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This young golden eagle was found in the flats west of the old white barn at BIWA 18 Mar, Photo by Ron Sempier

## Further Afield

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I don't know how they manage it. Some people seem so confident, so authoritative—it's as if they speak in proclamations, and walk through life with some sort of Enlightened Vision Statement plastered on their foreheads. I am not one of these people. My vision statements usually refer to some branch that's blocking my view—and these statements tend not to be very enlightening.

By nature, I like to contemplate, to assess, to question. But society often pressures us to act quickly. I, on the other hand, like to do things at my own pace, and have the satisfaction of a job well done. Society often compels us to be "on the cutting edge;" this works well for some, but not for those of us who sometimes feel armed with only a butter knife. Society compels us to "think outside the box;" this is fine advice for some, but maybe not for those of us who find that we really kind of like it in there.

Occasionally, I too have been known to place needless pressure on myself. This spring, for instance, I voluntarily hoisted on the yoke in search of what has become known as The 38<sup>th</sup> Warbler. Although this may sound vaguely like a so-so Antonio Banderas movie, it actually pertains to the unusual opportunity to see 38 warbler species in Ohio in the same spring season. We have 36 warbler species that occur regularly in Ohio, and it's actually a fairly challenging task to record each of these in any given spring. As a late May migrant, the rare and demure Connecticut warbler is typically the last to be located.

For reasons unknown to mortal man, this spring both Kirtland's and Swainson's warblers were discovered in Ohio; more importantly, they both settled in long enough for many birders to catch up with one or the other. A few intrepid warbler-fiends even saw both, which, when coupled with finding the 36 regular warblers, would have provided these exalted seekers with the legendary 38<sup>th</sup> Warbler.

In my travels this spring, I encountered many birders embarked on this same quest. Some were to succeed splendidly; others, not so much. Count me in the "not so much" category, as the rare and despicable Connecticut warbler refused to appear when I needed it most. Although I was looking forward to holding a lifelong irrational grudge against all Connecticut warblers, this soon wore off when I discovered that as recently as Spring 2005, one could have seen 39 species of warblers in Ohio, when Kirtland's, Swainson's, and Black-throated gray warblers all were found here. So, as I cried myself to sleep on May 31, I tried to convince myself that missing The 38<sup>th</sup> Warbler wasn't so bad after all.

So I missed a Connecticut warbler. No big deal—and maybe it was even for the best. But naturally, this crushing grief forced me to look back and assess my entire birding career, and examine the state of mankind in general. I found that people change; that places change; that birds change; that goals are met or abandoned. I found that something exotic one day may become tiresomely familiar the next, and that something commonplace may soon fade away into nothingness, or into tender nostalgia. I thought far too much; it made my head hurt, so I stopped.

But at least this exercise inspired a premise for this column. I present you now with my nostalgic look back at birding the way it was, at least for me. Your memories may differ.

I miss my old field guides. “Bird books,” I called them. And when I first started birding, the best thing about them was that they were always right. My favorite bird book back then was unquestionably the 1966 edition of Chandler S. Robbins’s “Golden Guide,” or *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America*. My other option, the 1947 edition of Roger Tory Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds (East)* seemed rather stuffy and cumbersome. Really there was no comparison: Peterson included only eastern birds, but Robbins included almost every bird to be found in the east and west; many of Peterson’s plates were printed in black and white, while Arthur Singer’s plates in the Golden Guide were all brought to you in living color; Peterson included only textual delineations of a bird’s range, while Robbins boasted colorful range maps. Robbins even included something called sonograms, which attempted to illustrate birds’ vocalizations visually. All these features seemed to make the Golden Guide that much more authoritative—but I still carried Peterson, just in case.

But while these field guides were useful on a broad scale, I needed something more local as well. I found Donald L. Newman’s 1969 *A Field Book of Birds of the Cleveland Region* indispensable and revealing. Here was my introduction to the elegance of histograms or bar-graphs, to acknowledging noteworthy bird records, and to the wide variety of birding sites present in the Cleveland area. Newman managed to pack all of this into 48 pocket-sized pages. And I can still quote his description of Virginia Kendall Park—“over 1,500 acres of fields and forests, and a small lake, none of which has been birded intensively. Here’s a chance to be a discoverer....” That was powerful stuff.

If Newman’s little book was my trusty companion, then Arthur B. Williams’s 1950 *Birds of the Cleveland Region* was my professor. Scholarly and reliable, thorough and unpretentious, this 215-page tome sparked my interest in the historical aspects of birding. If you’ve read my columns in the past, you may have noted my interest in historical birding. This book is to blame, and it’s still one of my favorites.

