

ABOUT BOOKS

Follow That Bird! Magnificent Feathered Obsessions

Mark Lynch

Tracking Desire: A Journey after Swallow-tailed Kites.

Susan Cerulean. 2005. University of Georgia Press. Athens, GA.

On the Wing: To the Edge of the Earth with the Peregrine Falcon.

Alan Tennant. 2004. Alfred A. Knopf. New York.

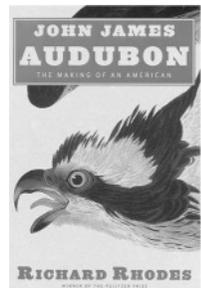
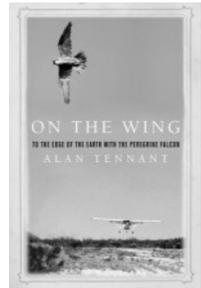
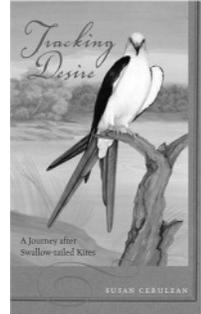
John James Audubon: The Making of an American.

Richard Rhodes. 2004. Alfred A. Knopf. New York.

As years go by, birding can often quickly slip from passionate hobby to a rather silly quest for names on a list. A birder may have some unique experience with the natural world, and may even send a post to Massbird about it, but then it's quickly off to the next new bird, the next new experience, and the next tick. Birding most often happens within the context of our larger, more ordered lives. Birding is for most of us just an avocation. For nonbirders, this same rapt attention is spent on bowling, fly-fishing, NASCAR, or expensive wines. How many of us have truly had our lives radically changed by the birds we watched? Here I am not talking about some deepening of an appreciation and understanding of nature that was already there. That's really just "growth" and should happen fairly often if you are a thoughtful and intelligent adult. Instead, I am talking about birds literally changing the way your day-to-day way life is led, chucking your old routines, jobs, and even love interests, to follow the birds. The following three books are about people who did just that.

Susan Cerulean clearly remembers the first time she saw a Swallow-tailed Kite wafting over South Carolina's Edisto River, and that sighting led to a lifetime of passionate pursuit:

When that first fleet kite shadow darkened my face and I lifted my eyes, astonished, to watch the bird wheel above the river's sunny run, I knew that something essential connecting me viscerally to wildness had come into my life. I wanted that wildness. I wanted to leap out of the boat, to scramble over the abrupt knees of the cypress and climb the insufficient wild aster vines. I wanted to follow that bird (p. 1, *Tracking Desire*).



Though she was trained as a wildlife biologist, Susan's experience with the kite precipitates a virtual peak experience "on the wing," a deep desire not only to get to know the bird better, but to integrate the kite into her life as a personal symbol of her spiritual connection to nature. In 1993 she volunteered to help Dr. Ken Meyer, a biologist for the National Park Service who was working on monitoring and banding nesting Swallow-tailed Kites in southern Florida. In a Cessna 172 Susan flies with Meyer over a communal roost of nearly two thousand kites, a sight most hardcore birders can imagine only with jealousy. Cerulean learns that most of the kite's life is a mystery, but the little that is known only deepens her fascination. Swallow-tailed Kites are amazingly synchronous in their nesting, with most nests in the study area built between March 29 and March 30. Their fragile nests are constructed on the very tops of conifers, making them prone to being blown down in storms. The reason they build nests high atop these wind-exposed trees is that though kites are true "wind masters," they do not maneuver well at low air speeds. Kites need to be where the wind can lift them aloft. At the time Susan begins her work with Dr. Meyer in the early 1990s, very little was known of the postbreeding movements of Swallow-tailed Kites, though some postbreeding dispersal over large areas had been observed. Later it will be found out that kites like to wander when not nesting, sometimes great distances.

