

# The Christmas Count

by David B. Coe

The clock on the dashboard says 6:38. It's eleven minutes fast, but still, I'm late. I'm always late. Shit. Ron's going to kill me.

The sky over the river is already light and I'm a good six miles from his house—ten more minutes. Provided I don't get caught at the tracks by some goddamned, two-hundred-car freight train. Ron will have his audio equipment out, but it won't do us any good. Not this late. Once the sun's up, even a set-up as good as Ron's is pretty much useless for calling in owls. Great-horned, screech, barred; usually Ron and I can call in at least two out of the three. Not this year. Maybe someone else in the McCarron count circle will have owls on their list, but it won't be us. Two years ago the count had none at all, and Clover County beat us by two species. Two lousy species.

The heater whines, the faint smell of burning oil and warm vinyl mingling with the scent of what's left of my coffee. I glance at the gas gauge. The needle hovers just above the *E*. Shit.

I speed past Logan's dam and the half-frozen lake that backs up behind it, spotting a cluster of geese. Seven perhaps; close enough. A heron stands motionless at the water's edge. First of the day.

The tracks are clear and I make it through town without hitting a single light. Maybe it'll be a good day after all.

Ron's house is in the hills above the town center, where broad, winding streets and sidewalks of herringboned brick wander past enormous oaks, maples, and sycamores. Each house is unique, a novelty to someone used to the tired monotony of a subdivision. Sprawling Tudors stand next to three-story stone houses and stately clapboard colonials. Yet, as different as they are, there's something organic about the neighborhood itself. Like paintings in a gallery, these houses belong together; they complement one another.

My old Escort, on the other hand, has no business cruising these streets. There are no cars parked by the sinuous curb, and the few that I see in driveways are sleek and substantial, gleaming new in the pale morning light. The only car I see that looks like mine passes too quickly in the opposite direction. Probably the paper guy.

Ron is waiting on the porch, a cup of coffee in his hand, a beige cap, emblazoned in red with the word "Canon," tipped back on his head. He raises a hand in greeting, a tight smile on his lips. He's not happy with me.

I park on the street, grab my binoculars, backpack, and spotting scope from the back seat, and hop out of the car.

"I'm sorry, Ron. Just got a late start." I could have lied, told him that I got stuck at the tracks, but chances are I'd forget and slip up later. I've never been a good liar.

"I figured," he says. Placing his cup on the porch railing he descends the steps and extends a hand. Ron always greets people with a handshake. It doesn't matter if it's a man or woman, an old friend or a stranger. He's a lawyer, with his own small firm here in Logan's Glen. The town may be small, but there's enough wealth, and just enough scandal, to make a one-man practice based on estates and divorces quite lucrative. He's also just plain friendly, someone who genuinely enjoys people. He and I met nearly ten years ago and immediately became friends, mostly because Ron made the effort. I was in my second year as a math teacher at Reid County Middle School. Ron's son, Eric, was in my class; a good kid, but not much of a student. My divorce had just been finalized, and what little money I had was going to a lawyer in Blakeville, a guy Ron knew.

I've never been clear on just why Ron chose me to be Eric's tutor. Sure the kid needed help, but there were others who could have done it cheaper, maybe even better. But Eric liked me, and I suspect Ron knew that I needed the money. Whatever the reason, I tutored him for much of the year, his grades improved, and Ron and I figured out that we were both birders. Before long, we were going on bird walks together and driving to see rarities that showed up on the state birding website.

Ron had tried to get me into running as well. He's one of those runners who does marathons once or twice a year. He has two, maybe three inches on me, but I outweigh him by twenty pounds, easy. Suffice it to say that my experiment with running was short-lived. I still have a pair of Mizuno running shoes that set me back over a hundred bucks and that I wore three times at the most.

At this point, our friendship is based almost entirely on birds. We've been doing the count circle near Logan's Glen for six years running now, and we also do a Big Day event every spring. Ron's a good birder, quick with identifications and great with songs and calls. I've been at it for far longer than he has—at least ten years more—but he's better than I am, and his life list is a good deal higher than mine.

We climb the steps to his porch and he reclaims the coffee mug.

"Want some?" he asks.

"I'm fine."

He shoulders his pack and picks up his scope and a new-looking binocular case. I notice that the audio equipment has been placed just inside the glass storm door. I almost apologize again. He opens the storm door and pulls closed the wooden door behind it, checking the lock before letting the glass door close again.

"Whose car should we take?"

We go through this every time, a ritual of sorts. He drives a Lexus, and we both know that he'll be happier in that than in my Escort. Hell, we'll both be happier. But he doesn't want to presume, and I feel compelled to offer.

"I'm happy to drive if you want me to." I wince, remembering the gas gauge. "We'll need to stop for gas, though."

Actually, it's just the excuse both of us need.

"Well, then let's take mine. I'd rather not stop."

The Lexus is in the driveway, and after putting our gear in the back seat, we climb in. Every time I get in Ron's car, I'm amazed by how big it is inside—it feels more like an office than a car.

