

# **'If you were shipwrecked on some uncharted island, what ten birds would you choose to keep you company?'**

**I**N JUNE, WHEN SUN-light dominates the northern hemisphere, road-weary birders can play highway games to stay alert and keep boredom at bay.

*"Yellow-headed Blackbird! Trip bird."*

*"Red-tailed Hawk on the fence post. That makes 34."*

But in December, highway diversions are few and quickly spent. We'd listened to every cassette a dozen times, my wife Linda and I. We'd played out every conceivable conversation, and argued every pressing social/economic issue to the point of blind indifference.

And I-10 across Texas seems to run on forever. Though there might have been a thousand miles behind us, there were still two thousand to go.

And the windshield offered no greater diversion than a painted line...line...line...that went on...on...on....

I realized, suddenly, that Linda's face was turned toward me. A question must have been asked.

"What?" I asked, to prove I'd been listening.

"I said, what are your ten favorite birds?"

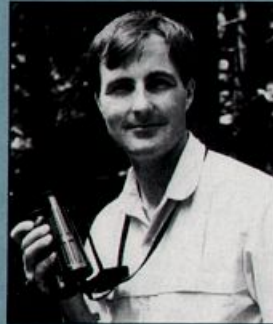
"Oh," I replied, taken aback. "I guess I'd have to think about it."

"That's the point," she explained. "We're two days from home."

I did think about it. In fact, I found myself positively intrigued by the question. All the birds on the planet. All the colors, songs, plumages, prowess, evolutionary adaptations, finesse, and skills. Add to these compelling attributes the human

Pete Dunne

## **AMERICAN BIRDING**



### **Ten!**

*Illustration  
by Keith Hansen*

bonding factor, the irreplaceable memories that mark the encounters of your birding lifetime. *Now* try to pare this list of favorites down to...

"Only ten?" I asked.

"Only ten."

"How about an even dozen?" I pleaded.

"Ten," Linda insisted. "Put it this way. If you were shipwrecked on some uncharted island and had to spend the rest of your life there, what ten birds would you choose to keep you company?"

"That's easy," I said.

"Turkey, chicken, goose, game hen, pheasant...."

"Be serious," she chastised.

"I am serious," I insisted.

"Assume we'll have an unlimited supply of food."

"Oh, you're on this island, too."

"Of course I'm on the island. I'm your wife."

"Then we've got to have a consensus with this list."

"Sure," Linda said. "Unless you want to spend the rest of your life on a desert island with a very disgruntled birding wife."

It wasn't an attractive prospect.

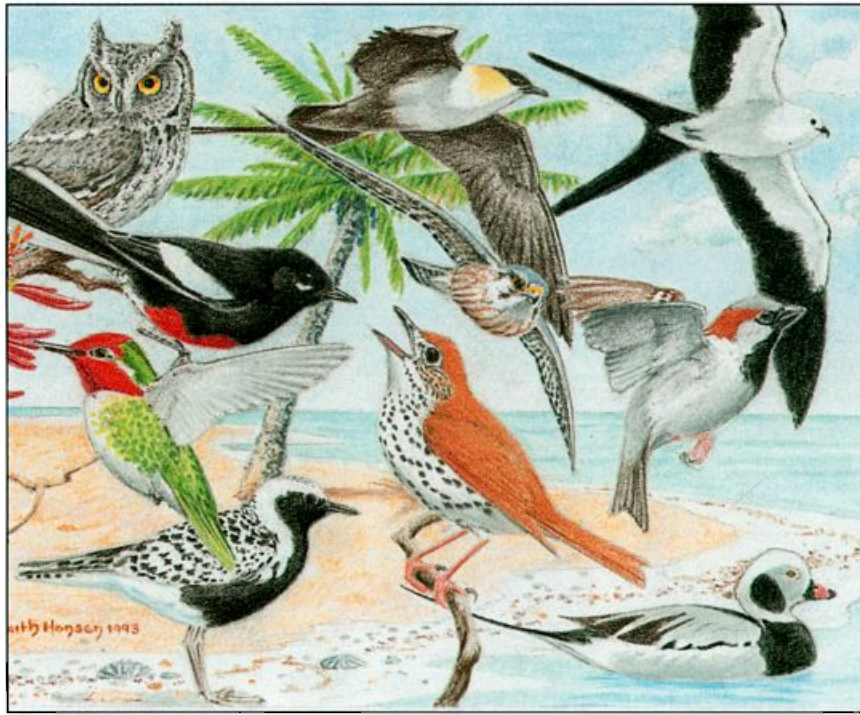
"OK," I replied. "Who chooses first?"

