

Outdoors

Birding and hunters a natural match

Most kinds of hunting involve a lot of waiting. The best thing about this fact is that the waiting is mostly done in some very pleasant places — autumn woods, near stock tanks in dove season, and in blinds on the bays, rice fields and river bottoms frequented by waterfowl, for a few examples.

The other best thing about it is that there is almost always something to see, to watch and to learn about.

I am very rarely bored on a deer stand, if only because I'm a birder. Everywhere in the world I've hunted, there have always been birds to watch, many of them colorful and (to me) exotic, with behaviors to match their plumage.

I am plagued by an overwhelming curiosity to know the name of every animal, snake, tree, star, seashell, wildflower, butterfly, fish and bird I ever saw. For that reason, I always have a field guide to the local bird life tucked away in my hunting pack, no matter where in the world I happen to be, and my trip lists of birds seen are trophies the equal of whatever antlers, horns or tusks I bring back.

On the other hand, I've never made a trip outside the U.S. specifically and exclusively for birding. Most of my life list of over 500 species has been "collected"

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John Wootters

while hunting something.

Anybody out there who always thought that "bird-watching" is for bunnyhuggers and chardonnay-sippers would be stunned to note the associations in my memories between certain new species on my list and certain big-game animals in pursuit of which I first saw them.

Like the yellow-headed blackbirds nesting all around me in the poplar tree in which I was sitting up for a monster black bear in northern Manitoba. I never glance at that great chocolate hide without hearing the blackbirds' territorial whistles. Or the fork-tailed drongo that followed me as I (successfully) stalked a bull elephant in Botswana. Or the "g'way bird," lilac-breasted roller and carmine bee-eaters that accompanied me and my companions as we crawled on our bellies into a herd of Cape buffalo. Or the eerie whistles of the gallina de monte, or tinamu, as I spent night



Photo by John Wootters

Even locally common birds like this scissor tailed flycatcher add life, beauty, and grace to a day's hunting.

after night in a lawn chair lashed into an ebano tree over a waterhole used by a cattle-killing jaguar in coastal Mexico.

But it hasn't been all far-away scenes. I can think of at least a dozen species of Texas birds that I first identified from deer stands in the Brush Country, including verdin, groove-billed ani, blue-gray gnatcatcher, Say's phoebe, varied bunting, olive sparrow, green-tailed towhee, ash-throated flycatcher, and others.

I remember sitting by a secluded stock tank in South Texas while no fewer than

six great kiskadees played all around me. Fifty years ago, my first painted bunting appeared near a tree stand in East Texas. What a thrill that was! And my first Bullock's oriole was one of dozens foraging about a windmill in the Hill Country one spring as I waited for a gobbler to answer my turkey call. Similarly, the first scrub jay I ever saw was one of several stealing corn from a feeder over which I was hunting up in Kinney County.

And now we are coming up on the premier annual event in all of birding, the great spring migration. This fascinating and dramatic movement will begin within a week or two (if it hasn't already; I saw the first Bald Eagle on Johnson Creek three weeks ago). Think of it

as a vast river of birds flowing north, hundreds of thousands of birds of hundreds of species in their brightest colors.

Oddly, many Texans are only dimly aware, if at all, of this great spectacle of nature. It's true that much migration

occurs at night, but much more is by daylight.

Hunters of all people, trained as we are to be aware of every detail of the wild world around us, to catch the slightest movements in the woods, should enjoy the annual migration to the fullest.

Be sure to take your binoculars and a field guide on your turkey hunts; you may bag more than Thanksgiving dinner.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's "Hunting" magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."