

# The Bounds of Knowledge

Alaska, the travel agent tells you, is the ultimate seen-it-all, died-and-gone-to-heaven vacation. In Denali National Park: glaciers and grizzly bears, daybreak at midnight, the eponymous 20,000-foot peak. There are birds, too: Long-tailed Jaegers harrying the lemmings, a Willow Ptarmigan watching from a snow bank, maybe a Gyrfalcon. The bus rumbles past a willow thicket. A small bird emerges from the dense vegetation, but nobody notices. The tour guide drones on about the park's caribou herd.

The Arctic Warbler—drab olive, a skulker—is no showstopper. Most visitors to Denali will not make its acquaintance. Many will never even know of its existence. Besides, there's plenty of that stuff—brown “sparrows” in the weeds—back home in Michigan or Maryland or wherever.

For the birder, though, Arctic Warbler is the chief reason to visit Denali. The sighting of *Phylloscopus borealis* is not a seen-it-all, died-and-gone-to-heaven experience. Rather, it is a gateway, a port of entry, to the vast Palearctic avifauna. Next on the agenda: Gambell or Attu, and hopes of Middendorf's Grasshopper-Warbler and Mugimaki Flycatcher. After that: Kamchatka, Baikal, the Himalayas, swarming with Old World warblers and flycatchers.

Whoa! Is there no satisfying the birder? Must we search harder, push farther, linger longer? Is it necessary to be so driven, so intense? It is permissible—is it not?—to stop and smell the flowers. To listen to the longspurs.

Longspurs?

On the tundra at Denali, at the Gambell boneyard, amid the debris at Attu, there are Lapland Longspurs. They are the heralds of spring, the characteristic sound of summer in Alaska. Their singing—languid and lovely, uncadenced and amorphous, eternity—gives aural expression to the boundlessness of the Arctic. A male, splendidly attired, alights on a tuft of parsnip and bids us Stop, Look at Me, Listen to Me. Next on the agenda: Study Me, Understand Me. After that: Love Me.

The longspur's lesson is that this world is full of riches and glories; that there are new things,

strange and wonderful, right here, right now. It is a lesson that is transmitted in two contemporary works of poetry, very different in their rhetorical strategies, yet focused on the same fascinating and forgotten subject matter: the Japanese invasion of Alaska in 1942.

Macklin Smith, in his evocative “Birding the Battle of Attu”, writes of the realization that he is treading among human remains: “Under soft mosses, somewhere here, they fill caverns / As dust and jelly. Ordnance actually floats in tundra: / Fragments, small shells, a driftwood sandal growing ferns, / And what we can't identify: this jar of rain and tundra.” “Tundra is merciful and just,” says Smith, “The way it fills holes, enfolding history. / Ptarmigans lay in machine-gun nests, / Snow Buntings sing on territory.” And an unsettling question: “Are those their holes in the scree, their snowfaces?”

Karen Hesse's *Aleutian Sparrow* is restless and agitated, a grim tale of betrayal and disappointment. On close reading, though, one detects flourishes of hope and beauty. The Aleutians are a “necklace of jewels around the throat of the Bering Sea”, a land where “the sun emerges from the galloping clouds, / Where one moment the rain ices our hair and the next a rainbow arches over the volcano, / Where early grass ripples in the wind and violets lead an advance of wildflowers across the treeless hills.” Here one finds the Aleutian sparrow, which “repeats over and over its welcome of fluid notes.” Hesse does not say so explicitly, but her Aleutian sparrow has to be *Calcarius lapponicus*, symbolic of an exhilaration borne of intimacy and devotion.



Arkansas, any birder would tell you, is not a top destination in the ABA Area. The best spots stretch around the periphery of the region: South Florida, South Texas, and Southeast Arizona; the pelagic zone; and Alaska, of course. In the interior, one concentrates on “extreme” habitats—tall peaks in the Rockies, the boreal forest of Minnesota, peninsula tips in the Great Lakes. Arkansas, however,

tends not to attract the attention of the out-of-state birder. It is landlocked, unexceptional. There aren't many lifers to be had in Arkansas. The state harbors no specialties.