"Check this out," Ron says, handing me the binocular case.

The leather smells new, and the name Swarovski is imprinted in the lower corner. I glance down at my ancient Tascos, abruptly feeling self-conscious.

"Go ahead and open them," he says, starting the car and pulling out of the driveway. "These are the ones I was telling you about that day at the river. The E-L's. Best glass on the market."

I open the case and pull out the binoculars, handling them as I might a ticking bomb.

Ron chuckles. "It's not a carton of eggs, Jeff. They're built like a tank. Go ahead and look through them. Brightest image you've ever seen."

"Maybe later," I say, not wanting to see what I'm missing. I wave a hand vaguely at the window. "With the car moving I wouldn't see much anyway."

"Well, you've got to try them when we stop. I tell you, they're amazing. You should get yourself a pair."

I make myself laugh and stare out the window. That's fifteen hundred dollars worth of optical equipment sitting in my lap. I net just over three thousand a month—how could I afford them?

"I've been looking at a new pair," I say, trying not to sound defensive.

"Which ones?"

"Bushnells; the Legend I think it's called. Eight power."

Ron nods enthusiastically. "You should do it. Bushnell makes great glass, and you've been toting those old things around since I met you, talking about how you need better binoculars. You're too good a birder to be using second-rate equipment."

He means it as a compliment and I take it as such. But I can't help thinking that Ron doesn't have a clue as to what it's like living on my salary, paying alimony and child support.

"Where are we going first?" I ask, eager to change the subject. "The river or the nature center?"

He gives me a sly look, a small grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Neither. I did some scouting around yesterday. There's someplace else I want to take you."

"All right. That reminds me. I saw seven geese, a heron, and four crows on the way over."

"The count sheet is in my pack. Write them down."

I reach for the pack and pull out the bird lists on which we're supposed to mark down what we've seen.

"While you're at it," Ron says, "I had two chickadees, a nuthatch, and six goldfinches at my feeders this morning."

I glance at him, pen poised over the paper.

"Come on, Jeff. It's close enough."

Ron's house actually lies outside the fifteen-mile count circle, though by less than a quarter mile.

"It's not as though the guys in Greyrock are going to check my yard. The birds are there and they ought to be counted."

Still I hesitate.

He makes a sour face and drapes one hand over the steering wheel. "Look, whatever you want to do."

I mark down the birds from his yard.

When I look up again, I realize that we're approaching the small private airport north of Logan's Glen.

"Is there an owl here?" I ask, hoping for redemption. Three years ago we'd found a short-eared owl in the grasses by the runway.

Ron shakes his head, the grin returning. "No, it's not an owl."

We park near the small control tower and Ron practically jumps out of the car. I pull on my gloves and take my binoculars.

"Oh, would you mind bringing my scope?" Ron calls back to me.

I grab that as well and follow him to the control building. It's windier here in the open, and far colder. I briefly consider going back to the car for my hat, but Ron is waiting for his scope, looking impatient. Instead, I hurry to where he's standing and hand the scope to him. While he sets it up I scan for birds.

"What do you see?" he asks after a few moments.

"Starlings, a kestrel, a few killdeer. Oh, wait. There's a harrier on the far side of the runway." I lower my glasses and point at the hawk. It glides low over the grasses, teetering like a child's toy, its wings held in a shallow V.

Ron looks at where I'm pointing and nods, though he doesn't bother using the Swarovskis. "Good. What else?"

"Not much, really."

"Check the roof of the hangar."

I lift my binoculars again, scanning the top of the building's curved tin roof.

"Mourning doves?"

He's grinning broadly now. "Not all of them. Look again."

I do. There are twenty or so mourning doves. But there are other birds as well, similar, but considerably larger than the doves. Their heads have a bluish cast to

them.

"What the hell?" I lower my glasses, blink once, raise them again. I feel like I'm looking at a ghost.

"You read the articles I saved for you, right? You knew they were doing this."

I nod once, still looking at the birds. "I didn't know they were releasing them here."

"They didn't. They released them at the observatory in Cape May. But the population is established now. It's growing."

I look at him. "So we can actually count these?"

"You're damn right we can count them. You know the guys in Clover will. You wanna see them through the scope?"

I'm smiling now, like a kid seeing his first eagle. Ron takes the count list from me and I gaze through the scope. The bird on which it's focused nearly fills the view. It's gorgeous, the iridescent feathers on its back gleaming in the early morning sun.

"Passenger pigeon," Ron says. "See? It's even here on the list. *Ectopistes migratorius*. How many are there?"

I move the scope slowly, counting as I do. "Thirteen. No, fourteen." I focus on another one and stand there watching it for some time.

"Hey, let me have a turn."

I raise my head quickly. "Oh, sure. Sorry." Stepping away from the scope, I look at the birds through my binoculars again. "Christ. Passenger pigeons."

"There are Carolina parakeets at the nature center."

I gape at him. "What? Are you serious?"

"I was going to take you there next."

