

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Green Book and the Redhead*

I should have listened to my parents. More than fifty years ago, they had warned me about associating with the wrong sorts of people for fear of what would happen to my priorities in life. First they had railed against cheats and liars, thieves, swindlers, braggarts, and the morally lax. When I got older, drug users and dropouts from society topped the list. Though they had never specifically mentioned birders, I should have had the common sense to steer clear of their influence, too.

Now look what had become of me. On a sunny June morning I had ducked out of work to skulk around a sewage pond.

It was pleasant as sewage ponds go. No foul odors, chemical or organic, assaulted my nostrils as I skulked. Mallards paddled across water that looked clear enough to sit inside a drinking glass, while a flock of sheep munched on bright green lawns. A bell jangled in the distance, bringing back not altogether fond memories of childhood as shrieking kids poured out of a school behind the facility toward a row of buses. A manicured housing development framed the south side of the property. A flooded field awash with swallows and red-winged blackbirds lay to the north. If you didn't know any better, you might consider it to be a prime spot for a picnic. But it was a sewage pond. There was no way around the fact. And I had spent an hour searching the sewage pond for birds.

As I scanned the pond edges through binoculars I kept an eye on the sheep, which were lumbering in my direction. I'd once had a narrow escape from a petting zoo where a sheep had tried to make a meal out of my pants, and I had no idea what twenty of them might do. Would sheep chase down and tackle a skinny man who tried to flee from them?

A facility employee waved as his truck scooted past, smiling—I was sure—at the idea that anyone would visit his workplace for fun. But the shorebird migration was in full swing, and I had hopes of finding a rare

species. For reasons I didn't understand, sandpipers, plovers, and other waders gravitated toward sewage ponds on the way to their breeding grounds. My ability to tell those birds apart was virtually nonexistent. My only chance was shooting scads of photos and trying to identify them later by scouring three shorebird reference books, five general birding field guides, three iPad apps, and the Internet. So far I hadn't found any shorebirds at all. Just sheep.

Finding not just any bird but a rare bird of some kind in my little corner of West Michigan had been my obsession for about a decade. I'd seen rarities passing through the area, from cattle egrets to greater white-fronted geese, but only because reports from the birders who had discovered them told me exactly where to look. I had yet to find a noteworthy species on my own—a bird that other birders would want to see. Ferreting out a rare bird would indicate that I had finally arrived, achieving bona fide rather than bumbling birder status. It would jolt my sad-sack soul with a surge of happiness like a bibliophile discovering a Dead Sea Scroll at a rummage sale or a fossil hunter finding a whale vertebrate poking out of a backyard boulder.

But there was more to it than that. Throughout my life, I'd always given up on any pursuit the instant that it turned into work—like playing a musical instrument more complicated than a pocket comb or making cute, blobby coffee cups on our potter's wheel. The only skills I'd mastered were dodging household chores and falling into a deathlike nap in the blink of an eye. By achieving a minimal degree of competency as a birder, I could prove to myself that I hadn't sputtered out a quarter of the way to every goal I'd set for myself and that I wasn't, in fact, the laziest mammal on the planet. While I'd never live long enough to evolve into an expert, I could finally say the words "yellow-bellied sapsucker" without sniggering and more or less knew what one looked like.

As I rounded the pond, the sheep changed direction and walked then trotted toward the back of the property. I was safe from depantsing for now. At the same time, three tiny sandpipers *peep-peep-peeped* and rocketed off, their pointy wingtips nearly brushing the water. I didn't have a clue what they were. They looked like every other sparrow-size sandpiper I'd ever seen. Identifying a rarity required learning all of the common birds first, then the uncommon but not necessarily rare species next, and finally having at least a passing familiarity with the good-luck-



**My first rose-breasted grosbeak dumbfounded me by tricking out his tuxedo with a blazing red cravat.**

seeing-any-of-these birds. The learning process seemed endless. The more I learned, the more I learned I didn't know. Hawks still looked alike to me. Sparrows merged into a streaky blur. Most thrushes and flycatchers needed to sing before I could pin a name on them, and the only shore-bird I knew at a glance was the killdeer of ball field and parking lot fame.

