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The Birds That Asked Me to Come Out and Play

KEVIN ENNS REMPEL

Over the past fifteen years, some of my most enriching playtime has focused on the activity of birding. Since 1998, I have pursued birds in places as varied as my own backyard, the water treatment plants of California cities, the jungles of Costa Rica, and the lowlands of Holland. I do it for many reasons: to enjoy the beauty of birds in their natural habitats, for the thrill of the hunt, for the fun of keeping lists of what I have seen at specific places and times, and for the mental discipline of sorting out visual and auditory clues to make an identification.

But how did I get so interested in such an odd form of play? For almost the first forty years of my life I scarcely gave birds any attention. And then, almost without warning, I became willing to spend significant amounts of time and money to pursue them for nothing more than the sheer joy of it. Why would I have done such a thing?

Perhaps the best answer is that the birds asked me to come out and play. Over the course of about two-and-a-half years before I finally discovered that I was a birder, I had a series of remarkable encounters with a few very specific birds and with people who had already learned what it meant to play with them. These encounters triggered something in me that I finally could not ignore. The birds convinced me that I should indeed come out and play, and I owe them a debt of gratitude for their insistence. Their stories deserve to be told.

Encounter 1: Western Tanager and White-Headed Woodpecker

The first of these encounters took place on a hike in Kings Canyon National Park in the summer of 1995. We had scarcely begun walking when my brother-in-law stopped suddenly, pointed across a clearing, and exclaimed, “Western Tanager!” All I saw was a yellow and orange blur flying rapidly away from us, but I saw it well enough to know that this blur was something special.

Dan's announcement impressed me on at least three levels. First, I had no idea that birds like this might exist so close to where I lived. Birds with such brightly-colored feathers were found, I thought, only in the tropics or in pet stores -- but certainly not wild in Central California forests. And yet there it was. Second, Dan actually knew that there was such a thing as a tanager. I had never even heard the word, let alone knew



1. Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*)

what it was. And third, not only did he know that tanagers existed, but he could identify one based on a mere instant's worth of observation.

As astonishing as all this was, the tanager did not instantly transform me into a birder. The ability to perform such feats of identification was, I assumed, far



2. White-headed Woodpecker (*Picoides albolarvatus*)

beyond anything I could ever achieve. Dan obviously had special powers that I did not possess. I did, however, make a note of the tanager in a journal of hiking observations that I had begun to keep. It was the first bird on my list – though I did not yet know what listing was.

Later in the afternoon we had another, rather different, bird encounter. While stopping to rest by the trail, Dan pointed out a woodpecker working methodically around the base of a pine tree. It was, he informed us, a White-headed Woodpecker. This sighting was a bit more comprehensible than the tanager. Even I could tell that this was a woodpecker, and I could easily see its white head. Still, Dan's ability to

name it by species impressed me greatly. He had done it *twice* in one day -- just how many other birds could he name like this?

Encounter 2: Great Gray Owl

More than two years passed between these first entries on my “list” and the second meeting with a particularly persuasive bird. During that time the list had grown to nine birds, though I still did not really know I was doing such a thing. Most simply were dated notes in the margins of a Sierra Nevada natural history guide, along with similar notes about trees, wildflowers, mammals, and geographic formations I had seen. Only later would I retrieve those bird notes and enshrine them as the first entries on a genuine life list, but that is getting ahead of the story.

This second encounter occurred in the fall of 1997 in Clover Meadow campground, southeast of Yosemite National Park. My son Chris and I were staying there for the night before beginning a backpacking trip the next day. On the way to get water just before dark, we noticed two men in a nearby campsite



3. Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*)

pointing toward a tree. Curious, we walked over to see the object of their interest — a huge owl perched in the branches not more than eight feet off the ground. It calmly watched us watching it, allowing me to make mental notes about its field marks (though I did not yet know that term). After several minutes the owl took wing, seemingly not so much out of fear as because it simply had other things to do.

But what kind of owl was it? I had by now discovered that one should ask such questions. It was not enough just to call it an “owl.” My mental list of owl names then included only Barn and Great Horned. I was pretty sure it wasn’t

a Barn Owl, and it didn't have "horns." But the answer to this mystery would have to wait, since I had no field guide with me on this trip.

Back home I grabbed my Sierra Nevada natural history guide (I did not own a bird field guide yet) and looked through the section on birds. There it was, without a doubt -- a Great Gray Owl. I did not at first realize just how remarkable a sighting this was. A little more reading in other books, however, revealed that these birds actually were quite rare in California. Many birders spend years unsuccessfully trying to track down one of the few Great Gray Owls that live in the state, and we had stumbled onto one with no real effort at all. Was this bird trying to tell me something?

Encounter 3: Northern Harrier

The next compelling event came only three months later. We were spending Christmas 1997 with my family in Oregon. The day after Christmas, my brother suggested that we go out to look for birds. He had been a birder since the 1980s, but I had never really paid much attention to his hobby. By now, however, my previous experiences with tanagers, woodpeckers, and owls hinted to me that his suggestion might be a good one.

We headed for the nearby Ankeny National Wildlife Refuge, where Phil introduced us



4. Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

to wigeons, buffleheads, shovelers, goldeneyes, sandpipers, and a host of other birds. Little of it sunk in -- it was all one huge indistinguishable confusion. I was not sure whether to be awestruck or skeptical at his apparent skills. At one point Phil turned his head briefly skyward and casually pronounced the object on a wire to be a "kestrel." He had hardly even looked at the bird. It *can't* be that easy, I thought.

None of these birds made it onto the list that I would create a few months later. I had not really *seen* them, though they all had been pointed out to me. One bird from that day, however, did make it onto the list. Among his many other lessons, Phil showed us a Northern Harrier, describing its distinctive low-to-the-ground flight and white rump patch. Later, while my son and I drove home without Phil, we saw a harrier of our own. It had a rump patch, plain as day, and it was flying just the way Phil said it should be, searching for prey in a grassy field. That was “our” harrier, the one bird sighting we actually earned for ourselves that day. Maybe this was something I could actually do.

Encounter 4: Cedar Waxwings

By now birds were starting to flutter into my consciousness in new and more insistent ways. Yet except for my one bewildering day at Ankeny, birds still remained something that happened to me while I was busy doing other things. It would take one more such chance encounter to change that.

I had volunteered to help chaperone my daughter Jenn’s class on a field trip to a local museum in January 1998. I got there before the bus did and so sat down outside to wait. A rustling overhead caught my attention. There, only a few feet away, was a flock of the most elegant birds I had ever seen, energetically devouring the shriveled berries still hanging from the branches. Their feathers were like silk, they wore black eye masks as though ready for a costume ball, and the most lovely tufts of feathers extended from the backs of their heads.



5. Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

But what were they? As with the Great Gray Owl, the answer would have to wait -- I had a field trip to chaperone. But with that duty completed, I made a detour to the public library before returning

to work. I headed for the shelves where they kept the bird books, and started thumbing through a Peterson's Guide. I had no idea where to look, but figured that there could not be too many birds that looked like *that*. I was right— there were only two, and only one of those -- the Cedar Waxwing -- could possibly be in central California in such large numbers.

That was it. I was, at last, completely seduced. It had taken two-and-a-half years, but I had finally succumbed to the birds' insistent requests to come out and play. On March 22, 1998, I took binoculars, field guide, and notebook in hand, got in the car, and set out for no other purpose than finding and identifying birds. When I returned home, I had eleven new life birds on my list. I was, at last, a birder, and I will remain forever grateful to that handful of birds who invited me to come play with them.

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