All this time spent in close contact with the object of Cerulean's passion is set against the sad reality that the breeding habitat of the kites could not be in a worse location. Cerulean declares that Florida gains 900 new residents each day. Given that alarming statistic, it is therefore not surprising that much of the land of southern Florida is going the way of unbridled sprawl as acre after acre of kite habitat is converted into endless condos, marinas, and golf courses. The citrus industry is another serious threat to kite breeding habitat as corporate farmers seek larger areas farther and farther south in the state to establish citrus groves the better to avoid frosts. And if all that wasn't enough, the very trees the kites nest in are rapidly being replaced by invasive species.

When her time with Dr. Meyer is finished, Susan Cerulean is like a junky needing a fix. She seeks kites on her own by waiting for endless sweaty hours around Lake Okeechobee just for a glimpse of their graceful silhouette. She visits other people involved with kite preservation, like Jennifer and Tom Colson in the Pearl River area of Louisiana, the very edge of the kite's breeding range. Whenever outside, she gazes skyward in the hopes of seeing a kite soaring high above the city.

Within seconds, the kites have outclimbed the vultures in the thermal, as if they were on an independent elevator, their profiles contracting wafer-thin, unsubstantial, to a memory or a dream of a thing that once was here (p. 29, *Tracking Desire*).

Her ceaseless search for these beautiful raptors leads her into a deep meditative consideration of how she might more directly serve the wilderness she craves. For Susan, the kite is ultimately the external representation of that ineffable feeling we get when we experience the natural world on its own terms. For those of you who

traveled to Montreal to look at the Great Gray Owls, you know what I'm writing about. We want to hold on to that feeling for as long as we can, and we will sometimes then seek ways to save that small bit of the world that graced us with that epiphany.

Tracking Desire is part natural history, part memoir, and part poetic meditation on the fate of the kites and their environment. The slim book wonderfully evokes the sights, sounds, and feeling of the Big Cypress region of Florida and the extraordinary raptors that breed there while at the same time looking beyond the kites to what it is we deeply desire from our experience of the natural world.

In *On the Wing*, Alan Tennant's object of desire is also a raptor, but in this case it is the tundra subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon. While helping band Peregrines on Texas' Padre Island, Alan gets an inspired, if rather crazy, idea. Why not fit one of the Peregrines with a radio transmitter and then hop in a plane and follow the bird as it migrates back up to the Arctic? Now if this was your typical nature book, this plan would be discussed at length with the powers that be, elaborate plans would be devised over months, and then with all provisions and supplies in place, the journey would begin.

But the story told in *On the Wing* is really that of one man's unbridled love of the Peregrine and the bird's stunning ability to fly far and fast. This is a book about that man's willingness to immediately drop everything, including his love life, throw common sense into the toilet, and as the ad says: "just do it." This involves breaking laws of course. The Army is in charge of the Padre Island Peregrine project, but that doesn't stop Alan Tennant and his friend and pilot, George Vose, from illegally fitting a falcon with a transmitter, and then with the Army after them, hopping into George's beat-up Cessna and beginning to follow the bird as it made its way north to Alaska. Keep in mind, Tennant and Vose had no flight plan, little food and had no idea where they would be flying from day to day, or, for that matter, where they would land, as they radio tracked Amelia the Peregrine. When Amelia put down for the night, Alan and George would put down wherever they could find a place to land.

As days pass, they amazingly stay with Amelia as she effortlessly wings over mountains and prairies. They learn the peregrine's daily rhythms of flight, which they have to duplicate in order to keep up with her. Soon it dawns on both Alan and George that they themselves have become part of migration:

Vose had spent much of his life in the air, but hearing about the flight strategies of other airborne creatures, he said, still gave him a better feel for what our old Amelia was doing. For now, aloft in its midst, George and I had become part of that ancient river of migration. Most of our companions were too small to see, but below us by the tens of thousands flew godwit and plover, sanderling and knot, wee kinklet and wood warbler-all flung forward, a hundred or a thousand miles a day, by the same flurry of hollow bone and fast-striking heart with which each bird worked its own small miracle of return (p. 119, *On the Wing*).

