

In the measure that we appreciate and understand birds and are grateful for our coexistence with them, we help to bring to fruition the agelong travail that made them and us. This, I am convinced, is the highest significance of our relationship with birds.

Alexander F. Skutch,

A Birdwatcher's Adventures in Tropical America



13. WSONG OF THE CANYON WREN

That Joan Easton Lentz became a naturalist is perhaps inevitable. She grew up on the flanks of Rattlesnake Canyon, a fifth-generation Californian whose father was an eminent naturalist and environmentalist. Now a consummate birder, she is one of the best to have around for the identification of North American birds.

The journey that brought her to appreciate and love birding began with her grandfather, Robert E. Easton. Easton trained as a civil engineer and was foreman for the Sisquoc Ranch in the early 20th Century. The ranch, an original Spanish land grant, covered 40,000 acres in the San Raphael Mountains of eastern Santa Barbara County. Lentz says he surveyed the land by horseback.

“Periodically he would ride the fence corners. On an area called Montgomery Portrero he often saw huge condors.” When the National Audubon Society heard about the rare vultures, they sent a reporter from the *Saturday Review*. Ranchers obliged by hauling in a dead horse, attracting a large number of California Condors. In the 1930s, Easton was instrumental in establishing this area as the first condor preserve, the Sisquoc Sanctuary.

Robert O. Easton stepped into his father's habitat preservation boots. He rallied for the San Rafael Wilderness, the first wilderness area in the United States backcountry, established in 1964. It encompasses the old Sisquoc Sanctuary. Easton recognized the need for close-in natural space as well, and toiled to bring together the City of Santa Barbara and the Skofields to establish the Rattlesnake Canyon Wilderness Area in 1970.

“Daddy was very instrumental in this,” remembers Lentz. “He helped negotiate the deal and get trail signs put up. He just hung in there. It was a place he loved, and he wanted to preserve it. Otherwise, it could have been just more houses.” She pauses, thinking. “I’m a more quiet environmentalist.”

Lentz agreed to be my guide on a bird walk through Rattlesnake Canyon. We stand whispering on the Las Canoas Bridge overlooking the creek on an early spring morning, binoculars poised. Her lively gray eyes dance around the landscape searching for birds the way a mother watches her young children at a playground. She reminisces about her own childhood introduction to nature.

“I remember playing in the creek with my sisters. We often biked to the Museum of Natural History and pushed the button that made the rattlesnake's tail buzz in the diorama at the front entrance. In our yard I would take Daddy's old World War II field glasses to go around and learn the common birds.”

Lentz returned to her childhood hobby when her own children were young. “I'd say to my husband, ‘Gib, I've got to go birding,’ and he would look after the two little ones.” Lentz has kept detailed bird journals for over thirty-five years. She read me an entry from Rattlesnake Canyon in March 1970.

I sat on my favorite rock a little upstream from the crossing facing the thicketed bank. Many House Wrens were singing. Suddenly they started scolding madly. One in particular was going crazy, squawking on top of a dead stump. I looked up to the branch of

a sycamore nearby and there was a Northern Pygmy-Owl. He was the tiniest owl I'd ever seen. The main clue was its tail, which was quite long and definitely had a jaunty angle.

"This was my first Pygmy-Owl, a life bird for me," she says, her eyes wide and articulated speech emphasizing the importance she attached to this discovery. A couple of months later she identified her first Phainopepla, a sleek bird with distinctive white wing patches, also in Rattlesnake Canyon. "Here it is," she said, flipping to another place she'd marked in her journal. "Below the seminary a large black shiny bird flew over, a cross between a Kingbird and a Cedar Waxwing, with a fantastic crest that curved up and almost forward. Most striking, with a red eye." Lentz removes her glasses and slides the book back into her satchel. "This canyon was really the bridge between my childhood and adulthood as far as birding goes. It recalled my childhood memories and made me realize *this* is what I wanted to do."

Keeping bird journals and attending Audubon outings, Lentz rode the crest of an emerging new bird aficionado: a serious bird watcher who was not a degreed ornithologist. "In the last fifteen to twenty years there's been the rise of a new category, except it's not really new: the birder or bird naturalist. The naturalist doesn't necessarily have a scientific degree, but is interested in going out in the field and observing," she tells me. With those observations the naturalist can teach, write, catalog, or take specimens. "An ornithologist can often be stuck in the lab, measuring percentages of egg albumin or something like that," she says, rolling her eyes.

Instead, Lentz leads birding classes in the community as she has for over twenty-five years. She also participates in bird breeding surveys in the front and backcountry. The University of California Press published Lentz' *Introduction to the Birds of the Southern California Coast* in 2005. "I try to get people interested in the environment through birds; it's the

way I've chosen. I love teaching: it's exciting to share my passion for nature and for birds. I hope to raise people's awareness and perhaps encourage them to be more proactive on the part of the environment."

We listen to the morning bird chatter for a while, and Lentz trains her binoculars into the dense oak woodland by the bridge. She had already spotted cowbirds and Yellow Warblers before I arrived.

"You know about the cowbirds," she reminds me. "They are parasitic: they lay their eggs in other birds' nests, usually Yellow Warblers, Song Sparrows, and Hooded Orioles." The size of the eggs doesn't seem to matter – orioles have larger eggs than cowbirds – only the probability that the adoptive parents will raise them as their own. Often the ruse works. But some clever warblers figure it out and build another nest layer over the intruder eggs, starting over.

As Lentz speaks softly, she tracks a Song Sparrow across the narrow gap between oaks, and we hear its song: three introductory notes followed by a rhythmic, descending trill. I am still focusing my field glasses by the time it disappears into the thicket. Though I completed several classes with her and some with another great local birder, Fred Emerson, I still have a hard time advancing beyond "Binoculars 101": focusing on a bird before its flight takes it out of view. That may have been why my interest in plants emerged before birds. Plants mostly stay where they are.

Another quagmire in bird identification is the widely varying appearances for most species. Size and shape are fairly consistent but males, females, and juveniles often have different coloration, and breeding plumage can be dramatically different from markings the rest of the year. Bird vocalizations also vary considerably. Not only



Joan Easton Lentz with her birding scope. Photo by Ellen Easton.