Like a broken clock that wasn't even right twice a day because the hands had fallen off, I didn't have much chance of success. But I loved birds more than anything in the world, with the possible exception of my wife, Linda, and our cats. So even if I failed, there really wasn't a downside to doing what made me happy, other than the public humiliation of announcing yet another bogus identification to the online birding community and having to tearfully retract it. So I was determined to keep trying to find that rare bird that would change my life in a subtle yet meaningful way.

Birding would have come easier if I'd started as a child instead of taking it up in middle age when my memory, reflexes, and senses were sliding downhill like penguins on an iceberg.

I had given it a half-hearted go way earlier. Back in 1962 when I was nine years old, our neighbor Mrs. Glass lugged over a box heaped with toys that her sons had outgrown. Along with a plastic coin bank shaped like a pot of gold and an Uncle Wiggily Game with half of the cards missing, I fished out a small green book with a cartoon bird on the cover. It was a wood thrush, though I didn't know it at the time and can barely identify one today. But the aptly titled *Green Book of Birds of America* disappointed me once I peeked inside. Instead of the comic book story I had anticipated, there were lifelike drawings of birds accompanied by descriptions in tiny type. Not the sort of thing that appealed to me.

I forgot about the book until a few months later in the spring when I woke up to the Beach Boys singing "Surfin' Safari" on WGRD. I cranked up the volume of my brown plastic table radio until the bass notes buzzed. I had knocked it off my shelf a few days earlier and patched the case with cellophane tape. Convincing myself that the distortion made the song sound even "tougher," I decided that the time was right for transformation. Squinting and nodding my head to the drums, I brushed out my hair and moved the part from the left side to the right, which I imagined gave me the cool demeanor of a surfer.

My coolness didn't last. Pivoting at the stove and glaring at me through the steam of frying eggs, my mom doused the eggs with water and clapped a lid over the pan. "Go right back upstairs and fix your hair before you sit down for breakfast."

I wanted to tell her who I was and how my nine-year-old heart yearned for the thrill-packed life of a hotrodding beach bum. But with eggs sputtering and popping in greasy water, the kitchen radio droning the hopelessly square "The Syncopated Clock," and my dad breezing in wearing his Saturday white shirt and tie, the atmosphere wasn't conducive to disclosure. I slunk up to my room, readjusted my part, and reverted to the full measure of my never-to-be-anything-like-a-surfer, whiny, sulky self.

And sulk I did. Ignoring my sister Joan's exhortation to go bike riding with her and Terry Gray from down the block, I read a model car magazine instead. My bedroom door thumped as my mom emptied a basket

of freshly laundered sheets into the hallway linen closet. “I thought you liked going to Aberdeen Creek,” she said.

Aberdeen Creek? No one had said anything about going on our once-a-year ride to “the crick” to gape at the spectacle of flowing water that didn’t come from a faucet.

I trotted out to the garage and wheeled out the bike that I never rode anywhere without a degree of shame. In order to save a few bucks, my genial dad had decided to scar me for life by attaching a painted broomstick bar to a blue hand-me-down girl’s bike. I called up to my mom in the kitchen window that I was taking off after Joan and Terry. “You’re not crossing Fuller Avenue by yourself,” she said. “You’ll have to find something to do around the house. You can help me with the dishes.”

Contractually I wasn’t obligated to dry dishes until after dinner, so I snuck back inside without answering and hatched a plan for showing everybody up. Rummaging through my dad’s dresser, I fished out a small metal box resembling a woman’s compact that snapped open into a pair of opera glasses. Armed with *The Green Book of Birds* and this two-power optical wonder that somehow managed to make distant objects seem even further away, I hurried to the closest approximation of a woods in our neighborhood: a scrubby string of trees behind the tennis courts at Aberdeen Park one block from our house.

I had no doubt that I would bag most of the birds in the field guide, even though I’d only ever laid eyes on one of them before. Joan and Terry wouldn’t believe what they had missed, and my parents would admire me so much for taking up a grownup hobby that they’d let me wear my hair like a surfer.

