

BIRDING WITH FATHER

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It is 24 Jan 2004, and my father has driven from his home in Southern Connecticut to join me for a winter birding expedition. He picks me up in upper Manhattan at about 10:30 AM, and we head for Point Lookout, Nassau County, on the western shore of Jones Inlet, a prime seasonal birding location. For my Dad, winter birding has generally meant feederwatching, while I have long since fallen off the deep end into the serious, occasionally masochistic, pursuit of coastal winter specialties, and so I hope to offer several new birds to my father on this day.

Arriving around noon, we work our way down the rock jetty in search of Harlequin Ducks, a species for which it has been a particularly good year. In a generally bitter cold winter, this is a relatively mild day, with the temperature around 15-20 degrees, but the wind has picked up a bit in this coastal location. I am accustomed to the cold, and I merrily trot along in a fleece jacket and a small hat. I look back at my father, bundled up in a heavy, hooded parka, and he has clearly been happier. His discomfort is exacerbated by the absence of Harlequins, but it also occurs to me at this moment that my father is 70 years old. I tend to overlook this fact, as he is generally quite fit and in good health, and I believe I have eternally assigned my parents the age they possessed in my childhood. I find myself silently reflecting on the passage of time, and shared experiences that have led us to this place...

I grew up in Flushing, Queens, in a neighborhood of attached townhouses, and one containing little wildlife of note. But I was the child of teachers; my father taught English at a NYC public school, a thankless job at best, but, on the bright side, one that gave him long summers off. We spent parts of these summers in the southern Adirondacks, for varying lengths of time according to available budget, first renting an A-frame near Garnet Lake, and later buying a small house on Crane Mt., one with good property and surrounding unoccupied lands. My Dad was an avid bird photographer. He never kept a life list or traveled far to chase down rare species, but he possessed a remarkable tenacity in his efforts to get the right shot. Much to our delight (and amusement), he would also create all manner of Rube Goldberg contraptions to aid in his photographic efforts; various blinds were employed, and a tripod was as likely to be propped up by a kitchen sink as by terra firma. Dad improvised a remote-control shutter device for his camera, and would sit for hours with the camera pointed at a stand of milkweed, waiting for a Ruby-throated Hummingbird to land on his chosen flower (more often than not, chosen well). I will never forget the time we found a Red-breasted Nuthatch nest in a cavity about 25' up a dead tree. My father propped an extension ladder against a neighboring tree, climbed to the top, and somehow balanced his camera to get remarkable eye-level images of the young being fed.

He created a bounty system for my brother and me; a reward of one dollar was offered for the discovery of a nest, his favorite photographic opportunity. Thus, my brother and I developed birding skills of our own, and occasionally collected some pocket change. Dad paid the reward even when the nest turned out to be inactive.

As will happen with young men, during my teenage years the pursuit of birds became less interesting to me than that of other, more worldly distractions, although I never entirely lost sight of my love of the natural world. During my twenties, I took my first solo vacation for the primary purpose of birding, and began to pursue the passion in earnest. Whereas my father was content to enjoy those birds which came to him, I began to keep a life list, and endeavored to locate and identify as many species as possible.

Inevitably, at some point my knowledge, and my interest, surpassed that of my father, and our field trips together involved my introducing him to new species. Our differing styles and agendas resulted in amusing exchanges: "Yes, Dad, it's nice that we're stopping to photograph that American Redstart, but I hear a Prairie Warbler in the next tree over, so can we move on?" Becoming a factor as well was the slowing down of reflexes and loss of visual acuity that affects all but the most gracefully-aging human beings: "Dad, there's obviously a Wilson's Warbler 3 trees back, about 50' up, at 11:00- why can't you see that?" But we generally found a happy medium, and we both seem to enjoy the fact that the student has now become the teacher. More often than not, I can get him on the bird, and his unofficial life list has expanded greatly in my company.

Back at Point Lookout, the Harlequins are nowhere to be found, nor are there other birders present to help us out, and my father is starting to get an "Are we there yet?" look on his face. I decide to take us down a side street, and we park near the jetties at the south end of the Point. Within a few feet of the car there is a male Red-breasted Merganser proudly posing on a rock, and my Dad stops to photograph it, happily distracted while I wander down the beach in search of bigger game. As I approach the first jetty, a few shorebirds fly in- Purple Sandpipers- one of my target species! My father is several hundred feet away, fixated on his merganser, so, short of a futile effort to yell into the wind, I have little choice but to hustle back to retrieve him. He picks up his camera and follows at what seems an excruciatingly slow pace. We are halfway to the jetty when some ducks alight a bit offshore- Harlequin Ducks, the "must-not-miss" species for the day! They are too far offshore and too backlit to photograph. I know enough about Harlequins to expect this situation to change, but my Dad, new to the species, curses the sun. I urge him onward, and, as we approach the jetty, 3 Purple Sandpipers fly in, and obligingly land on a rock not 25 feet from us. We set up our respective cameras- mine a Canon digital video camera, and, befitting the generation gap, my Dad's a 35mm Minolta with a telephoto lens- and we both shoot away. Then something wondrous happens; the sandpipers take off, swiftly joining a larger flock in undulating flight. The birds bank sharply several times before alighting en masse on the rocks directly in front of us. There are at least 30 Purple Sandpipers (I have never before seen more than two at a time), and the rocks seem to be covered with energetically peeping, foraging birds. Soon the Harlequins, nine of them, float into the fray, and entertain my father with their

synchronized diving act. They are close to shore, the light is now excellent, and, oddly enough, we have both forgotten to be cold.

It is 15 minutes before the birds move on, and we are happy to call it a day, and head for the car. But Point Lookout has one more treasure to yield; a female King Eider, which has been present for much of the season, swims back and forth for some time quite close to shore. It is another life bird for Dad, and an excellent opportunity for me to point out the plumage details that define this winter specialty.

On our last stop, the Jones Beach Coast Guard Station, across the inlet, it seems a foregone conclusion that a flock of Snow Buntings lands only a hundred feet away, and allows close approach as they forage. It is that kind of day, and it is the fourth new species today for my father. It is an exhilarating experience we have shared, and I have proudly delivered to my father all the birds he dreamed of on this day.

Over the years, our shared passion for birding has been so much more than a simple hobby for my father and me. The dissatisfaction of an unrewarding job, and a deeply flawed marriage between two good people, one that ultimately resulted in divorce, created an atmosphere of tension and occasional anger as I grew up. We also faced the typical political differences between generations, taking years to learn that people can disagree while maintaining a civil respect. Through the most troubled of times, my father and I could always fall back on birding as a time when we were perfectly in sync, and all differences were put aside. My brother never really took to birding, and he has had to work that much harder to maintain a positive relationship with my father.

Is there something about birding that particularly connects fathers and sons? I can readily cite examples of noteworthy father and son birding teams, even one mother and son combo. In Panama last summer, I met a mixed bag of three generations, but I draw a blank on a mother-daughter birding pair. Perhaps it is true that men tend to bond over shared interests, and women on a more directly emotional level.

My father takes pride in my modest birding achievements, and I eagerly share my most joyous moments with him. We have built a deep bond that is centered on a shared passion, one that has carried us through hard times and into better ones. I love my father for many reasons, but never more than when I glory in the beauty of a new or long-admired bird, grateful for the world he opened up for me, a world that has offered me many of the finest memories of my young life.