

The Search Alone is Beautiful: a Retrospective on Birdwatching

Jessica Ooi Yun En

Before participating in the Young Birders Program organised by Jejak Liar, birdwatching as a concept had only ever existed to me from a respectful distance - I knew of it, could even imagine liking it in theory, but I never had the opportunity to become familiar with it and didn't find it interesting enough to be worth the effort of engineering such an opportunity myself. As for after, well...



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Plate 1: Young birders at programme organised by Jejak Liar (left) and the author birdwatching with her group.

The truth is, I'm still not actually all that passionate about bird watching, at least not enough to go around calling myself a birdwatcher instead of a person who casually watches birds. I recognise how that could come off as an offensively ironic statement considering the fact that I'm currently writing an article about bird watching for a bird watching journal, but I believe that there is something to be gained from examining the perspective of someone at the fringes of this community, that there is something to be considered about how even I could understand the appeal of birdwatching and experience something sublime along the way. It begins like this: within the realm of influence, there is no medium more powerful, no idea more contagious and no argument more compelling than a person who just really, really loves something.

My friend really, really loves birdwatching.

Through his eyes, I could see birdwatching for the endlessly fascinating and fulfilling activity that it was to him - everyone loves something for a reason and if you manage to comprehend that reason, you cannot help but fall a little in love with it too. This was a paradigm shift that resulted in a subtle, irreversible transmutation of my mundane: Now, the piercing whistle carried from the trees could be a Golden-bellied Gerygone *Gerygone sulphurea*, the black-clad and orange-footed menaces hopping about the curb is a flock of Javan Mynas

Acridotheres javanicus, a flash of vibrant yellow in your peripheral vision - the Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis*! (Plate 2). In those sequence of moments, a whole new aspect of the world -one that is never unseen, but often unobserved - is revealed to you, and you are, once again, a newborn opening its eyes for the first time.

When you give something a name, history, understanding, attention, a weight, you give them power over you and power to move you. Anyone can look at and dismiss a little brown bird, but a Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*? (Plate 2). It is only then that the metamorphosis from indifferent background filler into something incredibly personal occurs, and you will have witnessed a miracle of probability brought about by the culmination of a work that has been in progress for longer than you are capable of visualising. To experience a delight completely incomprehensible and likely laughable to half the people on this planet - is that not the point of doing anything at all?



Plate 2: Black-naped Oriole (left) and Paddyfield Pipit.

No doubt, there are plenty of eminently practical purposes for birdwatching: to measure the health of an ecosystem, to gather research data for scientific publications, to educate the public on biodiversity, etc. All vitally important work and kudos to everyone involved in it, but to quote mathematician Paul Lockhart: "*just because something happens to have practical consequences, doesn't mean that's what it is about*". Any utility gleaned from birdwatching is a byproduct of the impractical, irrational, terribly human core of giving a shit about something for the sake of it.

When you think about it, birdwatching isn't even really about the birds themselves. If someone merely wanted to see beautiful or rare birds, they could just go to a zoo or a bird park, but where would be the fun in that? Nothing exists in isolation: to cut a favourite part out of a larger tapestry in order to admire it separately is to ruin both the fragment and the original

piece it came from; to display a treasure is to rob someone of the thrill inherent in discovering hidden wonders. While it is not inaccurate to say that 'seeing some bird' could sum up the collective holy grail of all birdwatchers, the individual journeys taken to reach that destination is what truly gives it context and therefore meaning beyond the textually obvious.

There are countless other avenues of thought to explore of which I could indefinitely continue waxing poetry about in order to justify and rationalise bird watching as a not-quite-birdwatcher, but if I've learnt anything from this entire affair, it is that nothing beats experiencing something yourself:

There is a bird perched on the tree outside your window right now. You identify it as a House Crow *Corvus splendens*. You may have seen this specific bird before, or maybe you have not - they are virtually indistinguishable from one another to the untrained eye. Hundreds of them exist above you and around you, if you notice; thousands more live and die where you do not. A couple million years of evolution has granted it a prominent beak, dull greyish feathers and a brain incapable, by any human metric, of having the existential crisis that you are currently experiencing.

It is remarkable how the universe perpetually spits out beautiful, fleeting marvels of biological engineering that crash and burn and rot in a blink of its eye - to call it an indifferent creator would strain even the limits of anthropomorphism. What is one House Crow against the breadth of everything else that is? At such a scale, surely, nothing must matter; not you, not the bird, and certainly not this accidental, forgettable meeting between one creature of *Least Concern* and another. But you make it matter, and through you, the universe perceives itself, briefly, and it realises it is beautiful.

The bird flies down from its perch and begins pecking at the ground. It does not care; it cannot. But you can, and through you, the universe cares. You pull out your laptop and begin writing an article about birdwatching.

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