

Identify Yourself: Gee-whiz Stories

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# BIRD WATCHER'S<sup>®</sup>

## DIGEST

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2021

Species Profile

## Red-bellied Woodpecker

Julie

Zickefoose

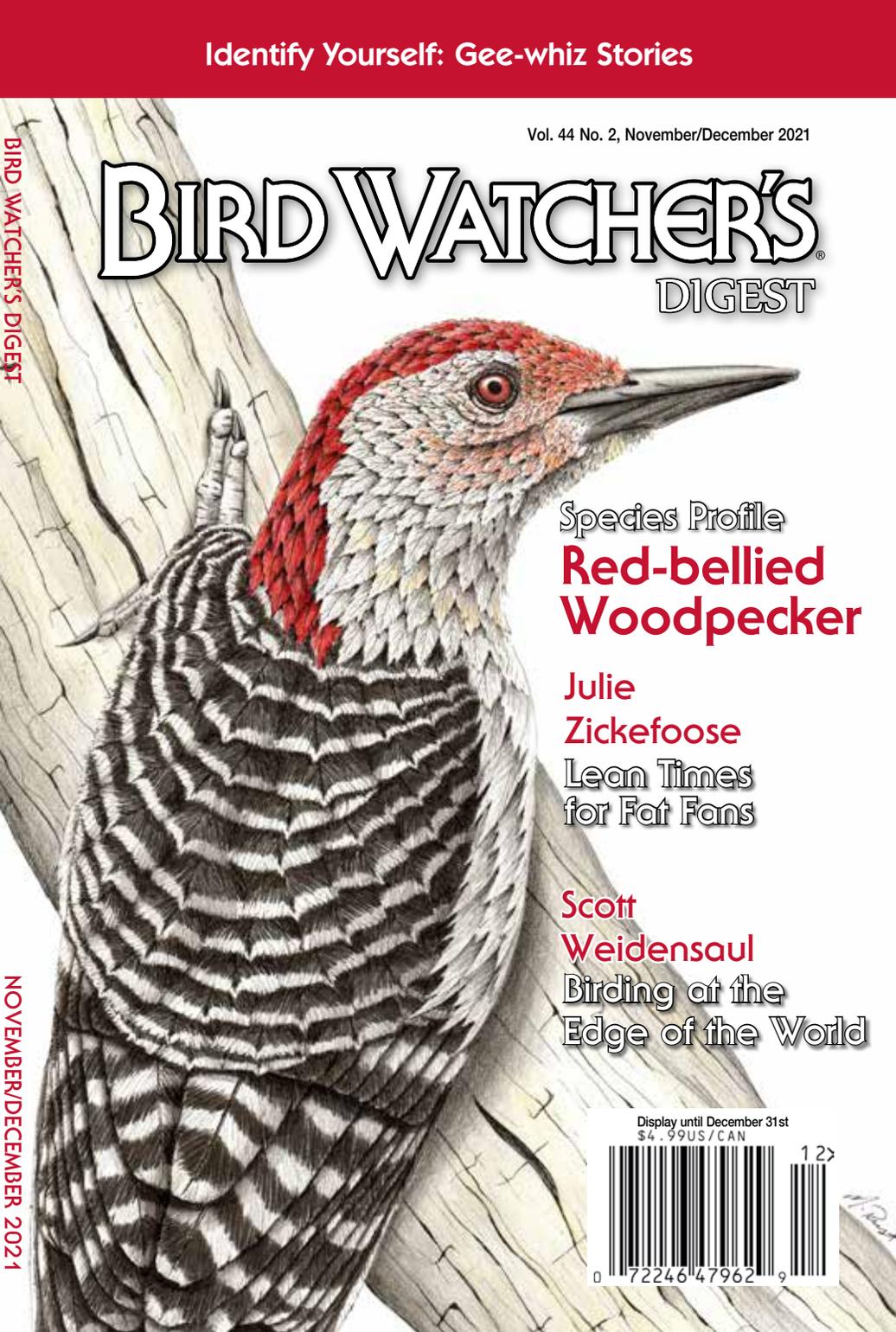
Lean Times  
for Fat Fans

Scott

Weidensaul

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# Quest for the Rufous-capped Warbler

LINDA M. BENDORF



*The rare and elusive rufous-capped warbler.*

As my husband Carl and I planned a ten-day midwinter trip to southern Arizona for February of 2018, I extracted one promise. “This will be a hiking, fishing, birding trip,” I said. “In that order.”

I longed to hike for hours each day, from the cool of the morning until the heat of early afternoon; to explore trails winding through brilliant landscapes of oak and pine forests and sculpted rock walls; to feel energized and exhilarated until the happy “dog-tired” of dusk swept me

into bed. Above all, as my 64th birthday approached, I needed to work my knee joints.

“But we’ll take our binoculars?” he said, more like a question, holding my gaze with his steel blue eyes. Binoculars had long been his second skin. In the spirited slang of avid birders, his binos, binocs, or bins. He wears them not only for his own enjoyment, but, as he is a bird guide, they are his number one tool in service to others.

“Of course we’ll take them,” I said, “and we’ll go birding,

CARL BENDORF

too, but above all, this is a hiking trip!”

And it would have been hiking first, except that sometime in the first three days, between Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and the D’Anza trail in Arizona, I became fixated, relentless in our quest for two difficult birds.

