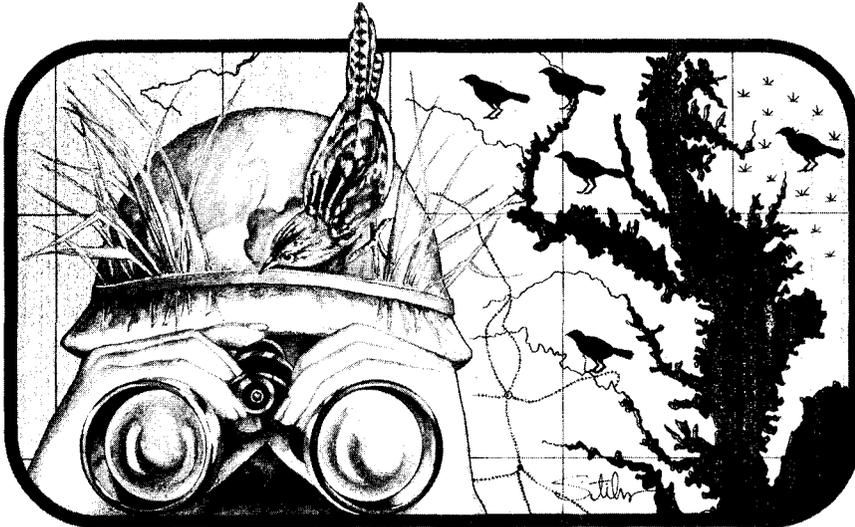


Watching the Feathers Fly

by Jonathan Evan Maslow



OF ALL THE SPORTS that approximate war, perhaps none comes closer to the full-fledged military encounter than birding. What?—I hear you choking—surely you cannot mean bird-watching!

Well, no: not exactly. You see, bird-watching is that most pacific, pastoral pursuit of the high-minded, pastoral conservationist, the eccentric widow, and the curious adolescent, himself a rare species. I mean *birding*, the highly competitive sport that has been quietly replacing traditional bird-watching in this country—is something altogether different. Birders are out to count species of birds, not to pine over feather and song. They go forth for the glorious goal of amassing the longest list of species, not for pausing in quiet contemplation of the red-breasted nuthatch in flight.

Birders do not shiver in a cold blind. They storm the countryside in platoonlike detachments, during daylong campaigns in which no quarter is given. They scout, deploy specialists, and coordinate a highly mobile assault on foot, in cars, motorboats, and, sometimes, small planes. And they come armed with the most advanced technology of the birding-industrial complex, from tape recordings of predator calls (dandy for routing shy warblers from thickets), to low-level explosives like cherry bombs (fine for flushing marsh birds from their roosts when tossed in from a speeding auto).

Birding does have a secondary environmental justification: Knowing how many birds are to be found in a

given locale on a given day helps ornithologists plot population trends and habitat changes. Each Christmas week the National Audubon Society, harnessing the efforts of the birders in the interest of conservation, sponsors a nationwide bird count.

Environmentalism could no doubt use the services of eight million bird-counters (the current total, according to the Commerce Department's estimate). But the true birder, or "lister," as he is sometimes known, secretly scoffs at the nature-for-nature's-sake types. After all, he has his "domestic life list" to increase and, provided he is wealthy enough, his "world life list," which can run to over 5,000 species. While the bird-watcher is wasting time in peace and solitude, our birder is busy strategizing to add "exclusives," or rare birds, to his embossed record book. And when birders gather for their team counts—well, there's the honor of the regiment to uphold.

I traveled to southern New Jersey for last year's Audubon-sponsored count. While Aurora still snuggled under her pink cloud comforter, an insistent hammering came at my motel-room door. It was not a pileated woodpecker, but birding's Napoleon, David Cutler, in paratroop boots and flyer's jacket, field glasses around his neck, tape recorder in hand, Roger Tory Peterson in his hip pocket. In the parking lot, Cutler's silver-gray Cadillac convertible pawed the ground in eagerness. The battle of Cape May, New Jersey, was about to commence.

Cutler has campaigned at Cape May,

and numerous other places, for almost 40 years, rising through the ranks of the Boy Scouts to the enlisted men and thence to his present exalted position as Group I leader. No one would deny that Cutler rates his command. Although he claims that "listing really isn't my thing," he has cornered the white-naped manakin, found the snowy cotinga in the steaming jungles of Panama. Pressed to abandon his modesty, Generalissimo Cutler admits to having notched upwards of 650 species on his domestic life list.

More important for my present purpose, Generalissimo Cutler has repeatedly led the winning group at Cape May, scoring on one occasion a record count of 118 species. "A crack birder has three qualities," says the Generalissimo, who numbers people as well as he does birds. "One, he's devoted. Two, he has a good memory. You win this game by moving fast. And three, he's a planner."

Cutler produced a topographical map of Cape May with the group territories marked in bold red. "My people will cover the entire territory once over lightly in the morning, meet at noon to decide what we still need, then divide up again for the afternoon mop-up operation." He added with no note of apology, "Sorry I can't take time to show you much about birds today. A bird count isn't the best day to see birds, I'm afraid."

