The Three-Winged Bird

a short story
by
Judith K. Berg

WHENEVER I PARTICIPATED IN NATURAL HISTORY FIELD TRIPS, WHETHER FOR COLLEGE CLASSES OR PURE SECULAR PLEASURE, I ALWAYS SEEMED TO DRIFT TO THE REAR OF THE GROUP. I PROBABLY GOT A BROADER PERSPECTIVE OF THE HABITAT THROUGH WHICH WE WERE TREKKING THAN THE SPECIFIC SPECIES THE GROUP WAS STUDYING, BUT IT ALSO ALLOWED MY IMAGINATION TO ENVISION SPECIES OTHERS COULD ONLY DREAM ABOUT. THIS STORY RELATES ONE OF THOSE EXPERIENCES.

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What a 'bonny' day for a field trip into Mother Nature's world. The sun breaks slowly above the horizon shedding light on Nature's dew covered vegetation. She spreads her carpet of diamonds across the landscape for all to enjoy. Briskness fills the air as our rosy cheeked nature group gathers around our fearless leader. It's time to begin our adventure.

"Excuse me!" My trembling voice emits a concern as I wrap my body into warm coverings. "Shouldn't we at least wait until the sun rises just a little further into the sky?" There was no response.

Our nature group was divided, primarily, into two descending levels of wakefulness. The more wide-eyed and alert folks quietly bounced along the trail behind our leader. The rest were slit-eyed and fractional as they quietly dragged along the trail behind the bouncers. I was a member of the latter. Yeah, a few more minutes of sleep and another cup of hot coffee would have satisfied us laggards just fine. However, we should all at least try and stay together. Right?

Our nature group gathered to search for different species of wildlife and learn about the habitat they called home. Although mammals were a rarity, we hoped to at least see some species of the flying wonders. Even a few members of those families who crawled or slinked along the ground would be a cause for excitement. Anything with the tag 'wildlife' was recorded in our journals.

"Oh, boy, the group stopped; there must be a sighting!" I spoke softly to myself. Since I always seemed to bring up the rear, by the time I caught up with the others, "The mammal just fled!" or "The bird just flew!" were the vocal expressions that often filled my ears. It was no different this time either. Oh well, is there a chance for another quick sip of black java? Not really, the herd – I mean group – was again on the move. Darn! Onward we trekked. Everyone again stopped. This time it was a slow-moving creepy crawly, so I decided to take advantage of the situation and talk in some detail about our new find, while pulling my thermos out from my backpack. However, there wasn't my hoped-for interest as one by one my fellow trekkers slithered away like the creatures we were seeking. Soon I was talking only to myself. Oh well, onward we hike with me again bringing up the rear.

Actually, by moving more slowly, I experienced more than the others. I could piece together the environment as a whole rather than just seeing one species in one section of the habitat. At least that was my philosophy or my excuse!

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Slowly, I ventured forth on the path of discovery. The bouncers and the draggers were now out of my view, so this was a good time for a short break. Stopping next to a lovely large densely foliated tree, I assumed the stance of a wildlife watcher, raised my binoculars to my eyes, then scanned the landscape. No wildlife was to be seen. Then, I systematically investigated the sprawling branches of this enormous tree in front of me. *Wow!* I put my binoculars down, shook my head, and rubbed my eyes. Umm, better take another look. Once again I raised binoculars and looked up at the same branch of the tree as before. It was the same bird I saw the first time.

"Should I call out to the others?" I asked softly to myself. "No, that might frighten the bird." So, before toppling over from the excitement, I sat down and pulled the thermos from my backpack and sipped some strong black coffee. Ah, I needed that. Then I began recording the description of this avian species, along with other pertinent information. Once my work was completed, I sat quietly enjoying the bird. It had stayed in the same exact location. Was it real or was it a planted decoy? Yeah, someone must be playing a joke. Then it moved. Yes, it is a real bird!

