



A loggerhead shrike sits beside Fred Ramsey in a van during a Malheur birding trip.
(Photo by Mark Baldwin)

Birders in Paradise

A lifelong guide introduces a novice to Malheur's avian marvels

By Lee Anna Sherman

EARTH GIVES UP ITS SECRETS to those who hold still. Birders are the stillest of the still, and in their stillness gather to themselves Earth's avian nations, from the humblest LBJ ("little brown job") to the flashiest neotropical migrant.

But in our time, stillness is as elusive as a little brown Rock Wren among boulders as big as school buses. Stillness is the antithesis of life as most of us live it, with headsets and earbuds and screens small and large, filling our senses so fully with motion and sound, information and entertainment, that just-plain nature, unscripted and unedited,

unenanced by special effects or soundtracks, can fail to capture our imagination. Or even our attention.

When you drive from Oregon's crowded Willamette Valley, for instance, and steer eastward toward the state's lonesome High Desert, you may equate the gathering quiet, the unbroken vastness, with ennui. As your tires hum monotonously along Highway 20, acres of sagebrush and bunchgrass unfold from horizon to horizon, hypnotic in their sameness. You can sense the timelessness locked in the mesas, their rimrocked walls, shadowy and silent, formed eons ago when fissures cracked the earth open and liquid lava flowed across the basin.

In the seeming emptiness of this landscape, animal life appears absent. There are jackrabbits, of course, and you might spot a Mule Deer or, off in the distance, a Pronghorn. But mostly, the land feels barren. To get past this illusion, to draw back the curtain on the bountiful lifeforms hidden among the sage and the rimrock, a guide is essential — someone like Fred Lawrence Ramsey of the Audubon Society of Corvallis. Fred knows in which quiet marsh the three-inch Calliope Hummingbird perches atop the willows, just a dot to the naked eye. He knows how to suss out the secretive Bobolink, bringing you to the meadow where the bird is likely to pop up, sporting its outlandish hood, like a dollop of whipped cream on the back of its head. Until one day, all on your own, you discern the difference between a Willet and a Long-billed Curlew. Or watch a squadron of White Pelicans spiral heavenward on their nine-foot wingspans like a slow-motion cyclone.



STILLNESS USED TO STRIKE ME AS TORPOR. That's why I didn't come to birding until late in life, tugged, finally, by remnant memories of my long-dead father, a hard-driving businessman who retreated on many Saturdays to a deck chair in our woodsy Seattle backyard, his World War II-era binoculars hung around his neck and his 1961 edition of *Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide to Western Birds* by his side. Having earned his birdwatching merit badge as a kid on his way to Eagle Scout rank, he never lost interest in

identifying the birds that inhabited his environs. He would command the family to witness his latest sighting. “A Rufous-sided Towhee!” he would announce. “A Steller’s Jay! A Red-breasted Nuthatch!” My mom, sister, and I would drop whatever we were doing to dutifully examine whichever *Peterson’s* illustration Dad was pointing at.

Wanting to humor my dad, whose mercurial moods were at their most upbeat during these bird-filled moments, I feigned more interest than I felt. In the fraught relationship between an autocratic father and a headstrong girl, these rare moments of peaceful connection felt precious. But to me — a revved-up kid with a blue bike, a blue scooter, a blue skateboard and scabs on my skinned knees — sitting quietly waiting for birds to show themselves was a thing I never imagined doing voluntarily. Birding struck me as best suited to bookish eccentrics or Marlin Perkins wannabes. So, during my muddled and often troubled march toward adulthood, aside from marveling at the occasional feathered beauty that accidentally crossed my path, it never occurred to me to take a pair of binoculars into the field with deliberate intent.