Until 28 April 2005, the day birding changed forever.

"Where were you when it happened?" The story broke during rush hour on that Thursday morning. By noon, every birder had heard—*The Ivory-billed Woodpecker Lives!*

The news of the rediscovery of the Lord God Bird was met with astonishment, to say the least. There was an audacity about the entire enterprise—its shocking premise, the clandestine search, its outrageous success. For decades, birders and ornithologists had "known" that the species was extinct. The last hope had been Louisiana's Singer Tract or maybe The Big Thicket of East Texas. Nobody could have imagined that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker would be holed up in eastern Arkansas, midway between Little Rock and Memphis. An easy day's drive from many eastern and Midwestern metropolises. Only five miles from the nearest McDonald's.

The frankly fantastical nature of the rediscovery comes across clearly in Pete Dunne's eerie and prophetic *Small-headed Flycatcher. Seen Yesterday. He Didn't Leave His Name*. It's all in there: the incredulity of the birding community; the imperative to get good photographs; the matter of protecting the site from twitchers; the specter of collecting; the embargoed technical report; the timing of the press release. The physical setting for *Small-headed Flycatcher* is familiar, too: a regenerating but neglected forest unexpectedly close to civilization. And the discoverer himself: "The kid was definitely on the outside looking in."

There is, however, a difference between *Small-headed Flycatcher*—which debuted, by the way, as an evening presentation at the 1992 ABA Convention in Mobile, Alabama—and the news of 28 April 2005. *Small-headed Flycatcher* ends in failure. *Small-headed Flycatcher* is an account of miscalculation and lost opportunity. It is a fictional—but sadly plausible—story of habitat destruction, of the one that got away, of extinction.

*Small-headed Flycatcher*, like any authentic prophecy, is hortatory. And it is as though the Cornell team heeded its advice: Listen to the backwoodsmen, to the folks on the outside looking in; Look for the bird in familiar places, the

sorts of places where birders don't go anymore; Learn the lay of the land; Be patient and expect success.



What does the post-Ivorybill era hold in store? For starters, the end of rarities: The discovery of ten North American firsts at Gambell would pale in comparison with the rediscovery of *Campephilus principalis*. As a corollary, the end of listing: This most prized twitch of all is, practically speaking, completely off limits. There are the closures and restrictions, for starters; and the snakes and mosquitoes, not to mention the birds' (or bird's) notorious reclusiveness; and, yes, the ABA Code of Birding Ethics, in spirit for sure and arguably in law.

But not the end of birding. Is it time, at last, to get serious about identification? About status and distribution? About conservation? It is time to get beyond the "think outside the box" mentality, which requires only discipline of thought. It is time, instead, to get like that kid, "on the outside

looking in", to embrace truly new and different, strange and wonderful, ideas about the natural world.

Brian Greene, in his *Fabric of the Cosmos*, concludes with a surprising exhortation to the contemporary physics community: "Assessing cutting-edge proposals for deep physical laws may well require the ferocious might of particle accelerators able to re-create violent conditions unseen since moments after the big bang. But for me, there would be nothing more poetic, no outcome more graceful, no unification more complete, than for us to confirm our theories of the ultra-small—our theories about the ultramicroscopic makeup of space, time, and matter—by turning our most powerful telescopes skyward and gazing silently at the stars."

Analogously, but conversely, the birder's charge is to return to his proverbial backyard, to focus on the familiar, to probe closer and closer, into the depths of a tupelo swamp in Arkansas, into the eyes of an Aleutian sparrow still standing on the near side of the tarmac. It is here, in these most ordinary of places, at the bounds of knowledge, where daring adventure awaits, where the most outlandish of discoveries are to be made.

— Ted Floyd



The Aleutian sparrow (or Lapland Longspur, *Calcarius lapponicus*) repeats over and over its welcome of fluid notes. Colored pencil on matte paper by © Jennifer Brumfield.