"Excuse me!" I spoke softly to the bird. "No offense, but you are a wee bit unusual." The bird turned his head so he could look down towards the noise coming from the ground.

"Squawk!" he responded, and then looked away.

"Do you know that you have three wings instead of the normal two like other birds?" Again the bird looked in my direction.

"Squawk!" he responded. If a bird could look sad, this one definitely did.

"Gee, it must be very difficult for you to fly or even glide," I continued. "Ah, maybe you can climb down the tree, walk over to the next one, and then climb back up again. Right?

"Squawk! Squawk!" was the response.

"I think you actually comprehend my words," I expressed in an understanding fashion.

With my camera, I took a couple pictures of my new friend while continuing the conversation.

"Actually, you may even be an evolutionary link between your avian ancestors and the current day bird species. A discovery was recently made of fossils of a bird-like dinosaur with four wings and feathers. You may be that missing link between the past and the present. If so, you are a type of nobility in the avian world," I expressed in my enthusiastic state. "Whether that is the case or not, you really are a beautiful and unique bird."

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This time, I swear, a smile appeared on the bird's face. This expression was followed by a unique yet melodic song as the bird disappeared further into the foliage. I waited for several minutes, but the bird did not reappear.

Then I left the area, and, actually bounced along the trail in my heightened state.

“Whoops!” I expressed as I slid out in the mud and my body became one with the ground. “Darn!” Agitated, I fought to raise my body upright, and continued my forward motion. When I finally caught up with the group, I told them about my discovery. Strange expressions formed on their faces as they looked at the muddied person speaking before them.

"Gee!," I said, "didn't you also see the bird?" The rest of the group's response was loud laughter. "Well, I *did* see it!" I shot back at them in an indignant tone. "Look at my journal entry with a full description of the bird." They looked at my entry then continued to laugh.

"You really do have quite an imagination," responded our group leader. “By the way, are you Ok, since you obviously fell in the mud?"

“No, it wasn’t my imagination and yes, I am fine!” I expressed in my agitated state. "Just wait until our meeting tomorrow night when I show you the photo of the bird. Then we'll see who laughs!" I continued.

“Wow, she even got a photo," responded one on my fellow trekkers. Again there was laughter.

The field trip ended and we each went our respective ways. Although muddy, I immediately took my film to the photo lab and told them I would pick it up after work the next day. I told them to be extra careful with the film. They promised to do exactly that, while obviously trying to keep a straight face as they looked at this mudded person.

Late the next afternoon I picked up my pictures from the photo lab. Excitement reigned supreme! I walked to my car and opened the envelope. What appeared before my eyes were nice clear photos before the pictures of the bird and nice clear photos following what should have been pictures of the bird. But, the bird photos looked like an impressionist painting of the foliated tree and landscape as might be seen through the eyes of artists Paul Cezanne and Vincent van Gogh. A tiny spot of color appeared where the special bird had been sitting, but there was no clarity of an image.

Needless to say, I did not attend the meeting.

I returned several times to the same tree where I had seen the unique bird, but it did not appear. I even talked to the tree hoping my voice would alert my feathered friend, but there was no response. Discouragement infiltrated my being. So, for one last time I decided to return to the beautiful tree and sit within its embrace. *Gee, had I been so desperate for a cup of coffee that my imagination got carried away?* I thought

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to myself as doubt about the experience took over my mind. *Or, when falling in the mud, did I hit my head and receive a concussion?* If either of these scenarios was the case, then how could I have written such a detailed description of this three-winged wonder in my wildlife journal – after partaking in some good strong coffee, no less? Also, I was conscious of my muddied state and remember washing myself after dropping off the film. Then a big smile emerged across my lips as I re-read my notebook entry from that special fieldtrip day.

Well, I guess there are only two living beings on earth who know the truth, the three-winged bird and me. You do believe I saw such a bird, don't you?

"Squawk! Squawk!”

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