

BERT RAYNES: THE SAGE OF JACKSON HOLE



REBECCA WOODS

You ought to meet Bert Raynes,” a friend said, on learning we were going to the Grand Tetons.

It seemed like a good idea. I knew of other birders, including Roger Tory Peterson, who had

Bert Raynes.

sought out Bert Raynes for guidance. I’d read some of Raynes’ nature columns, “Far Afield,” which had been clipped from the *Jackson Hole News* and sent me by a mutual friend. And in preparation for our

trip, we'd bought his helpful guide, *Finding the Birds of Jackson Hole*, co-written with Darwin Wile, whom Raynes described in his foreword as "a cracker-jack birder."

Raynes, too, is a cracker-jack birder, by all accounts, already well-known from his column and from his earlier book, *Birds of Grand Teton National Park and Surrounding Areas*, published in 1984. He is also steeped in the history and folklore of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, an unabashed enthusiast for the region and its wildlife, and a man of strong opinions and an irrepressible wit that shows up in unexpected spots in the bird-finding guide. For example: "Pull into Willow Flats Parking Area. . . . Try to avoid hitting any of the Yellow-headed and Brewer's Blackbirds which often hang around the parking area. Aim instead for the Brown-headed Cowbirds."

No mistaking his opinion of cowbirds. We could understand his viewpoint when they mobbed our car in unseemly numbers, demanding handouts. However, we avoided hitting any of them—or the less numerous Brewer's and handsome yellowheads.

Before leaving home, I'd written a last-minute note to Raynes, suggesting that we get together and giving him our itinerary. Checking in at Signal Mountain Lodge, we found a welcoming message from Bert. On the phone, offering tips about birding trails we should be sure to hit, he urged us to take a drive up nearby Signal Mountain to view the sunset over the western mountains and to hear the twilight chorus of thrushes. He also invited us to a

meeting of the Jackson Hole Bird Club later in the week. "You'll be wanting to come into town at least once while you're here," he added.

That meeting turned out to be a memorable highlight of our trip—memorable mainly for the commanding presence of Raynes himself, president of the club. Arriving early for the meeting at Jackson's city hall, we found him standing outside surrounded by a cluster of club members who seemed to be peppering him with questions. He recognized us as outlanders and detached himself from the group to greet us warmly and introduce us.

We had recognized him instantly from the picture on the bird-finding guide that had become our constant companion. He is a tall man, well over six feet, slightly stooped with age (75 would be a good guess, but he doesn't talk about age). His thinning hair and thick moustache are silvery gray. His eyes, behind thick glasses, twinkle a warning that at any moment he may burst out with some irreverent witticism. He smiles often. His manner is friendly and his wit is gentle, often self-mocking. Someone described him as "Captain Kangaroo with a streak of Andy Rooney thrown in," but that misses the element of wisdom that inspires confidence and makes people seek him out for guidance.

One of the founders of the Jackson Hole Bird Club back in 1976, he was chosen as its first president ("That's what a big mouth does for you," he says). He has held that office ever since, like a

benevolent and beloved czar. Everyone seems happy to maintain the status quo.

"The bylaws call for elections," Bert told me later, "but we haven't had any in a long time." He wrote the bylaws himself. It took one evening and three typewritten pages. If he were doing it today, he'd cut it down to one page. He believes in simplicity—and conservation of paper as well as other resources.

Raynes led the way into the august council chambers of the city hall and opened the meeting on a note of easy informality. Its main purpose was to share bird observations and appreciation, with strong accent on appreciation. There was a treasurer's report, refreshingly brief, delivered by President Raynes in the absence of the treasurer: "We are solvent."

Having disposed of that item, he said, "What have you been seeing?" and called on each of the 20-some persons present to report on what birds they had been seeing, and where.

Jackson Hole—the long valley that extends between the Grand Tetons on the west and the Gros Ventres on the east, ending at the Snake River Range just south of Jackson—is a vast area with varied habitats and many opportunities for birders. In the days preceding the meeting, we had driven many miles and explored many of the trails described in the Raynes guide. We

could have reported amazing (to us) numbers of MacGillivray's warblers at Oxbow Bend, where an armada of stately white pelicans cohabited with common mergansers and a lone moose that came to drink; long-billed curlews nesting in the grasslands; western tanager on a mountain trail; a trumpeter swan, serene on her island nest; and an American dipper, just where Raynes had said it would be, diving into the rapids of a mountain stream. But we restrained ourselves to brief remarks to allow time for the local residents, who knew the area well and whose reports we were eager to hear.

One of them, a newcomer to Jackson Hole, said, "*Everything* I'm seeing is new and exciting—but I suppose it's old stuff to all of you."

"Doesn't matter," said Raynes. "We want to know what you've been seeing—and enjoying."

That was typical of "Uncle Bert," as he is commonly known around Jackson Hole. Enjoyment to him is a worthy goal. He never puts anyone down, and he finds nothing relating to nature too trivial for his attention. He listened to each report with interest, sometimes asking questions or adding his own commentary, based on his many years of observation and study. He noted with pleasure the sighting of bobolinks in the valley and expressed the hope that they would stay and nest.

