## STEPHANIE MARTIN

*Flicker*, 2017
Intaglio Etching, 6.8 x 9 in

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## RICHARD M. LANGE

# A Little Extra Weight

### Birdwatching in the High Sierra

Every summer, in preparation for my annual backpacking trip to the Sierra Nevada, I load my pack with all the usual equipment—tent, sleeping bag, bear canister stuffed with food, portable stove, cookware, pocketknife, water filter, etc.—and then put the pack on to make sure the load is secure and the weight properly distributed. It's at this moment that I usually mumble something like, "Holy crap, that's heavy!" or simply, "Uggghh!" Despite some upgrades to lighter equipment, the forfeiture of creature comforts like novels and my iPod, and food choices that prioritize lightness over taste and nutritional value, my pack always weighs at least forty pounds. When I take longer trips, which require more food, it gets closer to fifty. Regardless of the number, before I set out on the trail I always break the cardinal rule of backpacking by adding a few pounds of wholly unnecessary weight. I bring a pair of binoculars (two pounds) and David Sibley's *Field Guide to the Birds of Western North America* (one pound four ounces).

My early backpacking trips almost always included some type of misadventure, usually due to poor planning or simple foolishness. I took my first trip, at fifteen, with my friends Ron Storm and Mark Warner. It was a ten-mile two-nighter along the Pacific Crest Trail in the Laguna Mountains, a modest range of oak and dry pine forest east of San Diego. Though my friends and I were all from San Diego proper and had no wilderness experience beyond a few car-camping trips with our respective families, we saw ourselves as rugged outdoorsmen. We decided that, instead of bringing a tent or sleeping bags, which, in our view, were for city-dwelling sissies, we'd bring a single cotton blanket that Ron's mother had recently purchased in Tijuana and sleep out under the stars. Unaware that, in March, the nighttime temperature at five thousand feet can be quite a bit colder than it is at sea level, we spent the first night violently shivering and woke to find that everything from the water in our canteens to the laces of our sneakers to the tips of our hair had frozen solid.

In the years that followed I got full-body cases of poison oak in the Ventana Wilderness multiple times, was snowed on in famously hot and dry Death Valley, took my friend Mike on a "shortcut" through Yosemite's Tiltill Valley that led straight into a crotch-deep bog, and got my then-girlfriend Molly and myself scary lost in an isolated part of Joshua Tree. But as the years went on and the trips

piled up, I matured (at least somewhat) and got closer to becoming the competent outdoorsman my fifteen-year-old self had thought he already was. I learned to identify (and avoid) poison oak, paid closer attention to the weather, stopped taking ill-advised shortcuts, and got better at reading maps. As a result, my wilderness adventures started to get a little predictable. Head out, see the territory, take some pictures, come home. "How was your trip?" someone might ask. "Good. We had a nice time. It was pretty." The wilderness and I had become an old married couple. Looking for something that might recapture the original excitement of our relationship, I bought the binoculars and field guide, and started paying attention to birds.

Now, instead of simply hiking, I was treasure hunting. It didn't matter that I didn't get to keep or even touch these treasures once I found them; the joy was in the hunting and finding. The attraction has something to do with birds being both accessible and elusive. Some species—American crow, European starling, house finch—are widely distributed and very common in the U.S. Others—Gunnison sage-grouse, spotted dove, bridled titmouse—are confined to one or two states or just part of a single state. But even a common bird can be feeding on the ground in front of you, or singing from a conspicuous perch, and then take flight and disappear. In the game of hide-and-seek, birds are perennial champions. Certain birds—wrentit, fox sparrow, yellow-breasted chat, among others—generally offer just a glimpse before dashing into a dense thicket, where they remain, refusing, like an actor with stage fright, to come out and be seen by the audience. But sometimes, if you are patient enough and keep watching, they get over their nerves, hop out into the sunlight, and offer a dazzling view.

A few years ago I took a trip with my then-girlfriend, Elizabeth, to Martha Lake, one of the headwaters of the San Joaquin River. It sits at eleven thousand feet near the base of Mt. Goddard in Kings Canyon, twenty miles from the nearest trailhead. As usual, I brought my standard three pounds four ounces of unnecessary weight. When we arrived, after two days of hiking, the lake was an astonishment. Well above the tree line, it's a near-perfect circle of flawlessly clear (and ice-cold) water edged by granite on the east side and tundra on the west. As soon as we arrived we noticed a flock of birds flitting around the shore. Through my binoculars, we could see they had gray heads contrasting sharply with dark-brown bodies and brushstrokes of pink highlighting their wings and flanks. Gray-crowned rosy-finches. In California, with few exceptions, they are only seen in the Sierra Nevada, generally on rocky outcroppings and talus slopes above ten thousand feet. They breed on alpine or arctic tundra, and, in winter, suffer absolutely brutal conditions—subzero temperatures, icy winds, howling blizzards. Though they are year-round residents, due to their difficult-to-reach habitat they are among the hardest birds to see in the state. I watched them for half an hour, smiling the whole time, repeatedly hugging and high-fiving Elizabeth. I wouldn't have been more excited if I'd stumbled upon a flock of flying yetis.

