

Pete Dunne

UTAH—Halfway Between Colorado and Nevada



“YOU GOTTA GO TO UTAH,” RICK Blom insisted. “There are more raptors out there than even you can imagine.”

Rick paused here to give my mind time to process the enormity of this assertion, and perhaps to give A.T.&T., one of Rick’s favorite charities, time to calculate its earnings. “More raptors than even I can imagine comes to a lot of raptors. My imagination, as any member of the New Jersey rarities committee can attest, is pretty expansive and I’ve done time at places like Cape May, New Jersey, and Eilat, Israel—places that see a lot of raptors, let me tell ya.”

“JEEzus, Mary, and Joseph Smith but there is a Red-tailed Hawk on every telephone pole out there and I’m not lying,” Rick lied. “There are more eagles than jackrabbits and there’s more rabbits than rabbitbrush,” he prophesied.

I did some quick calculations based on Rick’s observations and my knowledge of Great Basin vegetation. Near as I can figure it, if Utah’s wintering Red-taileds were placed beak to tail they would form a line stretching from Alpha Centauri to the Crab Nebula, leaving (approximately) half a galaxy of slack. Certainly Rick was exaggerating just a tad.

“What was a nice boy from Maryland doing in Utah,” I wanted to know. “Looking at gulls,” he replied, matter-of-factly.

“Who’s birder-on-the-spot out there?”

“Ella Sorensen,” he pronounced.

“Great lady. You’re gonna like her.”

This, at least, was no exaggeration.

Ella Sorensen is shorter than taller with hair cut short for ease and convenience. She is a full-time wife, full-time mother, full-time and part-time member of the work force (holding three jobs), and more than full-time birder.

Ella started birding in 1977 when the arrival of her firstborn interrupted a career as a medical technologist. Motherhood, this dynamic Utah native discovered, was satisfying but confining—challenging but not particularly all-encompassing. There were holes enough in a day for boredom to creep in, and boredom is anathema to the energetic likes of Ella Sorensen. Then, one day (as the nearly universal story goes), this bird appeared in the back yard. It turned out to be an Oregon Junco.

It turned out to be NUMBER 1. And the story of the woman who put Utah on North America’s birding map goes on from there. I stumbled into the plot on a cold, still morning in February.

“Where do you want to go?” Ella asked.

“Anywhere you like. You’re the expert.”

“Is there anything you particularly want to see?” she probed, inviting a listener’s twitch response.

“No,” I replied. “Not really. It’s all just good clean birding to me.”

“But,” I added, (there’s always a “but”) “but, if you want to specialize, we can focus on raptors. Rick Blom raved about raptors out here.”

Ella looked a bit unhappy about this. First, because raptors have an historic lock on popularity in Utah. Second, because...

“Raptors are down this year,” she



“Morning sunlight was beginning to erase the stars...we turned west heading for the sagebrush ocean where space and silence are the dominant features.” Photograph Pete Dunne.

allowed, sorry to disappoint her guest. "But we can go out into the west desert where I took Rick. They'll be plenty of Rough-leggeds and eagles and maybe a Prairie Falcon or a Ferrug."

This didn't sound like bad fare from an East Coast birder's standpoint. I cheerfully agreed that this sounded like a fine course of action. Morning sunlight was beginning to erase the stars that are bright enough to battle the lights of Salt Lake City and win. We turned west heading for the sagebrush ocean where space and silence are the dominant features and human souls expand to fill the void...or they get out of town.

If you were to ask your basic birder to rank the states according to their birding potential, few would account Utah in the top three or four. As a matter of fact, some might place it 51st, anticipating statehood for District of Columbia.

Ironically, Utah's popularity lag may in part be traced to the state's compelling raptorial wealth. Birds of prey



A Rough-legged Hawk sitting on high small branches—a natural position that helps birders identify Rough-leggeds. Photograph/Roger and Donna Aikenhead.

have long held the state's academic spotlight. Raptor food—shorebirds, passerines, etc.—stood very much in the raptorial shadow.

