

On Listing

I saw my first Resplendent Quetzal in the cloud forest of Lagunas de Montebello National Park in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The bird was perched on a vine about six feet above the ground. It was glowing. Transfixed with emotion, my companions and I watched the male as it sat regally upon its perch, slowly turning its turquoise-and-golden head as if surveying its realm. When it finally flew across the road, its breast was an explosion of crimson. Then it vanished into a forest of soft green tree ferns without a whisper of sound.



Black-throated
Blue Warbler.
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I keep lists. For bird guides, like me, it is a professional obligation. Regardless of how good a guide's memory is, or how great his or her ability to spot, a well-groomed database enables a guide to construct the most efficient route for a group.

But pragmatic considerations are not the only reason I keep bird lists.

The date I saw my first Resplendent Quetzal was 7 January 1984. Small groups of Guatemalan refugees were using the same dusty road where we saw the quetzal, men and boys dressed in vanilla-colored muslin blouses and pants that stopped mid-calf. Their wives and daughters wore long calico dresses and *huipiles* with elaborately embroidered designs. Both men and boys carried machetes in waist belts. Women and older girls carried babies and younger siblings in shawls on their backs. Most of them were barefoot. They scarcely glanced at us as they walked past. Over the course of the morning we also saw Azure-hooded Jays and heard the poignant songs of Slate-colored Solitaires. The exquisite colors and carols of those birds, too, are two more bright threads forever woven into my memories of that frontier road.

My bird lists are my personal journal. Some people measure the worth of their lives by the size of the fortunes they amass. Their lists are lists of assets. Obviously, this strictly quantitative approach has its advantages. Birders cannot, say, give up a Resplendent Quetzal sighting in exchange for a loaf of bread or a repair job on a leaky faucet. On the other hand, no matter how long one stares at the portrait of Benjamin Franklin on a hundred-dollar bill—or how many miniature portraits of Old Ben a person may possess—none will ever summon the vortex of memories that come associated with one's life bird sighting of a Resplendent Quetzal.

Aside from the mental image of your first quetzal—or Willow Ptarmigan or Colima Warbler—a life bird comes replete with a whole phalanx of associations. A lush cloud forest draped with bromeliads, an arctic postcard of ice-capped mountains under cerulean skies, or burnt-umber volcanic peaks polkadotted with surprisingly shady pockets of maple. A

bird is part of its habitat. Moreover, the bird may be a window which permits our memory to recreate the events of an entire day.

Especially if it's a bird that has drifted far away from its expected geography. To discover a male Black-throated Blue Warbler among yellowing cottonwood leaves on a crisp October morning in Arizona, a thousand miles out of range, creates an indelible impression. I think again of my companion that day, of how perfectly luminous her face became as she saw the bird. And I remember how absolutely good I felt just to be alive. When I notice the date of the Black-throated Blue on my Arizona list, it all comes rushing back.

Similarly, I'll never forget the falcon-like flight of a Common Cuckoo among a field of boulders on St. Paul in Alaska's Pribilof Islands. It was just the first of five we saw on that

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trip in early June. The cuckoo in turn evokes visions of other Siberian vagrants. I see again the red-morph Ruff at Webster Lake—and the Hawfinch perched on the Russian Orthodox cross at Webster House. I recall nights when the sun barely set at the King Eider Hotel, that aging dowager where groups put up on St. Paul Island, and the rollicking conversations over surprisingly delicious meals at the nearby Trident Restaurant. And the memories of the people with whom I shared these experiences, as well as the memories of the Aleuts who were our hosts, all come flooding back.

I recently saw a “milestone bird” in the backyard of my home in Arizona’s Chiricahua Mountains. Quite unexpectedly, a Louisiana Waterthrush lit on the lawn and began bobbing as it foraged just 15 feet away. It was number 200 for my yard list. I called to my spouse, Lynne, and together we enjoyed this tiny wanderer as it voraciously snapped up insects from the grass, fueling itself for the next leg of its journey. Eventually we returned to our chores, but throughout the day the waterthrush showed itself intermittently, invariably launching another cascade of memories. I remembered a waterthrush I saw in March in Chiapas, teetering along the perimeter of the hotel swimming pool in Palenque, and another—perhaps the same?—in April at the pool in Sabine Woods on a hot Texas day. I thought of earlier encounters with this species in Arizona—and of the people I’d been birding with, a doctor and his wife who eventually retired near Tucson, and a father and son who, serendipitously, actually hailed from the state of Louisiana. Like so many birds, the waterthrush was impervious to petty concepts of state and national boundaries, of imaginary cultural and political limits.

I thought of other avian vagrants that had come to this house, almost like gifts, over my tenure of the past 30-plus years. One of these, a Plain-capped Starthroat, was responsible for transforming me from a birder to a bird lister. That summer some 500 people from throughout the entire U.S. came to pay homage to “my” starthroat. I was impressed that such a little bird could dictate the expenditure of so much human energy. It dawned on me that my decision to become a bird guide was not so inconsequential as it had seemed.

The appearance of the Plain-capped Starthroat at my home was an experience I never want to forget. Although it took years to accomplish, I finally reconstructed both my yard list and my life list from two decades’ worth of checklists, notes, and random marginalia in my field guides. That exercise gave me a sense of mastery over my own personal history. For the first time in my life I had a framework that gave me access to the people, places, and events that had shaped my entire adulthood.

I remember, when I was a fledgling guide a long time ago, how intrigued I was to learn that most of my clients had in their childhood collected stamps or coins. I had, too. Many, of course, still do. Others now collect stamps of foreign and exotic locales in their passports, or the imprimatur of U.S. National Parks in their National Park Service Passport Book. Obviously, the drive to collect precious objects is a deeply-rooted human impulse. Listing birds might be taken as yet another expression of the same fundamental behavior. I think it’s more.



Louisiana
Waterthrush.
© Andrew Birch.

Listing birds is the next evolutionary step. It represents our desire not just to enrich our lives, but also to organize our lives into a series of interlocking vignettes that we know from the onset will prove valuable only to ourselves. Our bird lists are the medium. They are, if you will, the wings of memory. As anyone who loves birding already knows, it is the quality—not the quantity—of those images that will ultimately determine our own sense of personal worth.