

And yet, despite his raptor fixation, he is euphonic when describing other facets of the countryside,

The wood lark's song is less abandoned and more melancholy-sounding than the skylark's. Each new cadence is elaborated from the one that went before. The bird seems to ponder each phrase before shaping it into song. He sings it, lets it fall, recovers it, lets it fall, then lets it lie where it fell ... It was a wonder to me that so small a fragment of life could fly in complete darkness, and in heavy rain, breathing so carefully, skilfully, out into nothing, for nothing, to nothing, but to be itself.⁵

While the two books are distillations of his diaries, a third of which are published in this volume of his 'complete' works, it is these recently discovered sheaf of papers, printed now for the first time, that shine a ray of sunlight on the true spirit of the man. Through them we learn of his birding companions, of the tools of his trade that created his style of birding, of his frailties, of the incredible sensitivity, and reluctant mortality of his thoughts. The above song of the Wood Lark was taken and rearranged from a slightly differently worded, yet profoundly poignant, diary entry of

16 June 1954:

We stood under that wonderful sound, coming down to us in the thick darkness and the pouring rain. And a feeling of great exhilaration possessed me, like a sudden lungful of purer air. The great pointlessness of it, the non-sense of nature, was beautiful, and no-one else would know it again, exactly as we knew it at that moment. Only a bird would circle high in the darkness, endlessly singing for pure, untainted, instinctive joy, and only a bird-watcher would stand and gorp up at something he could never hope to see... sharing that joy.

Baker's greatest achievement is the ability to draw the reader into the atmosphere of the peregrine's, or indeed, his own, landscape on any page that falls open, despite the author's perceptive confession, "The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there."

No birdwatcher's library is complete without *The Peregrine* perched on the shelf, nor his eye honed to that skill, if it were not well thumbed.

— Aasheesh Pittie

Post card from the Pacific Ocean: a boat trip to see seabirds off the California coast

Ragupathy Kannan

Kannan, R., 2011. Post card from the Pacific Ocean: a boat trip to see seabirds off the California coast. *Indian BIRDS* 7 (1): 23–24.

Oceanic birding is the last frontier for birders rooted on *terra firma*. Even the most hardened and seasoned member of the tribe may be pushed to the limit in the face of chilly winds and choppy seas. Birding on wet, heaving decks can test anyone's skill and resolve. To add to the difficulties, pelagic birds invariably offer mere fleeting glimpses, and identifications are difficult even in the best of conditions.

So I forayed into this unfamiliar arena with trepidation. On a characteristically chilly and foggy California (United States) June morning I boarded *Shearwater Journeys'* pelagic birding launch with an assortment of birders. As we chugged out of Santa Cruz harbour, our leader, Debra Shearwater (yes, that *is* her name) went over all the safety instructions. 'Be sure to know where the flotation devices are; take your motion sickness pills *now* if you are prone to seasickness; always be prepared to grab something for support.' And then the more experienced sea birders shared tips for efficient sea birding. 'Use the clock face to point out a bird's general location: 12 o'clock for straight-ahead, 6 for directly

behind, *etc.*; as you yell out locations, mention if bird is above or below horizon ...'

Someone cut all that with a sharp, 'Loons!' Swimming gracefully to starboard was a small raft of Pacific- *Gavia pacifica*, and Red-throated- *G. stellata* Loons. Being from the far-away, land-locked state of Arkansas (where loons are a rarity) I was pleased to see these fish-eating specialists. With their dagger-straight bills, and legs set far back on their bodies, they epitomise adaptations for piscivory.

Once clear of the bay the launch surged ahead with a deafening roar. Chilly and salty spray soaked everyone and everything. We scrambled for cover and support. No wonder they insisted on raincoats under clear skies. An hour or so later, when we were out of sight of land, amidst relatively calm seas, the captain eased back the throttle and grabbed his microphone: 'Shearwaters to port!' A teeming flock of Sooty- *Puffinus griseus*, and Pink-footed- *P. creatops* Shearwaters circled above the waters in long arcing glides. As I struggled to focus on them, a strange excitement swept through me. 'Life Order', I muttered to myself, as in, 'Life Bird', celebrating the inclusion of Procellariiformes (tubenoses) to my life list of bird orders.

5. 'May downland' (p. 195).