"Let me see that list."

He hands me the papers and puts his eye to the scope once more.

I scan through the bird names on the count list. In addition to passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet, I find Labrador duck, heath hen, and ivory-billed woodpecker, which, though not quite extinct, hasn't been seen in this part of the country for more than a century. I also find New Zealand quail and Norfolk Island parrot.

"We can count all of these?"

"We can if they're on the list."

"But New Zealand quail? Norfolk Island parrot?"

Ron straightens, looking at me. "I guess they were part of the genome project, too. As I understand it, they've tried to restore as many species as possible."

"Yeah, but why here?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I care, either." He flashes a smile. "The only thing that really matters is that I can add a bunch of birds to my life list."

I look at the papers again. On the cover sheet of the count list, beneath a heading that reads "A Word about GRIBS," is a paragraph in bold letters.

"What the Hell are GRIBS?"

"That's what they call them," Ron says, stooping to look through the scope again. "Genetically Re-Introduced Bird Species. GRIBS."

GRIBS. I shake my head and read on.

In accordance with rules established by the American Ornithologists' Union, the American Birding Association, the British Ornithologists' Union, Birds Australia, and sister organizations throughout the world, Genetically Re-Introduced Bird Species, including exotics, will be listed as viable species for the purposes of Christmas counts, Big Day counts, and other birding censuses, events, and competitions sponsored by the National Audubon Society and its affiliates. At their own discretion, local affiliates may choose not to count GRIBS for the purposes of local events, including fund-raisers (e.g., birdathons), but all data forwarded to the national organization should include sightings of re-introduced species so that they can be noted in national census figures.

"So how many species have they restored in all?"

"Worldwide? I don't know the exact number, but I'm sure it's over a hundred." He gestures at the scope. "You want another look?"

"No. Thanks." I stare at the paper again.

"Did you write down the doves?"

"What? Oh, no, not yet."

Ron frowns at me. "You all right?"

"Fine."

"Good, let's go look for those parakeets."

I walk back toward the car staring at the ground. *I've just seen a flock of passenger pigeons*, I tell myself, trying without success to fathom how that makes me feel.

"Blue jays," Ron says. "First of the day."

I look up in time to see a pair of jays fly to a line of ghostly gray trees beyond the parking lot.

"Why don't you give me the list? I'll write down what we've seen."

I hand him the papers and get in the car, glad to be out of the wind.

Ron gets in, spends a few moments jotting down our sightings, then starts the car and pulls out of the airport lot.

He glances at me, his brow creased, a half-smile on his face. "You sure you're all right?"

"How long have the pigeons been here?"

"Not long. A few days, maybe. I'd have called you earlier—"

"No, it's not that," I say, shaking my head.

"Then what?"

I open my mouth, close it again. "I'm not even sure."

"You didn't read the article, did you?"

I shrug and stare out the window. "I glanced at it. I thought it was—I don't know—talking about future stuff. I didn't realize they were doing it already, that they'd managed to bring back so many species."

"You read the papers. They have the technology. They might as well use it. I mean, what harm could come from this?"



I look at him for a second before turning back to the window. Tree trunks rush by, the sun angling through them so that the brilliance appears to flicker, like those old nickel movie projectors they have at amusement parks.

"This is science fiction stuff," I say, sounding foolish. "This is like Hollywood bringing back dinosaurs."

"No, it's not. This is much easier than that. It's not like these birds have been gone for millions of years. Museums all over the world have specimens of them—skins, mounted birds. Hell, they even have bones of the dodo in England."

"They've brought back dodos?"

"Not yet, no. But they could. And dodos have been extinct for over three hundred years. Most of the birds they've brought back have only been gone for a century, or less. Even if the DNA samples they have are damaged in some way, there are enough closely related species available for them to extrapolate. I mean, I don't really know anything about the science, but from what I've read, it seems that they used mourning dove DNA to fill in some of the gaps with the passenger pigeon. And apparently there's a parakeet in South America that's closely related to ours."

"Ours is extinct."

Ron smiles. "Not anymore."

"But it should be."

He frowns. "It should be? What the hell does that mean? This isn't natural selection we're talking about. Carolina parakeets were driven to extinction by hunting and habitat destruction. Passenger pigeons were slaughtered by the millions. These aren't birds that became biologically obsolete or some such thing. They were destroyed by us. And now we have the power to bring them back. Doesn't it make sense that we should?"

I have no answer for him. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm sorry, I'm just ... It's weird, you know?"

The smile is back and he nods. "I understand completely. It's strange for all of us. This is a new world, my friend. Birds you and I never dreamed of seeing are showing up on rare bird alerts all across the country. They're seeing great auks off the coast of Maine. Great auks! Can you believe that? You should hear what kinds of things they're seeing in Hawaii. Kona finches, Hawaiian geese, honeycreepers, O-o's. You name it. Every bird we were told we'd never be able to see again. They're all back."

I smile, trying to match Ron's enthusiasm.

"How many birds are on your life list?" he asks.

