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LETTER

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THE RIVERSIDE PARK BIRD SANCTUARY

Geoffrey Nulle

“I hate quotations. Tell me what you know”, said Ralph Waldo Emerson. Indeed – and yet I can’t think of a better way to begin this article than to quote the man Emerson let camp on his property near Walden Pond for a two-year stint that got condensed into one year in the man’s book. “I have travelled much in Concord”, said Thoreau in that book (and if you travel even a little in Concord now, you soon learn that he pronounced his name, as they still do there, like the adjective “thorough”).

I have travelled much in the Riverside Park Bird Sanctuary. The pun on “Concord” (i.e. “I have travelled much in harmony with my surroundings”) is missing, but I’ve put in some twenty years of pretty much daily attendance in the Sanctuary, and I’ve planted a whole lot more there than just a few bean-rows. Helped by two or three thousand volunteers recruited by Riverside Park Fund from companies wanting to do team-building in the great outdoors as well as school and community groups, I’ve planted hundreds and hundreds of ground covers, bushes and trees. And so I like to think that *my* travels have been in some sense almost equally Thoreau.

Riverside Park is a long, narrow park in upper Manhattan, having as its western border about four miles of Hudson River shoreline. The Sanctuary – the smallest of the New York

City areas designated “Forever Wild” by the Parks Department – is approximately ten acres of woods and fields mid-park, stretching from 116th street to about 124th street (where Robert Moses stopped covering the railroad tracks that lead to Penn Station).

Of course the key to good bird sanctuaries is habitat, habitat, habitat, and we don’t have enough or enough diversity to make us one of the city’s “Important Bird Areas”, but we like what we do have, and birds seem to like it, too. We’ve recorded 174 species in twenty years, we average 120 species a year, and we seem to get a fair amount of repeat business. For example, what was likely the same Acadian Flycatcher spent three or four days each spring and fall in one small area of our north woods for four years, and on its last day with us two years ago finally spoke, calling “pizza” for half an hour and confirming its identity.

The crown jewel of the Sanctuary is a man-made fresh water source we call the “Bird Drip”, located on a hillside just south of the 119th street tennis courts. Since its opening in the fall of 2002, the “Drip” has attracted about seventy-five species, from Wild Turkey to Yellow-billed Cuckoo and including thirty species of warblers (and one form: a “Lawrence’s Warbler”). (More about the “Drip” in a future installment.)

I can't speak for the other four boroughs of New York, but we in Manhattan take very seriously what someone in our borough probably gave the name to: boundaries. And yet, in my neck of the woods at least, strangers feel absolutely licensed to talk to you if you go about accompanied by a pet (except one of the scarier breeds of dog), one or more babies or binoculars. This is more than fine with me because every stranger (dog walkers, mostly, but also runners and strollers) who has ever talked to me in or around the Sanctuary (and there have been hundreds) loves the place – our little patch of “wild” nature – and it's fun to congratulate ourselves on our luck to have it and to “dis” Central Park as becoming too manicured.

Besides those two topics, what I hear about most are::

Hawks/Falcons

Most people who talk to me have heard of the Peregrine Falcons that nest in the tower of our neighbor across the street, Riverside Church (as falcons did in the 1930's and 1940's before the DDT die-off). And so when those people see a raptor – almost always a Red-tailed Hawk – about ninety percent of them think it's a falcon (5% say hawk; 5% say owl). I try to explain that the Peregrine is a smaller bird with slimmer wings that allow for more acrobatic flight, so the Peregrine catches birds in mid-air and is often seen over, but almost never in, the Sanctuary. People listen with interest, but, within a month or two, about twenty percent of them say something like, “I saw one of the falcons chasing a squirrel the other day.”

Red-headed/Red-bellied Woodpecker

This is more easily explained in print: Sanctuary visitors have seen a red-headed woodpecker but not a Red-headed Woodpecker. I tell them there is indeed such a bird as the Red-headed Woodpecker – it even appears on some New Jersey license plates – but it is a different bird from our Red-bellied Woodpecker, black and white with its entire head bright red.

What I don't tell them is that there once *was* a Red-headed Woodpecker in the Sanct-

uary for a few hours on fall day, but it was an immature bird with no trace of red and it spent its few hours here madly attacking every bird that came within fifty yards of it. It was, science would probably say, “defending territory”, except that it was mostly attacking birds that would have had no interest whatsoever in any acorns it had gathered had it gathered any acorns, which it hadn't because it was much too busy attacking. Then it left the “territory,” never to return. The bird was simply crazy. This, of course, happens in birds as in people, but my Upper West Side neighbors are such devout believers in the purity and perfection of Nature that to tell them something like that seems to me as heartless as proffering unsought revelations about Santa Claus to a child.

Northern Cardinals

I have no problem reacting appropriately when people tell me they've recently gotten their first look at a (male, of course) Scarlet Tanager. I still share that astonished enthusiasm and would not be surprised – would be tempted to join in – if they broke into George and Ira Gershwin's “How Long Has This Been Going On?”

