

I WOKE TO THE sound of Great Horned Owls and the *spat, spat, spat* of a lawn sprinkler spraying the side of our van — the same lawn sprinkler that had lulled us to sleep. Not far away, the trailer residents of McIntyre County Park in Blythe, California, slept their way into Thanksgiving Day. Paul Lehman and Shawneen Finnegan lay huddled in an ocean of dew — the only *true* campers in the “campground.”

We were going birding...or more accurately, *chasing*. Yesterday, we'd fled the Los Angeles basin, joining the Thanksgiving holiday throng heading east into the Mojave Desert. *Their* objective was various resorts (I guess). *Our* objective was a string of riverside communities that California birders generously called “Oasis.”

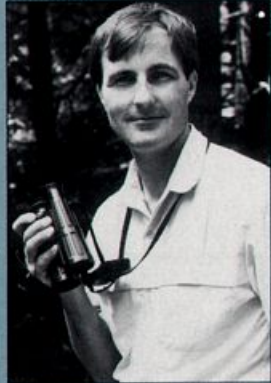
Why were we doing this? Because I, for one, like birding more than I like sitting in front of the tube, sucking down brewskis, stuffing my face with “cheeps” and watching a bunch of college kids try to murder each other over a ball that won't even roll straight.

That's why.

As anyone who lives in Phoenix, Arizona, can tell you, Phoenix and environs are desert of the first magnitude. But as you head west on I-10, even the hardy Sonoran plants wither in despair. The land goes from dry to parched to Mojave. The principal features become rock and

Pete Dunne

## AMERICAN BIRDING



### Why Every Desert Chase is an Adventure

Illustration  
by Keith Hansen

creosote bush. Most of the earth's living things are pleased to give the Mojave a wide, wide berth, and most succeed.

Then suddenly, you hit the Colorado River. And where there is water, there is life, both bird life and “the good life.” Along the banks of the river, little trailer parks have sprouted. These oases host trees that were planted to serve the need for shade and to appease nostalgic cravings. Every spring, and every fall, these sapling forests attract migrating birds—some that should be found there; some, according to conventional wisdom, that should not.

Starting in the seventies, a pioneering cadre of California birders, led by Guy McCaskie, began shaking down these desert oases for eastern waifs—warblers, vireos, flycatchers and

the like. Now these Memorial Day Weekend, Columbus Day Weekend, and Thanksgiving Day Weekend “Desert Chases” are a tradition.

*Now*, whenever at least three days can be rubbed together, bands of birding mercenaries, armed with sophisticated optics and some of the best ears in birding, sweep through these desert communities.

Trying not to wake wife Linda (and failing) or Paul or Shawneen (and failing), I eased out of the van, circumnavigated the sprinkler, and began working my way down toward the river.

The Colorado River is wide,

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muddy, and just a vestige of what it was. Hoover, Davis, and Parker dams have constipated its flow. Agriculture bleeds it for irrigation, and the returning runoff infuses a plasma of fertilizers, chemicals, and salts. Trailer park residents add their waste to the poor man's Big Sur and extract their share of liquid. By the time one of America's greatest rivers reaches Mexico, it is a sad, brown embarrassment.

But even bad water is better than no water. In the parched horror of the Mojave, it is precious beyond measure, as precious as life itself. And it attracts birds.

The tempo and abundance of Yellow-rumped Warbler chip notes kept pace with the dawn. A Cooper's Hawk sallied out of a nearby orchard, heading north along the river bank.

It seemed like a good course of action. In unfamiliar territory, it pays to rely on the wisdom of the local birders and the Cooper's Hawk was quite plainly birding.

A sliver of vegetation survives between the river and farmland. Abert's Towhees, with their soot-smudged faces, alternately cavorted and skulked. A pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers was drawn into momentary view. But it was the White-crowned Sparrows that held the field. Dozens...scores, the gentrified sparrows were everywhere!

In the Northeast, birders sift through flocks of White-throated Sparrows in the hopes of turning up a wintering White-crowned. In the Southwest, they search through White-crowned's for the odd bird out. Everything is relative. The value accorded each bird species follows the principle of supply and demand.

So, while a fully mobilized Paul and Shawneen scrutinized leaf and limb for eastern birds bearing the bounty that geography had placed on their heads, Linda and I reveled in the everyday wealth of the West. The binding thread was shared in-

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terest. The common denominator was birds.

*On to site two.* Paul called it "an Oasis." Uninitiated eastern minds would probably think of it as a ranch house surrounded by several big trees. But the birds clearly sided with Paul because the postage-stamp patch of green in the middle of a great, flat agricultural nowhere was riddled with White-crowned Sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers, the fertile flocks from which rarities spring.

Paul Lehman lives in Goleta, California. He is a geographer by training, an editor by choice, a leader of tours *etc.* Shawneen is an illustrator. Both Paul and Shawneen spend a little bit more than *all* of their spare time pursuing and identifying birds.

This year, the accent at Paul's ranch-house oasis was on mass rather than class. A ten-minute ocular shakedown of the greenery produced more and more and *more* of the same. So we left.

