

A Primer on Birdsmanship

Rob Harlan is on leave, and will have one of his "Further Afield" columns in our next issue, so we prevailed upon a British colleague for a guest column offering some instruction in a pastime becoming popular in the U.S. -- Ed.

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Birdsmen are reporting ever more beginners in our midst, some of whom have sought our advice on how to sharpen their skills. Perhaps the time has come to offer these eager youngsters more than just another demonstration of the art out in the field. Here we offer, however sketchily (some techniques are being tested, and hence not yet ready to disclose), an exposition of some of birdsmanship's first principles, derived from my experiences in the States.

To those birdsmen* who fear that public revelations of their manoeuvres may put them at a disadvantage, I can only say they harbour far too low an opinion of our sport. A wider familiarity with the game's rules and etiquette can only improve the play, and with it the satisfaction of winning. Nor should the necessary incompleteness of what we present here daunt us. We have only to set our feet on the right path, confident that the community of birdsmen will continue the advance. If we of the present day may in some ways see farther, we do so only by standing on the shoulders of the giants who taught us in days gone by.

How to begin? That there are fundamental principles to be discovered in the complex and subtle interplay that enlivens the pastime of birding can scarcely be denied.

At the same time there are those who worry, with some justification, that laying out these principles in a systematic way might deprive birdsmanship of its delightful spontaneity, and even encourage the appearance of an entire new cohort of practitioners with an all too mechanical devotion to the craft. We must therefore steer between twin hazards: the Scylla of mere accumulations of anecdotes, however enlightening, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of style-cramping dogmatism on the other.

We will begin, as directed by Aristotle (an accomplished birdsmanship in his own right), with definitions. Simply put, birdsmanship is the art of seeming a much better birder than one really is. As performance, birdsmanship must of course be social, and requires an audience, real or implied. Because theirs is an art rather than a science, skilled birdsmen are able to disguise their own ignorance, deftly outplaying those who are merely better birders. Even when

*We do not apologize for using the term "birdsmen" to refer to birdsmen both masculine and feminine. "Man" comes from the well of Old English undefiled, and means, like the German *Mensch*, simply "human being." If our brothers can find no better word than "male" to denote their sex, so be it.

the birdsmanship actually knows something, he may disguise that knowledge, preferring instead to enlist the allegiance readily granted to the underdog.

My own ambition was first fired when as a young tourist I was privileged to watch the accomplished birdsmanship Phoebe Dunnock out-duel a widely-admired but rather smug expert, whose name I will not here reveal. The backdrop was a reeking mudflat in Florida Bay, where a crowd—composed of individual birders and a large tour group led by Expert—was scanning multitudes of feeding waders. As Expert confidently called off the names of species present, Dunnock reacted to each new find with a barely audible "hmm" of mild pleasure—or perhaps it was mild surprise—briefly regarding each bird through a curious pair of inordinately bulky old field glasses. Inevitably, a skirmish ensued.

Expert (pointing, an incautious excitement entering his voice):
Flamingos!

Dunnock: Really? Are they right or left of the spoonbills?

Expert (a bit impatiently, warding off any impression he'd made an elementary error): No, over here, on the horizon. You can barely make them out in the heat-haze. Look, you can see the black flight feathers when they lift their wings!

Dunnock: Ah yes, way out there...I wonder which species they are?

Expert (now with a sharp glance at Dunnock): Which species?

Dunnock: Well, aren't there several flamingo species in zoos around here? I'm a bit rusty on some of them, I'm afraid. *(Then, with good-natured humour)* Maybe somebody could shinny up one of those palm trees far enough to get a good look at the legs....

