

CRITTERS

Semi-Tuft

Forget your Dallas cowboys and your Houston Astros. Texas' real champions count birds once a year at freeport. They're not bird watchers, they're birders. And therein lies a tail.



By William Martin

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It's all right to laugh. Birders ("Don't call us birdwatchers!") expect it. They resent it, and send your name to Alfred Hitchcock, but they expect it.

It is my fortune—evaluate it as you will—to count among my acquaintances several championship-caliber birders. They have on occasion sought to kindle in me a like passion for our feathered friends, and I have as often only barely held back devastating comments laced with irony and satirical wit. Still, they persist. So, though profoundly dedicated to the Great Indoors, I finally decided—condescended is actually more precise—to look into this bizarre activity somewhat more carefully.

My friends the Bird People give several reasons, some of them rather plausible, for what they do with their spare time. Birds are, after all, more colorful and interesting than, say, roaches or flies, and their capacity for flight endows them with a spiritual quality not found in your average pot plant. Further, birding not only offers its enthusiasts an opportunity to get outdoors but encourages them to relate to the environment more intimately than they might if their interests ran to bowling or roller derby. Victor Emanuel, a sometime political scientist at Rice University and one of the

leading birders in the state, claims that catching the weather report is one of the most important events of the day for him, because it helps him anticipate what birds he might see the next day. In the same way, he says, “Wherever I am, I notice such things as what kind of bushes or trees are in an area, whether there is water available, and whether it is fresh or brackish. It’s hard for city-dwellers to get involved with nature. Birding offers that opportunity.” Emanuel also extols the drama of birding. “Of course, every birder dreams of finding a bird no one has ever seen before, or a bird that is believed to be extinct, or a bird that has never been sighted before in a given area. But even more common aspects can be thrilling. When I go out on crisp fall day to see the first geese of the year, I am always impressed to realize that these geese have made it all the way here from the tundra and that their ancestors have been coming to this prairie every year since before people lived here.”

Such explanations are plausible and no doubt account for the initial attraction birding holds for many. But for the majority of those who pursue it most actively, ecology and drama run a poor second to sport. To join the agonistic struggle for excellence and, in the process, to defeat the competition is the essence of modern American birding, especially as practiced in Texas, which boasts an extraordinarily large number of bird species. Excellence and success in competition are judged by the size and quality of one’s lists. To bird is to list: to list all the different species one has seen in one’s lifetime—“lifers,” they are called; to list all the species one has seen in America in a single year; to list all the warblers one has seen on Wednesdays. The possibilities are endless, although some birders have made an impressive assault on infinity.

Consider, for example, the case of Noel Pettingell, a Houston postal worker who appears charmingly non-neurotic in all other respects. Noel—he is just not the sort one can call Pettingell—admits he is a compulsive lister and record-keeper. He is interested in records of all sorts and occasionally writes the Guinness people to let them know the flea-jump record has been surpassed or that an astronaut has set a new mark for gravity-free Tang consumption. But his real, indeed his consuming interest is in birding

records. Like fanatical baseball fans who can tell you the record for fewest total bases achieved in a single season (89. C. Dallan Maxvill, Saint Louis, 1970), Noel can dig into a brown file pouch and come up with a sheet of paper or a Scotch-taped, hand-made booklet that contains, in his neat penciled script, up-to-the-minute records in such categories as: most species seen in Texas in a single year (428. Ben Feltner, 1973), most species seen in one hour, (112. Victor Emanuel and Ben Feltner, May 3, 1973), most species photographed in North America (650. Don Bleitz), most species seen in the smallest area in a single day (112 in 100-foot square area), species seen from Pettingell's back yard (92), and much, much more. The man is incredible. One is surprised to learn he does not know who was awarded first base the most times in a single season on catcher's interference. (Patrick Corrales, Philadelphia. Six times, 1965. All the more, remarkable because achieved in only 63 games.)

Every day is game day in the sport of birding, and enthusiasts spot and list all year, but the World Series or Stanley Cup or Class 4A Championship of this sport is the Christmas Bird Count, an event that has been described by the editors of *American Birds* as "North America's premier exercise in mass masochism and cooperative science."