For fear of becoming a target of the racquet wielders’ aggression, I avoided setting foot anywhere near the asphalt. I willed myself into invisibility and whisked behind the chain link fence in back of the courts, which rang when a tennis ball walloped it. Though the term *birding* hadn’t been invented yet, inside my head I sang my own version of the Beach Boys’ “tough” new song, which I called “Birdin’ Safari.” Scanning the trees and bushes, I began searching for a vireo, warbler, or warbling vireo, which I fancied were as easily observed as the cardinals that sang from the telephone poles on our street.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, there was no better month

than May for finding migrating birds in Michigan. But I also didn't know that out of the sixty-two species included in *The Green Book of Birds of America*, only the robin frequented my neighborhood. Barring the intervention of an inland hurricane or the defoliation of every other stick of wood in the state, I would have to bike to Aberdeen Creek for a reasonable shot at the vireos, warblers, or warbling vireo, and I'd have to mosey on down to Albuquerque to bag the verdin. Armed with that knowledge, an informed Bob would have rung Mrs. Glass's doorbell and insisted that she fork over *The Blue Book of Birds of America* if she had it—a companion guide to *The Green Book* that included the blue jay, European starling, brown-headed cowbird, northern cardinal, and common grackle, which were all commonplace on our block. But no informed version of Bob existed to make such a demand.

I followed the trail behind all four courts without discovering a single winged entity. Not even a fly dropped by. Eager to look at anything, I pressed the opera glasses to the bridge of my nose and tried to zero in on a pot-bellied squirrel scolding me from a tree branch. Having never used a pair of binoculars “out in the field” before, I couldn't find the *chuck-chucking* beast through the opera glasses, which I decided possessed sophisticated squirrel-avoidance lenses.

As I rounded the fence at the east side of the park, I decided to impress the tennis player in the mustard yellow t-shirt with my cool new hobby. With his wavy hair and perpetual grimace, he reminded me of Ron Westcott three doors down, who woke my dad revving up his souped-up car in the wee hours of the morning and was the closest thing to a surfing hotrodder on our street. Clutching *The Green Book* with its green cover conspicuously facing him, I stood in the grass next to his court and dramatically trained the opera glasses on the trees behind him.

Missing the bounce off the backboard, he shouted at me, using a two-word phrase I had never heard before and whose meaning I would ask Terry Gray about later.

It's probably safe to assume that many of the biggest names in birding had less than stellar results the first time they went out. Maybe they saw only a few of the most common species. Maybe, like me, they didn't see anything at all. But some sort of magic happened that took root and developed into a lifelong passion for birds.

I, too, fell under a spell when I returned to the wooded strip behind

the tennis courts. As soon as my feet hit the path, an almost supernaturally powerful jolt of defeatism gripped me and pushed me toward home, dispersing my last fragile wisp of interest in any aspect of the great outdoors. I didn't even pause when I flushed a bright blue shape from a maple that might have been an errant indigo bunting.

I was over it. I hadn't succeeded in finding birds immediately. So behaving in accordance with principles that had already embedded themselves in the deepest fibers of my being, I whined bitterly to myself about the unfairness of life and gave up. I didn't just call it a day. I decided that bird watching was a fraud and threw the book back into the box with the Uncle Wiggily Game with half of the cards missing and a dried whelk egg case that the Glass boys had found on a Florida beach.

I didn't give wild birds another thought for the next twenty-five years. Then I met an unusual woman who combined the vivacity of Pippi Longstocking with the delicacy of Ma Kettle—or vice versa. My pig-tailed, redheaded, wife-to-be Linda helped transform me from a useless lump of human clay into a semi-useless lump that began to fall in love with birds shortly after I had fallen in love with her.

Many unlikely things have happened to me over the decades—and most of them happened after I married Linda. But until recently if you would have told me that finding birds in the woods would bring me a shot of joy like few other activities in my life, I'd tell you that you were crazy. In fact, I might have used the phrase that I'd learned from the tennis player.

It wasn't entirely my fault that the first time I visited Linda's ramshackle trailer in the woods it shocked the bejeebers out of me. A lot had to do with my upbringing. I had never been nurtured to care about nature. I was born in the 1950s in the post-World War II era of technological hubris. Scientists hoped to control the weather by covering whole cities with huge inverted glass bowls and envisioned replacing snowplows with nuclear powered zappers. Although my dad never thirsted after climate manipulation, he followed the prevailing winds of the day by choosing urban leisure activities over countryside diversions. I don't recall my parents ever taking my sisters and me to anything resembling a woods, except for the occasional picnic—and on those occasions the hiking occurred strictly between picnic table and parking lot.