"Four ninety-seven."

"Four ninety-eight, with the passenger pigeons."

"Right."

"If we can find the parakeets it will be four ninety-nine, and there have been sightings of Labrador duck a hundred miles or so upriver, just by the bay. With any luck, one of them could venture further inland and you could reach five hundred birds today. I bet when you woke up, you didn't even think that was a possibility."

"No, I didn't."

We turn into the nature center and follow the gravel road to the small parking area.

"The parakeets have been seen in the swampy area along the Keene Hollow Trail."

Despite my misgivings, I realize that I'm eager to find these birds, not so I can count them on my list but simply for the sake of seeing them. They've been extinct since the early 1900s. Seeing them in the wild would be like hearing Franklin Roosevelt give a speech or watching the Babe hit a home run.

I'm out of the car before Ron is. "Let's go," I say.

We leave the scopes, taking only our binoculars. Several birds are calling along the trail—towhees, sparrows, finches, but we hurry past them. We can count them on the way back. Right now we care only for the parakeets.

They're just where Ron said they would be. Six of them, eating seeds from cones in the bald cypress trees that overhang the swamp.

"Check them carefully," Ron says in a breathless whisper. "There's a western subspecies that's paler than the eastern bird. It might end up being split into its own species."

"Would it be here?"

"Anything's possible."

These all turn out to be eastern birds. Not that we're disappointed. They're playful, and incredibly loud, just like the parrots you see at a pet shop or a zoo. *There should be wild parrots in this country*, I think, watching them. Sure, we've got parrots and parakeets living in Florida and California, flocks of escaped birds

roaming through city parks. But these parakeets are native. At least, they once were.

We're so jazzed by the time we're done watching the GRIBS that we walk back to the car without looking for any other birds and have to backtrack in order to count sparrows, towhees, and the rest. It's after eleven by the time we return to the car and leave the nature center. For all our excitement, we've seen only twenty-one species and just barely a hundred birds in all. On any other Christmas count, we'd be deeply disappointed with those numbers.

"We'll go to the river next," Ron says.

"Yeah, we need to get these numbers up."

He laughs. "Everybody's numbers will be bad this year."

"You think?"

"Of course. We're not the only ones interested in seeing GRIBS. It's hard to get excited about counting white-throated sparrows when there are passenger pigeons and Labrador ducks to be found."

"I suppose. Still, we should try to get a few more of the regulars."

He nods. "We will, we will."

But when we get to the river, Ron barely even gets out of the car. He scans quickly for the distinctive black and white of the Labrador duck before climbing back behind the wheel, ready to search another part of the bank. This despite the fact that there must be five hundred ducks and geese on the water, and at least that many gulls.

"Come on, Jeff," he calls, starting the car as I set up my scope.

A frigid gust of wind makes my eyes tear. "No. We have to count these birds."

"They'll be here later. Let's go look for the duck."

"If it's there now, it'll be there in an hour. We have to count these first."

For just an instant I think he's going to leave me there, but then he shuts off the engine, flings the door open, and thrusts himself out into the cold. He slams the door, startling a small flock of ring-billed gulls gathered around a puddle near the car. He pulls his scope from the rear seat, then slams that door as well.

He comes to stand beside me, setting up his scope in silent fury.

"If we miss that duck . . .," he mutters, leaving the thought unfinished.

I almost remind him that we're not even sure the Labrador has come this far south, but I keep my mouth shut.

It's an impressive assortment of ducks—scaup, gadwall, widgeon, goldeneye, bufflehead, two species of merganser, even a pintail. The gulls are mostly herring and ring-billed, but we find a few Bonaparte's, and one laughing gull. Just before we're ready to leave, an immature bald eagle flies by. As we finally make our way back to the car, even Ron has to admit that the delay has been worthwhile.

We drive to two other parks that overlook the river and manage to add a few more duck species. But we don't find the Labrador duck. Reluctantly, Ron agrees to check a couple of other spots that don't abut the water, and though we see no more GRIBS, we end the day with respectable numbers of species and individuals for our count area. Driving to Oakdale, with darkness settling over the farms and forests, the western sky the color of embers in a dying fire, I try to recall the last time I added a bird to my life list. I know it's been a few years, but I can't remember precisely when, or what bird it was.

The birders' dinner is a tradition for many Christmas counts, and the McCarron County Audubon Society count is no different. We always meet in the old VFW hall in Oakdale, mostly because Henry Scott, in addition to being an avid birder, is a former treasurer of the local chapter and can get us the hall for free. We all chip in for pizza and beer, and sit around tallying up our numbers, comparing notes, sharing stories about what we've seen. One year my younger daughter, Cindy, came with me on the count and to the dinner. She said it was like a meeting of Bird-geeks  
Anonymous.

We're among the last to arrive, and as we enter the hall I can actually feel the euphoria.