Though little known to most citizens, this contest has been held for 74 consecutive years, since it was organized in 1900 by Frank M. Chapman, editor of the Audubon Society's *Bird Lore* magazine. A gentle naturalist, Chapman deplored a practice known as the Christmas "side hunt," a tradition that saw hunters meet on Christmas Day, choose sides, and ride out to slaughter Bambi, Pogo, Smokey, and Jonathan Livingston Seagull. When the hunt was ended, the side that had laid waste the largest contingent of big-eyed woodland creatures was declared the winner. Mr. Chapman urged the substitution of a bloodless "hunt" in which participants would spend part of Christmas Day trying to spot as many species of birds as they could in a given area. The first year was not a crashing success, as only 26 people participated, coast to coast. But the idea somehow caught on and survived, to the point that over 15,000 people participated in more than a thousand different counts in 1973.

The basic rules for a Christmas Count are these: a team, which may consist of as many competent observers as team leaders will accept, counts all the species and the number of birds of the species that it sees within a circle fifteen miles in diameter during a single calendar day during a two-week period ranging from about December 15 to January 1. Stringent efforts are made to ensure that all birds reported were actually in the area and not simply figments of imaginations overheated by the fires of competition.

Ornithologists praise the Christmas Counts because of their scientific value in producing estimates of the wintering populations of different bird species in a given area. By comparing the results of several years of counts, all of which are elaborately documented and preserved in a thick edition of the Audubon Society's *American Birds*, ornithologists are able to chart the rise and decline of species in an area, and to relate changes to various factors such as pesticide use, drought, pollution, new construction, and the like. One of the most dramatic shifts in recent years was what Victor Emanuel described as the "Brown Pelican crash." "In about 1960," Emanuel said, "we counted a thousand Brown Pelicans. In two years, that number dropped to ten. Today, the Brown Pelican is virtually extinct in this area. I saw one several weeks ago in Mexico and it gave me a feeling of nostalgia."

I do not wish to appear cynical—even if I am—but I do not believe many Christmas Bird Counters think much about science on the day of the Count, any more than young men play football to gain information on the weakness of the human knee. The purpose of the Christmas Count, viewed from a phenomenological perspective—that is to say, from a perspective that focuses on how the participants themselves interpret what they are doing—is to provide birders with the opportunity to beat the competition. The competition varies. The count in Kouchibouguac National Park, New Brunswick, which turned up only fifteen species last year, can hardly expect to compete with counts in California or Texas or Florida, which may report over 200 species, but it can try to break its own record and perhaps nose out Summit Lake, Wisconsin, in the bargain. Similarly, Fort Worth or Dallas have little chance against Texas coastal counts, but they can and do compete with each other. The crown jewel of Texas counts is the Freeport count, which

holds the U.S. record for the event with 226 species, a record many birders feel will stand forever. Moreover, Freeport placed first in the nation in both 1971, the year of the record, and 1972, when it tied Cocoa Beach, Florida, with 209. Besides Cocoa Beach, Freeport's main competitors are three California counts—San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Point Reyes Peninsula—each of which regularly scores in the 200-species range.

The Freeport count began fifteen years ago, when the late naturalist Armand Yramategui suggested to Victor Emanuel and Carl Aiken that Freeport would be a better area for a Christmas Count than Baytown, where the Houston Audubon Society traditionally held its count. Yramategui pointed out that, in addition to a coast that enabled the sighting of pelagic (pe-lag'ic. *adj.* Of or pertaining to the ocean; oceanic.) species, Freeport was relatively undeveloped and had a wide variety of habitat in a small land area. Emanuel and Aiken followed his suggestion and quickly developed the Freeport Count into one of the most prominent in the nation.

In recent years it has received television coverage, been the subject of a film, and been described for *Audubon* magazine by participant observer George Plimpton. This past Christmas, I accepted an invitation/dare from my friend Jane Robinson to participate in the count. If Jane, a multi-talented woman of fine intelligence and exquisite taste, had found pleasure in traveling all over the world in birdy pursuits, then surely I could risk a single day in Freeport.