I think it’s also proper to acknowledge that members of the Kirtland Bird Club supplied the technical expertise for each book, and that both were published by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. These organizations have never wavered in their support of our local birds, and continue to publish, organize, preserve, and educate. I don’t know if they also attempted to inspire—but it worked on me just the same.

After all these years, I’m sad to say that my old bird books, with their taped bindings and frayed edges, are now a bit worse for wear. And perhaps they aren’t as foolproof as I once liked to believe. But I believe I’ll keep them, if that’s all right with you.

I miss my trips to the zoo. My frequent visits to the Cleveland Zoo provided many special childhood memories. The vibrant ensemble of penguins, toucans, kookaburras, and their other assembled brethren in the old Birds of the World Building provided my introduction to, appropriately, the birds of the world, and the endlessly-playing loop recording of background bird sounds forever burned the call of the screaming piha into my pliable mind. I can almost hear it now....please, please make it stop.

But the bird building fell into dotage, and it disappeared just as surely as did the Talking Storybooks, metal boxes which I activated by inserting the trunk of my plastic Packey the Elephant key, and the Amazing Mold-A-Rama vending machines, which molded waxy-plastic gorilla and elephant statues right before my greedy eyes.

While I dearly miss the Mold-A-Rama machines, I don’t miss the decrepit, fetid, and archaic cat and primate building, which was obviously a holdover from the Middle Ages. The cages lining the outside of the building were at least open to fresh air,

but even these enclosures were Spartan at best, consisting of a crumbling concrete slab surrounded by bricks and bars. For some reason, I became attached to one unfortunate occupant, a giant anteater, which even at that young age I recognized as neither a cat nor a primate. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him as he mindlessly paced his cage, shuffling back and forth behind the bars; long claws, made for digging, instead clicking uselessly on the concrete; his singular snout always pointing hopefully downward, awaiting the rare appearance of some foolhardy crawling thing. I would watch this behavior for a long time, and although I instinctively knew something was amiss with these conditions, I felt helpless to do anything about them.

As every child is taught, while at the zoo one does not feed the animals. But no one ever told me explicitly not to toss woody, spiky, ball-like sweetgum fruits into an anteater’s cage, and so I would do exactly that when no one was looking. He would nudge these spiky little balls here and there ahead of him with his long snout, just as a child might do with a new Matchbox car. Have you ever seen an anteater smile? I have.

Thankfully, zoos have improved dramatically since then, and the old cat and primate building is long gone. I think a zoo’s best and ultimate purpose is not to breed or house animals, but to inspire an appreciation of them. And somehow, even with those deplorable conditions, the old Cleveland Zoo managed to inspire one child to grow beyond his concern for one particular anteater to a deeper appreciation and concern for all anteaters. Which, although sappy, is pretty neat, I think.

I miss old-style TV nature programs. Are you as tired of overbearing crocodile tormentors as I am? Good grief, leave those poor things alone already. I miss kinder, gentler nature shows like Mutual of Omaha’s *Wild Kingdom* and *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*. As I remember it, Mutual of Omaha (for liability purposes, I suppose) would never let their dignified host Marlin Perkins out of his canoe or jeep; instead, Marlin would send his indentured servant Jim Fowler into the swamp or brush to subdue some partially tranquilized croc or wildebeest, but even then only for its own good. “Don’t forget to staple one of those big, plastic ID tags into his ear, Jim—it won’t hurt him a bit,” Marlin would say. And I believed him.

Jacques-Yves Cousteau would never send anyone out to wrestle anything. He was a thinking man’s naturalist, a romantic. I can still hear him say something like “I nevaïr cease to marvell at ze gentill ahlbatrahss; so gracefool in his aerial domain, and so undesairving of ze unflattairing appellashun ‘goonay baird’.” Now that’s kinder and gentler, if you can translate it. Even Jim and Rudy from *Nature Scene* would be proud, although in their vernacular, they might simply have said that the albatross was “doing very well here.”

I miss my old birding haunts. I miss the Magee Marsh Bird Trail—at least its pre-boardwalk days, when you needed to cross narrow plank bridges to span the watery gaps. I miss the old Gordon Park Impoundment, with its predictable cast of birders and its unpredictable array of rare birds. I miss Donald Gray Gardens, this little gem now as long gone as its former neighbor, Cleveland Municipal Stadium.

And I miss places that you’ve never even heard of—places like the Green Bridge, the Boy Scout Cabin, and Ohmygolly Swamp. These are places where my parents and I would go birding back when I was very young. I hope you have places like this too, places that have special meaning, if only for you. I hope you have your own, because I’ll be keeping mine.

So it really doesn’t matter if you miss the 38<sup>th</sup> Warbler, or don’t feel able or compelled to live up to society’s expectations. Appreciate what you have, or what you’ve had, or else you may miss the point entirely.