

Third Place Writing – Age 14-18
Tim Hodge – Roseland, VA

A Lost Attempt

It's dark; I'm lost and weary, but still running on adrenaline. After two miles of constant, restless running, the path has disappeared. I look around fearfully. Where is the trail? Tall pines and dark spruces loom in every direction. Pine needles cover the ground unbroken as far as the eye can see. Where is the path?

It was a fine June evening while visiting upstate New York. I had persuaded my mom to take an evening to go birding with me. Having driven for nearly half an hour, and now going back the way we came on some other obscure road, we were sure we had come the long way. That fine June evening quit instantly as we hit a clearly defined wall of water. It poured; it rained; it poured some more and still we had not reached our destination.

What was our destination? A little, ill-defined, overgrown trail in the middle of nowhere now flooded in several inches of rainwater. Why was I going there? For two small birds: the mourning and Nashville warblers. Both warblers have a gray head and yellow undersides and olive-green back. The Nashville is smaller and has a yellow throat, while the mourning is larger and longer-billed, with a black throat and breast.

Finally, the rain had sunk to a light drizzle, and we had arrived. After waiting in the car for approximately a quarter of an hour, I opened the door and stepped out. Because the trail was too wet, Mom had decided to wait in the car while I did my birding. I set out listening for bird songs and identifying only the drip, drip of water dropping off the leaves, and landing on my head (and elsewhere).

Having walked a little ways, I came upon a standing pool of water covering the path for about ten feet. Foolishly deciding to leap across, but having no other option, I backed up for a running jump. The take off was fine, but the landing defeated the purpose of jumping at all. I landed with another three feet to go and some now thoroughly waterlogged sneakers. The splash startled a nearby great blue heron, which flew directly overhead, and seemed to set at least a few birds singing. As I walked on, a pileated woodpecker called from somewhere across the swamp I was in, and a black-throated blue warbler began singing close at hand.

Crossing a bridge, I came to a split in the trail and a map. The map said the trail took a three-mile loop. Checking the time I realized I had two more hours of daylight. "Well," I thought, "I do about two miles per hour while birding, and on this terrain, if need be, I can probably move nearly four. I have time." So, without telling Mom, who expected me to stay in the general area of the swamp, I started off.

The birding started out pretty bad, with just an American crow, white-breasted nuthatch, and red-eyed vireo. The birds noticeably began to pick up with eighteen wood thrushes,

juncos, titmice, some chickadees, and some excellent views of a black-throated green warbler, but sadly no Nashville or mourning warblers. I had traveled about two miles when the sun began to set, so I decided to pick up the pace. Once I began to go faster, I lost track of my exact location on my mental map.

An hour and a half later I was lost, having literally run four miles in the past forty-five minutes, fording streams, losing the trail, and finding it again. Standing now in front of an old-looking white house, in which I could see an old man watching TV, I knocked on the door. The man looked at me curiously and told me to go around to the back. I told the man I was lost and what had happened. He offered me a ride back to the place he thought I had started. I gratefully accepted.

Throughout the entire ride, which lasted seven minutes, he told me in brief the entire history of the hollow in which I was birding. He told me about an old mill that had been washed away in a flood in 1886, about how he found the old mill stone back in '45 and how it was hanging from the outside of his chimney. Then he went on to describe the whole history of every generation from 1823 when the first settlers (his ancestors) came into the valley.

Forty-five minutes earlier, Mom had begun to get worried. It was dark; she could not see the trail. So she got out of the car and called. When that did not work she began honking the horn at five-minute intervals. Her cell phone was out of range. By nine forty-five she decided to flag down the next car. Fifteen minutes later the next car came by. She got out to flag the car down. It pulled up and I got out. She was relieved. It took us ten minutes to get back to where we were staying. I was lost on this attempt to see my first mourning warbler, which I never saw.

The moral of this true tale is, don't ever go birding far alone in an area you don't know, just before dark, without telling anybody exactly where you were going.