I was a Cub Scout for two years, but even though my *Boy Scout Hand-*



*book* with the happy Norman Rockwell cover bulged with outdoor lore pertaining to camping, woodcraft, and compass work, Blessed Sacrament Elementary School treated green spaces as if they were drenched in sin. We concentrated on learning to tie nineteenth-century sailor's knots instead of risking our immortal souls through proximity to wildlife.

I certainly didn't grow up caring about birds. I fought back against the house sparrows and the late-afternoon din they raised outside my bedroom window by banging on a saucepan with a spoon. It did little good. A few minutes after I had scattered them, they trickled back and returned to full volume. Annoyed at my mistreatment of birds, chimney-sitting mourning doves wreaked revenge upon me. Tiny, itchy bites began appearing on my skin. My dad tracked the cause to "pigeon lice" that he found crawling inside the bedroom windowsill. He didn't like mourning doves or any other birds that hung out in large flocks and complained about the grackles that pecked at our front lawn. He viewed them the same way that he viewed ants—as individually brainless members of a feeble-brained group.

Considering my dysfunctional relationship with the great outdoors, it was little wonder that Linda's trailer startled me. It probably would have startled Daniel Boone. The trailer crouched at the end of a rutted baked mud road near the village of Pierson. If I owned a Conestoga wagon, I wouldn't have risked its delicate undercarriage on such a rugged path. I parked my puny little gray Toyota Tercel at the entrance and hiked the rest of the way.

Linda lived without electricity, running water, or a telephone. We sat drinking tea in front of a wood-fired cooking stove listening to mice run a relay race behind the walls. I hadn't imagined that anyone outside of remotest Appalachia had such primitive digs, and I wasn't polite enough to resist asking, "Do you actually like living like this?"

"I'm a get-back-to-the-lander," she told me. "I wish I lived closer to nature. I'm thinking of putting up a teepee outside and moving in."

If any birds lurked within the shoulder-high weeds that tapped against the siding when breezes blew, I wasn't looking for them when she took me out on a tour. She had cut back the vegetation around her flowing well, a three-quarter-inch pipe that stuck out of the ground at an angle and constantly spurted water. While marveling at this hydro-engineering triumph, I jumped when a large bird dropped down from



a tree. Within a minute or so I recovered enough to recognize it as a chicken.

"There's a rooster named Fletcher around here somewhere," Linda said. She stared up at the branches. "But I haven't seen him in a while."

The night was so black when I left that as soon as I had taken six steps I lost all sense of direction. I expected my eyes to adjust to the darkness and the hood of my Toyota to pop into view. Instead I saw a cluster of eerie blue-green phosphorescent mushrooms sprouting from a pile of firewood. This meant that in fifteen minutes of shuffling I had barely progressed past her outhouse. The situation terrified me. Once I identified a soft gurgling sound as the stream that ran alongside her driveway, I used it to grope my way back to the trailer. Emerging with a flashlight, she led me to my car.

I didn't see a future for us.

I had met Linda in 1985 after placing my fourth ad in a West Michigan singles publication. I liked her far better than the other women I had dated through the magazine, but we were just too different. I enjoyed living in downtown Grand Rapids and with my 1970s punk haircut tried miserably to be cool. Linda was the essence of the hippie earth mother and wore waist-length pigtails with colored rubber bands on the ends. Wide eyed with joy and effervescent, she talked in a rapidly flowing, bubbly stream of impressions about whatever had happened to her that day cleaning people's houses for a living, while I was so serious about the world I barely squeezed two syllables past my teeth without weighing them first on my tongue.

A country girl whose parents had come from rural Tennessee, Linda, with her first husband, Joe, had developed the utilities-free Pierson property to their liking after reading articles in *Mother Earth News* in the 1970s about getting back to the land, unhooking from the grid, and growing their own food. She spent much of her time outdoors not only tending their animals and fussing over their vegetable gardens but also operating their appliances, such as they were.