Cardinals are another matter, and it's mostly cardinals that people report to me, certain they've seen an unusual, special bird. I hope I've gotten better over the years at – as current jargon would put it – validating their feelings, and if I have, it's because I've learned to tap into my memory of a poem by Keats in which he imagines himself dead and says of his lover, “[T]hou woudst wish thine own heart dry of blood/So in my veins red life might stream again....” When I see a male cardinal against a background of snow, it's that phrase “red life” I think of. (Keats, incidentally, had an ornithological connection besides his “Ode to a Nightingale” and the comment in one of his marvelous letters that “if a Sparrow came before my Window I take part in its existance and pick about the Grave!” (a great writer, but not much of a speller). His two brothers, on their way to a new head-start in a pioneering agricultural settlement in Missouri, went too far down the Ohio River

and fetched up in Henderson, Kentucky, where a Frenchman talked them into joining him in his latest hare-brained get-rich-quick scheme: the purchase of a steamboat. The boat promptly sank, and with it went most of the brother's money and most of the money the poet himself had inherited from his father. This debacle poisoned the last year of Keats' life at a time he knew he was dying, but the harshest words he wrote to his brothers were "Tell Mr. Audubon I do not like him."

Here's a tiny sample of other things I've heard: "There's a partridge in a tree near 110th Street!" (It was a particularly gorgeous male Ring-necked Pheasant); "We don't get Nashville Warblers here" (said by a retired concert pianist who birded solely by ear back in the 1980's when for some reason Nashvilles never sang in the Sanctuary, although they were then, as now, reasonably common guests during migrations – and one red-letter morning when I unwittingly flushed a Chuck-will's-widow and called to tell her that the bird had flown to, and was now asleep on, a tree branch hanging over Riverside Drive's west sidewalk just two blocks from her apartment building, she said, "I've done my birding for the day", and hung up); "I just saw a hawk in a tree about a block north", said a man who had begun noticing birds after a close encounter with a Red-tailed Hawk, "and I don't think it's a Red-tail – it's smaller and with a longer tail" (it turned out to be a Cooper's Hawk); "What are the flitter-tail birds that are all over the place now?" (Dark-eyed Juncos); "I've seen quite a few marsh hawks around here" (the park is so much lower than Riverside Drive that we often see Red-tails from above, and many of them have a strikingly white rump patch); "There's a mockingbird up by Grant's Tomb that does car alarms" (I heard it with my own ears a few weeks later); "There are two ducks in the grass by the tennis courts! We've got to get them back to the water!" (the pair of Mallards survived, of course); "What is the beautiful black bird that's got a yellow beak and gossamer wings?" (European Starling – oh for lost innocence).

The best thing I've ever heard in the Sanctuary was said by a homeless man who lived for over two years in the north woods near the edge of our meadow. He lived on an aluminum and plastic lawn chair under a very large umbrella, and as far as I could tell he spent the entire day lying down, reading. Birds soon got used to him, and, possibly because of crumbs from whatever food he ate, the area around his chair even became something of a hot spot. If there was a Hermit Thrush to be found on the Christmas Bird Count it pretty reliably would be found near or under that chair. I saw him every day I went through the Sanctuary, and for almost a year he ignored me. And then one Christmas morning a high, thin voice came out of the bushes saying, "Merry Christmas". I wished him the same, and from then on he usually greeted me, and sometimes when he saw me coming he would call out, cackling, "His eye is on the sparrow! His eye is on the sparrow!"

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### **ARE SANDERLINGS CARCASS SCAVENGERS? AN OBSERVATION**

Matt Cormons

It appears they might be based on what my wife Grace and I observed Dec. 18, 2008 on Assateague Island's ocean beach (on Virginia's Eastern Shore). Just above the high tide line we discovered a washed-up porpoise carcass. A beached animal is always interesting, but what we found especially interesting was that a single Sanderling was feeding at the carcass.

Because the carcass was quite putrid, we assumed it was probably maggoty and the Sanderling was finding maggots, even though it seemed too cold for any flesh flies to be active. However, after observing for many minutes we suspected the Sanderling was eating porpoise meat (photos). I checked the carcass for any signs of invertebrates the Sanderling might have been feeding on, but saw none.

I did a cursory search on the Internet and found no reference to Sanderlings feeding on anything other than small invertebrates. I would be interested if any Society members know differently and if any have had an observation similar to ours.

Many animals are opportunistic feeders, but I assumed it was somewhat of a stretch for a Sanderling to switch from tiny invertebrates to porpoise meat. For many years we have observed another occasion of opportunistic feeding in the parking area of the fishing pier on one of the man-made islands of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. Ruddy Turnstones were feeding where the expected food, small invertebrates, was absent. The

turnstones were picking up tiny bits of something. We often had our lunch at this stop. One year (and many years since) I tossed some bread crumbs their way. They ran for them and gobbled them up, reminiscent of Central Park pigeons (photo).

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