Normally, I am not awake at 4:30 a.m. As I sat crunching my granola and anticipating the day, I did not feel normal. I felt foolish, but relieved my neighbors would not see me sneaking out to count birds. By 5 a.m. Jane and I were moving through the night toward Freeport, past cafes already open and at least a quarter filled with men in hats drinking coffee. I wondered who these people are who rise while it is yet night and stir about, doubtless seeking some advantage over those whose consciences permit them to sleep at least until God gets up. We passed prison farms and I wondered, at first with amusement, then with some guilt, how many of the inmates would trade with me for a day if they knew they would have to spend it wading

through swamps in search of the Rufoussided Towhee. At 6:15, still before dawn—I had no idea when the sun would rise—we pulled down Dike Road in Lake Barbara.

Down Dike Road, we met two other carloads of birders. We comprised one of fourteen parties who had responsibility for a specific portion of the count territory. Each of these parties was led by an experienced birder who knew the area thoroughly and who informed the members of his group what birds they should expect to find and what part of the territory they should cover at what time of day, for best results. Dan Hardy, an earnest young student who served as our area leader, gave us a hand-drawn map of our territory, explained it by the glow of his flashlight and told us where to meet him at 6 p.m., and that we would have to hurry since there was not much time. Birding has strange effects on one's sense of what constitutes a short day.

Our little party consisted of Noel Pettingell, Jane Robinson, Elaine Cook, a student from Cornell who had ridden the bus all the way from Baltimore to join the Freeport count, and your intrepid observer. We began on a note of apparent disaster. We were to cover a wooded area first, in search of the elusive Screech Owl. When Noel tried the gate, he found it locked and exuded dismay until we discovered that the high fence and gate were apparently designed to keep vehicles, not persons, out and that the fence ended a few yards from the gate, enabling us simply to walk around it.

At 6:30 it was still quite dark and quite silent, except for the noise I made by stepping on twigs like one of Fenimore Cooper's hapless Indians. As I thought about it, I realized I had not been in the woods in the night since I was a boy scout, which was 87 years ago. The trees reminded me of the trees in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and the thought crossed my minds that it would be comforting to have a theater seat to scrunch down behind so that I would not have to look at them. I was beginning to wish for dawn. Noel would blow his Screech Owl call and the Screech Owls would chuckle to themselves and not make a sound. We heard a rooster, a dog, and another bird-caller, but no Screech Owl.

Around 6:40 the sun rose (or appeared to, unless one clings to the old cosmology), looking a lot like it usually does, I suppose. Still, no sign or sound of a single bird. Then, at 6:50, as if an alarm had gone off, what a writer might call “a veritable chorus of birds” broke out in song and I soon spotted several small objects which I was immediately able to identify as birds. As the light came, I surveyed our territory and saw it was comprised of equal parts of woods, swamp, and thorns, but still not too many birds. At 7:18, the paucity was overcome and a large flock of grackles flew over. Grackles are not an exciting bird, but they are faithful in attendance. The famous Freeport Christmas Bird Count had begun.

Noel, ever on the alert—he admits he psyches himself up for several weeks before the Big Day—heard a Pileated Woodpecker, a good bird to get. In a bit, he sighted the bird and marked him down. We would be expected to find the Pileated, but it would be possible to miss him, too, and it was good to have him out of the way this early in the morning. The ‘Pecker started things rolling for us, and we began to log more good birds.

“Cormorants, Noel, Cormorants.”

“Good! Very good!”

“How would you like a Brown Creeper?”

“Good! Good!”

Jane spotted a duck at the far end of a lake, about 300 yards away, that she thought looked different from the others around it. “We’ll just have to go over there. It’s just a skooge too far to see clearly, but when it turns sideways you can see it is a little different.” I am astounded at the distinctions expert birders can make at such distances. Even with my field glasses, I could barely distinguish the bird from a nutria swimming in the area, and Jane was picking up subtle differences in profile and feather markings. My respect for the skill of birders was growing. Unhappily, by the time we reached the other end of the lake, the Mystery Duck had disappeared into the reeds, but my companions did pick up a gallinule, a grebe, and a coot. I picked up a shoe full

of water and a renewed sense that 6 p.m. was a long time away. For the rest of the morning we tromped through woods, sloshed through mud, picked through thorns, climbed over fences, avoided Jersey bulls, and shared the joy of discovery and the satisfaction of knowing things most people do not.

