

Are your weekends any less frenetic and routine than work? Do you rise at Oh-dark-thirty on Saturday to call the hotline just so you can rush halfway across the state to find some bird that somebody else found?

The wind is southeast. The tide is out and the sun is down. Tiny clouds, spawned by a distant storm, scuttle across the sky. Frigatebirds, oblivious to the rush of wind, move by on wings that match the languid pace of life here.

Kim Elliman, Byron Swift, Larry O'Meallie and I are sitting on a hooking spit of sand on the lee side, the "in" side, of an island. We're sipping chardonnay. Listening to each other and the cries of twenty thousand nesting gulls and terns.

The wine is cool, not cold the way it comes from the fridge, the way it will be served at half a million dinner parties this evening. *Cool*, the way wine is when it comes from a cooler two days out. Soon, someone will suggest dinner. The meats will be spread, rolls piled high, man-sized hungers appeased. Then, even before the sky becomes speckled with stars, we will retire to our tents—to sleep the good, deep sleep that follows a day of exercise.

But for now, in this wonderful interlude from busy lives, we are enjoying peace, good company, and talk about our day with the island and the birds.

Where is this island? What bird-finding guide is it in?

I won't tell you, not its location or its name. If you finish this column, you may come to understand why.

Out of courtesy and shared interest, I will describe the place, and,

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



An Island

Illustration
by Keith Hansen

from this, you may divine its approximate location. But, for the sake of the birds that live there, out of respect for those who brought me there, and most of all in deference to the spirit of adventure that survives in you, I will say only this: It lies beyond guides and within the reach of your dreams

The island is seven miles long and, in places, several hundred yards wide. It is low and sandy around the edges, grassy in the middle. In places there are low shrubs kept trim by shearing salt-laden winds.

The "out" side water is warm and clear and whipped to a froth by the wind. The "in" side is calm and warmer and the color of a Mississippi flood.

I am told, by Larry, who hosts this expedition and who has come here for sixteen years, that the other

end of the island boasts large mudflats of a sort that shorebirds relish. But here, on this end, the beaches have no muddy buffer and the foraging skimmers describe a narrow line of demarcation between water and shore.

You can reach this island by boat, from the mainland. But it is safer and quicker to navigate the 50 miles by sea plane, as we did.

"Wow," you think. "There must be some blistering hot rarity out there for four birders to have gone to so much trouble and expense."

Well, no, there isn't. Or maybe there is. But that's just incidental.

That's not why we came here.

We came here to savor something of the great natural wealth of the continent; to hold, for a weekend, and then to carry away, the vision of what so much of North America used to be.

John James Audubon, ornithology's great American Woodsman collected and painted in these waters. Audubon was a traveler. His search for the birds of a continent took him from Labrador to the incipient American West.

I cannot say with certainty that he stopped at this island. In fact, I rather doubt it. Islands come and islands go, and the spring of 1837 was many hurricanes ago. But he certainly stopped at islands like this one. The thousands of nesting birds on our island can probably trace their ancestry back to birds that earned Audubon's awe just as they eluded his grasp.

They still inspire awe and over the course of the day they earned ours.

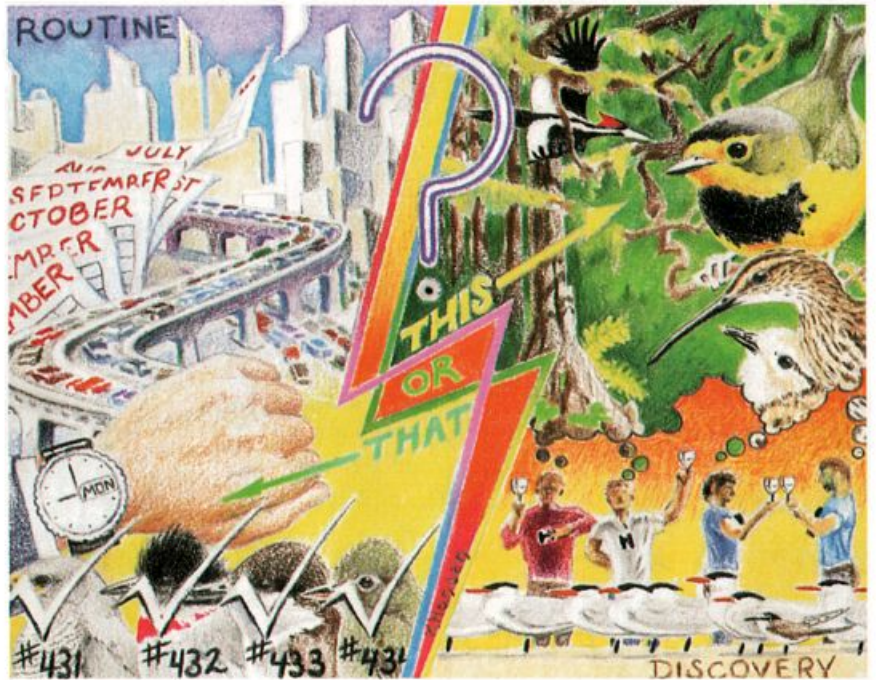
"How about dinner," Larry invited, giving into his hunger. His suggestion met with agreement all around.

Larry O'Meallie is a cardiologist by training and a birder and bird photographer by conviction. He is sixtyish, looks fifty, has the energy of a man one-half that age, and knows more stories than Hans Christian Anderson.

Byron Swift, not quite forty, works for the Environmental Defense Fund. He is tall, fit, and has the chiseled-feature look that sculptors try to replicate in marble. He is environmentally committed and when his tent blows down, he is a real good sport about it.