When Amelia crosses into Canada, it is with only some slight trepidation that Alan and George follow. This border crossing is illegal of course, as they have no permission to enter Canadian air space. They keep tracking Amelia for a while longer but soon run out of suitable places to put the Cessna down and, well...the Mounties do catch up with them.

But this is not the end of the story by any means. Alan Tennant travels to northern Alaska, on his own, in the slim hope of finding Amelia on her nesting cliffs. And if all of that is not enough, George and Alan hop in the rickety Cessna once again, this time dressed in phony “official looking” uniforms and follow wandering Peregrines into Mexico and Belize, illegally of course. This adventure is even more amazing and frantic than the first and involves narrow escapes from authorities, bandits, and plane crashes. Through all of it though, as they learn more about the Peregrine’s life and movements first hand, the two men develop a deep and almost mystical appreciation for these powerful falcons. Part reckless wild caper, part inspired natural history, *On the Wing* is like no other bird book I know of. It is a breathtaking tale of two men so insanely inspired by the majesty and mystery of migrating raptors, that they risk life, limb, and imprisonment in several countries to try to experience for themselves what the falcon experiences.

The real dream, I saw again, had been ours. The vision that by joining our peregrines’ ancient journey we could somehow become part of what Edward Abbey called the heroism and grandeur of life, the hidden struggle of the million of avian lives that, all around us, were enduring what it would seem could not be endured. Pushing on through storm and famine, downpour and sudden predation—always with the homeward-streaming determination that, for some of them, would at last overcome the barrier of inconceivable distance (p. 281, *On the Wing*).

Perhaps no other person dedicated as much of his life to birds, as well as art, as John James Audubon. Audubon risked everything — his family, career, and life — to tromp around early nineteenth century America possessed by the vision of a masterwork of bird art for which there was no immediate public desire or need. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, written by Pulitzer Prize winning author Richard Rhodes, is the first major biography of Audubon in decades, and it clearly affirms Audubon’s importance as a great American artist, writer, ornithologist, and environmentalist.

From the moment Audubon emigrated to America from France, this new nation’s birds captivated his artistic imagination. A mostly self-taught artist, he begins drawing the species he finds as he wanders around the country. He marries well-to-do Lucy Bakewell and moves to Kentucky. Though he deeply loves doing his drawings and watercolors of birds, being an artist is no occupation for a family man on the frontier. Audubon keeps trying other forms of work, all of which end up unsuited for his temperament or just as miserable failures. In dire poverty and with a growing family, Audubon makes the fateful decision that he will make a living from art:

After our dismal removal from Henderson to Louisville, one morning, while all of us were sadly desponding, I took you both, Victor and John, from Shippingport to Louisville. I had purchased a loaf of bread and some apples; before we had reached Louisville you were all hungry, and by the riverside we sat down and ate our scanty meal. On that day the world was with me as a blank, and my heart was sorely heavy, for scarcely had I enough to keep my dear ones alive; and yet through these dark days I was being led to the development of the talents I loved. (From a memoir by Audubon to his son, as recounted on p. 143 of *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*.)

Of course, few people in post-Colonial America wanted pictures of birds, so Audubon supports himself by painting portraits, a talent for which he had little previous experience. He travels up and down the Mississippi, leaving his family at home, while he makes some money painting the well-to-do. At the same time, Audubon is still painting birds, birds, and more birds. Gradually the vision of a *Birds of America* takes hold of him.

He had more in mind than simply scientific illustration: he meant to make art. Art, an older discipline than science, would substitute its reverberant verisimilitude for the life the bird had lost, revivifying it just as he had fantasized in childhood (p. 211, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*).