“Do pipits move their tails up and down?”

“Yes, they do.”

“Are Palm Warblers often with pipits?”

“It’s possible. We got the Palm Warbler right down there last year.”

One soon learns that the image of birders as frail creatures who took up the hobby when shuffling both decks for canasta got them down is inaccurate. Despite a near perfect body and great natural stamina, I was beginning to fade and it was still not noon. Fortunately, we stopped for the first of several sandwich breaks and talked of pleasant things we had seen and done. During brunch, we added Red-winged Blackbirds and several killdeer (For readers in South Texas, “killdeer” is the proper name for a bird known more popularly as the “killdee” or “Damn Killdee,” as in “No use wastin’ a shell. It’s just a Damn Killdee.”). I had been impressed at the number of species we had seen, but Noel and Jane were worried. We had been out over four hours and we had not yet seen several birds that should have been there. Three days of cold earlier in the week had probably driven a lot of lingerers out and that would be bad for the count.

A brisk wind was also working against us because birds don’t move about much on windy days. A car of birders from Arlington drove up and added to the gloom by telling us they had seen almost nothing in their area and were thinking of abandoning it. They had driven all the way down here for a big count and, shoot, they could find this many birds in Fort Worth.

Noel feared Cocoa Beach and San Diego would surely beat us, so we hurried back into the field. We scaled a gate and walked down a road to a pond where we got what was my favorite bird of the day. Jane told me a pond like the one we were approaching was a good place to find a Vermilion Flycatcher. If one

were there, it would likely be sitting on a bare limb hanging out over the water. Sure, Jane. When we got to the pond, Noel was ecstatic at what he saw. He pointed, and we all raised our glasses and simultaneously spotted. On a bare limb overhanging the water sat a small, beautiful bird with a red belly and crown and a black back and eye-mask. Right. It was your Vermilion Flycatcher, chirping along its “slightly phoebe-like *p-p-pit-zee*.” (Roger Tory Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas*, p. 162. This is one of the things that distinguishes the Vermilion from the Olive-sided Flycatcher, whose song is a spirited *quick-three-beers*. The other thing is that the Olive-sided is gray-green and white instead of red. A lot of people notice that first.) On a day like today, Noel said, this might be the only Vermilion Flycatcher that would be seen. If I ever become a dedicated bird-watcher, I expect that little red bird will have had something to do with it.

In the afternoon, we shifted to the Lake Barbara Town Dump. As Victor Emanuel had pointed out, birding offers one the opportunity to relate to one’s environment in a way that most city-dwellers miss. As I reflected on my surroundings I felt smugly sympathetic toward my fellows in the city who had elected to remain in their warm homes and watch the Dallas Cowboys while I had the good fortune to be able, on the eve of Christmas eve, to contemplate the wonders of the effluent society.

We found an Eastern Meadowlark and some gulls and, on a track across the field from the dump, I spotted a Canadian Pacific Refrigerator Car, a lingerer far off its normal migration route. We ran across a mother crayfish (a crawmom?) laying eggs and looking alarmed at our presence. One of the Arlington men who had joined us for the afternoon suggested it might not be so bad to change places with her, trouble-free as she probably was and all. I thought it would take a good many more troubles than I now suffer before I would be willing to spend Christmas in a tire track filled with stagnant water.

Dumps can be full of surprises, and the next one was not pleasant. Jane Robinson, who had walked ahead of me, stopped at the edge of a hole, took one glimpse, looked away quickly and asked me please to confirm what she thought she had seen. The hole looked like a grave and reeked of decaying

flesh. With the specter of Dean Alien Corll still hanging heavily over Houston I was, quite frankly, apprehensive. When I looked in and saw a heap of bodies wrapped in plastic, I feared for a moment we had found something we desperately did not want to find. Blessedly, the plastic was torn in spots and we could see the bodies were those of dogs and not teenage boys. Dogs die and town dumps are probably a good place to bury them. I hope you don't find any when you aren't expecting them.

