

An interview with Peter Cashwell, Author of *The Verb 'To Bird'*



Your book *The Verb 'To Bird'* is about both the joys of birding as well as the joys of writing. How did you land upon this marriage of birds and words?

Peter Cashwell: Honestly, I've been interested in birds for as long as I can remember, and I've been interested in writing since I first learned to read. I'd never tried to write about birds, but back in 1995, after I'd had an interesting and enjoyable birding experience in Iowa City, I discovered that I had a lot to say on the subject (and on several others...) At first I thought I was writing a magazine article, but when I hit the 30,000 word mark, I began to realize that it wasn't an article any more.

Birders are enthusiastic about their hobby, joining national and international associations, subscribing to catalogues and journals and travelling anywhere just to spot those elusive feathers. Why do you think birding captures the passion of so many people?

P.C.: I think birding sits at the intersection of a number of interests: it's an outdoor activity, so it draws those interested in hiking, canoeing, mountaineering and such, but it can just as easily be done in the front yard, or even from inside an apartment, so you don't have to be in perfect shape or able to spend two months away from work to see them. Birding also offers a naturally graduated challenge: birds are easy to spot, so even a novice can achieve some success, but spotting a rare or elusive bird requires expertise. And I think it helps that birds themselves are attractive--small, colorful, unthreatening, and able to fly, which is one of humanity's ultimate fantasies.

For you, which came first, the bird or the word? How did your birding career begin? Did it predate your interest in writing?

P.C.: It's hard for me to remember, but I definitely knew the names of some common birds before I learned to read. And while it's true that the first book I read for myself was "Johnny Crow's New Garden," I don't think the subject matter pushed me toward birding. I was interested in animals of all sorts, though; when my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Francis, would assign the class to practice writing, she would show us a story about something, often an animal, and ask us to copy it. I didn't like copying; I preferred to write my own, so I'd give her two or three pages about foxes, or peregrine falcons, or whatever the subject was. And I thank her for letting me write for myself; without that freedom, I might not have

become a writer.

What's the rarest bird you've seen?

P.C.: Probably the peregrine falcon, but I sort of cheated: I saw it in England, where it's not as endangered as it is in the States. The most endangered American bird that I've seen in America would be the bald eagle, which I'm happy to say is becoming less and less rare.

How many birds are on your life list?

P.C.: 254 species at the moment. I've got a long way to go to catch up with Roger Tory Peterson.

Birders phone, email and write in their rare or exciting sightings to birding groups across the country. Birders seem to be a generous community, sharing information with one another voluntarily and enthusiastically. How would you compare the community of writers to that of birders?

P.C.: It's hard to say, since I happen to belong to a particularly supportive community of writers, most of whom congregate online at www.readerville.com. Writers like Katharine Weber, M.J. Rose, Marta Randall have offered me help and advice there on a regular basis, and most of it has been unsolicited. I do think that generally there's a bit more internal politicking among writers than among birders, perhaps because writers sometimes feel they're competing for the same pool of publishing dollars. With birders, it doesn't matter whether a bird is seen by one person or a hundred people--nobody makes any royalties off it.

Where are your top 10 birding spots?

P.C.: There are some odd ones here, and they're not all public, but in alphabetical order, I'd say:

- ACE Basin, SC
- Back Bay NWR, Virginia
- Bombay Hook NWR, Delaware
- Cat Island, SC
- Cold Spring Harbor, NY
- Hawkeye Wildlife Area, Johnson County, Iowa
- My own yard
- Raven Rock State Park, Harnett County, NC
- Shenandoah National Park, Virginia
- Southwick Golf Course, Saxapahaw, NC

When you don't feel like hitting the outdoors to bird and would prefer instead to open up a book, what authors inspire you in the bird world or the real world?

P.C.: My reading tastes are catholic in the extreme. For contemporary nonfiction, I'm a big fan of Bill Bryson, Tony Horwitz, Tobias Wolff, Stephen Jay Gould, and John McPhee; my favorite nonfiction pieces from the past are G.K. Chesterton's essays from the Illustrated London News. As for fiction, I'm a total Tolkien geek--put on the cuffs. My favorite contemporary novelists often have at least one foot in the fantasy or science fiction camp: Jim Crace, for example, is brilliant. I love Jonathan Lethem, A.S. Byatt, and John Varley, and Terry Pratchett may be the most underrated popular writer today. I'm also a longtime comic-book fan, which may be one reason I think Michael Chabon and Neil Gaiman are so terrific, and

why I wish more people knew Alan Moore's name. I don't actually read that much about birds, but I think Christopher Cokinos' *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers* was a fascinating book, and E.B. White's "Mr. Forbush's Friends" is one of my very favorite essays. If I had to pick one writer for "inspiration," though, it would have to be Ursula K. Le Guin, who can write in any form or genre and produce something stunning.

Is your ideal reader a birder who likes to read or a reader who has some occasion to bird?

P.C.: I'm not going to pretend that I favor either camp, but the book is written primarily for a person who doesn't know much about birding--yet.

Do your two sons like birding or do they run for the baseball gloves when you say "how about hitting the trails?"?

P.C.: They're more likely to run for the Nintendo, but they've started to show occasional interest in birds. I try not to push it on them, but they may pick up an interest through constant exposure, sort of in the same way they've picked up an interest in Talking Heads and XTC albums.

Do you have a favorite bird? Is there a bird for which you would do anything to spot?

P.C.: I have a soft spot for woodpeckers of all kinds, but if pressed, I'd have to say the Red-headed Woodpecker is my favorite. It's got everything: bold colors, sharp contrasts, totally obvious field marks. And my current quest is to spot one of the really endangered American birds--a Whooping Crane or a California Condor. I may be running out of time, though.

What are you working on now?

P.C.: My wife, Kelly Dalton, and I are collaborating on a novel, and I've got another novel under way, but my next book will probably be a nonfiction work about the music scene in my hometown, Chapel Hill, NC, during the 1980s.