I knew Dunnock had never in fact seen a flamingo outside of the captive ones at the Bronx Zoo, and that she had probably been bewildered by many of the shorebirds present, but in a revelatory flash I recognized her cunning hint that Expert had made a too-hasty identification of what might, furthermore, be only birds of any of several exotic species escaped from some racetrack or the well-groomed grounds of a stately home, thus subtly ruining his moment. I saw him actually take a half-hearted step toward the nearest palms before trying to recover with a review of salient field-marks, which ploy Dunnock of course deftly countered by congratulating him on his discovery, while commiserating that the birds were so difficult to see well. A small victory, you may say, but on the walk back I overheard beginners in the group asking Dunnock's help with soaring vultures, and Expert grew more grumpy and subdued as the morning wore on, further underscoring her success.

Well illustrated here in Dunnock's play is the first great principle of our art, that *birdsmanship play only with other birdsmanship, or with their betters*. No true birdsmanship will be so crassly impolite as to embarrass a beginner, or avail herself of any crude advantage of genuine expertise. Underlying this practice is the twin principle that *the best birdsmanship is the best sportsman*. Among other things, this means that the birdsmanship will always behave more courteously than rivals, and conspicuously so. Stephen Potter, that great expositor of birdsmanship, illustrates this precept well when, speaking of other games, he states that the golfer, seeking an advantage by stalling play, must never do so by searching at length for his *own* ball in a rough, but for his *opponent's*, just as

the billiardsman, hoping to distract his rival with noisy cue-chalking, must do so not when his opponent is lining up a shot, but while he lines up *one of his own*.

Many useful subsidiary principles derive from the inviolable rule of sportsmanship. You will automatically go one-up by appearing the more courteous contestant, but at the same time your sportsmanlike demeanour will always, as if unintentionally of course, have the further effect of demoralizing your opponent. Accordingly, apprentices should commit to memory the following sub-precepts: EXCEL WITH SELF-DEPRECIATION, UNDERMINE WITH PRAISE, ADVANCE THROUGH DEFERENCE, and HAMPER WITH HELPFULNESS. Allow us to offer some elementary examples for the beginners among our readers.

As for the first sub-precept, suppose an immature skua (I believe you Yanks charmingly persist in calling them jaegers) flashes by your shoreline viewpoint, and some cocky chap calls it a long-tailed. "I never could have identified that one," you must say, "So you caught a glimpse of the undertail coverts?" If your rival, suddenly wary, begins to enumerate other field-marks, continue by saying, "So many of these young birds can be such a muddle, I'm afraid, especially in such a quick look." Just a light touch, but listeners will begin to wonder if your rival may have jumped the gun on this one.

As for undermining with praise, this is the converse of the preceding. "You have so much more experience with those races of white-crowned sparrow," you can say, "We almost never get a chance to practice on the white-lored ones around here." As to whether this lack of practice may be due to ignorance, or alternatively to the absence of the birds in question, you may leave for the audience to decide. Even if she is a genuine expert, what can Rival respond? If she answers, "I must admit I've spent a lot of time out West studying these sparrows," she sounds a trifle self-trumpeting, and if she counters with humility it must inevitably sound a false note.

Advancing through deference has many applications, but one primary ploy is exemplified after a distant bird briefly appears flapping over a marsh. The birdsman will often choose not to jump to conclusions, perhaps by looking thoughtful, then asking, "Well, what do *you* think?" even—or especially—when the ID seems straightforward. The birdsman can then proceed directly to undermining with praise.

Hampering with helpfulness will be familiar to anyone who has felt compelled to rush up flight of stairs by a "helpful" stranger holding open a door for one at the top of the steps, when one notices the stranger's features gradually reveal a struggle to avoid showing impatience with one's slow upward progress. Such a primitive gambit, it is hardly worth mentioning, would never disable an accomplished birdsman, who would counter by cheerfully waving thanks, then dropping to one knee to pretend to tie one or even both shoelaces, leaving the challenger to look foolish. This ploy works best, we must emphasize, when one's shoes actually have laces.

A perennially useful technique involves acting more politely than one's opponent. Any praiseworthy display of birding etiquette can, when guilefully carried slightly to excess, serve the birdsman in jockeying for advantage. Some elementary examples follow.