Once, when Donna and I were still together, we took the girls to a Double-A baseball game and saw some hot-shot kid pitch a no-hitter. It was only a minor league game, and the crowd was pretty sparse, but by the ninth inning we were all into it, rooting with every pitch, cheering wildly for each out. Afterward, as the fans filed out of the stadium, it was all any of us could talk about. It's not often that ordinary people are exposed to something so extraordinary.

I get that same feeling now, catching snippets of conversation as Ron and I take seats at a table in the far corner of the hall. Something miraculous has happened this day. These people have seen GRIBS.

I feel myself growing uneasy again, as I did at the airport. Sure, I got a thrill out of seeing the passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets, but shouldn't I be as excited to have seen the eagle?

We shrug off our coats, leave our count list on the table, and grab some pizza before it's all gone.

"You wanna beer?" Ron asks.

"Yeah, sure."

He returns a few moments later with two bottles of Michelob and a small pile of napkins.

"Thanks."

Pete Jenkins and his son are sitting at the table with us, their plates littered with pizza crusts. They both still have their binoculars around their necks. Pete is carrying the same Swarovskis Ron has; the kid has what looks to be a new pair of Leicas. I'm glad I left my Tascos in the car.

"You guys see anything?" Pete asks.

"We had a laughing gull at the river," I say, knowing that it will be the only one in the count. Laughing gulls rarely come this far inland. "And an eagle."

Pete eyes me briefly before looking at Ron. "Any GRIBS?"

Ron nods. "Fourteen passenger pigeons at the airport, and six Carolina parakeets at the nature center."

"We saw forty-seven passenger pigeons," the kid tells us, speaking too loudly. "Mostly at the Carroll Dairy."

"No parakeets, though," Pete says, his voice lower. "You say they were at the center?"

"Yeah. You know that swampy area on the Keene trail?"

Pete nods, then looks at his son. "We'll have to go there tomorrow."

The kid grins, his eyes bright.

Before we can say anything more, a microphone is switched on and feedback pierces the hall.

"Turn it down!" someone shouts from the front of the room.

Mickey Carr, silver-haired and fat, stands near the doorway, the microphone in his hand, an embarrassed smile on his face. "Sorry," he says, and the speakers squeal

again.

Mickey has been president of McCarron Audubon for as long as I've been a member. He's a retired CPA, awkward and shy; hardly someone you'd expect to command much respect. But in birding circles he's a big deal. His North American life list numbers somewhere in the neighborhood of seven hundred and ninety birds, making him one of the forty or fifty most accomplished birders on the continent.

"Welcome to the fifty-sixth annual McCarron County Audubon Society Christmas Count Banquet." The microphone works perfectly this time and there's a smattering of applause, though whether for Mickey's greeting or the improved quality of the sound, it's hard to say. "I hope all of you have gotten your fill of pizza." A few cheers. "There's still a bit left, I believe. If you're still hungry, you'd better get it now, because I saw Bill Maycroft walk in a few minutes ago, and we all know how much Bill likes his pizza." A big laugh.

"I'm concentrating on beer this year, Mickey," Bill calls from his seat on the left side of the hall. "You can have the pizza."

More laughter.

"Very generous of you, Bill," Mickey says. "For those of you who don't know, Bill saw his six-hundredth bird earlier this month."

Sustained applause, cheers, whistles.

"He was up in New York and spotted the yellow-legged gull that's been seen at Jamaica Bay."

"That's nothing!" Bill calls. "I had three new birds today!"

Mickey frowns. "Three?" He shakes his head. "Well, we'll get to that. In any case, congratulations to you, Bill. We're all happy for you." He looks down at some notes he has scribbled on an index card. "I guess there's nothing else. If you'll all get out your count lists, we'll start the tally."

For several moments the rustle of paper fills the hall. Ron pulls out the list and offers it to me. I shake my head, and he shrugs, putting on his gold-rimmed reading glasses and pulling a pen from his pocket.

"Are we ready?" Mickey asks.

Around the hall people nod.

"Loons."

A few hands go up.

"Area three?" Mickey says.

"Common loon," comes the reply. "Just one."

Mickey makes a mark on his list. "Area seven?"

"Four."

"Species?"

"Common. Give me a break, Mickey. We haven't had any other kind of loon in McCarron County since before you were born."

Mickey glares at the man, then points to Mary Anderson's table. "Area eight?"

"Two," Mary says, her voice clear and cheerful. "Both common."

"Any other loons to report?" No one answers, and Mickey gives a small nod. "All right. Grebes."

There is an undercurrent of conversation as Mickey makes his way through the first few bird families. When he calls for ducks, however, the hall abruptly grows silent. Hands are up at every table—not surprising, given that the river cuts directly through the count circle. But you can tell from the faces of a few of those waiting to speak that they have something special to report. I glance at Ron, only to find him eyeing me, the muscles in his jaw bunched.

"Area one," Mickey says.

Groans go up around the room.

"Can't we do the ducks by species, Mickey?"

"I know what you're waiting for, Bill, you and the rest. But it'll be just as long doing it by species—Labrador duck is way down on the list, with scoters and long-tailed duck." He rustles his papers, looks at them again. "Area one."