"You do," she said magnanimously, and I grabbed the opportunity before she could change her mind.

"American Swallow-tailed Kite!" I shouted, putting a name to my absolute all-time favorite bird. If the divine creator had set out to cast a dream in feathers, S/He couldn't have managed any better.

"Merlin," Linda countered.

"We can't have two raptors!"



"Why not?" Linda demanded.

"Because we only have ten slots to fill," I pointed out.

"So?" Linda said.

"So there are still some 170 families, and more than nine thousand possibilities floating around in the world."

"Let's limit the scope to North American birds," she offered.

"That still leaves us nearly 100 possibilities for every slot," I explained, confident that the weight of this disclosure would be sufficient for a spouse (even my most stubborn spouse) to see the error of her ways.

"Your turn," she observed.

"You're not going to pick something else?" I demanded.

"Merlin's my favorite bird," she said, smiling.

There is no contesting such an irrefutable point and, after all, this *was* the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life with on an island. Besides, I had to admit I like Merlins, too. The feistiest, most pugnacious little beastie ever set on wings. A bird that can fly rings around a Peregrine and make chutney out of the most acrobatic swallow at whim or need.

"All right," I said, relenting. "But make it a Blue Jack."

"A Richardson's Blue Jack," Linda

promised, naming the powder blue subspecies that shines like a sword blade.

"Hmmm," I mused. "An island. We're going to need a seabird or two."

"Like a shearwater?" Linda suggested after a moment's thought.

"Like a shearwater," I agreed, mentally running through the ranks of birds whose flight makes the poetry of Tennyson seem pinioned and earthbound.

"How about Buller's?" I asked, selfishly putting a name to a species I had seen in both the Pacific *and* the Atlantic oceans. Every time I see the species off Monterey, I recall a day off New Jersey and the silver-winged, heart-stopper of a bird that showed up in a flock of Greaters for an Atlantic coast record.

"OK," Linda said. "Buller's. How about waterfowl?"

"Wood Duck," I suggested.

"Too gaudy," Linda assessed.

"Hooded Merganser," I offered.

"Oldsquaw!" she asserted. A great choice, I had to admit.

"Owls?" she invited.

"Not so fast!" I objected. "What about gulls and terns?"

"We've already got a shearwater."

"We've already got a pair of rap-

tors, too," I pointed out.

"You're *not* going to have an owl!!!!?" Linda asked.

"Ok, ok," I soothed. "Take it easy. How about Ross' Gull *and* Snowy Owl?"

There was silence while Linda considered these options.

"You know," she said, "if you're going to spend the rest of your life on an island, you might want to make it a *tropical* island instead of one stuck in the Bering Strait.

"It's an imaginary island," I said "Therefore magical. There's no problem having Snowy Owls and Swallow-tailed Kites on a magical island."

"Why Ross' Gull?" she demanded.

"It's a functional hybrid between a Little Gull and a Roseate Tern—two great birds for the price of one."

Linda nodded. "Why Snowy Owl?"

"To keep you from saying Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and getting a life bird up on me," I admitted, smiling.

"You know," she observed, "it's getting to be an awful quiet island. And Snowy Owls aren't the most musical of critters."

There was no contesting this observation. Of the birds that had secured a place in our lineup, none—with the possible exception of Oldsquaws—were counted among the earth's great vocalists.

"Oldsquaws sound kind of neat," I offered.

"If you like the sound of fox hounds gargling."

"What are you saying?" I asked. "That you don't want Oldsquaw, now?"

"No. I'm saying I want a screech-owl."

"Screech-owl," I mused. Sure. Why not? I thought back to all the whistled duets on Christmas Bird Counts and Big Days. I thought of all the nights at home that my dreams had been shaken by a whinny, and of the wooded western canyons that had been flooded with starlight and the musical toots of owls.

"Eastern, Western, or Whiskered?" I asked.

"Western," said my western wife.

"How many does that make so far?" I demanded.

"Six," she said.

"SIX!" I exclaimed. "Why, we haven't even hit passerines yet!"

"And we skipped shorebirds—not to mention herons and egrets."

"NO SHOREBIRDS!" I screeched, taking Linda's cue and not mentioning herons and egrets, either. "We've got to have a shorebird."

"Try to pick something more colorful than a mud flat," Linda pleaded.