The Generalissimo's strategy had been activated long before sunrise, when his group's handpicked owl specialist, Dr. Ed Reimann, hit the fields and woods around Cape May Airport with a tape recording of owl calls. When they hear potential territorial interlopers, owls protest. Dr. Ed simply listened for the telltale screech or hoot, and chalked them up as finds for Group I.

With Dr. Ed in the woods, Jim Merritt, New Jersey editor of *Audubon News*, scouring hedgerows and thickets, and two younger birders advancing over Group I's northern marsh, the Generalissimo had deployed his troops. Now I accompanied him in the Cadillac (top down in wintry weather) along the Cape May causeway. He drove in the left lane, swerving to avoid oncoming cars and climbing the shoulder to search the edges of the great marsh

with a telescope mounted on an old rifle stock.

"Little blue heron, killdeer, ruddy turnstone, purple sandpiper, brant, black-bellied plover, bufflehead duck, green-winged teals at 11 o'clock," Cutler announced. He seemed to be shouting field directions, pointing his glass, and driving all at the same time.

During a brief lull I observed that birding, with no umpires, game wardens, or U.N. observers, provides golden opportunities to the, shall we say, less than honest. "Oh, there are plenty of fakes in birding, all right," the Generalissimo said with a leer. "But we know whether you've seen something or just imagined it. The whole basis of credibility is showing what you see to others, backing it up with solid evidence of observation. That's why the birders are as important as the birds. Finding an exclusive, seeing what's never been seen before. That's what gives you standing in the bird community."

My own standing in the bird community suddenly wrenched backwards as the Generalissimo spun out of the ditch and back onto the causeway. He was already talking his way onto the local Coast Guard base—"Part of my strategy," he advised with a wink—and we spent the next hour swiftly stepping on a long rock jetty to spot seabirds. ("Common loon, common eider, double-breasted cormorant, red-throated loon, greater cormorant," etc.) This was followed by a slightly insane race over landing strips and baseball diamonds in search of an exclusive longspur Cutler very much wanted, but in the end failed to find among the meadowlarks.

The inevitable doldrums came, because, as the Generalissimo says, "Birds are smarter than humans. They don't go flat out all day." Having foreseen the lacuna, Cutler gathered his troops in a nearby diner. I was imagining sighting a lovely duck on my luncheon plate; I got a cheeseburger instead. The Generalissimo, shrewdly listening to field reports, counted up 100 species in the morning haul, and exhorted his troops magisterially: "We still have no bitterns, no snow goose, no canvasback, no vulture, no eagles, no Maryland warbler, no pheasant, no terns, no rails, no oyster catcher, no catbirds, no kinglets, no shrike, no..." At the end of this stirring message, he concluded, "We have 106. Not bad for 12 o'clock. All we need is 13 to break the record."

This would call for sacrifice. Jim Merritt was under domestic stricture to be home early for the arrival of his new granddaughter. Dr. Ed was out birding despite a new Teflon hip, which retarded what must have been at one

time a ferocious gait. I accompanied Dr. Ed to the municipal waterworks.

More the traditionalist than the Generalissimo, the doctor preferred a long, refreshing walk through an old pine plantation. He called the birds down with a soft, kissing sound made through his fingers. At his coo warblers, nuthatches, and chickadees hopped down to within two or three feet of him. In the doctor's equally knowledgeable, but much more leisurely, company, one was privy to marvelous sights: the heavy, primeval flap of the great blue heron on the wing; the submarine plunge of the horned grebe, which possesses the unique ability to control its own specific gravity in order to sink without diving; and the exclusive of the day, a bobolink, the first ever sighted on a Cape May winter birding expedition. The bobolink "hung in" beautifully, giving the rest of Group I time to gather and confirm its notable "bink-bink" in the phragmites reeds.

I contributed my own bit by scoring the only red-crested kinglet of the day. Some might judge it beginner's luck. We were drinking coffee in a parking lot when I happened to notice something flit in a pine tree between the Dunkin' Donuts shop and the Exxon station. I said to Dr. Ed, "Hey, what's that?"

He said, "I don't believe it."

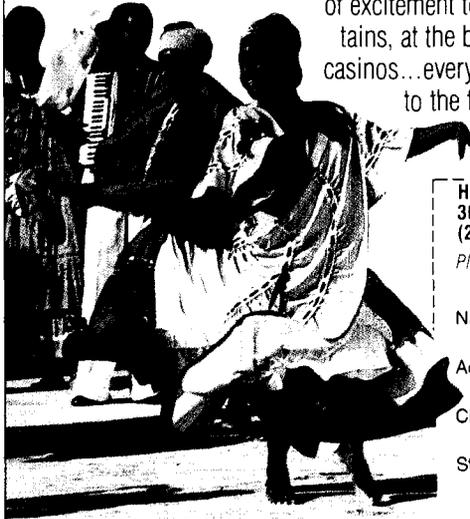
It was already past dark when we found Generalissimo Cutler supping on a meatball sub in the diner where all the groups came to report their scores. Group I had won the contest handily, counting 118 species, which tied the record. The Generalissimo went over his list again and again; when he still came up short, he considered going back to a small pond that he knew to be a favorite roost for wood ducks. "I could do it," said the happy warrior. "I'm not the least bit tired. It was an easy day. You should see us in the spring when we've got the boat and airplane."

