

BIRDERS AT WAR

Through every conflict, soldiers have looked skyward—not for planes or missiles, but for birds in flight.

by Linn Varney

AS MANNY LEVINE LED HIS RIFLE platoon through the Hurtgen Forest of Nazi Germany in the winter of 1943, he remembers hearing skylarks singing.

Lieutenant Stuart Keith, saw a Narcissus Flycatcher from his trench in Korea and once spotted a Black-naped Oriole from a hilltop while on duty.

Joel Abramson, a Miami doctor, volunteered for military

duty because he “thought it would be a good way to see difficult birds.” He did. In the hell that was the Vietnam War, Abramson sighted more than 250 species.

The tradition of the warrior-naturalist dates back to the armies of Alexander the Great. Through every conflict on every side, some soldiers have looked skyward—not to see arrows or missiles, spears, airplanes or smart bombs—but to watch a bird in flight.

In the Persian Gulf, some American soldiers are watching. Probably some Iraqi soldiers were as well. When the army gives you binoculars, if you are a birder, you search for more than just the enemy.



“You don’t see many birds under those conditions in the middle of winter,” Levine, a well-known Long Island birder and former editor of the New York State bird journal, *The Kingbird*, recalled of his dangerous mission in the German woods. “But I do remember the skylarks singing. I’ve always loved to see and hear skylarks.”

“It’s difficult to bird when you’re being shot at, and you don’t see many birds when you’re storming a hill.” Keith, the well-traveled co-author of *The Birds of Africa*, commented drolly. Keith served on the front lines in Korea. Always a keen field birder, he was the first president of the American Birding Associa-

tion, and for a number of years he was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as Champion Bird Watcher for having seen more bird species than anyone else in the world. At that time his record was 5650 species. He lamented his inability (the shots would have given away their location) to fire at pheasants he once heard calling on a hillside below him: “it would have been the first fresh food for three months,” he says. Yet Keith’s war, too, had its avian highpoints.

Wartime military service—even combat cannot totally obliterate a passion for birds and the natural world. Birders who served in World War II and subsequent American conflicts report that soldiers with naturalist leanings can often escape, if not from fear, at least from the boredom that dogs most soldier’s military heels.

As is often pointed out, war takes people to places where they wouldn’t ordinarily be. And birders, along with other naturalists, are peculiarly equipped to see advantages in this. In the words of Frank Haas, a Vietnam vet and East-coast birder known for his work in hawk censusing, “No matter where you are you can always be involved. There’s always something of interest. A bird—anything in nature—gives you a different slant on the country you’re in.”

Often turning wartime postings to ornithological advantage, birders frequently are able to add both to their life lists and to the general body of scientific knowledge. Along the way, they enjoy, albeit infrequently, encounters with fellow enthusiasts; they also have the pleasure of turning scoffing bystanders into people tolerant, even supportive, of birding.

Enduring hardships and dangers—not to mention disciplinary actions—they could easily avoid, wartime birders take notes that may serve as the basis for later publica-



"The sights, sounds, smells and feelings" of war fade like old celluloid, says World War II veteran Chuck Bernstein (above), but the birding experiences of a half century ago stay vivid. Bernstein today (left): a southern California birder and author of *The Joy of Birding*.

tion. They sometimes are able to collect museum specimens.

WAR STORIES

Chuck Bernstein, a long-time experienced southern California birder and author of *The Joy of Birding*, served more than three years of active duty in both Europe and the Pacific during WWII. He said, "The sights, sounds, smells and feelings—the pictures imprinted on the brain—like old celluloid film are, after almost fifty years, dissolving but my birding experiences cling to my memory."

He remembers, as staff sergeant, leading his squad of combat infantrymen in a dawn raid in Germany's Black Forest. In the darkness and fog they made their way gingerly through the conifers and down a hill, always alert for mines and trip-wires.

"I stepped forward, my right foot about to descend, when a small bird flushed frantically from under my boot! Startled, I pivoted left and threw myself face-down to the ground. For one awful moment, convinced I had tripped a wire, I waited for the blast."

It was only after he got to his knees that he realized that he had spooked a tiny European Robin off its nest. He searched through the wet pine needles and found a nest hidden by the heavy ground litter. In it were three tiny, warm, bluish eggs. "I was so relieved I desperately looked through the fog for the fragile feathered mass that panicked and fled, but I couldn't linger too long."