And birders, those errant knights whose expansive focus raises even the lowly sparrows to levels of esteem, didn't rush to Utah's rescue. Until recently, few out-of-state birders



"Ella Sorensen. Great lady. You're gonna like her." This was no exaggeration.

ventured into the region to carry news of its existence (and that of birds like Snowy Plovers, Spotted Owls, White-tailed Ptarmigan, Blue Grouse, Black Swifts, and Rosy Finches) to the outside world. Still, the number of transient birders, paltry though it may be, might outnumber native birders. By Ella's estimate, there are only "20-30 'birders' in the state and only two or three who might chase a sighting."

"Maybe five if it were close," amended Ella.

Ten years ago, a few birders on the sport's cutting edge wondered whether there were *any* birders in Utah. The Utah State Bird Checklist had been shepherded by a congenial and greatly loved academician whose standards for accepting sight identifications were not as rigorous as most today. The list, containing a few obvious temporal and extralimital zingers, was taken as a rather unfavorable measure of Utah birding acumen.

Ella changed that. Teaming up with Dr. William Behle, who as it turns out welcomed sharing the Listmeister's burden, the list was critically reviewed. Spurious and undocumented sightings (like California Condor) were trashed. Temporal specs for arrivals and departures (Rusty Blackbird in August!?) were tightened. In 1985, the new list was published, a lean, mean 367 species—tight enough to withstand the scrutiny of even a California records committee. Utah bird-

ing finally got the firm footing it needed. And its stock has gone nowhere but up from there.

We took the cutoff to Ophir, a ghost town whose spirit has been revived recently by prospecting suburbanites

"There is a large Bald Eagle roost somewhere up in the canyon," Ella explained. They should be heading out soon.

"Large" is one of those teflon-coated words that comprehension has a tough time sticking to. What constitutes a "large eagle roost" in, say, New Jersey (20 birds) would hardly measure up to "large" standards at Tule Lake, California (where 600 eagles have been counted all sitting around a hole in the ice). Judging from the habitat west of Salt Lake City, your basic basin-and-range sandwich, I figured Utah's idea of "large," was pretty close to New Jersey standards. Still, it doesn't hurt to ask.

"How large?"

"Several hundred," Ella affirmed.

"Several hundred?" I demanded, in a voice that passed through notes I haven't hit since I started shaving.

"Uh-huh. Hundred," Ella affirmed "Utah has one of the largest concentrations of wintering Bald Eagles in the country."

Ah. Of course. It's the lake, I surmised. The birds must be foraging along Great Salt Lake.

But there aren't any fish in the Great Salt Lake, are there? And from what I'd seen, the number of wintering waterfowl wasn't sufficient to sustain several hundred eagles.

"What do they eat?" I wanted to know.

"Jackrabbits, mostly," Ella said, smiling, keeping one eye on the road and one on the sky above the canyon "There are lots of jackrabbits . . . and lots of hunters," she explained.

Road kills, too. I recalled, thinking back to the bounty of rabbit carcasses we'd passed along the way. *A population of eagles wintering in a cold desert, living on jackrabbits. What a world.*

What a canyon. The land closed in, pinning the road between walls of juniper. We stopped, stepping onto snow that squeaked underfoot. The "finest packed powder in the world," saith the ski crowd. Mountain Chickadees *tweedled* and *dee, dee, deed* from opposing sides of the road. Cold

sunlight began to creep down from the peeks.

"There's a bird," I said, pointing. "Over the south wall."

High overhead, gliding on set wings, an immature bird was heading out for the sagebrush flats. Two more followed; two adults, pumping intermittently. They were followed by another . . .

another . . . another . . . two more . . . a trio . . . another . . .

"We'd better get going," Ella encouraged. "We have a lot of ground to cover."

And there was, too. A lot of ground. A lot of low, flat plains bristling with sagebrush; a lot of juniper-studded peaks that fell away to reveal another ocean of sagebrush beyond.