Kim Elliman is a financial planner who spends much of his time sitting on various Boards of Directors bent on saving the planet. He is the kind of person you like and respect immediately and two days later discover that you like and respect him even more.

Three men all caught in the rush of busy, demanding lives. Just like yours.



Let me ask you something. Do you ever stop and wonder how it came to be this way? Why there are five days of labor in the week and only two for rest?

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Do you have the time or courage to think about those thirty-five to forty (or fifty or sixty or seventy) hours each week that dictate the terms of your life? Have you ever seriously contemplated the merits of deadlines, spread sheets, department reorganizations, meetings at ten, two, and three-fifteen and that dinner party at seven?

Or do you close your mind to all the little trappings of life and just ride the tiger's tail to reach the weekend?

Are your weekends any less frenetic and routine than work? Do you rise at Oh-dark-thirty on Saturday to call the hotline just so you can rush halfway across the state to find some bird that somebody else found?

Do you let the calendar dictate your schedule? Habitually drive to thicket X because it is May, mudflat Y because it is August, and lakeshore Z because it is November?

Because that's what you always do. Because "that's what everyone does."

Do you arrange your vacation the same way you task-manage your way through a day at the office?

Arrive, Tucson, 11:23. Hit Santa Rita Lodge 2:30. Drive to Patagonia in time to get the Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Rise at 4:00 for Five-striped Sparrow then drive to Ft. Huachuca for Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Meet Smitty at 10:00. Drive to Ramsey. White-eared Hummingbirds coming to...

Do you return from vacations brain-dead from fatigue? Return to work on Monday morning more exhausted than when you left the office on Friday evening? Do you even

know the meaning of serenity any more? Can you appreciate the quiet contemplation of things? Is this the way birding started out for you, and is this what you really want it to be?

There are no fewer than 10,000 Laughing Gulls on the island, but human visitors are so rare that they haven't picked up the bad habits of their resort-side brethren. Although Larry's chicken salad could win chef's honors in Brussels and his baked ham is blue ribbon material at any county fair in the land, the gulls leave us in peace.

"The salad's really good, Larry," Byron said.

"So's the ham," Kim observed. "What's the secret?"

"Slow cooking," Larry confided. "Everything is better when it's cooked slow."

Across the tiny bay, separating us from the main island, a Reddish Egret thrashes in the shallows. On the beach, an American Oystercatcher gives us a goat-eyed stare. Audubon found oystercatchers around here, too.

Despite the late hour, a steady stream of Royal (*cheEer-up*) and Sandwich (*chreeUp*) terns moves by—heading out to the shoals or back to the colonies. Every once in a while, a raucous snarl announces an inbound Caspian. The raspy whispers of transient Black Terns mingle with the rush of surf. The peevish chatter of Least Terns is an unobtrusive constant.

Earlier, this morning and again this afternoon, when we'd hiked the beach, the clamor rising from the tern colonies had made the island ring like a chorus of loose fan belts. Hundreds of terns, thousands! Six thousand Sandwich, five thousand Royal, three hundred Caspian, and Least, and Common, and Bridled all massed on mats of shell. Silver-backed birds mantling precious eggs, all turned into the wind like skiffs at anchor. It was stunning. It was magnificent.

Yes, Audubon must have seen

colonies like these, here, and at Egg Harbor, New Jersey, where he also painted and studied. But no living person has seen the like; not in New Jersey, not for a long, long time. There and elsewhere, exploitation followed by decades of human encroachment has whittled the great mats of birds to shards.

There and elsewhere so much of the great natural splendor of North America has been reduced to remnants and memories.

For all the effort that ornithologists and birders have lavished on North America, there are still, here, now, on this continent, wonders that need the catalytic touch of discovery.

For three decades now, birders have dogged the footsteps of pioneer writers of birdfinding guides in search for birds X, Y, and Z, and they have rarely been disappointed. Thousands of birders have been led to the Miccosukee Restaurant and Snail Kite in Florida; Brownsville Texas' celebrated City Dump and Mexican Crow; and the "Famous" Patagonia Highway Rest Stop and Gray Hawk and Rose-throated Becard, and Thick-billed Kingbird and Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet in Arizona.

For three decades this is the way North Americans have gone birding. Birding by rote, birding by the book. And, although the wealth of these guides available today has brought the birds of a continent to within everyone's reach, they've levied a price. They drove down the value of discovery.

The guides made birdfinding easy.

But they may also have made birdfinding routine.

There comes a time, I think, when people should choose to step off the wheel. There is a pivotal point when the allure of possibility should be greater than the promise of routine satisfaction.

Nobody can gainsay the contribution to birding of these guides. And, there is no one more grateful to the authors than I, who have been virtually led to scores of birds. But all of the discovery and adventure didn't die when those books were published. Instead of following point-by-point instructions, maybe what birders should be doing is following the *lead of those authors*. For all the effort that ornithologists and birders have lavished on North America, there are still, here, now, on this continent, wonders that need the catalytic touch of discovery.

There are arctic reaches where bird distribution is poorly defined; box canyons where birders have never been. Migration corridors that are uncharted except in the minds of raptors and warblers. There are southern swamps where rumors of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers remain unpurged. Eskimo Curlews live and nest somewhere. And there are still parrots without names.

Out there. Uncharted islands. Windows that open upon a continent of wonder and discovery and beauty, too. Waiting. . .

Dinner was gone. The wine was finished. Plans for the morning laid. We retired to our tents to watch the stars come out and probe the night sky with separate thoughts. The clamor raised by the colonies never ceased, and if you chanced to wake during the night, you could hear it—the sound of another age—an age of wonder and discovery.

—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