Nevertheless, a seed had been planted in my young heart. It was a durable seed, one that lay dormant for nearly a half-century. I was well into my fifties when birding snuck up on me. I had moved from an urban neighborhood in Portland to a forested cul-de-sac in the small university town of Corvallis. The spreading branches of the Oregon white oak that grew just outside my living-room window seemed always to be brimming with birdlife. A Northern Flicker, a foot tall from head to tail, would draw my gaze, its wings striped, its breast speckled, its chest emblazoned with a black patch, the male sporting a mustache the color of a Red Delicious apple. A pair of goldfinches would show themselves, the male brilliant in its yellow breeding plumage, its canary-like song transcribed by Peterson’s as “*po-ta-to-chip*.” The snowy underside of the White-breasted Nuthatch, so distinct from its red-breasted brethren’s rusty belly, would make me stop in my tracks.

It wasn’t long before I started jotting down the names of species I could identify in the copy of *Peterson’s* I’d picked up somewhere along the way: the Hairy Woodpecker and its pint-sized look-alike, the Downy, their heads crowned in red, like Picasso’s “Girl with Red

Beret.” The Townsend’s Warbler made me gasp the first time I saw its yellow-and-black masque, saturated with color and drama, like a Mardi Gras reveler’s costume. The Western Bluebird, its metallic wings a-shimmer in the sunlight, like Carnival Glass.

Pretty soon, I had entered my name in the customer database at Wild Birds Unlimited, where I loaded up on tube feeders and bags of black-oil sunflower seed and earned “Bird Bucks” for future discounts.

It had taken decades. But I had become my father’s daughter. I was a backyard birder.



CURIOUS ABOUT BIRDING BEYOND MY BACKYARD, I signed up for a four-day birding excursion to Oregon’s famed Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. But I harbored some misgivings about what I was getting into. Four days of nonstop birdwatching could be — probably would be — drop-dead boring, I thought to myself as I pulled into the Benton County Fairgrounds one spring morning with a pair of new Vortex binoculars around my neck. The two-dozen birders from the Audubon Society of Corvallis were already assembled, making sightings of Acorn Woodpeckers from the parking lot. I stood next to a friendly woman name Margie who helped me locate one of the birds. As the large woodpecker came into focus in my lenses and I saw its “clownish face,” to quote *Peterson’s*, I had a Homer Simpson moment: D’oh!

“Really?” I thought, chiding myself. “How many times have I driven past the fairgrounds and never seen these charming birds that stash acorns by the thousands in trees just yards from the road?”

With our bags of gear (high-powered spotting scopes and long-lensed cameras, sunhats and sunscreen, hiking boots and heavy socks, insect repellent against Malheur’s storied mosquitoes), we piled into three white Ford vans and headed east. Our destination was the

Oregon High Desert, described by early twentieth-century writer Dallas Lore Sharp as “the wildest stretch of land, the most alien” he’d ever seen.

The birders, I soon learned, were heavily drawn from the sciences — experts in math and statistics, engineering, medicine, research methodologies, computer programming. Birding attracts people who are not only prone to close observation, to paying attention to fine detail, but also people given to keeping records and making lists, people on intimate terms with databases and spreadsheets.

Take Greg, for instance, a regular on this annual trip. A database manager for a big, multistate company, Greg’s deep tan evidences countless hours outdoors. When the winds come up on the refuge and lightning crackles on the horizon, he drapes a fringed Afghan “*shemagh*” over his shoulders, giving him the look of a scholar or a cleric. Indeed, Greg devotes himself to birding with the fervor a saint devotes to prayer. As the vans caravan through the Santiam Pass in the Cascades Range, which divides Oregon’s wet, green Willamette Valley from its arid, dun-colored desert, someone asks him why his wife never joins him on these Malheur marathons, where sightings can top 180 species. The answer he gives is simple: “She says she likes *birdwatching*, she just doesn’t like *bird waiting*.” A knowing snicker ripples around the van, tinged with a just a hint of condescension. I recognize it as the universal contempt of the savant for the uninitiated. The experienced birders in this caravan knew — and I was about to discover — that the waiting is inseparable from the watching. It’s the waiting, in fact, that makes the watching sublime.

