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Very Like A Whale: A Lesson by Bill Whan

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale.

Hamlet III.ii.392 ff

Birders who flocked to Seneca County in November 1996 to see a reported Marbled Murrelet had a good chance to contrast a real bird with its idealized version in the field guides. All of us had heard that the bird had been studied by experts, so there seemed no question about its identity; our simple mission was to find the bird, enjoy looking at it, and add it to our lists. This nine-day wonder seemed like easy pickings, floating and diving on an open, diked, public reservoir. As it was, I had a chance to talk with more than 20 observers on the banks of that reservoir, and learned that many found their mission more complicated than they had anticipated.

Some eager observers looked fairly uncritically at the bird. Hadn't it already been identified? It had to be one of the alcids-- a small, almost neckless black and white diving bird, whose shape and color, lack of extensive white behind or above the eye, and obvious white "racing-stripe" along the scapulars distinguished it, or so the field guides stated, from all others as a Marbled Murrelet in basic plumage. That was that. If a few things looked odd, well, they weren't odd enough to make it look like anything else. Check it off the list.

Others, myself included, had read that all of the score or so Marbled Murrelets recorded east of the Mississippi had proved to be of the Siberian race, acknowledged as distinguishable in the field, and moreover rumored soon to be recognized as a separate species. Photos and drawings of this race helped us to prepare for what to look for in the Seneca County bird, and these distinctions seemed borne out by our observations. The bird, we concluded, was not a Marbled Murrelet at all, but possibly a new species, far rarer in the US. While perhaps we knew more than others about what to look for, we also obediently scanned for what we'd been told to notice. Finding these marks, we were easily satisfied. Others perhaps hadn't done as much homework, but like them we followed the book.

Among better birders, many looked puzzled by what they were seeing. They kept trying to get better looks, and consulted their field guides frowningly. These observers seemed less than immediately enthusiastic with the find, and they lingered to talk it over with others. They seemed to think the bird was anomalous: it had no partial white neck collar, no apparent area of white above and behind the bill, and hardly a hint of that sharp blackish extension of the upperparts' color from the shoulder onto the breast. It didn't look like the photos or paintings of the Marbled Murrelet; it didn't really look like anything in the guides. One wondered about the smooth and uninterrupted demarcation between black and white on the head, throat, and breast-- something like a Pacific Loon's,

and very unlike the illustrations. And how to explain the pale spot on its dark nape when the bird faced away, or the longish, almost murre-like bill?

Now of course everyone knows that the AOU has recognized the Siberian form as a separate species, *Brachyramphus perdix*, the Long-billed Murrelet. Seemingly this confirmed the well-informed expectations of those of us who had anticipated the find by studying the less-widely read ornithological publications. But what if the AOU had split *B. marmoratus* into THREE species? Would our notes-- had we bothered to take any-- have helped us to be sure which one we'd seen? I must confess I can't be certain in my own case. With my head full of book-learning and with the reports of others' observations, I might not have paid enough attention to what was before my eyes.

Even though I could have learned more about that bird by studying it more carefully, I hope I did learn something from better birders-- whether or not they were prejudiced by having read about the Siberian form-- who scrutinized the bird itself, and refused to accept received opinion that it was either a camel, a weasel, or a whale.

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Thayer's Gull. C.J. Brown Res. (Clark Co.), 11/9/96.
Photo by Yvonne M. Mohlman, M.D.

Birding the Home Front-- the Holmes Area by Robert D. Schlabach

[Editor's note: the following article appeared originally in *The Bobolink* 1(2):10-11, published by the Holmes Area Birding Society, and is reprinted here with permission. *The Bobolink* is a fine new publication, impressive in appearance and content, covering the following counties-- Richland, Ashland, Wayne, Stark, Knox, Holmes, Coshocton, Tuscarawas, Carroll, Harrison and Guernsey. One year subscriptions (four issues) are available for \$7.50, payable to *The Bobolink*, c/o Leroy E. Yoder, 4501 TR 606, Fredericksburg, OH 44627.]

A careful study of the birds that occur regularly in Ohio will reveal that only a very low percentage haven't been seen in our region of the state some time in the past, with most showing up annually. According to my research, of 288 species that are considered regular in Ohio, 276, or 96 percent, have been recorded here, including all 137 passerines. Our biggest deficit is, understandably, in the gull family, where we are missing eight species that are more or less regular in Ohio.

Of course many rarities that aren't regular in Ohio have been spotted here as well. There is a twofold reason for this plethora of bird sightings: diversity of habitat and an extensive network of field birders. In this article I will attempt to give an overview of some of our prime areas and habitats, and discuss a few of the birds that thrive here.

The hemlock gorges and extensive pines and mixed hardwoods of Mohican State Park and Forest are a unique feature in our area. Numerous rare breeding birds that generally nest farther north can be found here, such as Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush and Canada Warbler. There are also some species that are isolated from their breeding range farther south, like Pine and Worm-eating Warblers.

The Funk-Blachleyville area of southwest Wayne County was at one time probably the best inland shorebird location in the entire state during spring migration. Fall-plowed and stubble fields flooded in the spring, turning to mudflats which attracted hundreds of shorebirds, including such incredible records as 101 Whimbrels on May 26, 1984, and 60 Red Knots on May 19, 1983. Ruffs have appeared here on at least three different occasions. Vegetation has taken over much of this area in the last six to eight years, greatly reducing the prime habitat. However, when conditions are right, this area can still produce fairly impressive shorebird numbers. Birders who visited this area during its heyday in the 1970's and 1980's can only dream of how it used to be and hope that maybe someday it will revert back to its former attractiveness.

The Killbuck Marsh Wildlife Area is our region's answer to the western Lake Erie marshes, matching up almost species for species, and even harboring a breeding bird, the Sandhill Crane, that regularly nests nowhere else in the state. Ohio's largest population of Prothonotary Warblers currently resides in the extensive marshes bordering Killbuck Creek in portions of Wayne, Holmes and Coshocton Counties (*The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas*, Peterjohn and Rice, 1991).