

ABOUT BOOKS

Who Are We and What Exactly Are We Doing?

Mark Lynch

Birders: Tales of a Tribe by Mark Cocker. 2001. Boston, MA: Atlantic Monthly Press. 240 pp. \$24.00



Recently while standing in the early morning cold fog without my coat looking for the Eurasian Kestrel, not visible at the time, with a scrappy bunch of like-minded fanatics, I paused to momentarily reflect. I often do at times like this. What am I doing? Who are these people? What is birding all about? How does this look to the nonbirder? Are we crazy? You probably have had similar flashes of soul-searching. Perhaps while lugging a heavy scope over the soft sands of South Beach in the midsummer sun, causing your back and neck all sorts of expensive trouble. Or while standing on a residential street in the wee hours of a winter morning, waiting for some feeder visitor to show up, while neighbors peer through the blinds. There can be little doubt that birding certainly has its moments of intense eccentricity and just plain weird behavior. But we are hooked body and soul. We are bird junkies. Which is why I love Mark Cocker's *Birders: Tales of a Tribe*. It is always therapeutic to read that others are just as obsessive as you are.

Cocker starts with an account of his search for the Satyr Tragopan high in the Himalayas in 1996. He uses this event to begin his personal history of birders in Britain: "In a sense, the purpose of this book is to explain why that tragopan is so special and to make that moment intelligible to someone who has perhaps never even been birding. It is to let you understand and feel what I felt on that May morning" (p. 3). What follows is Cocker's account of his growing into a life devoted to watching birds, from 1968 when he was a child looking at feral pigeons in Derbyshire, to 1993 when he was in the Extremadura region of Spain admiring displaying Great Bustards. Sightings from his many handwritten journals mark the beginning of each chapter as if they were historical markers to his life. Along the way, he also traces the general history of British birding, discussing topics like twitching and stringing, and telling tales of the birding community. In many ways, *Birders: Tales of a Tribe* is the *Little Black Book* by Bill Oddie (*Bird Observer*, April 2001, pp. 139-140) for this generation.

For American birders reading this very British book, it is interesting to learn about the ways in which birding here and there is both similar and different. As in America, birding in Britain was once solely the realm of the wealthy and the powerful. But probably only a Brit would express this notion of avocation and class in quite this way: "Earlier in the century it was the domain of millionaire bankers, famous explorers, the sons of famous explorers and millionaire bankers, the officer

classes, landed gentry and the odd country vicar. Since then birding has made a long, seemingly irreversible journey down the social ladder" (p. 46).

Cocker dwells on those everyday details that make all birders the eccentric tribe we are. Take our peculiar fashion statement of wearing our bins not only while out birding, but also while in a restaurant, while at a conference meeting, or simply "whenever," just in case something interesting flits by. I immediately identified with this because I confess I wore my bins during my son's wedding a few years back. After all, it was outdoors in spring at Castle Hill and I even ticked a Gannet during the vows. But Brits seem to have some birding obsessions that are particular to that isle. Cocker devotes a chapter to the love of field notebooks. Not just any notebook, mind you, but the "Alwyck" black laminated cloth one with the "All Weather Cover." He starts with the small model A 38/90 but soon graduates to the choice of serious field birders, the fatter A68/140 model. This very British tradition of keeping detailed daily notes of what was seen on a birding jaunt and illustrated with field sketches seems to have totally missed New England birders for the most part. How many of us keep regular journals written by hand and keep them filed by year? This is a shame, because Cocker lovingly describes pulling some of these old notebooks off the shelves and describes how they magically evoke the fine details of birding days gone by.

The British also have a genuine oral tradition of classic "ripping yarns" of going through hell and high water for some rarity. Perhaps part of the reason that this body of oral birding lore exists is that British birders seem to be more social than American birders. In the chapter "The Loop, 1," Cocker describes the famous birder's hangout near Cley, a dining room called Nancy's:

Nancy's, which is what everyone called it, was legendary. Every birder knew of it. Most birders of sufficient age visited it. Many went there weekly. Some almost lived there. One or two actually did. And even those who never went there spoke to its occupants on a regular basis. It was routinely mentioned in that naff comedy series about birdwatching set in Liverpool called *Watching*. When the café finally closed, the event was recorded in the press and on regional and national TV. I believe it should have one of those blue English Heritage plaques commemorating its former status (p. 98).