Waiting, let’s say, for a Bobolink. As the three vans crawl along Diamond Lane at the Malheur refuge — renowned as one of the “crown jewels” of the federal refuge system — drivers and passengers sit at attention, eyes scanning the wet-meadow habitat of the Bobolink, whose cream-colored bonnet poofs up on the back of its head like a pontiff’s headdress. Fred sits at the wheel of Van 1. Steering Vans 2 and 3 are two of Fred’s loyal long-time comrades: Tom, a retired water engineer and expert birding guide in his own right, and Jim, a veterinary surgeon whose special knack with reptiles comes in handy during the occasional rattlesnake encounter.

The walkie-talkie crackles on Fred's dashboard. "Anything?" asks Tom from Van 2.

"Not yet," answers Fred. A professor emeritus of statistics at Oregon State University and a master birder whose international life list numbers 4,200 species, Fred knows Malheur's 200,000 acres better than most people know their own city block. In part, that's because he got started at age seven. Fred's dad traveled the West selling wood-treatment products to sawmills. Summers, he took the family along. At Refuge Headquarters, as darkness gathered and nighthawks awoke to the hunt, the family would roll out their sleeping bags on the lawn and fall asleep beneath the open sky as it turned around the North Star.

One year when Fred was about nine, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist on duty at the refuge took him and his older brother Lee along to help band baby shorebirds — American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Curlews, Sandhill Cranes — for a scientific survey of wading-bird populations on the refuge. The little boys followed the biologist as he tramped the marshes in search of nests. Fred and Lee took turns holding the downy chicks in their small hands as the biologist wrapped color-coded bands around legs that would someday wade the waters of the refuge.

Two birders were hatched that summer in Malheur.

"Bobolink!" crackles Tom's voice from Van 2. Twenty pairs of binoculars follow the flight of first one, then another, of the robin-sized birds whose markings *Peterson's* describes as resembling "a dress suit on backwards." As the birds disappear again into the meadow, satisfaction settles over the birders like a warm cup of herbal tea. *This* is birding.



"SNIPE!" GREG CALLS FROM THE REAR OF VAN 1. Fred grabs the walkie-talkie as he brakes on the shoulder in a crunch of gravel. "Snipe, fencepost on the left!" he alerts Vans 2 and 3.

Twenty pairs of binoculars swivel toward a stout bird about the size and shape of a papaya. To fulfill its role as a “bog prober” (to quote *Peterson’s*), the “tight-sitting” Wilson’s Snipe sports a fantastical bill that is longer than half the length of its bulbous body. The overall effect is oddly adorable. “What a sweetheart,” I hear Fred rumble to himself.

That overheard comment lets me in on the marshmallowy heart that beats in the chest of this big, gruff man. Fred has a solidity of spirit that defies the bodily maladies of age. Even before he submitted to a hip replacement in his mid-seventies, he carried his stocky frame across the landscape as much on mental steel as on physical strength. Even when the pain of walking was evident in the rigid set of his jaw and the rolling sway of his shamble, hundreds of birders — the mega-count life listers as well as the greenhorns who can’t tell a Brewer’s Blackbird from a European Starling — followed him, as trusting as lambs, into every corner of Malheur’s chaparral, across endless acres of sagebrush and juniper under the ever-changing dome of the sky.

Fred’s been guiding birders at Malheur for fifty years, having missed the tour only twice in all those decades. The scuffs and sweat stains on his brown leather *Jacaru* bush hat suggest that it has sat on his head for every one of those trips (though he claims to have purchased a new “Aussie beauty” during each of his eight birding expeditions Down



Under). He runs the Malheur expedition with near-military precision, grumbling when someone delays the caravan by oversleeping, dawdling, or browsing too long in the general store at the pitstop in Paulina. When he puts his thumb and forefinger together and whistles, you know you’d better hustle.



