

Exceptions to the Rule

I know someone who, as a general rule, doesn't like dogs. He says they're smelly. And messy. They bark, of course, and they bite. That adage about "Man's Best Friend" just doesn't hold much water for my friend: He's scared of strays (they're dangerous), he's put off by lapdogs (so frou-frou), and he's opposed to birddogs (how barbaric).

But he readily makes exceptions to his "rule". He admits to a certain fondness for the next-door-neighbor's gentle and alert golden retriever, and he professes esteem for the well-groomed albeit poorly-trained kerry blue terrier that belongs to old Karl Menz. He can't help but smile at Mrs. Sanchez's clan of cocker spaniels—especially the little liver-colored one, and the all-black one, and the gimpy roan with the white feet... He is a great admirer of Max, the incorruptible German shepherd who dutifully accompanies the papergirl on her neighborhood rounds. And he gave \$20 to the Humane Society last year and helped to "adopt" an old potterer named Penny Beagle.

Once, on the losing end of a bet, my friend even went to a dog show. He was determined to have a bad time. Instead, he came home crowing about the manifold virtues of one "exception" after another. He was bewitched by a companionable Belgian malinois, and he was bowled over by a stunning Finnish spitz. He managed to see redeeming qualities in the aloof salukis (which he termed "laid back") and stubborn akitas (he called them "principled"). He got his picture taken with a fretful whippet, and he brought back a porcelain statuette of a self-assured, strutting boxer. His favorite was something called a wirehaired pointing griffon—wild-eyed and unkempt, apparently a real rarity in American dog shows.

But remember: As a general rule, my friend doesn't like dogs.



I feel the same way about raptors. On general princi-

ple, I don't like them. Maybe it has something to do with my aversion to falconry—which I shouldn't hold against the raptors themselves, I realize; it's not exactly their fault. Maybe it's a form of snobbery; after all, even the non-birder can recognize a Bald Eagle and perhaps a few other raptor species. Conversely, maybe it's because I find many raptors hard to identify; but then again, that's a charge I've never leveled against my beloved shorebirds, sparrows, or empids. Or maybe it's an unconscious relict of the twentieth-century birder's general indisposition toward the heartless, thuggish, raptorial lifestyle of the order Falconiformes; thus, even though I know better, might my affections lie with the nobler and less-savage granivores, frugivores, and insectivores?

Like my cynophobic friend, though, I make many exceptions to the rule.

Let's start with the Turkey Vulture, and in particular the *soaring* Turkey Vulture, way up there, the epitome of the lazy summer afternoon, that paragon of freedom from care. There are few sights more satisfying, more diverting, more liberating, than that of the lone Turkey Vulture riding the thermals amid the woolly clouds. Of course, I might conveniently point out that *Cathartes aura* was recently exiled to the order Ciconiiformes, that it really isn't a raptor at all. But deep down, I know otherwise.

A similar breed of (il)logic applies to the falcons. They're in their own family (Falconidae) and thus segregated from the "true hawks" in the family Accipitridae. One falcon species that always succeeds in endearing itself to me is the American Kestrel—so charismatic, so obliging, so easy to identify. And I've never—ever—walked away from a Peregrine Falcon, that ultimate "embodiment of speed and power", according to David Sibley. The Crested Caracara—boldly marked and long-legged—is a falcon, too, and the crown prince of the dry uplands of South Texas.

Even within the family Accipitridae, I make all sorts of allowances. For starters, there are the taxonomic outliers: industrious Osprey families wherever there are buoys or channel markers; wraithlike Northern Harriers about our marshlands and grasslands; and mainly along the periphery of the ABA

Area, the kites, more like giant butterflies, I like to think, than like little raptors. In fact, I'm a big fan of the type genus, *Accipiter*, and I always thrill to the sight of a Sharpie on migration, a wintering Coop in a suburban woodlot, or a rare Gos in one of our national forests.

Come to think of it, my only real gripe is with the genus *Buteo*—characterized by confusing birds that look more like other species than like themselves. But let's be clear about a few things. First, I have a soft spot for our “near-*Buteo*” species, for birds like the Harris's Hawk (an intriguing communally hunting raptor) and the Common Black-Hawk (a frog-eating denizen of southwestern rivers). Second, I grant special dispensations to certain species within the genus *Buteo*. For example, there are the Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks, those great harbingers of spring in eastern and western North America, respectively. And there are several others that score points for resembling non-*Buteo* species: the Rough-legged Hawk (hunts like an oversized kestrel), the Ferruginous Hawk (reminds me of a little eagle), the Zone-tailed Hawk (a Turkey Vulture look-alike), and the Red-shouldered Hawk (an *Accipiter* wannabe).

Basically, that leaves us with just one species in the genus *Buteo*—the protean Red-tailed Hawk. It is to raptors what the Herring Gull is to the Laridae, or the Song Sparrow to the Emberizidae: widespread, common, and complex. And like the Herring Gull and Song Sparrow, the Red-tailed Hawk is adaptable, resilient, and fascinating. You can observe Red-tails in downtown Manhattan, in the remote wilderness of western North America, or anywhere in between. And they come in more races, variants, and color morphs than any field guide has room for. If variety is the spice of life, then the Red-tail rates very high. In fact, I have to confess that it is my favorite raptor.



I have another confession to make. Sometimes I go birding for the sole purpose of finding raptors. And I do so with a feeling perhaps akin to that of my dog-dissing friend upon taking his seat at that American Kennel Club event several years ago. Hawkwatching is boring, I've been heard to mutter. It's sedentary and unathletic. The birds go by too fast, and there's not enough time to savor each sighting. Besides, they all look like Red-tails...

Felicitously—for me, and especially for my companions at the hawkwatch—my crankiness is typically short-lived. It lasts for only as long as it takes someone to blurt out, “Sharpie coming past the south lookout!” What follows—often for the remainder of the afternoon, if it's a good flight—is the mirth and camaraderie of hawkwatching, the giv-

and-take of learning and teaching about raptor ID, the pleasures of a sunny autumn day at the beach or on the ridgetops.

There's another kind of hawkwatching. It's done in the dead of winter. Far from the mountains or oceans, in places like South Dakota. The colder and snowier, the better. We'll call it “X-treme Hawkwatching”, in recognition of its popularity with Generation X birders. I'm not all that good at it. But X-treme Hawkwatching has an allure all its own, with no assurances, no stakeouts, no sure thing.

It starts before dawn, so as to get a jump on anything coming off a nighttime roost. It begins—it began—with a Prairie Falcon on a roadside utility pole. Eight minutes later came the first of many Rough-legged Hawks—this particular one a light-morph adult female. It took another fifty-seven minutes to get the morning's first Gyrfalcon, a spectacular gray-phase adult female that took a whack at a flushing pheasant and then made several low passes over the car. Next: a scrappy little Merlin. Then, thousands of Lapland Longspurs later, a pair of Golden Eagles at a carcass. Later still, on the heels of an early-afternoon snow squall, an adult Bald Eagle, almost too high up to see without binoculars, soaring in broad circles in the suddenly-clear sky.

I give up. “If you can't lick 'em,” as Lucy Van Pelt (that most curmudgeonly dog-hater of them all) advised, “join 'em.” I'm a convert. I like raptors. The whole blooming lot of them.

— TED FLOYD



Adult gray-phase Gyrfalcon.

Seward Peninsula, Alaska; June 2001. © Jim Zipp.