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Nell Joslin

The Snowy Owl

I am not a particularly experienced birdwatcher, and I came to the love of birds slowly and late. But when I heard that snowy owls had been seen on Ocracoke Island during the winter of 2014, I was determined to go and try to see one.

My interest in birds gathered more insistently after the death of my father in 2011. He had always been a passionate birder, and early on had introduced my siblings and me to birdwatching. I must say, however, that as a child and young teenager I was somewhat reluctant to rise early and tromp through woods or along beaches to find the migrating warblers or shorebirds in spring and fall, or to spend hours in open fields and scattered shrubbery looking for the elusive peregrine falcon. My father—gentle, large-hearted, and deeply grounded in nature—was patient with us. I am sure that he knew we would eventually find, as he did, an enduring solace from the vagaries of the human world through a connection with beautiful wild birds. These creatures live at the edge of our vision and understanding, and their brief lives know suffering and joy in ways not imaginable for us. Birds are one of the ways that God speaks to us, if we will listen.

Since my father's death, there has been no bird more evocative and fascinating for me than the snowy owl, which was in large part his totem bird, a revered symbol of self-sufficiency, purity, and fierce joy. These large owls live primarily in the arctic region, on the treeless tundra, in sharply contrasting seasons of light and darkness. During the winter months, they migrate down to southern Canada and the northernmost parts of the United States to escape the worst weather. Their primary food sources are lemmings. Every four years, there is a boom in the lemming population, which brings a corresponding boom in the snowy owl population. Nesting owls are able to catch as much food as their babies can hold, and thus many more of the owl chicks survive to adulthood. When this happens, more owls means that some must travel further south the following winter to establish territory and find food.

The summer of 2013 saw a superabundance of lemmings, and so during the following winter, many more young snowy owls ventured down into the Mid-Atlantic states. First they appeared in New Jersey,

then Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and finally, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. On Ocracoke Island, several snowy owls took up winter residence, and those persons willing to brave the cold, windy weather could spot them along the beaches and dunes, in a landscape that rhymed with the sparsely vegetated arctic tundra of their customary home.

Through friends in the Raleigh bird-watching community, I heard tell of an Ocracoke man named Peter who had seen the owls many times, and would help any traveling hopeful like me find them. So, on a chilly morning late in February, I drove east to Swan Quarter, a fishing community folded into the edge of the Pamlico Sound. There I boarded the broad, flat ferry for the two-and-a-half-hour ride southeast across the open water to Ocracoke. I stood on the deck and let the briny wind roughen my hair, my thoughts as weightless as the air that carried away the words of the passengers around me.

I was scheduled to meet Peter the next morning, but on that afternoon of my arrival, I drove up and down the island searching on my own for the owls, in all the places where others had seen them in recent days—along the dunes near the wild pony pen, at the tiny Ocracoke airport. Nothing there. And nothing again in the deserted campground, whose water and power hookups stood like tombstones in their field of stubby yellow grass. As the chilly wind brought the sound and smell of the reeds it traveled through, I attuned my eyes to measure any white owl-shaped object resting in the hillocks or along the salt marshes.

For some while my attention fixed on a blunt white shape that moved slightly in the grass, but it revealed itself to be a plastic grocery bag. Then a bit later, I stalked the smooth bald head of a sun-bleached piece of driftwood. As the afternoon faded, I grew very discouraged. I was cold, wet, sandy, and tired, and my hair was whipped into an impossible tangle from the wind. Had the birds already left to begin their long spring journey to the top of the world? Along the edge of the airport runway, I found a small, pure-white feather fluttering in the grass. Would this be the only part of the owl I would see?

That evening in my room at the Pony Island Motel, I closed my eyes and bent my heart toward the spirit of my father. "Dad, please, I want to see a snowy owl." It was not quite a prayer, but it was a reaching out to one I loved who had gathered secrets from wild birds—a presence that I knew was now merged with the sacred and the eternal.

The next morning, I was out again before sunrise, looking for more

white patches on the dunes. If anything, today was windier and colder than yesterday, and I searched for several hours along the island's chilly precincts before my slated meeting with Peter at nine o'clock. No luck.