I cannot think of a New England equivalent of Nancy's. I also cannot imagine spending so much time with most birders I know. At Nancy's, birders just hung out. The owners welcomed the muddy, sodden, and bedraggled lot with open arms. The food was cheap and plentiful. The phone was always ringing with the latest birding news, and folks sat around on off moments telling great birding stories.

Cocker includes a chapter on "hitching stories." Apparently, some of the most hard-core listers in Britain did not have a car in the 1970s and 1980s, so when a rarity was sighted in some odd part of the Isles, they just stuck out a thumb and went for it. Or, even if they did have a car and had a flat tire or got into an accident en route, they ended up hitching to the scene of the rarity. And therein lies the start of these sometimes humorous, sometimes scary tales. There are also thrilling stories of birders

being chased off cliffs in Afghanistan or devoured by a tiger in India. These stories are peopled with a wide range of quintessentially British characters. Some of these tribe members Cocker writes about with true respect and awe, legends in the annals of British birding and ornithology. Other people are close birding friends that are remembered fondly after years sharing the joys of the field. Still others are more than a bit odd, which is to be expected, because, after all, this is Britain, a country that has a yearly event consisting of wildly careening down a steep hill chasing after a wheel of cheese.

For me, no person in Cocker's book was more fascinating than the allegedly fictitious composite Robert Barry Shutbill, an archetypal "stringer." A stringer is a birder who purposefully reports rare birds that are not there, the bane of serious birders everywhere. The stories in this chapter are so filled with rich details that seem close to the truth, that this becomes the birder's equivalent of *Primary Colors*. Also in this exposé of a chapter is a nice summary of the infamous Hastings Rarities: "These were 595 records of rarities that were all claimed from one small area of East Sussex between 1892 and 1930" (p. 167). All of these formerly accepted records are now highly suspect, since it is believed that the birds had been "killed in the Middle East and elsewhere and shipped back to Britain on ice, where they were being sold as genuine British vagrants" (p. 168). The Brits seem to go all out in every aspect of birding, even when it is bad birding.

Birders: Tales of a Tribe is also filled with quintessential British birding lingo. New words I learned included "blocker": "a rare bird that a few *have* seen but most *haven't*" (p. 121). The Massachusetts equivalent would be the Terek Sandpiper at Plum Island years back. The term "fazed" is something I hope never to experience: "In times of great stress birders usually make one of two responses. Either they temporarily abandon birding — a condition known as having *fazed* — or they bird more intensively than ever. I've tried both therapies and definitely favor the latter" (p. 214).

Birders: Tales of a Tribe lets you eavesdrop on the inner workings of the mind of a very serious and somewhat obsessive British birder. It explains why nobody birds like the Brits. That said, birders everywhere share this same obsessive and crazy passion for the feathered set. *Birders: Tales of a Tribe* will resonate with anyone who has ever staked out a feeder or suddenly come across that *really* good bird. This book is a joy to read whether you are a birder from Aden, a twitcher from Zanzibar, or even a hardcore lister from the rebellious former colonies across the pond. 

Mark Lynch is an instructor, trip leader, and ecological monitor at Broad Meadow Brook, Massachusetts Audubon Society property in Worcester. He hosts Inquiry, an interview show of arts and sciences on WICN 90.5 FM. He is also an instructor and docent at the Worcester Art Museum. His list from his son's wedding also included Baltimore Oriole and Cedar Waxwing and many other species.