STATESIDE SERVICE

Ken Parkes, curator of birds at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, was a reservist in

his senior year at Cornell when he was called into the Army in April of '43. Service on many U.S. bases allowed him to see a large number of North American species.

"I was, for a while, at officers training school for medical administration at Camp Berkley, near Abilene, Texas," he says. "But I flunked out because I spent too much time birding." No matter. Later, back at Cornell and working toward his Ph.D. in ornithology, he was able to publish a paper on the camp's birds. One of the most common birds in the area was the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. "It's quite spectacular, and since I had gotten known as a birder, people were always rushing up to ask about it," he recalls. "It got so I wouldn't even let them finish the question."

Other highlights of Parkes' service career included:

- A stint near L.A., where he saw about 30 species new to him (including, on the, steps of a conscripted ladies lounge, his first roadrunner) and, on the Santa Monica coast, survived an encounter with a Coastguardsman who suspected him of spying;
- Nine months at Arkansas' Camp (now Fort) Chaffee, where he nearly collapsed from sunstroke on a bicycle expedition that got him his first sight of a Little Blue Heron;
- And a stay in eastern Oklahoma, where his commanding officer ordered him, in front of the entire camp, to cease the collecting he had been doing for Cornell. Everybody knew, the officer said, that the small mammals he was gathering carried diseases.

"It was no good explaining that they didn't," Parkes says. Noting that the camp in question was "not particularly near any metropolitan area," he adds that "for about 90 percent of the soldiers, it was terrible."

If an absence of avian enthusiasts

“I had this little pair of binoculars, and I always got into trouble and got sent to the kitchen to scrub pots and pans.”

is any gauge, this estimate is way low. Despite his many moves, Parkes never once ran into a birder he had not known previously. “There are a hell of a lot more people interested now,” he says.

SOUTH PACIFIC ADVENTURE

The two birders Parkes did run into were both fellow Cornellians. One, briefly encountered in Texas, was Dwain Warner.

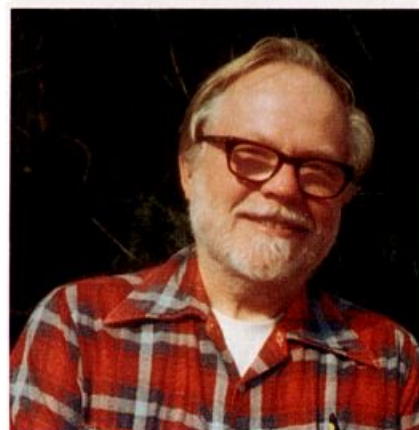
Like Parkes, Warner, who leads African bird tours and recently retired as the University of Minnesota’s curator of ornithology, was not a success as a trainee. “I had this little pair of binoculars,” he says, “and I always got into trouble and got sent to the kitchen to scrub pots and pans. I also got caught keeping lizards in my locker.”

But because biologists were needed, he and three other army men were picked up and sent to New Caledonia, where they manned the Navy’s Malaria and Epidemic Control Unit in Noumea. Though their ostensible function was mostly to collect insects and rats and experiment with insecticides and poisons, the four found time for many other activities. By far, the most important was to send “hundreds of thousands”—one sweep nets a lot of insects—of specimens back to the Smithsonian and other museums.

(Much of the credit for this massive *coup* must go to Professor William J. Hamilton, Jr., a Cornell mammologist who, Warner says, had told his students about a long-stand-



Ken Parkes (above) “flunked out” of officers training school because he spent too much time birding. Parkes is now Curator of Birds at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh (right).



ing general military order dictating that biologists and naturalists should be given every aid in gathering information and materials—and in getting it back to the Smithsonian.)

What Warner and his fellows also did was to spread a little joy. Because New Caledonia was Pacific headquarters—and because their office, an old French store with big windows up front, offered such interesting sights (a live giant fruit bat, for example), they got the attention of some of the hundreds of thousands of GIs passing through. “You feel sorry for them because there’s nothing for them to do,” Warner says. “We got some of them to look.”