Birders never disturb birds unduly. Match Rival's bold stride with exaggeratedly cautious stealth. When he advances towards a bird, you must yourself retreat, or at least move off at a tangent, as if seeking a less disruptive vantage point. When Rival speaks, wince almost imperceptibly and as if involuntarily at the volume of his voice, and when you must answer, whisper.

Birders respect the environment. If your rival absentmindedly picks at a bit of bark, wonder aloud if it might be the preferred nesting material for a local warbler. Be seen inconspicuously propping up stems of plants your rival may have trod upon, or replacing clods of earth stirred by her heedless boots. Birders take notes on observations. If your antagonist seizes the initiative here, taking voluminous notes upon finding an unusual bird, take none yourself, saying "Oh, notes are so important...but I like to use every available moment to observe the bird itself." If on the other hand Rival fails to take notes, take many, especially on common species like starlings, saying, "See? Must be a pre-flocking behaviour. Did anyone bring a thermometer? Ought to include the temperature in my report..."

Birders are cautious about jumping to conclusions about identifications. Suppose the birding has become rather slow at the arboretum, and Rival lowers his binoculars, saying, "Just another flock of robins." "Yes, I suppose so," you can say, "Still, I remember one time when Sharon Woods made us go through every individual in a flock like that, and we found a varied thrush."

Some over-eager theorists have grouped these techniques under the rubric of *paralysing by polarising*. Your rival can always be rattled, and onlookers enlisted to your cause, if you skillfully contrast your style with his. If he seems obsessed with finding rarities, make it a point to scrutinize common birds. If his binoculars are costly, proudly wear an old pair of well worn-in East German naval glasses. If your antagonist goes afield in wellingtons, Barbour jacket and matching cap, wear madras Bermuda shorts, a straw boater, and tee shirt with a motorcycle theme. If on the other hand Rival takes the informal approach, by all means act a bit proper and scrupulous without seeming too stiff. It goes without saying that with clothing you must be adaptable. Many clothesmen carry two or three outfits in the boot of the car, changing into the more advantageous outfit as called for. Maintain competition on your own terms. Remember that you can hardly lose if you seem not to be playing a game.

Finally, a matter of style. Birdsmen will have noticed in the foregoing a preference for the rather more traditional British methods. In recent years, a more rough-and-tumble American style is increasingly being seen on this side of the Pond, though it must be said it remains jarringly unacceptable in many settings here. Many veteran birdsmen regard it as heavy-handed, but it has scored some undeniable successes, and its practitioners seem to revel in the risks involved. I was able to study these contrasting approaches recently as I witnessed two birdsmen sparring one September at a Delaware refuge. Brit had announced finding a winter-plumaged little stint, and had asserted the natural one-upness of the British birder in such a situation, treating the sighting with perceptible nonchalance while being elaborately helpful to Yank in pointing out field characters, careful to mention his personal goal of finding a spotted sandpiper before the day was out, etc. All very well done, of course. When the bird had flown, he extracted a notebook and made some inscrutably abbreviated jottings therein.

Brit (*mumbling, but allowing himself to be overheard*): Nice little problem.

Yank: Eh? What's that?

Brit (*half-reluctantly allowing himself to be drawn out*): Oh...well, the tertials.

Yank: The tertials? What about them?

Brit: Yes, well...what looked liked notching...I suppose it's just wear, this time of year...But it was a bit of a surprise.

Yank (*recognizing where this was leading, and that his little stint could be turning into something much less exciting*): Say, I noticed your scope—it's one of those new-fangled crystal-sort of things, isn't it? Not real glass, right?"

Brit (*a trifle guarded now*): Yes, the fluorite.

Yank: I suppose it does make it easier.

Brit (*half-sensing a veiled accusation that he's cheating somehow, but rallying*): Yes, well, rather...I must say my wife was not pleased at having to put off getting new furniture for the parlour, but it was worth every one of the extra two hundred pounds. Care to have a peek?