NOT LONG AGO, I VISITED PORTLAND'S OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY to see “Catching Birds with a Camera,” an exhibit of black-and-white photos taken in the early 1900s by Oregon conservationist William L. Finley and his childhood friend Herman T. Bolman. My favorite image, labeled “Desert Sparrows perched on Finley’s hat, 1910,” showed three tiny birds sitting quite comfortably atop Finley’s holey fedora. The photo triggered a memory of the day several years back when I first understood that Fred is not just a bird expert but is, in fact, a kind of bird whisperer. Here’s the story as told by Rich, one of Fred’s longtime birding sidekicks: “We were stopped at the golden eagle nest on Harney Lake Road. It was very windy. There was a Loggerhead Shrike hanging around the lead van, often perching on the radio antenna. Fred got into the van for some reason, probably to fiddle with batteries or something similar. We weren’t getting ready to leave, so nobody else was getting in the vans, but the windows and doors were open. The shrike flew into the van, hopped around on the seatbacks for a while, and then flew up to the driver’s side and sat next to Fred’s shoulder. It sat there for several minutes.” Struck motionless, the rest of us assumed the aspect of statues until the shrike went on its way.

Rich, being strictly a numbers guy, admits he doesn’t buy into explanations that tap the poetic or mystical realms of experience. He figures the shrike — a handsome grey-and-black bird sporting white “handkerchiefs” on its wings — was simply “looking to get out of the wind.” My guess is less objective, closer to the “unlikely friendships” phenomenon captured in the eponymous book by *National Geographic* writer Jennifer Holland, who documents odd-couple relationships between disparate species, such as a hippo and a tortoise. As the photo exhibit noted, Finley was known for “the slow and measured nature of his speech and the gliding motion of his posture born from years of effort to avoid startling birds.” Fred, too, conveys this nonthreatening aura (except when he whistles to muster the troops). I like to believe that, like the sparrows on William Finley’s hat, the shrike sensed a species-to-species kinship with Fred that day on Harney Lake Road and flew in to check it out.

Birds aren't Fred's only interest here on the bone-dry desert. One morning as we headed out for the day, a pair of American Badgers materialized like shape-shifters, taking form, it seemed, from the very sagebrush. "Badgers!" Fred announced, jamming on the brakes. The badgers, members of the weasel family, scoured up great clouds of dust with their short, chunky legs as they dove headfirst into their burrow beside the road. They were gone in a blink. Fred sat still at the wheel of the van for a few minutes, savoring the pleasure of a new sighting, another species to put on the list at day's end.

At another stop, I was among a bevy of birders following Fred in search of a Lazuli Bunting when we heard Rich's urgent call from the next hill: "Over here! Over here!" Known as a



man who keeps his own counsel, Rich saves his larynx for only the rarest of utterances. So everyone shifted to high alert. We spotted him waving from the top of a steep slope of loose talus. Those of us whose hips and knees were reasonably intact scrambled uphill to find Rich pointing at a lizard about ten inches long from nose to tail, its neck circled in bold stripes of black and white, its skin scaled and baggy, its spiny feet and long claws as yellow as fresh butter. It was beautiful. Meanwhile, news of Rich's discovery had arrived at the bottom of the slope. It was a Collared Lizard, a species Fred had seen

in other places but never in Oregon. Fred hesitated for maybe a second. Then he started climbing. All of us stood still, holding our breath, watching this man with arthritic hips and questionable cardiovascular conditioning as he powered up the slope, puffing and sweating, a hell-or-high-water grimace on his face. Meanwhile, the lizard became interested in the shoe of birder Peter Stoel, who sat perfectly still as the creature crawled over for yet another human-to-animal interaction (shown in the photo above, taken by the author).



UNLESS THE WATER PIPES HAVE BURST (as they did in 2018) or the FBI has taken over during an armed occupation (as happened in 2016), Fred’s birders stay at the Malheur Field Station, an old Job Corps compound that houses birding groups and the occasional researcher. You must be committed to the birding life to endure the Field Station dorms — forlorn and long-neglected, paint peeling in great chips under the desert sun, creaky beds like relics from a World War II Army hospital, mousetraps requisitioned by the crate, toilets that work only intermittently. But the compound has its compensations. Common Nighthawks doze all day in the trees outside the dorms, lying on low branches like napping cats. Western Kingbirds stop by in their pastel plumage of misty-grey and baby-blanket yellow. Yellow-headed Blackbirds — the vivid mascots of the Field Station, featured on everything from T-shirts to notecards to coasters — gather in fidgety flocks to feast on seed strewn by the resident caretakers. One year, a raggedy arborvitae hedge on one edge of the compound was home to a nesting Great-horned Owl and her fluffy, giant-sized owlet, their great round eyes watching, impassively it seemed, the comings and goings of the humans below.



