

Ted Cross – late blooming birder

Birds I View

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The purest bird observers are the youngest. Before the intellect necessitates categorization, visual observations vividly flood our perceptions and ink our memories.

One day when my son Nick was about 10 years old, he ran into the house and said that he had seen an unusual bird. I gave him a Peterson guide and asked him to show me the bird. He looked carefully at every image, turned every page then said - “It’s not in here.”

We subsequently located the bird which turned out to be a yellow-billed cuckoo – unusual for sure. When we returned home, I showed Nick the cuckoo in the guide, unphased he replied – “It doesn’t look like that.”

That’s when I had an “aha” moment of my own. He was right the image in the guide didn’t look the bird we saw. And unlike me, he wasn’t trying to pigeon-hole his observation into a category. He was certain of what he saw – pure and simple.

This is what bird watching is all about – seeing.

Late blooming birders

Those of us who start watching birds later in life are handicapped compared to our childhood compatriots. Some overcome the handicap, some do not. My bird-watching friend Ted Cross started watching birds when he was 40 years old and was more than successful at overcoming the challenge of age.

Camera in hand, Ted Cross traveled the world in search of birds. Owing to his life as a successful businessman

(www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124205759), he had more than sufficient means to do so.

Waterbirds

Shorebirds and seabirds attracted much of Ted’s focus and attention. But it was the herons and egrets and the elegance of their plumage and the grandeur of their courtship displays that lured Ted’s deepest passions. His spectacular images captured moments in time that were pure iconic imagery.

A few months ago, his most recent book *Waterbirds* (Norton 2009) arrived with a very touching inscription. As the jacket information reads – this is the book that John James Audubon would have created if he had a camera.

From his previous book, *Birds of the Sea, Shore, and Tundra* (1989 Grove) and having spent time with Ted photographing in the field, I knew what to expect. Still the images were stunning time-frozen glimpses of what we hope to see.

Yet what also struck me about *Waterbirds* was the penetrating clarity and conciseness of Ted's writing. As many of his portraits reminded me of Japanese nature paintings, his writing has an artistic economy reminiscent of haiku.

“Now that I view the world through the eyes of an eighty-five year-old man, I savor in my imagination events of the great richness of nature that I was unequipped to understand earlier. I now look back with the most happy memories of my visits to some of the magical islands of birds that I had overlooked before. In my mind, I visit these islands almost every day. The memories of them help me accept the brevity of the time that lies ahead.”

Attraction to Newfoundland

The seabird capitals of Newfoundland drew Ted's focus and attention. After visiting Baccalieu Island with John Piatt, Ted was hooked and returned here a number of times visiting Cape St. Mary's, Witless Bay, Elliston, Bonavista, as well as Trinity and Placentia Bays searching for eagles. Yet trip that topped all others was Funk Island.

Funk Island adventure

Beyond the stretch of imagination, a visit to Funk Island is a life-time experience. Making the 60 km offshore voyage with the late Skipper Bill Sturge of Valleyfield ensured an adventure from dockside onward. “Funk Island is a marvellously terrible place” as Skipper Bill summed it up.

Landing on Funk Island involves jumping from a bobbing dory to a narrow granite solid ledge known as the Bench. Moving among cacophony and chaos of a more than a million seabirds on small rock in the North Atlantic can overwhelm the senses. Photographing myriads of murre, razorbills and puffins in the graveyard of their extinct great auk ancestor is overpowering.

In 1990 when we made the trip, Ted Cross was 67 years young. To my knowledge he holds the age record for a Funk Island visitor.

The last visit

In 2006, Ted chartered a Lear jet and with his photographic assistant Guy Horner returned to Newfoundland. This trip involved visits to Cape St. Mary's, Bonavista, days at photographing the puffins on the Elliston cliffs, and boat ventures and island visits in Placentia and Trinity Bays searching out bald eagles.

As the local in the group, I would book our lodging as we moved about. At times we were moving quickly and following Ted's spontaneously rotating compass. To ensure accommodation it was often necessary to book lodging at two different sites. At times there were charges at places where we didn't stay. This bothered me, and I mentioned it to Ted who replied "Bill – you don't understand – the money does not matter." He was right I didn't get it.

Ted Cross was a very privileged man. What made him an outstanding man was how he used his privilege with grace and good sense to support others and to help them see.

A blizzard of ivory gulls

If there was one bird that would bring Ted Cross back to Newfoundland, it would be the ivory gull. Owing to warm water conditions and little ice in the Labrador Sea, there has been a fall out of ivories in Labrador, Newfoundland and along the eastern US coast south to Georgia.

A bird in Bay Bulls and Witless Bay in mid-Feb was seen by a few keeners (Dave Brown), but the hotspot was along the tip of the Northern Peninsula. An Ontario photographer Brandon Holden was joined by the intrepid John Wells and Bruce Mactavish in a Northern Peninsula search. By the end of it, Brandon had seen more than 100 different ivory gulls. A spectacular collection of photographs including an arctic gyrfalcon carrying off an ivory gull can be found on his web site (http://www.peregrineprints.com/ind__WhatsNew.htm).

Birds in the area

The morning of 13 February was a magical joyous bird morning in Portugal Cove and no doubt elsewhere. The post-storm stillness was filled with twittering, calling and song, and birds were flying and flitting about everywhere. A singing flock of female purple finches, a white-throated sparrow, cedar waxwings and robins were merrily feasting on wilted dogberries (Madonna Melay). Flocks of robins and American goldfinches have also been showing up in Lewisporte (Bruce Porter), perhaps a dogberry effect as well?

The bird show at Quidi Vidi was quite amazing through the month. One observer on nf.birds reported a peregrine making a dramatic kill of black-headed gull only to have it stolen by a vigilant and opportunistic bald eagle.

A pair of Eurasian wigeon and some tufted ducks are moving about on the open water on Burton's Pond. The kittiwakes are making their St. Patrick's Day arrival at Cape St. Mary's where a robust count of about 500 harlequin ducks was made on a recent survey (Tony Power).

A common murre visited St. John's Harbour in late February and was the subject of striking photos by Gene Herzberg. A bald eagle with a loaded beak was spotted by Sarah Hansen flying over Windsor Lake. Billy Matthews photographed 5 ruffed grouse in the trees in his yard in Portugal Cove feeding on buds and wilted berries. A rare white-winged dove was seen in Pouch Cove (Dave Brown), and hairy woodpeckers are quite common in the area.

Sharp-shinned hawks have been attacking relatively similar sized yellow-shafted flickers with interventions from "compassionate" biologists (Luise Hermanutz). The most multi-faceted interaction was witnessed and engaged in by Carolyn Mayo of Neary's Pond. Trying to evade a sharp-shinned hawk, a flicker crashed into her window. The hawk taloned the flicker and flew across the yard where "they battled in a struggle that the flicker could not win". Crows were attracted to the racket but Carolyn held back knowing that hawk has to eat. That was until a black cat was also about join in the fray. At this with point broom in hand Carolyn dispersed the crowd. The flicker died and was buried.

Keep seeing. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (home), 737-7673 (work), 693-5305 (cell).