

AVIAN SORCERY OR APPLE SAUCERY

by Chuck Bernstein

In your normal Dark Ages style of birding, have you at some time, as I have, gone into the field -- certain that day you would find something really good -- and returned home with nothing but tired feet? Well, you may have been on the right frequency, tuned to the right channel, but you were obviously on the wrong wavelength. You did not utilize ESP. I understand that the way to do this is to concentrate on a bird, fixate on it hard, real hard. Then go out there, relax, possibly cross your fingers, and look for that bird. Being open to ESP (extrasensory perception) will enhance your powers of observation. Of course, if you choose a bird that has already been reported, you will increase considerably your chances of success.

Some years back a Gyrfalcon was reported from the outback of northern California around Davis. Needing the bird for my state list, I called for directions. "Go north to get on 80 toward Sacramento. Take the first exit after the Davis exit. Go south on Mace which becomes Route 104. Go south about two miles, then left on Road 36. After about 100 feet, go right on 104 again to Cross Road or 38A. After about two miles, 104 becomes a dirt road. Go one more mile to Midway Road, after which 104 is paved again. Turn left on 152 just before it ends, where there are buildings and a farmhouse. Or go west on 152 as it becomes Midway in four miles." The bird was in that kind of place.

Before leaving Los Angeles, I checked with five people who had seen the Gyr, and to the question -- "Where should I look for the bird?" -- I received a series of suggestions, all up high. "Check the transmission towers where the bird likes to sit." "It hangs around the higher branches in the clump of trees in the farmyard near the road." "I photographed it atop a telephone pole about a mile down from the farmhouse." "Check the tops of the bushes along the wash next to the dirt road about three miles northeast of the farmhouse." "It stays high in the shrubbery back of the tower on the extreme right."

I found the place, spent four hours looking for the bird, left just in time to make an appointment, and never did find the Gyr. Nancy Speer, who was there when I was and waited calmly while other birders came and went, finally saw it in late afternoon when, she reported, "It flew out of the tall grass, chased a pheasant, and essentially remained on the ground!" Hal Speer, her husband, with whom I spoke later, asserted, "She found it through ESP." I didn't hear Nancy say that. And it's my guess that it was through Essentially Sheer Patience! During my four hours of searching I had certainly willed the bird into my presence as hard as I could. Wrong wavelength, no doubt.

When I expressed surprise at Hal's conclusion, he claimed this view is not uncommon and cited a date in the Bay Area (San Francisco and Oakland)

Audubon Society's calendar of memorable bird sightings that might be attributed to such phenomena. May 9, 1981, the day Hal and Nancy went birding in the Antelope Valley with Jon Dunn, was the fifth anniversary of the sighting of a Hudsonian Godwit in California. At the marsh at Edwards Air Force Base they at first saw a Marbled Godwit, and then, perhaps twenty feet away, there was a Hudsonian Godwit -- only the third sighting of this species in the state! Hal suggests that "it could be electromagnetic waves, or who knows what, that we humans as yet do not even comprehend." Hal is obviously into ESP and other parapsychological phenomena that are far beyond me.

However, I once had an odd experience while leading a bird walk at Descanso Gardens on a Sunday in November long ago. That day I spontaneously announced to my group, "Today I will show you a Varied Thrush!" Then we all laughed. That species is unreliable -- some years in fall and winter we find a few, some years none. What made me say that? A sense of *déjà vu*? Nearing the end of our walk, we approached a cluster of live oaks. I set down my scope, looked up, and, lo and behold, there was a Varied Thrush! "You knew the bird was there all along," they chided. But, I had *not* known! I was, indeed, as astonished as the others to find it there. At the start of the walk, I must have subconsciously perceived the gray overcast, the quiet in the air, the aroma of moldering leaves, just as it was six years before when I had seen this lovely bird --on the same kind of a day, at the same time of year, and in the same live oak tree. This time I was on the right wavelength. A top birder once told me that being "bird-brained" helps one communicate with the birds. I'm working on the brain change. It would be more effective than Hal's kind of ESP, which sure didn't work for me with the Gyrfalcon!

After giving it some thought, I do believe that, instead of ESP, I would prefer instruction in another parapsychological phenomenon -- that of levitation. So that I could raise birds above high grass and suspend them in midair long enough to get a good look. But would this create another problem that some committee would have to deal with? Is the Gyr Nancy saw countable? We must keep in mind that if she truly found this bird by ESP, that would make it man-aided, not much different than if she'd caught it in a net.

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