FOR SPECIAL SIGHTINGS, the birders who have precision spotting scopes unfold their tripods and balance them on the berm next to the vans. “Bird in scope,” Fred announces as we cluster next to a lush wetland en route to Malheur. I lean into the 32-power Leica. It’s as if I’m Saul and the scales have fallen from my eyes. A teensy black silhouette — without magnification, just a speck atop a willow twig — coalesces into a hummingbird. Its back shimmers green like the deep pools of Opal Creek. Its throat flashes like a glass of claret in candlelight. Named after the Greek muse of epic poetry, Calliope, this tiniest of Oregon’s breeding bird species perhaps seems best characterized by its onetime genus name *Stellula*, “little star.” (Ornithologists recently reassigned the Calliope to the genus *Selasphorus*.) “Ohmygod,” I say. And then again, as I move from scope to scope, greedily grabbing look after look at the miniscule bundle of iridescence, “Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod.”

Over and over during the next four days, I experience the same OMG rush when a dark silhouette undergoes a metamorphosis in the scope. The copper and blueish-purple sheen on the White-faced Ibis shimmers on the surface of a pond like a raku glaze. Golden tufts radiate from the Eared Grebe's head like flames painted on a hotrod. Ear tufts like the bushy brows of an ancient scholar sprout from a Great-horned Owl dozing in the shadowy nooks of a fractured rockface.



BUT NOW AND AGAIN, STILLNESS FAILS. That's when the 21st century birder abandons the rustic methods of yesteryear and embraces eBirding. That's when you whip out the iBird or other birdsong app and do some "pishing" (mimicking birdsong to draw out a hidden specimen), not to be confused with "phishing" (scamming people through email). Fred's iPad is equipped with the *Sibley Field Guide* app, but he uses it only as a backup to his preferred song source, *Stokes Field Guide* CDs. These, he downloads to his laptop, crops and edits, dumps into iTunes, uploads to his iPod and, out in the field, amplifies with an X-Mini portable speaker. The recordings, he explains, attract birds that are guarding their territories, prompting them to burst out of the foliage or rockpile to chase off the interlopers. At least, that's the theory. It worked on the Green-tailed Towhee at Indian Ford campground. But the Ash-throated Flycatcher at Sagehen Hill never showed itself despite 10 minutes of electronic enticements. Recorded calls, Fred admits, are far from foolproof.

So birders experiment and improvise. "We had a mystery bird calling from the middle of a thick bush in the Klamath Basin a few years ago," Fred recalls. "We pished and squeaked with no success in getting it out. But I had a little tape recorder — the sort people use to record meetings in an office. I recorded the bird's song and played it back. Immediately, the bird popped up to the very top of the bush." Turns out, the mystery bird was a Juniper Titmouse, whose prominent topknot, sticking up like a well-gelled Mohawk, gives the petite, smoke-gray songbird an outsized, rakish mien.



ON A MAP, MALHEUR NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE looks like a diagram of the human female reproductive system: At the top of the diagram, Harney Lake to the west and Malheur Lake to the east form the refuge’s plump, fertile ovaries, while the narrow marshy zone running north to south alongside the river called Donner und Blitzen (German for “thunder and lightning”) resembles the womb and birth canal. At the southernmost tip of the refuge, at the pubic bone, if you will, is historic Frenchglen, a cluster of buildings that includes the Frenchglen Hotel built in 1923, a state heritage site famed among birders who often make it their basecamp at Malheur.