Yank: Oh, that's all right, thanks. A couple of my buddies have them. Touchy, aren't they, though? One guy had to send his back twice before it was re-aligned right. Anyway, I still like the old ones better—there's something warmer and more real about the image, I think.

Brit: More real?

Yank: Yeah, more analogue...more holistic—know what I mean?

Brit: Sorry? Afraid I'm not with you, old chap. Do you mean the colour correction?

Yank: No, it's...more direct somehow, less like a display...

Brit, against his better judgement, eventually grew a bit huffy. Several hallmarks of the more confrontational American style are apparent here, including the abrupt change of topic, and the use, almost diagnostic of this approach, of the boldly inscrutable. Brit's constitutional unwillingness to seem impolite is turned to a disadvantage as Yank runs roughshod over him. Birdsmen must decide which style is to their liking in a given situation, but while it is handy to be skilled in both, it is seldom advisable to mix them. I must add that my countryman rallied in this particular case, withdrawing an ebony case containing watercolours and brushes, then spending twenty minutes on a field sketch. A pity that no other onlookers witnessed this exemplary struggle!

I have, in these brief and inadequate remarks, enlisted many anecdotes and illustrative examples in the cause of clarifying some of the fundamental principles of birdsmanship. Doubtless, the beginner will always profit most from careful observation of the accomplished birdman *in the field*, rather than in the lecture room. No bare elucidation of abstract principles, no reading of the essential texts, will substitute for close study of the supple manoeuvres of skilled practitioners—and I should add that Ohio, based on my regrettably brief experiences there, has several of estimable rank, not the least of them the redoubtable Gordon Parks---at work against a well-matched opponent. Nonetheless, I hope that this rather more systematic treatment of the art's theoretical underpinnings has been of some help, to the uninitiated and the would-be birdman alike.

Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

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This report covers the spring 2005 migration period, a couple of new records from 2004, and recirculations from 2003-2004. Twenty-six records were reviewed, including 14 from Spring 2005, with one of these (Red-naped Sapsucker) a new state record. Half of these records were accepted by the committee, three were not accepted, and ten remain in circulation.

Accepted records

- Fulvous whistling-duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*
16 May 2005, Grand Lake St. Marys (Mercer Co.); J. Bowers
- Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*
15 May 2005, Ottawa NWR (Lucas & Ottawa Cos.); J. Morlan, m.obs.
- White-faced ibis *Plegadis chihi*
15 May 2005, Ottawa NWR (Lucas & Ottawa Cos.); J. Morlan, m.obs.
- Yellow rail *Coturnicops noveboracensis*
5-6 May 2005, Irwin Prairie SNP (Lucas Co.); T. Kemp, m.obs.
- Piping plover *Charadrius melodus*
30 April 2005, Shawnee SF (Scioto Co.); R. Rogers, m.obs.
- Piping plover *Charadrius melodus*
29 April - 4 May 2005, Caesar Creek SP (Warren Co.); L. Gara, m.obs.
- Red-naped sapsucker *Sphyrapicus nuchalis*
4-8 April 2005, Holmes Co.; many observers
- Bohemian waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*
6 March 2004, Cuyahoga Valley NP; J. Brumfeld
- Black-throated gray warbler *Dendroica nigrescens*
9 May 2005, Kelleys Island (Erie Co.); T. Krynak, S. & L. Roberts
- Kirtland's warbler *Dendroica kirtlandii*
16 May 2005, Metzger Marsh (Lucas Co.); J. & A. Edwards
- Kirtland's warbler *Dendroica kirtlandii*
25 May 2005, Magee Marsh (Lucas Co.); A. Boone, m.obs.
- Swainson's warbler *Limnithlypis swainsonii*
21 May 2005, Mohican SF (Ashland Co.); S. Snyder, G. Cowell, T. & T. Leslie