She did their cooking on a wood stove that made the trailer so sweltering, Joe had to relocate it to a tent. Her washing machine sat outside, too. It consisted of a tub of soapy water, a tub of rinse water, and a hand-cranked wringer. Water for the laundry was heated on a homemade bar-

rel stove inside the trailer, which busied itself providing hot water for the outdoor shower, too. A clothesline served as dryer, though Linda had to watch their duds, because the goats nibbled on them if they managed to escape from their pen. The liberated goats' greatest pleasure, though, was barging into the trailer and hopping up onto the bed, since they preferred being up off the ground. A jailbreak by Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle the sow caused even more trouble. Too large to be hauled back to her enclosure on the end of a rope, she had to be painstakingly lured back from wherever she had ended up on their twenty-acre spread by waving a can of cat food under her nose.

Pleasures such as these struck me as horrors, and even with the addition of a modern house and the subtraction of hooved cotenants, I couldn't imagine a chain of circumstances that would take me out to the sticks. Linda had no intention of moving to the city. But we continued to see one another. She was beautiful, playful, naturally smart, and had a kind of fearlessness that I could only dream about. I couldn't figure out what she saw in me.

One morning after I'd known her for a while, as she was eating her strawberry shortcake and ice cream breakfast by herself at Jody's drive-in restaurant in Rockford, she spotted an ad in a weekly shopper for a two-room cabin. That same day, after she had cleaned two houses and a bakery, she zipped twenty miles north to look at the property, decided to buy it, and made plans to sell her land to friends Keith and Barbara—who would replace her trailer with a mouse-free house. Then she chose the first serious snowstorm of the season to move in, phoning to tell me what she had done only after she had finished. No wonder I was falling in love with her. While I agonized over whether or not to lower a window shade, she made major life decisions between bites of strawberry shortcake. And she didn't ask me to help her to move.

Every evening Linda would call me from the pay phone at Jody's after her last job of the day. She would also send me notes through the mail about whatever subject occurred to her at the time and using the materials at hand if she ran out of steno notebook paper. I tore open an envelope that had a curious bulge and fished out a folded rectangle snipped from a plastic McDonald's food container. "A beautiful turtle laid eggs in the sun all morning," the note said. "I hope she's nice to the swan babies."

I didn't understand how a turtle could raise swans, but when Linda phoned she cleared matters up by first telling me about a snapping turtle that had clambered up her bank and spent hours laying and burying eggs on the cliff. Then she mentioned a pair of swan parents. "They were so proud of their babies, they came to my dock to show them to me." In addition to keeping me up to date on the swans, she would also fill me in on whether the kingfisher was outside her cabin first thing in the morning or if she ran into it a couple of hours later on the Jefferson Road bridge. I hadn't a clue what a kingfisher looked like, but Linda infused her description with such enthusiasm that I could picture one plunging into the pond for minnows, though my mind's eye misrepresented it as a sort of pint-size pelican.

Fate must have brought us together. As a child she owned a pet parakeet named Bobby. Her real passion in those days was for garden snails, however. In the summer she would spend hours in the ditch across the street from her mom's house on the outskirts of Battle Creek, collecting snails in a Shedd's peanut butter bucket. She felt particularly lucky whenever she found a big one, which she considered to be the boy. Each morning she'd check on her little community to see who was on a rock, who was on a stick, and if they had eaten their lettuce. Her love of these sluggish creatures turned out to be prescient. In my better moments, with my nervous tics and oversize beak, I resembled a parakeet. Otherwise I was slow moving, lacking in industry, and able to sit contentedly for long periods of time in a space not much larger than a peanut butter pail.

When she visited me in my downtown Grand Rapids apartment, we'd take my car if we went out to eat, since I mistrusted the appallingly bad vehicles she drove. For months she struggled with an ultramarine blue Volkswagen Beetle that needed to roll downhill in order to start. She had found it at a used car dealer near Cedar Springs, and even though the owner couldn't get it the engine to turn over, she couldn't resist its cuteness. After the Beetle died, she treated herself to a brand-new Ford Escort. I took her to a Lebanese restaurant to celebrate and on the way back noticed that the driver's side sun visor was covered with phone numbers written in ballpoint pen.

"Why would you do that to a brand-new car?" I asked.

"Because I'm always losing things, and this way I'll have the numbers I need as long as I have the car."