Basin and range.

It was exhilarating. It was harsh and beautiful. It was empty. Hardly a sizeable tree intruded to mar that perfect emptiness. Only the birds were short on reverence.

"There's something," I chanted, "coming toward us. Raven!" I pronounced, shooting from the hip, basing a guess on shape and cadence and clues too subjective to be put into words.

But it wasn't a raven. On closer inspection, the bird was clearly a raptor.

"Make that a Red-tailed," I corrected.

But it wasn't a Red-tailed, either. The approaching bird had a discernible eaglesque air about it.

"Ferrug," I amended, grasping the short straw.

Wrong again. It wasn't a Ferruginous Hawk. It was an immature Bald Eagle and as the distance between the approaching car and the approaching bird disappeared, there was little to do but acknowledge the obvious (and maybe make excuses).

"Not used to seeing eagles flying around over sage flats," I mumbled.

Ella, no stranger to eagles or sage flats, merely nodded. Her observations regarding raptor numbers were right on the money, too. There were lots of telephone poles, but lots of empty cross-bars. The surfeit of rodents that had attracted the bounty of Red-taileds during Rick Blom's visit had plainly disappeared. Raptors go where the food is and during the winter of 1989-1990 the food and most of the raptors were somewhere else.



"It wasn't a raven, a Red-tailed or even Ferruginous Hawk—the bird was clearly a raptor...it was an immature Bald Eagle." Photograph/Roger and Donna Aikenhead.

A disappointment? No, not really. In a perverse sort of way, it was exciting. Winter distribution is dynamic and it offers no promises. There is feast and there is famine. It gives birding a sense of gain and a sense of loss. Without this quality, what would put the "good" in a "good" bird? What would distinguish a "great day," from any other day afield?

Still, it's nice to see some birds now and again.

"There are two sitting on that pole," Ella observed.

Two buteos. Side by side? Now? Mated Red-taileds that remain on territory year-round sometimes do this in February. But here, now, in Utah?

The birds weren't Red-taileds. They were Rough-legged Hawks. Whatever happened to the territorial prerogative?

"Have you noticed that Rough-leggeds sit on higher, smaller branches than Red-taileds?" Ella wanted to know. "It probably has to do with the difference in weight."

I had noticed this phenomenon and, like Ella, had found it a useful aid in distinguishing the birds at a distance. The weight difference had never occurred to me. I had attributed the Rough-legged's penchant for perching on springy limbs to the absence of sturdy footing on the tundra. Any Rough-legged that can't manage twiggy perches had better take a lichen for low horizons.

We headed west through Skull Valley, past ravens and Rough-leggeds; Golden Eagles and Utah's bolshevik breed of Bald Eagles.

"Don't get the idea that this is Utah," Ella suddenly cautioned.

I turned, puzzled. "This is *part* of Utah," Ella explained. "Prairie Falcon," she said, pointing toward a bird just lifting off.

Her point was well taken. The basin and range region is no more (or less) Utah, than the prairies are Florida, than the Rio Grande Valley is Texas. Utah encompasses Red Rock country to the south; the Rocky Mountains to the east; the Great Salt Lake marshes, and much, much more.

"I just wish that people would come out here in the spring and summer when everything is happening," Ella moaned.

And I concur. Because I *have* seen Utah in the summer and thank Immigration Canyon for my life Lazuli Bunting, and the road out to Bear River National Wildlife Reserve for the first Snowy Plover to parade before my eyes. I've been lucky enough to see the rafts of Wilson's Phalaropes bobbing like pastel ping-pong balls on the Great Salt Lake marshes and walk the quiet avenues of the City Cemetery in search of spring migrants.

"The thing that makes Utah so special," Ella continued, "is that there is still so much to discover."

And for the first time that morning, I found myself disagreeing with Utah's birder on the spot. To my mind, the thing that makes Utah so special is that it is *undiscovered*. A distinction that will not last. ■

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