Our primary reason for having come to the dump was to find the elusive Le Conte's Sparrow, a tiny bird known to live in the field of tall grass next to the dump. We searched and beat the grass, but could scare up nothing. Then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, while the others looked in the wrong direction, a sparrow whisked by not four feet from me and disappeared into a clump of bush about twenty yards away. I called to the others and, eager with anticipation and obviously ready to welcome me into the ranks of the keen observers, they asked me to describe the bird. "Well, it was little ... and brown ... and had a beak." They had counted on something more diagnostic. My aura had dimmed. *Sic transit gloria*. To regain my lost prestige, I volunteered to flush the bird out and charged into the grass. I don't know what kind of grass it was, but it was vicious. After no more than eight steps I felt I had been bitten by a snake with a three-foot mouth and thousands of teeth. Heedless of pain, I charged on, circled the bush, flushed the bird and learned, to my delight, that it was indeed the Le Conte's. I had recovered. More to the point, I had been hooked. I was at least a white-belt birder.

Soon we spotted other sparrows fooling around on a collection of gravel and shell heaps. We were able to get within twenty feet of them and to get an excellent view through the glasses. Inexplicably, one of the Arlington men seemed to feel the need to get even closer and kept scaring them off by charging loudly onto the piles. I checked to see if this was good form and had my suspicions confirmed. I was righteously indignant at such amateurish behavior. We birders can be haughty.

At 6 p.m. we met Dan Hardy and his group and compared lists. Our worst fears appeared to have been confirmed.

“Did you get the Towhee?”

“No.”

“Ohhhhhhh. How about you? Did you find a swallow?”

“No. You neither? Oh, man!”

“Noel, it’s the worst list yet!”

“We did get two White-tailed Kites and the Rusty Blackbird.”

“How about the Palm Warbler?”

“No, and we saw three of them yesterday, but we couldn’t find them today. We didn’t get the Pine Warbler, either.”

“No Pine Warbler! That’s terrible.”

It was already dark, but we decided to take one more run at the Screech Owl and Woodcock. Last year, they had found the Woodcock in a patch of thick, tall reeds that virtually defy human passage. We had fought our way through the reeds earlier in the day, but with no luck. Perhaps one more look would turn up a Woodcock. It did not. Dan noted that part of the Woodcock area had been torn down and two houses constructed on the site since last year. “Why did they do that? Why? We’ve got to have a Woodcock.” As we trudged back to the cars, Noel was still blowing his Screech Owl call in the woods. I had been practicing a bit and, in a moment of whimsy, answered him with what was really a pretty good imitation. I think I came within an ace of getting my name listed as a Bleary-eyed Bald Ego, perhaps being mated by a Screech Owl.

Tired, downcast, sensing defeat, we drove to Jack’s Restaurant in Angleton, where the official tally would take place. It is amazing what a major sporting event can do for the local economy. From a standard 24-hour restaurant catering to local folk, Jack’s had been transformed into the nerve and nervous center of an epic contest. Approximately 80 weary birders jammed

the place, a bit pessimistic about the count, but happy to see people they had not seen since last Christmas. Jane Robinson even saw some people she had not seen since the day she got Ross's Goose at the Anahuac Refuge.

Not many folk in the Brazosport area seem directly interested in joining the Christmas Count themselves, but its success has brought enough local and national publicity that they have come to regard it with some pride.

Landowners welcome birders onto their property. During the day Victor Emanuel had been given a nickel discount on a glass of milk because of the business he brought into the area. A clerk in a drive-in grocery noticed his binoculars and asked, "Are we going to win this year?" Now, at Jack's, a public relations man from Dow Chemical was presenting Emanuel with a plastic ball that had two gulls and a sand dollar embedded within it over a little plaque that read "Brazosport Christmas Bird Count." (Folk in the area want Emanuel to name the count after the whole Brazosport area and not just after Freeport, but Victor says there is little chance of that, now that Freeport has gained national recognition among birders.)