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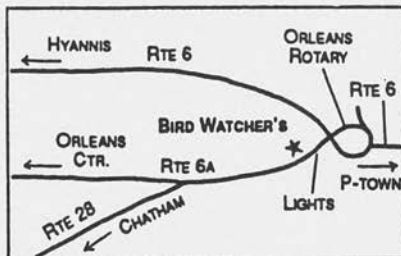
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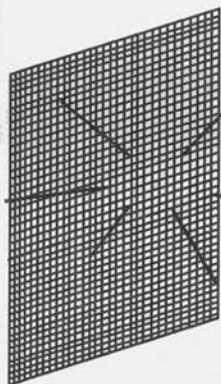
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News from MassWildlife

First Successful Peregrine Nesting. The first cliff-nesting peregrine falcons in more than half a century have produced 4 chicks at the Farley cliffs in Erving. MassWildlife District Manager Ralph Taylor confirmed the successful hatching by using a spotting scope to observe the nest site from Route 2. Peregrines have been displaying territorial tendencies at the cliff for the past two summers but were not known to breed until this year. This represents the first successful peregrine nesting at a natural site in Massachusetts since young were fledged from Hanging Mountain in Sandisfield and Monument Mountain in Great Barrington in 1951. The Farley cliffs aerie last produced chicks in 1942 and the last report of a peregrine on the territory was of a single male in 1957. By that time the pesticide DDT had devastated the peregrine falcon population in Massachusetts and by 1966 there were no nesting peregrines in the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. The banning of DDT in 1972 and subsequent restoration efforts brought the peregrine back from the brink of extinction in Massachusetts and across the country. In 2001, 54 peregrine pairs nested in New England producing 219 chicks. Five of the pairs and 13 of the chicks were found on buildings and bridges in Massachusetts. The peregrine has been removed from the federal Endangered Species list.

Bay State Eagles Fledge 15 Chicks. MassWildlife biologists have completed their annual visits to active bald eagle territories across the state and report 15 eagle
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chicks produced during the 2002 nesting season. Of the dozen known eagle nesting territories, 8 successfully produced chicks, three failed and one was vacant. From west to east the southern Berkshire pair had two chicks, four pairs nesting along the Massachusetts reach of the Connecticut River had a total of 8 chicks, one Connecticut River territory was vacant, two Quabbin Reservoir pairs had a total of 3 chicks, while two additional Quabbin pairs failed. The Quaboag Pond pair in Brookfield failed while the Assawompsett Pond pair in Middleboro had two chicks. MassWildlife's Connecticut Valley District personnel checked each territory and banded 13 of the chicks. Two chicks were not banded as the nest tree was unsafe to climb.

"Eagles continue to make a dramatic comeback in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the United States," said Dr. Tom French, Assistant Director for MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. "People who have followed eagle recovery in Massachusetts will remember that we jump started the process by releasing 41 young eagles at Quabbin Reservoir back in the 1980s, at a time when there were



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zero nesting eagles in the Commonwealth. Many of those released birds survived, nested and formed the foundation for today's nesting success. The wild nesting pairs have fledged a total of 151 chicks since 1989 and we're now seeing second and third generation nesting birds. I think we'll see the southern New England eagle population increase even more dramatically in the years to come, especially along our larger rivers and lakes." Massachusetts' eagles fared better in 2002 than they did last year, when late season snow and prolonged cold rains caused significant nest failures resulting in only 10 chicks fledged. Massachusetts is a distant second to Maine's 269 nesting pairs of eagles. New Hampshire had 8 pairs in 2001 while Connecticut had 6. Vermont and Rhode Island had no nesting eagles. The bald eagle is slated to come off the federal Endangered Species List once habitat protection issues are resolved in certain parts of the country.

Young Eagles Take a Dive. The two bald eagle chicks banded by MassWildlife biologists at the West Springfield site along the Connecticut River took an unexpected swim when the giant cottonwood tree supporting the eagle nest fell into the River. MassWildlife's Ralph Taylor reports that the tree was uprooted and appeared to have fallen slowly, leaving the nest suspended at a severe angle just 15 feet above the water. Taylor and his District crew located both chicks along the riverbank's floodplain forest and returned them to the nest tree where the adults were still present. The chicks will remain in the vicinity of the nest where the adults will continue to bring food, caring for them through their first flights later in June and until the young disperse from the territory in early October.