And thus begins one of the great adventures in natural history and art making. Possessed by his unique artistic idea and a deep love of birds, Audubon travels throughout the wilds of America, painting the birds he finds and becoming an expert on their lives. By the time Audubon arrives in England years later to hawk his magnum opus, *Birds of America*, and to find the right publisher, he himself has become an icon of the New World for the Europeans. Audubon is James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo come to life. A buckskin-wearing frontiersman, "a real and palpable vision of the New World," ready to imitate a Wild Turkey, Barred Owl or Native American war cry at any gathering of the London elite.

Richard Rhodes' book is a triumph of the art of biography. Rhodes has written a history that is both scholarly and deeply compelling. He does not minimize the troubling aspects of Audubon's life, such as his keeping slaves, but discusses these aspects with an historian's calm and caring perspective. This is very much a biography about Audubon the man, not Audubon the icon. His sometimes-rocky relationship with Lucy often seems teetering on dissolving, especially while Audubon is away being wined and dined in England. Their passionate letters to each other, full of longings, doubts and questions, cross constantly in the snail's pace of correspondence in the early nineteenth century. Who would have imagined that Audubon's life was also the story of a great romance overcoming tremendous obstacles?

Audubon is shown by Rhodes to be not just a great artist and ornithologist, but also an accomplished writer, something that is easy to overlook when gazing at the

magnificent elephant folio prints. Audubon also needs to be understood as an important environmental historian of America. He bore witness to the clearing of the vast and seemingly inexhaustible forests, the taming of a wilderness that once housed the endless flights of Passenger Pigeons and other uniquely American wildlife. Audubon knew it would all change. For Audubon, his work was meant to be a testament of a world that he knew was rapidly vanishing to be forever replaced by cities, railroads, and an ever-burgeoning population. His willingness to leave a safe life behind to follow and paint the birds of early America has left us with a lively and beautiful portrait of an America that will never be again. But as Richard Rhodes writes:

As for the rest of us, wherever there are birds there is Audubon: *rara avis* (p. 435). 

From MassWildlife

LOOK OUT FOR LOONS

The haunting wail of the common loon (*Gavia immer*) evokes a sense of wild and remote areas which may be why some people are surprised to learn Massachusetts is home to a small, but growing number of nesting loons. MassWildlife Biologists Bridgett McAlice and Carolyn Mostello recently summarized common loon nesting activity for 2004 and will be working with other cooperators this spring to document loon nesting sites across the state. In 2004, 28 territorial pairs on 12 waterbodies were documented with 19 attempting to nest. A total of thirteen chicks were produced and presumed fledged. In 2003, 24 pairs of territorial loons were observed with 19 pairs nesting on 6 waterbodies.

“The Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoirs are home to the majority of Massachusetts’ nesting loons,” said McAlice. “Other nests have been documented in relatively quiet water supplies and private ponds in Worcester County, but it’s entirely possible there are nests in other parts of the state which haven’t been reported to us.” McAlice noted that cooperators and volunteers played a vital role in gathering field data for MassWildlife. She acknowledged the efforts of the Department of Conservation Recreation, Massachusetts Aquatic Conservation Society, Biodiversity Institute, Forbush Bird Club, and other volunteers.

As soon as pond ice melts, loons sporting their striking black and white breeding plumage will be returning to their territorial waters. Egg laying begins at the end of May. McAlice encourages anyone to report sightings of loons, specifically pairs of birds, seen from mid-April through May. Be sure to include the name of the town, location and name of waterbody to her at the Central District Wildlife Office at 508-835-3607.

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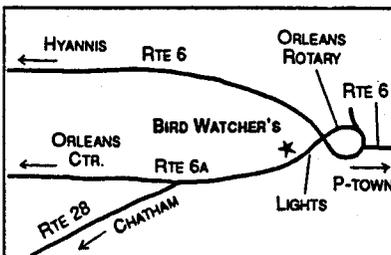
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