Fred sometimes talks about the way things used to be out on this remote wellspring of life, when the din of hundreds of thousands of migratory birds could be heard, reliably, every spring and fall across the refuge — birds such as Ruddy Ducks, whose bills are tinted the same shade of powder blue favored for royal outings by Queen Elizabeth II; Great Blue Herons, the swoosh of their black head plumes reminiscent of a 1950s rocker; and Pied-billed Grebes, described on Cornell’s Institute of Ornithology website as “chunky” with “blocky” heads and “virtually no tail” and, according to Wikipedia, having more unflattering nicknames than an unpopular politician (devil-diver, hell-diver, and water witch, to name a few).

In the early days of Fred’s excursions, water was so abundant in the basin that it would overtop the roads. The looming sentinel of the desert, Steens Mountain — a fifty-mile-long, 10,000-foot-high fault-block colloquially known simply as “The Steens” — held onto its snowpack until late summer, feeding the Donner und Blitzen well into autumn. Before climate change ramped up the region’s heat and aridity to new heights, enough rain would percolate through the plateau at Wright’s Point to keep the Silvies River flowing fast and full into the refuge’s northern lakes and marshes.

Those marshes have shrunk dramatically during Fred's decades as a witness in Malheur. Spring nesting sites have grown ever-scarcer. In the fall, migratory species winging along the Pacific Flyway fail to find the reedy waters that once beckoned them to this desert paradise, waters where they could grow fat and strong before continuing their arduous journey to wintering grounds thousands of miles to the south.

Among the tules now, remnant pools sparkle only ephemeraly, vestiges of the storied swamps that graced the basin before European settlers claimed huge swaths for farms and ranches. During the late-nineteenth century, hunters slaughtered birds by the tens of thousands to fill a demand for feathered hats by the fashionistas of the day — what Oregon Public Broadcasting has called the “bizarre bird hat fad.” Some hatmakers went so far as to sew the stuffed carcasses of entire birds onto their headgear. For the sake of women who imagined themselves glamorous in the purloined raiment of wild birds, plume hunters decimated Malheur's population of Snowy Egrets, especially prized for their dazzling white plumage. In 1886, Snowy Egret plumes commanded \$32 an ounce, twice the price of gold. The plume hunters got rich. The egrets nearly disappeared from Malheur.

The appalling carnage helped spark the conservation movement. Oregon naturalist Finley publicized the slaughter with photos and presentations around the country, gathering support for granting refuge status to Malheur, achieved when President Teddy Roosevelt signed the order in 1908. Since then, scientists and engineers have managed Malheur's waters with dikes and canals to preserve habitat. Nonetheless, human activities continue to conspire against the birds and other creatures of the refuge. One of the knottiest problems is the fin-to-tail invasion by Asian carp at Malheur Lake. Seeking to profit by farming the voracious carp (cousins to the catfish), early entrepreneurs stocked the lake. The business fizzled, but the carp thrived. These days, they're so thick you can practically walk on their backs while they bob lazily under the big sky, making a sickening *glub-glub* sound as they devour the grasses and insects that once fed migrating and native birds.

Fred carries within his bones the Malheur story, the vanishing waters, the spectral images of lost birds. At Krumbo Reservoir on the refuge's southeast boundary, he looks out across

the lake to the far shore where a lone cormorant dives for fish. On this windless afternoon, the azure sky and cottony clouds cast a perfect reflection on the water's surface. As I stare into the mirrored likeness of the sky, I feel momentarily untethered. So absolute is the fusion of sky and water and land, I have the sensation that a dive into the water would take me on a flight into the sky. I glance at Fred as he stands apart from the other birders who, in the absence of birds, have turned their lenses toward shimmering damselflies and dragonflies instead. In public, at least, his scientist's understanding — data-driven, clear-eyed, unsentimental — mostly overrides the lamentations of his heart. He carries his sorrow with grace.



WHEN FRED'S BAND OF BIRDERS ARRIVED for their annual excursion in 2016, Refuge Headquarters was an active crime scene. Armed agents of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service were turning away visitors as the FBI processed the detritus of an invasion by anti-government militants, an event that rocked Oregonians and birders nationwide.