Missing from the meeting was his wife, Meg, who is usually at his side and who gets full credit for opening his eyes to the world of nature. If he had not met her in their student days at Pennsylvania State University, he says he would have been "just a nerd engineer." He was,

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in fact, a highly successful chemical engineer in New York, and later in Ohio; there he designed a series of sewage treatment systems that attracted national attention and won recognition from President Lyndon B. Johnson, who invited him to the White House ceremony to witness the signing of a significant water pollution act. Somewhere among his memorabilia, Raynes has the pen LBJ used to sign the law.

Early in his career, when he and Meg were living in Schenectady, they bought a fishing cabin on a lake in upstate New York, where they spent their weekends whenever they could get away. Their main outdoor interest then was in fly-fishing, but a bird entered his life in a dramatic way and changed his priority. He was standing quietly watching a deer come in to drink, and suddenly, "a bolt from the blue came in and smashed into the water and pulled a fish out."

It was a magic moment. He had no idea what the big bird was, but on looking it up in the Peterson guide, he learned that he had seen his first osprey. It had hooked him as neatly as it had caught the fish. He and Meg began to study birds and go on bird walks, often with a group of friends who shared their interest in nature.

When the Rayneses moved to a small town near Cleveland, they joined the Cleveland Audubon Society, an organization of 1,200 members at the time, and Bert, a natural leader, became president. "We sat around and watched movies, mostly," he recalls, suggesting that his duties were not too arduous. But at the same time, he was a member ("and sometimes

president") of the smaller, more active Kirtland Bird Club that conducted Christmas counts, bird tallies, and nesting surveys.

In the 1950s, he and Meg began spending their vacations in Jackson Hole, choosing to go in September when the summer crowds had left and the weather varied from summer to fall to early snow and previews of winter. They loved hiking the uncrowded trails and enjoyed the privilege of walking through the National Elk Refuge, on the north edge of Jackson, where thousands of elk would come later to spend the winter. They knew they were missing some of the nesting birds that had left in August, but there were trade-offs, like "the glory of extensive, expansive wildflower bloom" in the high meadows.

When Bert retired in 1972, they decided to make Jackson Hole their permanent year-round home, a decision that took commitment and courage. They knew the winters were long and cold—cold being an understatement when the temperature sticks at 60 below. At that temperature, Raynes writes: "Automobile bumpers can, and do, fall off when bolts crystallize and fracture. Plate glass windows shatter. Trees snap as sap freezes, expands, and explodes plant tissues. Water pipes, even water mains, freeze up. . . . Combustion engines don't want to start, transmissions don't want to turn, vehicles don't want to move."

These transplanted Easterners learned to live with isolation when power lines were down and snow lay deep all around them. They got around on skis and snowshoes, and on milder days of winter they went



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ice-fishing with friends. All around them they saw the evidence of wildlife struggling for survival in a harsh environment. They once witnessed the death of a bull elk, which Raynes described movingly in his recent book, *Valley So Sweet*, a book that extols the beauty and fascination of the Jackson Hole country in all its seasons without glossing over the hardships.

When they adopted this area as their home, Raynes and his wife were determined to try to fit into the community and to try to contribute something to it. Their efforts began with the bird club, which—in spite of its low-key appearance—has raised thousands of dollars for various wildlife projects, including those for peregrines, whooping cranes, and trumpeter swans. Bert's weekly newspaper column has helped to promote these projects and has established his reputation as a knowledgeable naturalist who knows the valley and the Grand Tetons so well that he is often assumed to be a native son. His award-winning book, *The Birds of Grand Teton National Park and Surrounding Areas*, enhanced that reputation and has led many visiting birders, like us, to seek him out for guidance, which he gives willingly and graciously.

For many years, Bert has taught a bird-watching course at the Teton Science School on the outskirts of Jackson. Local people often call on him to identify a bird, to explain strange bird behavior, or to help a bird in trouble. He will drop everything to go to the rescue of a pine siskin with a porcupine quill in its head, a mission he could never have anticipated when that osprey

in upstate New York led him down the primrose path of addiction.

Slowed down by knee surgery and arthritis, Raynes no longer goes far afield, but takes shorter walks, always accompanied by his cherished cocker spaniel, not by Meg, whose health has been fragile since major heart surgery. But she is, as always, involved in all his activities, a fact that was publicly recognized when their adopted community honored the two of them in the spring of 1995 at a testimonial dinner, for their "contributions to wildlife and the Community of Jackson." When Bert got advance warning of the big event, his reaction was typical: "I'd better update my will."

Appropriately, the ceremony, attended by hundreds of their fellow citizens, was held at the National Museum of Wildlife Art, and the highlight was the announcement of two permanent tributes to be located on the National Elk Refuge: a grove of cottonwood trees in Meg's honor, and a boardwalk trail bearing Bert's name. There was no doubt that the couple had achieved the goals they had set for themselves when they moved to Jackson Hole: to fit into the community and to make a contribution to it.

Nearly half of their married life has been spent in Jackson Hole. When the community took note of their golden anniversary, Bert wondered why people insist on attaching the term to a fiftieth anniversary. "Every year is golden," he says. □

Lola Oberman is a BWD contributing editor and a regular columnist for the newsletter of The Audubon Naturalist Society in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

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