

THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDING

Paul Sullivan

A young birder rushed up to me on the Dry Tortugas. "Do you need a Gray-cheeked Thrush?" he asked. "Have you seen one?" I replied. "We had one over there." He pointed and rushed off. The hair on my neck bristled.

Near Boston I listened to a birder complain, "We had a Ringed Turtle Dove, but we couldn't count it. It was an escapee." I said nothing.

At Tillamook another birder spoke of searching through sandpipers "for a 'semi' until a 'Coop' came over and scattered them. That would have been a year bird for me." "Oh, I need it; that would be a state bird for me!" cried his companion. A third birder chimed in, "I got my life semi right here." I walked away.

I am probably as avid as the next person. Since I became hooked on birds about 8 years ago, I have maneuvered to live for periods of time in New England, Florida, Minnesota, Arizona, and the Pacific Northwest. I keep lists of the birds I have seen, in several states and counties, year by year.

Although my lifetime list is over 500, I never had a Graycheeked Thrush. I have seen one and heard it sing. I have seen a Ringed Turtle Dove. I have never had a lifer. I do not need a McKay's Bunting, although I would like to see one.

I object to the prevailing jargon of birders. To "lifer" and "countable." I object to the telescoped language— "semi," "Coop," "Zono," and to the use of "life," "year," "county," and "state" as adjectives to describe a bird. I strongly object to what I call verbs of possession — "get," "have," "need," and "want." I object to the conquest, the human domination, and the accumulation implied. As another birder agreed with me, "After all, these aren't baseball cards we're collecting."

For some, birding is a competitive sport often carried on in a carnival atmosphere. Perhaps they have come to it in the company of other keen competitors. Economizing on language, they hone their skills to shave a millisecond off their identification time as though training for the Olympics. They want to see a rarity before someone else does, especially if that someone is "ahead" of them.

In the book The Wallawas author William Ashworth tells of 3 stages in his approach to these mountains. As a brash teenager he sought to conquer the peaks with his boot, to climb them all. Later he sought to conquer them with his mind, studying their geology, vegetation, and fauna. Now he goes to them humbly, to be a part of them, to be at peace.

I slowly answer the hotshot birder with the long form, "I've never seen that bird in Oregon before." "I saw a Goshawk for the first time this year just yesterday." My avenue to this hobby has been largely a solitary stroll in the woods and marshes. I prefer the atmosphere of a cathedral to that of a coliseum. The element of reverence or awe before the living specimen, which I have previously seen only on paper, stands before conquest. I do not get a lifer. I see and enjoy a species for the first time. Alive, behaving, beautiful.

For this reason I would much rather see a bird in its natural habitat and range than find a wind-blown vagrant miles from its home. I would prefer to know a species rather than add another tick to the birds of Oregon. For me the achievement of enjoyment of a bird far outshines and should never be overshadowed by the enjoyment of achievement of a list.

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