It all started on the morning of January 2. I was still in bed, drifting in and out of wakefulness, my clock radio tuned to Oregon Public Broadcasting, when the words “armed occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge” penetrated the fog of my sleep. I opened my eyes. The details were still sketchy. Over the coming days, we learned that Ammon Bundy, son of outlaw Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, had inspired a small band of militants to take over the refuge in protest of federal land-use laws. The older Bundy already was infamous in the West for his 2014 standoff with law enforcement over grazing fees on federal lands.

When Ammon and his band forced their firearms and their rhetoric into the heart of Malheur, it felt like the desecration of a shrine. Malheur's headquarters — a leafy oasis whose willows and alders and ancient cottonwoods are, in this Anthropocene epoch of management and engineering, fed by a system of pumps and canals — lived in my mind as a place of origins, an Eden teeming with lifeforms, with Belding's Ground Squirrels and

Least Chipmunks and bird species in primary colors (Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Yellow Warblers, Western Tanagers, Bullock's Orioles, Cedar Waxwings, Townsend's Warblers, Tree Swallows) and in avian incarnations ranging from tiny whirring acrobats (Black-chinned Hummingbirds) to giant meditative sentries (Great-horned Owls), all flourishing together among the shade trees, beneath which the visitor center, bookstore, and natural history museum tuck in cozily.



WHEN WE RETURNED TO MALHEUR TWO YEARS AFTER THE OCCUPATION, I held my breath as I stepped out of the van and walked along the path toward Refuge Headquarters. When I exhaled, it was with a cathartic sense of relief. The place was lush, cool, and bursting with life — in short, every bit itself. Finally, I could shake off the dread I'd carried since the day the occupation hit the news, when “those bastards,” as Greg refers to the Bundy band, had callously violated a peaceful sanctuary. In the end, the militants' reckless machinations had failed to spoil this sacred spot, thanks in large part to the six hundred volunteers who restored and renewed the grounds and buildings.

For a long time, I sat on a bench near the main entrance watching a pair of Tree Swallows as they took turns flying in and out of a nesting box on the trunk of an old willow. As they performed their synchronized *pas de deux* of parenting, the birds' pure-white breasts beneath their midnight-blue backs, suggested a fresh snowfall under a dark winter's sky.

As I watched through my Vortex lenses, something suddenly appeared behind the swallows, an undulating line of pterodactyl-like creatures, hundreds of times bigger than the palm-sized swallows. Having once seen a squadron of White Pelicans, their wingtips dipped in black, flying in that exact formation — a low, jagged, single-file line — in the Klamath Basin (another refuge on the Pacific Flyway), I knew instantly what had crossed my sightline. “Pelicans!” I blurted to David, the birder who happened to be sitting at the other end of the bench. “Where?” he asked. I let my binoculars down and prepared to point. But the pelicans weren't there. I felt disoriented. Had I succumbed to some sort of

hallucination? We scanned the sky in front of us where the birds would have been if they'd kept flying on the same trajectory. And then David looked up. "There they are!" he said, pointing overhead. "There are about 25 of them." We realized that the birds with their huge, yellow, pouchy bills and their wingspans broader than an NBA player is tall, must have turned their flight path on its side, from horizontal to vertical, just as they were passing over the headquarters. They had grabbed a ride on an unseen current, a thermal, spiraling upward, swirling round and round as they rose higher and higher, as silent as the vaporous clouds above them. When the topmost spiraling birds reached the clouds, they faded into the mist, one by one. We stood still, watching the pelicans disappear into the firmament.



THE CURRENCIES OF OUR TIME — RUSHING AROUND, multitasking across a million apps, climbing the ladder of success, chasing productivity, aching for recognition — have enslaved us to busyness. For most of my life, I wore the blinders of striving. The things I missed seeing along the way, I can only guess at. But now, no longer racing toward some unformed future, I'm learning to give myself over to stillness.

Birding, it turns out, is the perfect portal for the seeker of stillness, the sojourner reaching for the deep peace of the quiet earth.

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