

Twitcher's Temptation

John Nelson

I admit it, I'll chase a bird. Eurasian Kestrel in Chatham? Honey, where are my car keys? Mew Gull in Newburyport? I'll never find it on my own, but surely other birders will be looking. Black Rail in New Hampshire? Too bad I'm retired 'cause I'd blow off work for that bird. Call me a ticker, a lister, a twitcher. Call me obsessive, compulsive, a man comically addicted to avian accounting—ask my wife and she'll tell you what to call me — I plead guilty on all counts. Sometimes I wish I were more like her, a self-proclaimed “Alzheimer's birder.” In truth, she remembers far more than she lets on, but she keeps no lists, targets no birds, and won't cross state lines to see a goose. For her each bird is a new bird, a life bird, a uniquely delightful morsel at nature's feast.

How far will I go to chase a bird? I have no idea. When I began birding in 1998, I'd amuse myself and my civilian friends with tales of the tickers and twitchers I'd meet—one, I remember, complained bitterly about a whale watch on which he'd seen scores of whales—and I was prone to making pompous pronouncements fixing rational limits on the birding excursions I'd be willing to undertake. “I'm not going all the way to the South Shore, and then trudge down some beach, just for some dinky little shorebird.” “I'm not driving clear across the state to see a towhee with dots.” Sad to say, the unchased Red-necked Stint and Spotted Towhee remain unchecked on my state list — what was I thinking? — but I've since roamed the Commonwealth from South Beach (Elegant Tern, no) to the Berkshires (Gray Jay, yes!) in search of vagrants and strays. Now, I need merely start a sentence with “I'm not” — and my spouse collapses in a fit of merciless laughter. How far will I go to chase a bird? Ask me when my ABA list reaches 699.

I'll particularly chase my nemesis bird — that bird, of all the birds I've chased, which remains most defiantly unobserved, most intractably unchecked. Nationally, my nemesis is the Chukar, a bird I've hunted from Colorado to California, from barren rock to barren rock, a creature I've come to regard as not merely elusive but apocryphal, no more real than the single-winged Pinnacle Grouse or the backwards-flying Goofus Bird in Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings*. Yes, the Chukar is described as “widely introduced” and “locally common” in *A Birder's Guide to Southern California*. Yes, I've met birders who claim to have witnessed Chukars — two, ten, thirty at a time — sunning themselves on rocks or cavorting along the road. Liars, one and all. As a birding peon, I'm reluctant to add Roger Tory Peterson or David Sibley to the list of liars, but . . . Perhaps they've shared a hallucination. Perhaps the detailed depiction of fabricated birds is their idea of a little sick birding fun. Just because Sibley draws it, with all those clever little field marks, doesn't mean that the bird exists.

Statewide, my nemesis has evolved as I've spent more time in the field. For a while the Connecticut Warbler headed my hit list, until that blessed morn at Cumberland Farms when one, two, three showed themselves for split seconds at a

time before skulking back into the bush. Instantaneously, the honor of being my local nemesis passed on to the Northern Goshawk. I've had wonderful looks at goshawks at Yellowstone and Rustler Park in Arizona. One evening, I nearly careened off Route 2 while striving to get a better look at a distant goshawk-like fly-by before it vanished into the woods. But I've yet to fix my bins on a certifiable goshawk within the admittedly artificial boundaries of Massachusetts. It's not for want of trying. I hang out in neighborhoods that goshawks are known to frequent. I meditate with a goshawk mantra, beckon the spirit of Goshawk to welcome me into its realm. Still, no goshawk.

In June 2003 I saw a Massbird report of a goshawk at Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary in Princeton. It was a spot I'd been meaning to visit, and with the prospect of goshawk goading me, I drove out there, from Gloucester, a few days later. When I arrived, I checked the map outside the office to get a feel for the layout of the place. A notice was posted next to the map. Goshawks, it said, were nesting in the sanctuary and, to ensure both the safety of visitors and the breeding success of the birds, the nesting area had been closed to the public. How disappointed I felt. How foolish. Why was I trying to chase down a nesting goshawk?