After we went through the buffet line, we moved into a dining room that lay beyond the beige accordion divider. On the wall behind the head table was a hand-painted scene obviously intended to be Highwayah. An insect-repellent stick and/or deodorizer hung from the ceiling. As I sat at the end of one of two long rows of tables, my mind filled with visions of the Tail Twister of the Lion's Club threatening to cut off a Brother Lion's necktie if he didn't make a larger contribution to the eyeglasses fund, and of the somewhat more dignified Rotarians singing *God Bless America* and talking about the Four-Way Test.

As we ate, I met or had pointed out the luminaries of the crowd: Jerry and Nancy Strickling, who had recently returned to Houston after several years in St. Louis. David Marrack, a clinical pathologist at Baylor Medical School. Margaret Anderson, whose life list was only one bird shorter than Victor Emanuel's. Ben Feltner, a large, burly man whose wife provides primary support for the family to allow him to give full time to birding; for his part, Feltner has assumed the household duties and serves as a professional guide

on birding tours. Jim Tucker, editor of *Birding* magazine and a highly skilled, apparently indefatigable birder. A great deal of attention was going to Kenn Kaufman, a young man who dropped out of school for the whole of 1973 in an effort to break the American record for species spotted in a year. (626. Ted Parker, 1971). Kaufman backpacked around the country, walking and hitchhiking almost 70,000 miles, sleeping in fields or with birders who would put him up for a day or two, and eating canned dog and cat food to save money. With a week still to go, he had logged a record-smashing 672 birds and had spent less than \$300 (Approximately 4¢, per mile, or 45¢ a bird.)

In addition to his singular life-style, Kaufman gained attention at Freeport for having been swept off the jetty during the afternoon by a huge wave. He had cut his hands, lost an expensive telescope, and come dangerously close to drowning, which would have taken the edge off setting the American single-year bird record. His colleagues tried to find something redeeming in the incident: “Did you get any new birds? That might have made it worthwhile.” “Do you remember what you were thinking when the wave knocked you off?” I suppose they hoped for, “My lifers passed before me” or “If I have to die, this is the way I want to go—on a Christmas Bird Count.” Kaufman’s actual response was somewhat less grand—“Yes. I thought, ‘Oh, shit!’”

Victor Emanuel began the tally by running through the list of “regular” or “expected” birds to see how many of these had been sighted. As he ticked off the names, we roller-coastered along between the thrill of victory when we learned that a bird missed last year had been spotted and the agony of defeat as the absence of upraised arms told us the sad news that an expected bird, one we always count on—indeed, one we could scarcely do without if we were to have a chance against Cocoa Beach—had been missed.

“The Horned Grebe.”

“Yes.”

“Marvelous! John got the Horned Grebe. We missed that last year.”

“White-Fronted Goose.”

“Yes. We saw a party of them.”

“Wonderful, David! You saved the day!”

For awhile, Emanuel ripped along without a miss. Then, alas, we learned no one had sighted a Ross’ Goose. Too bad the Anahuac Refuge was not in our territory.

A missed Rough-legged Hawk drew an anguished “Ouch!” from Emanuel. No Bald Eagle. A Bald Eagle had been spotted the day before. We should have gotten it. Emanuel put his head in B his arms.

No Caracara.

No Osprey, though one had been in the area for two weeks.

The killdeer got us back on the right track, as only one person on the entire team had missed it. As part of the new trend, someone reported having gotten the Woodcock. Noel and Dan sighed in relief. Our group would not be singled out for public shame at having missed the Woodcock. John Tveten had spotted the Black Skimmer, and someone else had seen two Whitewing Doves, a sighting that brought more enthusiasm than I thought it deserved. Out at Delavan’s Tank between Devine and Hondo you could pay a dollar a gun for the privilege of shooting Whitewing Doves all afternoon during dove season. I started to mention this but decided it was perhaps not appropriate, they being so scarce in this region.