Area four is the first to report a Labrador duck, a single bird swimming in the middle of the river.

"It seemed to be keeping its distance from the other birds," Sally Porter says, her husband, Burt, beaming beside her.

Bill nods, looking around the hall as if hoping others will confirm it as well. "Ours

did the same thing. There was a big raft of ducks nearby, but the Labrador stayed apart from them."

"Ours did, too," comes a voice from another corner of the hall.

Heads turn, necks crane. Everyone wants to know who else was lucky enough to see one. I chance another look at Ron and wish immediately that I hadn't. He glares at me, shaking his head.

"I told you," he mouths.

"Can we be certain that these aren't three sightings of the same one bird?" Mickey asks. "Were all three birds male?"

"Ours was female."

"So was ours."

"Ours was a male."

Mickey's eyebrows go up. "So it was at least two birds."

"Aren't Labradors sea ducks?"

Everybody turns to face me. It takes me a minute to realize that I asked the question aloud.

Mickey nods. "I believe they were, yes. Why?"

I'm growing uncomfortable with all of them watching me. "I don't know. I'm just wondering why they'd be so far upriver."

"It's been more than a hundred years," Bill says. "Maybe they forgot where they're supposed to be."

People laugh, and I feel my face coloring.

"Leave it, Jeff," Ron whispers.

"Shouldn't these birds be acting like the ones that lived two centuries ago? Isn't that what the genome project was trying to do?"

"We can't make them behave a certain way," Mary Anderson tells me. "We can only bring them back and help them get reestablished. These birds didn't have parents to teach them where to get food, or where to breed. They have to figure it out for themselves."



I nod. Ron's right: I should just shut up. But I can't. "So now other species, species that survived, are having to compete with them for food, even though they're not even supposed to be here."

"Yes," Mary says. "I suppose that's right."

"So you think they should have just kept them extinct?" Bill asks, taking up the argument. "They have this great new technology, but you think they should ignore it so that baffleheads can have a bit more to eat."

He's right. What I'm saying is ridiculous. Something about the genome project bothers me, but this isn't it. To be honest, I'm not sure what it is. Too bad I didn't think of that before I started talking. "I'm not saying that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I'm just ..."

Ron shakes his head.

I exhale, closing my eyes for just an instant. "I don't know what I'm saying. It's been a long day. I'm ... I'm sorry." This last I say to Mickey.

He wears a strange expression, half smile, half frown. After a moment, he turns back to the Porters. "Area four? Other ducks?"

"You should just keep your mouth shut, Jeff," Ron tells me, his voice low.

As if I haven't figured this out by now.

Mickey runs through the count list and I sit there staring at the table, wishing I was anywhere else. I can tell that Pete Jenkins' kid is watching me, trying to understand how I could be saying anything against GRIBS, but I don't meet his gaze.

When we reach the doves, it becomes clear that nearly every group has seen some passenger pigeons. Mickey adds up all the sightings and announces that taken together the nineteen groups saw over three hundred of them.

"Jeez," Bill says loudly, casting a quick look my way, "I hope they don't endanger the mourning dove population."

Laughter all around.

Parrots are next, and since Carolina parakeet is the only species that can be found near here, we get right to them. In this case only two groups have seen them: Ron

and me, and a young couple who covered an area at the north end of the count circle.

Lots of people want to know exactly where we found them, so Ron describes the Keene trail for them. He even offers to lead a walk at the nature center tomorrow morning.

"So that's two GRIBS you saw today, Markham. You going to put them on your life list?"

Reluctantly I pivot in my chair so that I'm facing Bill Maycroft. He's a big man, with an overlarge nose and a crew cut. He looks more like an old drill sergeant than a retired optometrist. Truth is, I've never liked him.

"I don't know yet," I admit.

He opens his arms wide, glancing around the hall as if to see who's listening, and who's agreeing with him. "Why the hell wouldn't you? It's our fault the birds were extinct in the first place. Doesn't it make sense that we should bring them back as soon as we learned how? And once they're back, doesn't it make sense that we should count them again? They're native species, after all. We count pheasants and starlings, even though they were introduced from Europe. Why shouldn't we count GRIBS?"

They're all looking at me again, and I realize that I have no stomach for this fight. "You're right," I say. "I can't think of any good reason not to count them. It just takes some getting used to, you know?"

Bill nods, looking pleased with himself. "I agree with you there. I never thought I'd see anything like this. None of us did."

Mickey eyes us both, seeking some indication that he can go on with the tally. A moment later he begins again, and with the GRIBS now mostly behind us, he gets through the rest of the bird families in good time. He pauses at ivory-billed woodpecker, but no one has seen any today.

The count numbers are down a bit from past years, but they're respectable. We'll know tomorrow if we beat Clover County. We never do, but who knows? Maybe this is our year.

People linger in the hall after we're done with the tally, but only for a few minutes. It's been a long day.