But in the end he relented. There was a certain anguish in not breaking the record, but there had been great joy in the chase. Birding, I was reminded, derives from the colonial "side-hunt," a meretricious ritual of setting aside a day to kill birds indiscriminately for the apparent thrill of a big bird body-count. The development of the field guide and the field glass—both largely American innovations—have eliminated violence and cruelty from this war game. American birders now chase after life, much as the game hunter pursues death—and perhaps the birder's claim on civilization is a little stronger. ●

Haitian Sensation



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Michelangelo's study for Adam in the Creation of Adam, 1511.

Drawing Card

The largest collection of drawings by Michelangelo ever displayed in this hemisphere will be on view at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City from April 26 through July 28. The collection of 24 leaves and 41 illustrations traces the artist's development, from the early, quite simple "Bathers" cartoon to the

studies of Adam and sketches for the fresco of the "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo and His World reveals the artist's painstaking struggle to achieve perfection. Philip Morris, Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts deserve praise for sponsoring this exhibit.



Chris Sarandon as Webber and Lee Grant as his lover, Esther Jack.

Decry Wolfe

Poor George—rejected by his hometown, disillusioned by the fame he had so desperately sought, friendless among New York's cultural elite. Even the relative peace he found when he fled to Europe was spoiled by the forbidding presence of the Nazis.

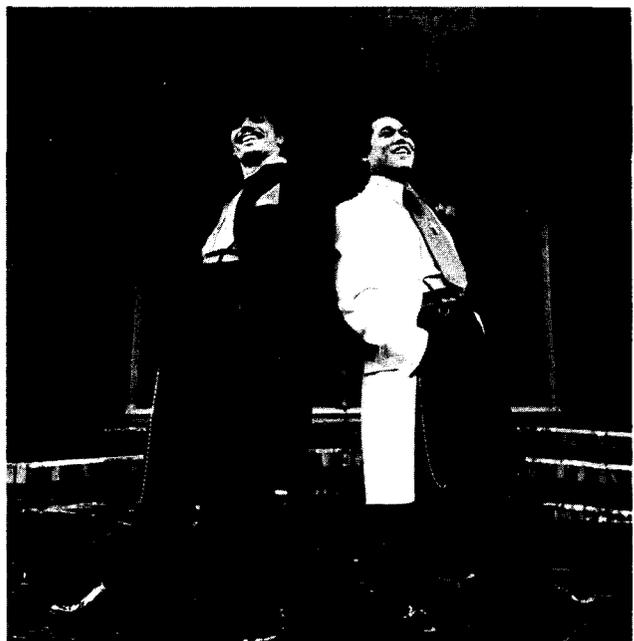
George Webber, whose

striking resemblance to his creator Thomas Wolfe was no accident, will be brought back to life on April 24 in CBS's adaptation of *You Can't Go Home Again*. The quality of the source material is unarguable, but how can Wolfe's colossus be squeezed into two hours of air time?

Mozart, Boy Wonder

Concertgoers are well acquainted with such songs of Mozart as "Warnung," "An Chloe," "Das Veilchen." Over 30 more are available in Philips's two-disc album of Complete Mozart Lieder, sung by Elly Amerling. The songs range from "An die Freude" (written by the genius at 11) to "Komm Lieber Mai" (adapted from

the B flat piano concerto, K. 595). Mozart's music is truly the pre-dawn of the German art song, later echoed in works by Schubert, Richard Strauss, and Hugo Wolf. And in Amerling's voice is the artistry to make Mozart's songs one delight after another. Her pianist is Dalton Baldwin, long famed for his work with Gerard Souzay.—I.K.



Zoot-suiters Edward James Olmos and Daniel Valdez.

Clothes Make the Zoot-Suiter

Luis Valdez's West Coast hit *Zoot Suit* has come East to the Winter Garden Theater in New York City. The play focuses on life in the Mexican-American barrios of Los Angeles during the turbulent World War II years of 1942 and 1943. The infamous Sleepy Lagoon murder case, which left one youth dead and 17 convicted of killing him, and the ensuing "Zoot Suit Riots," which left four dead and dozens in jail, marked the beginning of decades of persecution of those Mexican-Americans known

as "zoot-suiters." Valdez uses the zoot suit—with its reet pleat (pleated, high-waisted pants), carlango (jacket), and tando lid (hat)—in the same way that those young men used it, as an expression of their nonconformity and vitality. Valdez contends that the American press misrepresented the zoot-suiters and fed on the public's fear of the volatile youths. His play offers not a restatement but a reevaluation of that violent time.