Jerry Strickling had gotten the Groovebilled Ani, the Barn Owl, and the Screech Owl, and Victor allowed he was glad the Stricklings had moved back to Houston. Ben Feltner got the Hairy Woodpecker, another good bird—apparently better than the Downy Woodpecker I had seen, although the major difference is three little stripes on the tail, which I do not consider a mark of clear superiority. Another personal letdown came when I learned that six people had seen Vermilion Flycatchers. It was still a lifer for me.

Clearly, things were not as bad as they had seemed, and the early negativism was giving way to a ripple of feeling that the count might not be as bad as had

been feared; still, the doubters insisted we would suffer mightily when we got to the warbler page. But marvelously, wonderfully, fantastically, one or two people kept coming up with birds feared to be missing. Somehow, we had managed to find 182 birds on the regular list. On paper, it was sure to (be a good—though probably not great—count, but one had a feeling things were going to be rather worse one of these years soon, not only for our crowd but for a few warblers.

Now, the real drama began as Emanuel went around the tables to get reports of birds not on the “regular list” and to challenge those who reported the sightings to satisfy their peers that their report was accurate. Birders have this compulsion about accuracy. Most of them feel not many of their number would deliberately lie about seeing bird they had not seen, but they do believe some birders want so much to see a bird that their eyes may fill out features that are not really there. To avoid misreporting, the Freeport count utilizes a rigorous and potentially embarrassing cross-examination procedure. I learned rather quickly that if one is going to report an unusual sighting to this crowd, one had better know one’s bird, for it is in the challenge round that birders seek to exhibit their competence and enhance their prestige.

“Did you see the bird in a good light?”

“Did other members of your party see the bird?”

“What color were its legs?”

“Did you see the top of its wings? Can you describe them?”

“What kind of area was it in? What kind of grass? Were there seeds on the grass? Did it run or fly when you chased it?”

Several challenged birders defended their haziness over such details by claiming “I know this bird so well that I didn’t even bother to look at it closely. I was looking for something rare.” Sometimes this appeared to work and sometimes it didn’t. Inevitably, some birders got off with less questioning than others. People did not press Ben Feltner or Jerry Strickling

or Jim Tucker too much. After all, they would be the jury who would eventually decide which birds to keep and which to give away. Emanuel admits that the better birders get off easier in the cross-examination. “If Jerry Strickling reports he saw a bird, you can ask him two or three questions and be confident he saw it. Someone else might get asked fifteen questions about the same bird. Some complain this is favoritism, and perhaps it is, but it is just a fact of birding that some observers are better than others. When we question a birder extensively or decide that he did not see a bird he reported, we are making a basic judgment about the competence of the observer. That is just the way things are.” The challenge round continued until every unexpected bird had been described and defended, then the jury retired to a vinyl booth in the main dining room to reach their verdicts. There was tension and speculation among those who remained. Nobody seemed to think a reported Pectoral Sandpiper would survive, especially since none of the judges had ever seen one in the area at this time of year. Others fretted that their credibility had been challenged. In general, the air was filled with an interesting combination of wanting the identifications to stand, for the sake of the count, but a willingness to see fellow birders lose a bit of face, if that seemed appropriate.

The jury struck some birds—just which ones is a loosely-kept secret until the final report is published in June—and wound up with a final list of exactly 200 species, a remarkable number for a fifteen-mile circle, but probably not enough to take the prize.

In the days that followed, Victor Emanuel learned that at least two other counts had outspotted Freeport. He fretted over what might have been. “The wind hurt us. We should have gotten the Chipping Sparrow, the Ruddy Turnstone, the Henslow, the Purple Finch, and the Pine Siskin. We haven’t missed those in years. We also missed the Caracara, the Peregrine Falcon, and the Black Rail, and they were all likely in the area. If we had used a marsh buggy this year, like we have before, we might have seen them.” He also wondered if perhaps the jury should have allowed some of the birds they had eliminated. “I think one or two of them might have been legitimate. Next

year, we are going to stay in the area the day after the count and look for the birds the jury questions. If we find them, that could help the count.”

Now you’re chunkin’ in there, Victor! Just wait’ll next year. You’ll get ‘em. *We’ll* get ‘em. I don’t mean I’m *promising* to make the next count, but if it’s a pretty day and I don’t have anything else planned... .