Ron and I walk to his car without speaking, and even after we're on our way back to his house, he barely even looks at me.

Finally, though, as we pass by the darkened store fronts of Logan's Glen, he says, "You're really not going to count those birds, are you?"

I don't want to talk about this. I feel utterly spent, the way I did in the days just after my divorce, and I can't explain why. "I don't know, Ron."

"What is it that bothers you so much? You seemed excited enough when we were looking at the parakeets."

"I was. I'm not sure that I can explain it."

"They can use this technology to save species, you know. It's not just bringing them back. Kirtland's warblers, California condors, whooping cranes. And we can do it with animals and plants, too. We can keep all of them from disappearing. We can make all extinctions a thing of the past. Can't you see the value in that?"

"Of course I can. But I can also see the danger."

"What danger?" he asks, his voice rising. "What possible danger could there be in saving species from extinction?"

"Complacency," I say, thinking that perhaps I'm finally getting to the crux of the matter.

He scowls. "What?"

"Why have we come so close to losing the ivory-billed woodpecker?"

"Actually, we did lose it."

"No," I say. "They found it again. Don't you remember the ..."

I stop. Ron is shaking his head, a strained smile on his lips.

"Come on, Jeff. Think for a minute. It was gone for more than half a century, and then it just reappears? Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

I feel numb. "They brought that one back, too."

"It was the first. They did it in secret; it was kind of an experiment."

"Fine then," I say, my voice thick. "How did we lose it in the first place?"

"Habitat destruction. Forests were cut, drainage patterns were changed."

"Right, and that's what threatens most endangered species today, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"But we're able to stop a lot of that habitat destruction by saying that the land is needed to save one species or another from extinction. Take away that threat, and the land will disappear."

"You don't know that," he says, but I can tell that I've got him thinking.

"Not for certain, no. But it makes sense. And who's to say any of this is going to work in the long term? We brought back the ivory-billed, but we can't go back in time and provide them with the old growth they need to survive. What's to keep them from dying out like they did before?"

"Nothing, I guess. But if they do, we can bring them back again."

"Yeah, that's what bothers me. We're like kids on a playground giving ourselves unlimited do-overs. There are no consequences anymore. We can do whatever we want, whenever we want, and there's no cost. At least, that's what we can tell ourselves."

He shakes his head. "It's not that easy."

"My point exactly. Someone once said that just because we can do a thing, doesn't mean we should do it. Or something like that."

He frowns again, looking like he wants to say more. But we've reached his house. He pulls into the driveway and we get out of the car. I reclaim my gear from the back and retrieve my keys from my jeans pocket.

Ron is standing in the driveway, watching me.

Reaching the door of my Escort, I pause.

"I'm sorry about the Labrador duck, Ron. I should have listened when you said we should go."

He shakes his head. "Don't worry about it."

I pull the door open.

"I think you're wrong about the GRIBS," he says. "This is going to help more species that it hurts. You'll see."

"I hope so. Thanks for driving today."

"Yeah, sure. I'll talk to you soon."

He turns and walks into his house. I climb into the car and drive home.

It seems a shorter drive at night than it did this morning. I try to make myself remember how I felt looking at the pigeons and parakeets—the excitement, the wonder—but I can't seem to recapture those moments. All that's left is this queasy feeling, like I've done something wrong, though I can't quite say what it is.

Arriving home, I pile my gear in the corner by the door and get a beer from the fridge. My house seems smaller than usual tonight. I turn on all the lights, but everything looks dim, and the air smells slightly of mold. There's a message from Cindy waiting for me on the machine.

"Hi, Dad. Kath and I wanted to call and wish you a Merry Christmas. We leave tomorrow for Barbados. Call if you get home early enough. If not, have fun. Do something nice for yourself, okay? Love you."

She doesn't say it, but I know they're going with Steve, Donna's latest boyfriend. From what I understand, he's rich and likes to spend money on Donna and the girls. Well, good for them.

I get the phone from my bedroom and dial their number.

Donna answers.

"Hi. It's Jeff."

She doesn't say anything to me, but I hear her shout away from the mouthpiece, "Girls! It's your father."

There's the click of another phone being picked up, followed immediately by the sound of Donna turning her phone off.

"Hi, Dad." Cindy.

"Hi, Sweetie. How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"I'm fine."

"Where were you today?"

"Ron and I were doing the Christmas count."

"Cool. See any new birds?"

I hesitate, but only for a second. "No," I say. "Nothing new."

"Too bad. It was fun though, right?"

"Yeah, it was fine."

"Good. You need to have more fun, Dad."

I don't want to talk about this, at least not with my own kid. "Have you been birding at all?" I ask. Last year I gave her a pair of binoculars for Christmas. Tascos, of course. I keep hoping that she'll become a birder, too.

"Not really. But I'm going to take the binoculars to Barbados. I figure there should be some cool stuff there, right?"

"Yeah," I say, wondering what species they've reintroduced in the Caribbean. Probably some parrot I've never even heard of.