"Sure," I promised. Phalaropes. Curlew Sandpiper. My thoughts raced, picking through the possibilities like a Sanderling moving down the tide line. Red Knot. Ruddy Turnstone. Whimbrel. There were just too many to choose from. Too much animation; too many handsome plu...

"Plover!" I exclaimed.

"Can you be a bit more vague?"

"I want a plover," I asserted. "It would go perfect with the beach. And give your Merlin something to chase."

"So you want a semipalmated-sized plover?" Linda assessed.

Actually, I didn't. I wanted a full-sized plover—either a Lesser Golden Plover or Black-bellied. And I wanted the Merlin to harass the bird, not to eat it (not that a Merlin can't manage a magnum-sized plover).

I was leaning toward Golden, until the whistle of a Black-bellied surfaced in my mind—surely one of the most haunting calls in nature.

"Black-bellied," I said. "In high plumage."

Linda nodded. "Need a hummingbird now."

Of course we needed a hummingbird! What would life on a magical island be without the earth's most magical bird? But which hummingbird?

"Your call," I said, punting the dilemma away.

Linda put on a ponder. She looked at her reflection in the glass. She looked at her hands in her lap. Finally she looked at me.

"Anna's," she said, surprising me.

"Why Anna's?" I asked. "I'd have bet you'd say Magnificent."

"Anna's reminds me of home," she said—and whether she was thinking of her childhood in California or her mother, Anne, she wouldn't say.

"Then I want a Blue Jay," I announced loudly.

"What!?" Linda answered, even more loudly.

"Blue Jays remind *me* of home," I said. And they do recall the eastern woodlands where I grew up.

"That makes nine then."

"Oh!" I said, and my mind leaped ahead to all the birds that would be missed.

"I guess I'd rather have a thrush than a Blue Jay." It would be hard to live in a world in which thrushes didn't sing.

"Varied," my wife suggested.

"Wood," her parochial-minded husband insisted.

"Hermit?" Linda pleaded.

"Wood," I said.

"Then I get to choose the warbler," Linda said, "and I choose Painted Redstart."

A terrific choice! A wonderful choice. The Arizona specialty might not take top honors in the vocalization category, but in color and animation the bird scores a perfect ten. As a matter of sad fact, it was ten, number ten. Our list was complete.

"But we don't have an oriole or tanagers or bunting," I pleaded.

"Or a wren, or a sparrow."

"We'll live out the rest of our lives without ever seeing another crossbill or a kingfisher," I said.

"Or a ptarmigan. Or a jaeger."

Linda and I turned as one and said as one: "No jaeger!"

No Long-tailed Jaeger? "The sexiest bird that flies," in the words of the late Tom Davis. It was unthinkable.

"Time to rethink this list," Linda said, and we did. Added Long-tailed Jaeger and dumped the shearwater and Ross' Gull. We figured Long-tailed Jaeger embodied many of the

attributes of both. That gave us one last slot to fill.

"We need a sparrow," Linda observed. "There's got to be something coming to the feeder."

And we did need a sparrow. One sparrow. One favored species from those subtle, secretive ranks that birders discover late in their development and come to love.

I thought of Henslow's—my last North American lifer. I considered the chestnut-naped LeConte's; the silver-voiced Vesper; the dandified Lark Sparrow; the dapper Black-throated; and the gentrified White-crowned. I thought of Aleutian Song Sparrows and the musical twittering of Tree Sparrows that has brightened more winter days than I can recall.

"What about Fox Sparrow?" I invited. "It's a great looker and the song is rich and almost comical."

Linda considered each of these points, but I could see that she wasn't entirely won over.

"I get to choose the last bird," she said. "You chose first; I choose last." It wasn't a question. It was incontestably proper and fair.

"Make it a good one," I said.

"House Sparrow," she announced.

"HOUSE SPARROW?" I exploded. "What on earth for?"

"We've got to have something for my Merlin to eat," she explained. "Or do you want it to eat your plover?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. ▶

—Peter Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*.

Answers to *That's Bird & Word Entertainment*, Vol. 46, No. 5, Winter 1992 American Birds.

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|------------|------------------|
| 1. Owl     | 9. Turkey        |
| 2. Swallow | 10. Storm-Petrel |
| 3. Gull    | 11. Bluebird     |
| 4. Parrot  | 12. Albatross    |
| 5. Eagle   | 13. Goose        |
| 6. Peacock | 14. Grouse       |
| 7. Cuckoo  | 15. Raven        |
| 8. Stork   |                  |