*On to site two and one-half.* Raptors flourish in the ag-land along the Colorado River. Harriers cruise the fields, American Kestrels hover over the flats. Every tenth telephone pole seems to sprout a Red-tailed...a Ferruginous...a Prairie Falcon...a...

"Did that raptor look black to you?" Paul asked.

"Did you see white speckling on the chest?" I asked (to go on record

that I'd gotten the point).

"That bird had a dark terminal band." Shawneen added, building the case for *harlani*.

"Harlan's," Paul pronounced with obvious satisfaction. Harlan's Hawks are *still* out-of-range when fortune finds them in southern California.

Cutting phylogenetic distinctions fine is a California specialty and wherever possible—wherever plumage or vocalizations provide—birds are identified down to the level of subspecies. It adds to birding's challenge. It adds to the picture. It adds to the fun.

Down the line, it might even add species to a birder's list. Because the scientific line drawn between one species and another shifts through technology, field and laboratory techniques, and reigning attitudes, sometimes all the forces that move the phylogenetic line push it so that two species that used to be separate, now stand on the same side.

Maybe the Divine Creator knows where to draw the line between species, and then again, maybe the subject doesn't hold His interest. But science, in its efforts to make sense of the natural world, continues to speculate. So while the lines firm up, North American birders at large would do well to take a hint from their California kin and honor all the forms.

For fun, challenge, and profit.

*On to site three.* "You're going to like this next spot," Paul promised. As usual, he was right, fulfilling his own prophesy by picking an adult male Vermilion Flycatcher off a fence wire — the first of two the pasture produced.

The bushes and trees surrounding the corral were patently *saturated* with sparrows. A spirited bout of spishing brought nearly a hundred into the open — along with a dozen Brahman cattle that regarded us with bovine detachment. It also sent a pack of ranch dogs into full chorus with not a single baritone among

them.

Just down the street, a second overgrown field offered up a Thanksgiving cornucopia of sparrows of every ilk and hue. There were so many adult White-crowns that they made the weed tops look frosted.

Several Vesper Sparrows studied our intrusion with quiet dignity from the elevated vantage of a telephone wire. A mewing call note from deep in the tangle led to the discovery of not one, but two Green-tailed Towhees—a bird whose winter range *just* straddles the California line.

A woman wearing an apron stepped onto the porch of a farmhouse and regarded us with an expression whose tone was difficult to read. She didn't linger. Hers was a day filled with tasks, one that would put all of her culinary prowess on the firing line. When I looked again, the figure was gone.

Only later, after we'd gone, did it occur to me that the expression on her face might have been wistful.

*On to site four.* There was no site four! Where Paul had promised a row of pecan trees, now there were stumps and the drying skeletons of trees. Northern Flickers (Red-shafted form) perched on their remains, but any other bird that might have been there was clearly someplace else.

*On to site five.* The "Riverview Mobile Home Park" was hardly big enough to cause the four of us to split up, so we rounded the streets *en masse*, striving to hear the sounds of birds over the din of televised college football games. In trailer after trailer, Thanksgiving dinners were in preparation, in progress, and some were history.

Overhead, the electric chattering of Anna's Hummingbirds sifted through the foliage. Monarch Butterflies drifted in the sunlight. Along a hedge and a carefully trimmed lawn, a junco sampler fluttered and

hopped — three Slate-colored and one Gray-headed enjoyed the company of the more common Oregon forms.

After an hour or so, we took our leave with the scrape of cutlery on china ringing in our ears. Although our ambitions were set on the next desert oasis, clearly our stomachs were beginning to feel beyond that.

*On to site six.* We crossed the Colorado River near Parker. "I've never had any luck here," Paul confided.



The trees around the "Parker Cow Palace," were not without merit, charm, or fortune. A large dark woodpecker drifted across the street. Paul's binoculars fused to the bird. "Lewis' Woodpecker," he pronounced before the bird could affix itself to a telephone pole for general appraisal. Lewis' Woodpeckers were on the move this year, and this one had moved *just far enough* — across the river and into the trees. Lewis' Woodpecker was a "state bird," for Shawneen's Arizona list — in bounds by a geographic whisker.

Overhead, White-throated Swifts cut impossible designs across a pale blue sky. We turned north toward Parker Lake and its host of water birds. But after half an hour, (and

Clark's and Western grebes) four tummies took a vote, and it was unanimous. The next stop on the itinerary would be Parker, Arizona, with all the epicurean trimmings.

*On to site seven.* The diner was packed with townfolk and transients. And small wonder! Today's Special, the blackboard announced, was Turkey, *etc.* for \$4.75. Our order was specials all around.

Dinner arrived in short order — a new bird for our Arizona list, swim-

ming in a one inch sea of white gravy (and if anyone had asked, no doubt any among us would have judged it the best Thanksgiving Dinner they'd eaten in days; maybe weeks).

Only dessert kindled a mild form of dissent in our ranks, the only controversy we'd experienced all day. Shawneen and I were staunch pumpkin pie advocates. Linda is a mince-firster.

Paul? Paul held out for sherbet. Which is pretty unusual for a Thanksgiving Dessert (even by relative standards). ■

*—Pete Dunne is the author of Tales of a Low-Rent Birder, coauthor of Hawks in Flight, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.*