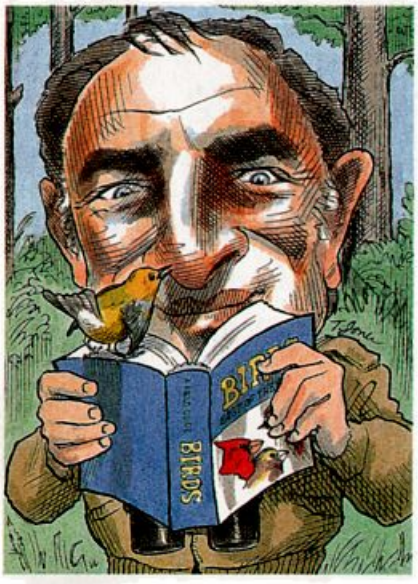
Paul R. Ehrlich

Enjoying being a non-expert



PERHAPS, LIKE ME, YOU STARTED birding recently. Perhaps you have to check your field guide to remind yourself how to tell a Whimbrel from a dowitcher. If you too are among the roughly 10 percent of males who are color-blind, you find it impossible to identify a bird on the basis of descriptions like "in Louisiana Waterthrush the flank ground and undertail covert color is clean pale to ochraceous buff, pale cinnamon or fawn, and is usually rather bright, often very bright." If, like me, you find it nearly impossible to interpret sonagrams, then you probably are vaguely embarrassed going out birding with pros who can call the name of every bird by its song (or, worse yet, its chip note) long before you ever see it.

If so, this column is dedicated to you. I'm not only color-blind, I'm tone-deaf. A quarter of a century as a pilot destroyed my ability to hear high frequencies, so I often can't even hear warblers warble, let alone instantly identify them by the sounds they make. And my eyes aren't what they used to be, so when I bird with Susan Drennan or Kenn Kaufman, "birding" consists mostly of saying "Where, Where?" as they patiently guide my line of sight to some elusive dickybird. "Just look up in the left tree in the back, below the two yellow leaves [still color-blind, can't see it]. No, no, just follow the thin branch up to where it forks and the becard's sitting right in the fork facing away" [at last I spot it]. Just the same, I have a hell of a good time birding—and so will you, even if you never become an expert.

DARRYL WHEYE

A Eurasian Ruff spotted on the San Diego harbor shores—they have a fascinating breeding biology.

First of all, I bird for myself, not against the experts. My ambition is to see almost all North American birds alive in the field, and eventually to see about a quarter of the world's birds. These self-set goals may be achievable because I travel a great deal on business. But if I don't reach them, I'll have no regrets—the joy is in the trying. If I couldn't travel, I would confine my birding to the Stanford University campus and still never get tired of it.

Just watching Scrub Jays outside of my classroom has increased my understanding of how nature works. One day, for instance, I saw a jay attack a juvenile starling, whose life was saved by the intervention of an adult starling. Subsequently, another starling under jay attack was rescued by two or three California Towhees. Why did they do it? I'll discuss some possibilities in a future column. But the point is that all action isn't in the Amazon, on Attu, or along the Mexican border. Birding at home can be an adventure too.

If you must travel, watching birds can help preserve your sanity through cancelled flights, airline food, sterile motel rooms, and dull meetings. Last year my color-blind birding companion, John Harte, and I both spoke at a meeting on the "Gaia Hypothesis"

DARRYL WHEYE

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in San Diego. The Gaia Hypothesis is the notion that Earth is one gigantic organism that is self-regulatory and makes things ever-better for life. The idea suffers from one small defect—it is utter nonsense.

The papers were mostly dull and often wrong, so John and I were soon listening to the San Diego rare bird alert and then off to try to find a Ruff reported along the harbor shores. Carefully following the instructions, we arrived at the point of last sighting where soon, among a mob of other shorebirds, we found this Eurasian straggler.

Ruffs have a fascinating breeding biology. Although they are shorebirds related to snipe, they have a mating system similar to that of prairie-chickens and many other grouse. Ordinarily, 5 to 20 males display communally on a traditional mating arena or "lek." There are normally two types of males, presumably two genetic forms, which behave differently and also have distinctive plumages. "Independents" either hold or will hold territories on the lek, display aggressively, and have dark display plumage. "Satellites" generally do not display and have light display plumage. The latter are more or less tolerated by the independents and mate opportunistically. The independent males perform a wide variety of displays, featuring a showy ruff of feathers around their necks, and do battle with each other but are silent. As in lekking grouse, a few males monopolize most of the females, although the relative success of independent and satellite males is not known with precision and has been the topic of interesting evolutionary speculation. On a lek in Holland, one male participated in 52 of 100 observed copulations.

The Ruff John and I saw was not in breeding plumage, but it was good enough for us. We are both "twitchers," and were delighted to tick the bird on our North American lists even though we'd already seen breeding Ruffs in Europe. We headed back to the hotel where the meetings were being held, pleased to have missed an entire afternoon of dreadful papers. As we neared the hotel, I suddenly thought I was hallucinating. I had just returned from lecturing on a Stanford Alumni Association trip to the Amazon, where we had been thrilled by dawn and dusk flights of parrots across the river. There in San Diego, I was unprepared for what appeared to be a flight of *Amazona* parrots zooming across the road.

John swung the car around and gave chase, and we were able to follow the flock to a tree overlooking the parking lot of a condominium. In this "wild" setting, we began studying the parrots (about 15 of them), making careful notes, since, of course, they weren't pictured in our field guides The parrots were bright red, with a dark area around the eyes. As we made more notes, a gentleman strolled by, and I suddenly had an idea. "Sir, would you do me a favor and look at those parrots through these binoculars?" He obliged. "What color are they?" "Bright green."

Moral: never find rare parrots (or hummers) if you and your buddy are both color-blind. We corrected our description, but ransacking Forshaw and Cooper's *Parrots of the World* and even a call to the San Diego Audubon Society failed to give us a positive identification. Parrots in their homelands are often endangered by the trade in exotic birds, but there are many more parrot species flying around North America now than when John James Audubon was studying our birds. They give some organizations fits trying to decide which species are well enough established to "list." But as non-experts, we can just enjoy their beauty and behavior—and realize we are observing part of the bastardization of Earth's flora and fauna. This is accelerating as people thoughtlessly transplant organisms, often to the detriment of both native species and humanity, as the introduction of the European Starling to North America so dramatically illustrates.

In this column, I'm going to concentrate on how to have fun watching birds—even if you, too, have trouble remembering where scapulars and tertials are—on avian ecology; on evolution and behavior; and on what birds are telling us about the state of our planet. Meanwhile, the next time you can't tell whether the bird you're watching is a Pacific-slope or Cordilleran Flycatcher (Aren't *Empidonax* fun?), relax. Imagine that it is 1988, before the species were "split" and both were called the "Western Flycatcher." Besides, if you're as bad a bird identifier as I am, it's probably a Western Wood-Pewee anyway. Just remember that most birders are non-experts, and enjoy watching the little flycatcher hunt for insects.

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