Aided in his identifications by Ernst Mayr’s book on birds of the Southwest Pacific, part of which he somehow obtained prior to publication, Warner was able to see “50 or 60 bird species, nearly every one on

the island.” He learned some tricks as he went along. “Finding a flowering fruit tree can be very profitable,” he notes. “Flowering trees might be miles apart in the tropics, but you might find five or more species of honeyeaters in one tree at one time.”

With his experience and the aid of expeditionary records supplied by the American Museum of Natural History, Warner later wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the birds of New Caledonia and the nearby Loyalty Islands.

He did not, however, do much collecting of bird specimens. He never, for example, collected a Kagu. “Already I knew they were in peril... endangered,” he says, “though we didn’t even use those words then. I could see that agriculture and grazing were being extended into the mountain forests and that the island’s large percentage of the world’s



Joel Abramson (above) sighted more than 250 species in Vietnam. Exploring the marshy coastal area of Quang Ngai on foot or bicycle, he sometimes encountered enemy fire. In addition to his medical practice, Abramson (right) runs the Bird Bonanzas tour agency.

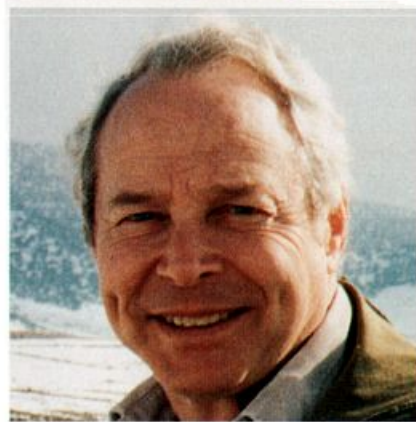
nickel meant that the land use would change.”

THREE VERSIONS OF VIETNAM

The vastly different experiences of our four WWII birders were played out against widely separated backdrops. It's a bit of a surprise to hear three equally different stories from three Vietnam vets.

One is the experience of Jay Sheppard, a nationally-known birder who works for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Endangered Species Program. A Naval officer serving from August of '64 until early '68, Sheppard, who was stationed on a destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, actually saw the take-off of some of the first U.S. air strikes, though he didn't immediately know what they were. Later stationed at the base at Camrahn Bay, he experienced similar birding problems at both postings.

Though he had gone many times to study references at the University of California Los Angeles, he had trouble identifying what he saw. Leaving just before the publication



of Philip Wildash's *Birds of South Viet Nam*—though he spent a couple of nights at Wildash's home in Saigon—his problem was greatly compounded by the fact that both his postings put him in the path of the autumn migration from China to Southeast Asia.

As for danger, his chief concern was the fauna. “Some of these cobras are fairly sizeable critters,” he says. “We're not talking four-foot garter-snakes. We're talking seven feet long and almost three inches in diameter.”

Frank Haas, who served with I Corps just south of the DMZ from July of '68 to July of '69, did have the benefit of Wildash's book, which his mother sent him, but says he had to do most of his identification from descriptions rather than pictures.

Haas was able to identify 27 species. “The Red-whiskered Bulbul stands out in my mind,” he says. “I

“There are no windows in a bunker. Eventually, when a bird would come by, other guys would call me so I could come out with my binoculars and take a look at it.”

saw it at Camp Red Devil outside Quang Tri. They were common. The thing that got me was that there is an escaped population down in South Florida, and a lot of people have them on their life lists for North America, but I was able to see it in its native land.”

Haas, who, like the vast majority of wartime birders, never met a kindred spirit, does note that the razzing he took over his birding did die down. “There are no windows in a bunker,” he says. “Eventually, when a bird would come by, other guys would call me so I could come out with my binoculars and take a look at it.”

Joel Abramson says he's sighted more than 250 Vietnamese species, an estimated 60 percent of the country's total. In addition to his medical practice, Abramson also runs a bird tour agency called Bird Bonanzas. He attributes some of the sighting success of his 14-month tour in the Army Medical Corps to intensive preparation.

He also put himself in the way of a good deal of danger, several times encountering rifle fire or people who might have been Vietcong. Exploring the marshy coastal area around Quang Ngai on foot and bicycle, he later took to sitting silently on the floor of the jungle around the An Kag base.

“You see a lot of shy birds that way,” he says. ■