We talk for a while longer and then I speak briefly with Kathy, my older daughter, who doesn't care much for birds, or for me, for that matter.

After hanging up, I flip on the television and pull an old carton of ice cream from the freezer. There's a basketball game on, but I don't pay much attention to it; I'm thinking about GRIBS and Barbados and my kids. After a few minutes I give up on the game and turn in for the night.

I sleep poorly and wake with the sun, my mind still fixed on the birds. I dress quickly and drive back to the airport. Suddenly I'm eager to see the passenger pigeons again, though I'm not sure why.

There are far more of them today than there were yesterday—close to fifty. They're all over the roof of the hangar, and I'm struck once more by how beautiful they are, how graceful. I find myself remembering stories I've read about the passenger pigeons of old, of how colonies, consisting of tens of millions of birds, would congregate in the spring, and clouds of them would block out the sun during their mass migrations. Would these new birds establish themselves in such numbers?

I notice that the mourning doves have abandoned the metal roof and are now huddled together on telephone wires. But I don't think much of this until one of the doves attempts to land on the hangar. Immediately, the dove is mobbed by the larger pigeons. The birds make no noise, save for the beating of their wings, but they're relentless in their efforts to drive it off, and for a moment I fear for the dove's life. It quickly returns to its comrades on the wire, however, and the pigeons settle down once more.

It's not as though I've never seen birds do something like this; territorial behavior is pretty common with many species. Still, as I head back to my car, my heart is racing. Something about this attack was different, disturbing: the ferocity of it, the speed with which they ganged up on the dove. As eager as I was to see the pigeons, now I just want to get away from them.

I drive next to the nature center and walk quickly down the trail toward the Carolina parakeets. Several people are there already—Ron, Pete Jenkins and his kid, Bill Maycroft, a few others. They're talking quietly, some of them looking through their binoculars, others pointing toward the swamp.

I can hear the raucous cries of the parakeets and I slow down, not wanting to scare away the birds.

Ron turns at the sound of my approach, smiling and raising a hand.

"They're still here," he says as I draw near. "Actually there's more of them today."

I nod, raising my glasses to look at them briefly.

"I'm surprised to see you here."

"Yeah, I know," I say. "I never said they weren't cool to look at."

"No, I guess you didn't."

"What are you doing here, Markham?" Maycroft asks. "You going to tell us again what a mistake we've made?"

Ron shakes his head wearily. "Give it a rest, Bill."

We all stand there for a few minutes watching the birds. Pete Jenkins and his kid are speaking in low tones, but the rest of them have fallen silent. It's almost like they're afraid to say anything about the GRIBS with me around.

Finally, Ron clears his throat, glancing at the others. "Listen, Jeff, we were going to drive to the airport, maybe check on the passenger pigeons. You wanna join us?"

"I actually went there before coming here."

"Were the pigeons still there?" the Jenkins kid asks.

"Yep. Lots of them. More than yesterday." I almost say something about how they attacked the mourning doves but decide against it. The last thing I want to do is give more ammunition to Maycroft.

"All right, then," Ron says. "I guess we'll see you later."

I nod again and make myself smile. Ron pats my shoulder and starts back toward the parking area. The others file past me, a few of them nodding as they do, the rest trying to avoid eye contact. Bill Maycroft is the last. He looks like he might make some comment, but he just laughs, shaking his head.

Once they're gone, I turn back to the parakeets. I'm struck again by how loud they are. And how beautiful. Who am I to say that they don't belong here? Maybe Ron's right. We were to blame for their extinction. Don't we have a responsibility to bring them back now that we have the technology?

I watch them for a while longer, and then I notice a lone sparrow on the ground below them. The parakeets notice it as well, because in the next moment one of them dives down at it, trying to drive it off. Or so I think at first. Another one drops toward the sparrow, and then a third. In seconds there are six around it, squawking wildly, pecking at it with their hooked beaks.

I stare, horrified, unable to look away. My throat has constricted and I feel like I'm about to gag. I can see the sparrow struggling to break free, but more parakeets join the throng, attacking it as if they were a pack of wolves.

After just a few minutes, the sparrow stops fighting and the parakeets tear into it, occasionally raising their heads to stare at me or let out a harsh cry. I can see blood on their beaks, and small tufts of down.

I try to remember if I've ever heard of Carolina parakeets killing for food. I know that there's a parrot in South America that eats birds and small mammals, but these parakeets are strictly seed eaters. Or rather, they used to be. Once more, I find myself thinking of the passenger pigeons.

I glance around, hoping to see another birder, or a jogger, or anyone at all who can prove that I haven't made this up. But I'm utterly alone. No one is going to believe this—whatever *this* is—at least no one who matters. Certainly I'll never convince the birders who heard Bill Maycroft mocking me last night.

I lift my binoculars and focus on the birds again. I've always thought that parrots and parakeets look like they're smiling. Something in the curve of their bills and the shape of their faces. And with their calls echoing across the swamp, their beaks stained crimson, these birds seem to be laughing. At me. At all of us.

The End



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