A bit disoriented, I wandered down a path across a field, toward some wetlands. Tree Swallows zoomed by me. A Red-shouldered Hawk cried out incessantly — *keer! keer! keer!* — and then flew across the field and over my head. A rare butterfly, a sign said, had been spotted in the sanctuary. It was a gorgeous day, sunny, sharp, calm, a beautiful day for birding, for communing with all of nature.

The trail I was on took me into the woods. A nearby Veery sang harmony with itself. Scarlet Tanagers duetted in technicolor. At a junction I turned on to another trail, heading vaguely in the direction of the goshawk area. I heard jackhammer tapping and caught a distant glimpse of a Pileated Woodpecker.

I walked until I saw a sign at the head of another trail. I was at the edge of goshawk territory — it was the same “keep out” sign I'd seen posted at the office. I stood at the trailhead looking around me, listening for signs of human invaders. I was at the far end of the sanctuary, a good ways from the office. I'd seen no one on the trail. I knew that nesting goshawks could be ferociously protective — I'd heard of birders being divebombed and bloodied — but I was willing to sacrifice a few chunks of scalp to see my nemesis. And I felt a presence looming, an overwhelming conviction that if I went down that trail, Goshawk would be there, waiting. I was one lone, quiet intruder — how badly could I disturb these birds? If anyone saw me, I could swear that I'd never seen any sign, that I'd been birding along obliviously. Who could call me a liar? And even if they did, what could they do about it? Take away my birding license?

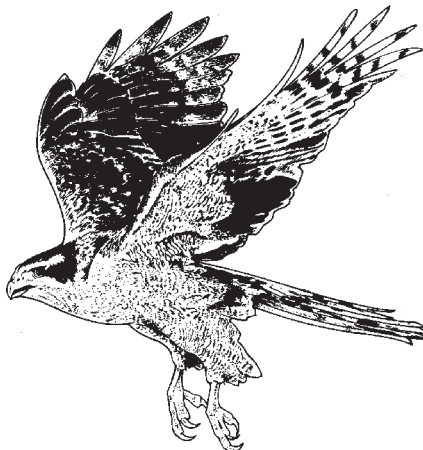
I stood for some time at the trailhead, tempted, glancing about, the gears of rationalization grinding away in my goshawk-mad brain. Why, I asked myself, was I so driven to see this bird, or that bird? What was I doing here? When I was on my deathbed, how much would these numbers matter? Would I care if my state list were one more or one less? Why was I birding in the first place?

I finally turned away from the trailhead. I wasn't afraid of getting caught, or getting hurt. And it wasn't because I'm inherently law-abiding. If I were, I wouldn't have driven seventy miles per hour down Route 2 to see this bird, nor would I have joined my pal Al Gore in conducting certain unscientific "experiments" during my wild and crazy days at college. The reason was simpler: if something was bad for birds, it couldn't be good for me. The birds have enemies enough already: fragmented habitats, pesticides, communication towers. They don't need one more. And if every birder gave in so easily to temptation, I wouldn't be one lone intruder. There would be legions of intruders and no birds to breed, or to see.

I didn't leave the area immediately. For a while I loitered around the fringes of the forbidden zone, hoping, almost expecting that the Bird Gods would reward me for my display of ethical rectitude and send a goshawk soaring my way. But life doesn't work that way, or it shouldn't. A felon doesn't deserve to win the lottery because he has magnanimously decided to refrain from mugging old ladies. I left the sanctuary chastened and goshawkless. It was still a gorgeous day.

How far will I go to chase a bird? I know part of the answer now — not to that point where the chase might harm the bird. I still haven't seen a goshawk in Massachusetts. A week ago one was reported within a mile of my house, and on several occasions I've come home mud-spattered, briar-scarred, and tick-ridden after a fruitless search for it. Perhaps, if life is poetic, the first goshawk I see in the state will be the offspring of the pair at Wachusett Meadow, or the offspring of their offspring, if their breeding is successful. I can wait. That doesn't mean I've stopped twitching. Cave Swallows on the Cape? And a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher? Honey, where are my car keys? 🦅

John Nelson has recently retired after more than three decades as an English professor at North Shore Community college. He now dedicates himself to writing fiction and going birding, not necessarily in that order. He has published a book on teaching, Cultivating Judgment: Teaching Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum, and volunteers as a property monitor for Essex County Greenbelt. He makes his home in Gloucester.



GOSHAWK BY ANON.