My guide met me outside the filling station where I had just finished a microwaved sausage biscuit and a Styrofoam cup of watery coffee. Peter was sixtyish, weather-beaten and reassuring—an island transplant whose manner held none of the smugness that his superior knowledge could have easily justified. He hustled me and several others into his four-wheel drive vehicle and drove out onto the beach—something that one must have a permit to do on Ocracoke. The car hunched down the pale, windy shore alongside the rough, pewter-colored winter ocean. I felt a fierce and sudden release at this freedom from any road. Several miles from the beach access—much farther than I would have ever been willing to walk on my own in the wind and spray—Peter stopped his jeep. "Ah," he said softly, his forefinger pointing across the steering wheel to the top of the dunes, about 150 yards away. At once, we were out of the car.

Without binoculars, the owl did indeed look like a white blob, resting on the leeward side of a patch of sea oats and beach grass. But with the binoculars and—even better—a spotting telescope that Peter erected in about thirty seconds, she came clearly into view. The owl, about twenty-four inches high, sat with the cold wind ruffling her white feathers, a fierce yellow-eyed monarch. She regarded us with a calm and mild curiosity, perhaps wondering for a moment at our suddenly uplifted arms, our scissoring legs, our muffled exclamations of delight. She was certainly not afraid of us. We were not important. This creature's heart quickened to a different pulse than ours—the beat of the wind, the waves, the turning of the Earth and the frightened hearts of her prey that cowered in the grasses.

In that moment, this beautiful wild creature brought me right down to the ground—and simultaneously, up to heaven. I experienced a joy that did not hunger for more, an overpowering sense of the divine, and contained within those things, the spirit of my father and the state beyond time and trouble that waits for all of us. I lifted and lowered my binoculars again and again, and in between, wiped the salty tears from my face.

Nell Joslin

Endless Rise and Fall

It was a hot day in August of 1952 at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. My grandmother's cottage, a bungalow on stilts, had been built in the late 1920s. It was a low, modest house that sat like a serene eyebrow on the smooth forehead of the shoreline. From the earth rose the smell of sun-baked sand and a camphory odor from the myrtle bushes that clustered in the borders. The ocean breeze passed through the house at will, alternately lifting the light, gauzy window curtains and then pulling them strongly back against their screens.

The air held the thick, brittle sound of the crickets that lived in the shrubbery and in the sea oats that grew on lumpy dunes all around the house.

On this day there were two little girls (my older sisters), blond and sun-burned, who had played on the beach that morning before coming in at midday for a dinner prepared by inexplicably kind black hands. After the meal the girls lay in the breezy front bedroom, their sandy feet relaxed against the small ridges of the dark green bedspreads, their faces quiet in a sleep that would not remember dreams.

In the late afternoon the paper boys came up and down the street, calling out the names of the afternoon editions they sold, and my grandmother, then a plump and capable woman of sixty-one, always bought both the Florence and Columbia newspapers. In that hour before supper, she sat in a rocking chair on the porch to read them, her veined hands smoothing the pages in her lap against the breeze.

On the beach that day my mother wore a pale pink bathing suit with straps that tied around her neck, a fitted bodice, and a heart-shaped neckline. The bottom of the suit ended in square cuffs like the shortest pair of shorts. Her brown hair was shoulder-length and wavy, held back from her brow by a white scarf folded to make a soft wide ribbon across the top of her head.

My father was cheerful, strong-limbed and dark-haired, with freckled arms and shoulders, the one whose laughter and favor everyone courted even though here at the beach it was abundantly and impartially bestowed.

That evening my family gathered in the living room and played an

old-fashioned parlor game called "Murder," deliciously shivery to small children. In suspenseful moments my sisters gave squeals of pretend alarm and buried their faces in my mother's soft lap, scant inches away from me, the tiny person inside her who they could not yet know would join the family the following spring.

Outside a bright coin of moon shone on the wide gray ocean, and the long slow waves broke one at a time in the silvery light. The evening breeze carried the smell of ocean life—creatures both living and long dead, all part of one great life, one great consciousness, the family, the baby girl waiting to be born, the house, the moon, the sand, the ocean, the endless rise and fall of wind and waves.