Someone with hawk eyes shouted that one of the birds in the swirling mass was a Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*. It was hellish getting it in focus. Either the deck heaves with the swell or the bird dips, or both happen in perfect unison. And you have one hand to use the binoculars because you use the other to prevent careening across the plunging decks. But finally, I managed to lock focus long enough to even see the 'tubenose' that gives the order its name.

In tubenoses, the hollow cylindrical nares cover the salt gland, making salty fluids flow down the tube. Evaporation therefore occurs away from the gland, making it less likely that any salt residue clogs it. Tube-nosed seabirds find their main food, krill (a zooplankton), by smell. Phyto- (plant-like) plankton emit Dimethyl sulfide in response to zooplankton predation, and it is this chemical that the birds home in on. Most tubenoses nest in burrows in oceanic islands and come to *terra firma* only to nest. Being nocturnal, they use their sense of smell to locate their burrows in the dark. One species can even discern its mate's scent from others!

Two birds chasing each other off the bow caught our attention. The chaser, a Pomarine Jaeger (pronounced "yay-gar") *Stercorarius pomarinus*, twisted and turned after its quarry, a shearwater, with amazing dexterity, harassing it to give up its food. Jaegers are related to gulls and are known for this kleptoparasitic behavior. I dearly wanted to see the end of this pursuit but they dipped below the horizon and vanished into the background of the choppy seas. Pelagic birding always keeps one yearning!

As the hours passed and we drifted farther off shore, our excitement increased because we were at the edge of the continental shelf, about 50 km from the coast, where upwelling currents bring nutrients and food from the depths. Sail jellies abounded in the waters. It was the right place for one of the most coveted sea birds—the Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*. Debra threw popcorn off the stern to lure them. They must have smelled the stale popcorn because they just materialised out off the blue! A pair of these majestic birds drifted in like giant crosses. With their scythe-like 2 m wingspans, these great oceanic wanderers circled our launch and then, as though in slow motion, settled gracefully on the frothy wake to eat the popcorn. There was a chorus of jubilant cries, but two of my peers were emitting decidedly different noises. Overcome by seasickness, they grabbed the rails by the stern, doubled up, and retched. Some astute birder remarked that the albatrosses were eating the vomit as well. That was not exactly what we wanted to see. We tried to convince ourselves that it was the popcorn they were gobbling up.

The scene was ever changing. Alcids showed up next. Common Murres *Uria aalge*, Pigeon Guillemots *Cephus columba*, and Rhinoceros Auklets *Cerorhinca monocerata* appeared almost simultaneously on both sides of the boat, leading to a mad scramble across decks. There is nothing more exhilarating than seeing three lifers at the same time, but it was challenging to follow them amongst the swirling mass of the ubiquitous shearwaters. Once they alighted on the waters, the alcids swam in lines and were easier to observe. Alcids too, our leader explained, come to land only to nest, which they do *en masse* in rocky ledges or burrows. The rare Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus* is unique because it nests in tall old-growth conifers far inland.

The raft of alcids 'exploded' when a horizon altering humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* breached, exhaling a towering spout, wafting us, seconds later with stale whale-

breath. Over the next hour we were treated to more cetaceans: pods of northern right-whale- *Lissodelphis borealis*, and Pacific white-sided- *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens* dolphins, and Dall's porpoises *Phocoenoides dalli*. The porpoises swam incredibly fast just ahead of our bow, keeping abreast our 19 knots (c. 35 kmph). I could look down directly from the bow as they sped ahead, breaking surface for quick breaths through their oval blowholes. Nearer to the coast, we saw sea otters *Euhydra lutris* languidly floating on beds of kelp. Steller's Sea Lions *Eumetopias jubatus* and Harbour Seals *Phoca vitulina* basked on rocks near the harbour.

For the novice, pelagic birding can be exhausting. Most of us munched sandwiches at lunch while the seasick birders just slumped on the cabin benches in a Dramamine-induced torpor. But drowsiness caught up with us too. As the launch made the long ride back in the late afternoon, most of us were totally out of it. When someone shouted, 'Brandt's Cormorant!' *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*, I could barely muster the energy to look at it.

Seabirds are among the least known of all birds. Despite the popularity of birding here, more new species are added to the North American list in the pelagic realm than any other. Facing an array of problems, from plastic pollution, to incidental killings by long-line fishing, these birds are increasingly threatened in their once off-limits habitats. Go sea birding and enjoy them. And do what you can to conserve them by supporting NGOs like Ocean Conservancy.

Indian BIRDS

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Dr Ragupathy Kannan

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