By comparison, the first bird had been easy. A vagrant Sinaloa wren that had not been spotted for two days, suddenly and finally landed, then buzzed its song before dashing into the low canopy of mesquite along the Juan Bautista d’Anza National Historic Trail. But up in Florida Canyon, a vagrant rufous-capped warbler had not been spotted by anyone for 10 days. Not even top guides. Yet, everyone was looking. “Did you see it?” we’d ask, passing group after group returning from the top. “Did you see it?” others asked us as we made our way down. Our six-hour trek to Florida Canyon two days earlier had yielded every beautiful thing, except this warbler. Two days later, I insisted we go back. I loved the canyon’s rocky West Fork trail, and the challenge of crossing



*Sinaloa wren.*

clear, frigid creeks.

During our second visit to this canyon, we ventured far above the dam.

“Aren’t you tired?” Carl asked, “We’ve been searching for hours.”

I did not say this aloud at the time, but this quest was not for me. I’ve seen hundreds of birds, always grateful for the spotting, but I do not keep a list. I love what I see in the moment and etch the colors and shape into memory; enjoy the rhythms and pitch and tone of each song. I listen intently, then imitate as best I can, oft times calling one in. I love all creatures, birds included. But my husband is the lister. And he had come to Florida Canyon eight years ago in search of this same warbler.

“I can come back another year,” he said. For us, other destinations beckoned. I knew

that wouldn't happen.

"Let's keep looking," I said, as my yearning intensified. The rufous-capped warbler held me locked in her grip.

Next, we searched near an area marked "the east bend" of the West Fork, as stated in the Tucson Audubon Society's map. We had not gone as far as the Oak Grove. We crossed the dam, then we crossed the creek again. Then 40 to 50 yards beyond that crossing, we heard water rushing down the wall of a large rock cliff. The weight of it made one constant crash as it broke the surface.

I followed my ear to the source and saw a large expanse of dense brush, but no trail to guide us to the water's edge. Yet it's where we needed to go. "Carl!" I called. "We need to get close to the water!"

"Let's stay on the trail," he said. "Let's take it a bit farther," and he kept walking. Walking the steps of a measured life that had for the most part served him exceedingly well. But today, True North lay elsewhere. The warbler was not on the trail.

"Well then," I said, sounding more than a little huffy, "on our way back, we need to ditch this trail and get to that pool of water." Then I thought to myself...since when did I, the incidental birder, get so insis-

tent, so bossy, about finding a bird? But in that moment, intuition told me to get close to the water. We hiked up the trail a few more minutes, then on the way back, I reminded him. "This is the spot."

So, we stepped off the trail and into a small clearing. At the base of the ravine, water spilled over a curved wall of igneous rock, splashing far down into a beautiful pool. Filled with gratitude for whatever forces conspired on that canyon trail, I knew this would not be an accidental spotting, but the perfect confluence of events. "That's where we'll find the bird!" I said.

Water. My spiritual geography. I recall as a toddler the pebbled beaches of the North Sea; my formative years were spent in a city on the shores of Lake Michigan. Possible genetic memory: ancestors who sailed from the Iberian Peninsula to the Canary Islands to Venezuela, then on to the Caribbean. And my grandparents' Italian village near the Adriatic Sea. And who knows about past lives? Maybe I swam with a school of anchovies. Now here in this dense-underbrush canyon, the sound of rushing water urged me to step off this trail to wrestle the tangled thicket.

"We need to make our way down the slope," I insisted, fac-



*Rufous-capped warbler.*

ing a snarl of thorny branches. “We need to get closer.” My hands and arms reached straight into the thicket, then down and back. Breaststroke on dry land. It was the only way.

I glanced back to be sure Carl could keep up. But he hadn’t moved. “I’ll wait here,” he called, feet planted on the hard desert floor in that small open space between the trail and the thicket. I urged him to follow, but he nodded me forward, ever patient with my need to go deeper when we come to wild places, the same advice

I give to writers when they’ve only scratched the surface. “Dig deeper,” I say. “Dive into the tangled thicket. That’s where the words are hiding.”

I went ahead, but not too far, maybe 15 or 20 feet in, gently parting thorny brush with my forearms. No sooner had I lifted the next branch when I heard it. Faintly at first, amid the sound of rushing water. Then clearly. Not the bird, but Carl’s voice. At first I thought he’d been bitten by a rattler, but when I could make out his words I realized it was the sweetest sound of all: a victory cheer.



The author,  
triumphant.

“There it is!” he cried. “It’s the warbler!”

I realized right then, that as I had worked my way to the water, the bird had flushed. If Carl had walked with me, he might not have seen it. It was not visible from where I stood. His restraint had paid dividends.

I hurried back to him, then I spotted it, too, rappelling like a miniature hiker down the bark of a cottonwood tree, then hopping and flitting back up. The bird heard us, too, and stayed in view for several good minutes, gifting

us with its song, a photo shoot, and short video.

I hope I will always recall the elation in Carl’s voice. What’s more, I felt elated, too. To share such beauty and joy. To feel rewarded for one’s patience. It’s the gift of one birder to another. It was, as I tell writers, a moment of consequence.

As a writing coach, I remind writers to greet each day with a sense of wonder and awe. “Be open to possibilities. Be receptive,” I say. That day in Florida Canyon invited me to take my own advice. To be open to the myriad moments of consequence that alert us and teach us and gift us. And leave us somehow changed.

What changed for me after finding this bird?

I realized that one does not have to be a studied, seasoned birder to make a wondrous discovery. Equip yourself with sturdy, reliable trekking poles, and of course, trusty binoculars. But above all, embrace a spirit of adventure, rekindle that sense of wonder we had as children, so that when intuition strikes like a flash of light or a deep powerful inkling, we stand ready. 🦋

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