate, as does each he among us—nothing, we insist, panicked, we know nothing about birds, certainly not the ones in front of us, we are not volunteering and our hands are not raised. Females try to make up for the misinformation shortfall but make a sorry spectacle, like girls trying to throw.

TO BIRD, birding, birder: One suspects these words of being PR coinages, planted to de-geek “bird watching.” (Good luck to them.) Yet the OED claims that “bird” had already been verbed by the 16th century. I don’t buy that, and neither would Uncle Milty.

LAUGHING GULLS—laughing with us or at us?

TO TRAIN MY CHEAP BINOCULARS ON THE STARS I have to shorten up, to dial back from focus at infinity. Which means? That for \$75 I can see *beyond* the stars? That’s more of the universe than I bargained for. Too much universe. If I see something scary, like the edge, I’ll want my money back.

DO BIRDS get lonely? Do they have enough IQ? Not by the evidence of where they live: a New Jersey salt marsh, for example, which however full of microscopic life offers to the human sensorium bleakness unrelieved—until the eye pans to the horizon and the welcoming neon glow of a wondrous Byzantium, Atlantic City.

Tuesday Night Fever

How to describe the courtship of the woodcock? Easier if it were visible. First come plaintive dusk-sounds, a symphony of joy buzzers, male woodcocks saying “Watch this space.” Cool guys offering trick wingshakes, goofing on nerds to impress woodcock babes. Uncle Steve mimes the follow-up mating flight: males spiral 300 feet high, wind ululating through their feathers, then descend abruptly—vocalizing, swooping side to side, and finally plunging to the ground.

“He’s up!” One buzzer stops, whistling starts, we strain ears and suspend disbelief. “He’s down!” waiting for babes and catching his breath before the next attempt, focussed on the entirety of a major enchilada, reproductive success. Uncle Steve fills dead airtime with woodcock lore, the tip of an iceberg of incredibility: woodcocks stamp the ground to rile up worms, detect the resulting indignation through the soles of their feet, and pluck the angry worms to eat. Birdwatching class is one long crescendo of implausibility. One anticipates the final words of Uncle Steve’s final lecture: “I made it up.”

Hooters

I’ve been excited about the bard owls ever since I first misspelled them. They are, it turns out, b-a-r-r-e-d and not bards hooting the deeds of gallant mouse-eaters.

We stand in rainy woods, as tape-recorded calls alternate with Uncle Steve’s owl impressions. To round out the program we need a tap-dancer and someone playing the

spoons. Twenty minutes' labor provokes distant hooting. Moments later, a great gray bird swoops through the blackness, caught glowing in a flashlight beam. The bard perches above us, indifferent to the crowd of now-non-hooting non-owls, until honor is satisfied; then wings home to lead his mate in a frenzied commemorative duet.

I become one

I can now throw binoculars smartly to eyes with drill-team precision and without yanking self offstage by the neck strap. I can whip them out in public unembarrassed by what the neighbors or their dogs will think. I *am* Uncle Milty.

I take my new art of the familiar, an art of being at home, to my boyhood backyard. Any natural history from that urban lot will be news to the whole family, however many decades late. Should I pull my parents' legs with fictive Kressiana?

Fumbling with binoculars and bird book, I lurch through a tangle beside a sluggish creek. Mallard, catbird, house finch, kinglet, sparrow (white throated), phoebe (heard). And just behind me emerges a creation ex nihilo: heavy wingbeats pull my eyes around to an astonishing Great Blue Heron as it leaps, from ankle-deep water, into the sinuous dignity of its flight.