I've come to see that birds are, in their very existence, amazing. As a class of animal, they have been around for 150 million years, inhabiting every continent on the planet, and currently number about ten thousand distinct species. In the nineteenth century, the English biologist Thomas Huxley proposed the idea that birds are descendants of dinosaurs, a theory that is now widely accepted. Recent science has shown that birds and dinosaurs are in fact more closely related than Huxley realized. If this sounds strange to you, lay a photo of a greater roadrunner next to one of a *T. Rex*; the family resemblance will be unmistakable.

As my bird knowledge has expanded, I've remained amazed by the simple fact that most birds can *fly*! Many of them fly *thousands of miles* every year in migration. Recently, a broad-billed hummingbird, a native of central and northern Mexico that normally migrates to southern Arizona in summer, was found about a mile from where I live in Santa Cruz, California. Adult broad-billed hummingbirds are four inches tall, with wingspans under six inches. That they travel up and down Mexico every year is astonishing enough, but this one individual flew an extra nine hundred miles to central California. Assuming it departed on its journey from southern Arizona, what route did it take? Did it head straight west across hundreds of miles of desolate desert, then veer northwest up the coast, through Los Angeles and Santa Barbara and Monterey? Or did it head north first, toward the Grand Canyon? Did it stop in Las Vegas? Cross the Sierra Nevada?

In the birding world, stories of amazing solo flights like this are not unusual. A few years back, Watsonville, California, was visited by a common cuckoo, a bird native to Asia, Europe, and Africa. How in the hell did it get there? Did it have a sense of where it was headed or was it just lighting out for the territory? Did it miss a key turn and, as I probably would have done as a younger man, try to improvise a new route?

Moving under my own power—and fifty pounds of pack weight—I can cover about fifteen miles on a good day. Most birds are a tiny fraction of my size—hummingbirds an especially tiny fraction. When I try to comprehend how they can survive such long and arduous journeys, I just shake my head.

Beyond keeping me entertained with treasure hunts and stories of epic migrations, becoming a birdwatcher has exposed me to an additional dimension of the world. It's helped me understand how birds and other animals interact with their environment, which is also my environment, and shown me how critical their habitat is to their survival—and mine. In my pre-birdwatching days, a pyracantha tree exploding with bright red berries meant nothing to me. But now, knowing pyracantha berries are a favorite food of wintering cedar waxwings, every time I see one I think, *We need to make sure nothing happens to this tree. The waxwings are depending on it.*

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Because I'm now in my forties, and most of my backpacking friends have real jobs, as well as non-backpacking spouses and children, it's harder than it used to be for them to break free for a week in the woods. (Or so they tell me. Some may not be entirely convinced that my propensity for misadventure is a thing of the past, and are just making excuses.) In any case, the upshot is that these days I often go backpacking by myself.

On one of my first solo backpacking trips, I set out to climb the Monarch Divide—a run of peaks that separates the deep gorge of the South Fork of the Kings River from the even deeper gorge of the Middle Fork. Because the hike comes with 6,200 feet of elevation gain—the same elevation gain between sea level and Lake Tahoe—very few people do it. By the time I reached Road's End in Cedar Grove, picked up my permit at the ranger station, and got back to the trailhead, it was two thirty in the afternoon. When I started hiking, the temperature was in the low nineties. Long stretches of the trail were scarred by a recent fire; in the barren landscape, the sun's heat pounded me from above and radiated up from the ashy dirt at my feet. I was like a tender piece of chicken getting nicely roasted and blackened on all sides. I felt the weight of my binoculars, which I wore around my neck, with every upward step. If I didn't keep a hand on them, they swung in a pendulum and knocked my gut like a double-barreled wrecking ball. I hiked for five hours and didn't see a soul.

My goal for the night was Frypan Meadow, which sits about 3,200 feet above the trailhead. By the time I got there, my legs were wobbling. The gallon of water I'd ingested on the way up had turned to sweat and soaked my clothes, and my stomach ached from hunger (and binocular abuse). I had about ten minutes of daylight left, so I pitched camp at the edge of the meadow, made dinner in the dark, and crashed. Lying in my sleeping bag, smelling like a high-school locker room, I felt desperately lonely. To the pitch-black forest I said, out loud, "This sucks!"

When I woke, at dawn, after many hours of deep sleep, my legs had somewhat recovered and the air was cool and crisp. Emerging from my tent, I saw that the meadow, which had been barely visible in the dusky light the night before, was ablaze with birds. I grabbed my binoculars and dug my field guide out of my pack. The meadow didn't hold anything as special as a gray-crowned rosy-finch, but there were dozens of yellow-rumped warblers, dark-eyed juncos, and mountain chickadees working the pines and tall grass. I spotted a Wilson's warbler skulking through a tangle of branches. A green-tailed towhee picked its way across an open patch of dirt, looking for seeds. Steller's jays shrieked and swooped from tree to tree and Clark's nutcrackers called out in the sky overhead. After my long sleep I was starving again, but I spent an hour staring through my binoculars. My loneliness was gone.

**Richard M. Lange**'s short fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Ping-Pong*, *Portland Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, the *William and Mary Review*, *Eclipse*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Georgetown Review*, and elsewhere. Two of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His essay "Of Human Carnage," originally published in *Catamaran Literary Reader* (Issue 12), was selected for *The Best American Essays 2016*. A former copywriter for a major insurance company, he is working on a novel about the financial crisis.