John R. Nelson

Mr. Forbush and Mr. White

For a bird-fancier, I was late in getting to Edward Howe Forbush's three-volume *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*, published in the 1920s. I assumed that much of Forbush's work would now be dated, supplanted by fresh scientific knowledge and more scrupulously kept records of the distribution and habits of birds. And the weight of it, fourteen hundred pages in all—that's a lot of damn bird-lore to lift. But in 2012, when I took on the task of writing a hundredth anniversary history of the Brookline Bird Club (BBC), I knew I could put the man off no longer. The preeminent New England ornithologist of the early twentieth century, he'd been the first speaker at the annual BBC meeting (his stereopticon malfunctioned), and the club had lobbied the Massachusetts legislature to fund publication of his three volumes. In my research his name kept springing up everywhere. One could not write any history of New England birds without looking into Forbush.

As I curled my way through his first volume, I found myself more than pleasantly surprised—I was enthralled. Here was a vast nest of curiosities. Harlequin Ducks were once called the Lords and Ladies of the Sea. Northern Fulmars had been widely hunted for their oil, used for both lighting and medicinal purposes. To Cubans the American Redstart was Candelita, or "little torch." Furthermore, rather than rendering his information obsolete, the datedness of the work added a historical dimension to my awareness of the birds I saw, or didn't see, each year in Massachusetts. Common Loons and Trumpeter Swans had once nested on many ponds and lakes in our state. Killdeer, now common breeders here, had once been "practically extirpated" as New England nesting birds. Dickcissels had almost disappeared from the Massachusetts coast for reasons "that must be left to conjecture." Avian life is dynamic, and terms like "common" and "abundant" and "rare" are relative and transitory, contingent on both the adaptability of birds and the changes wrought by humans that have stressed this adaptability to the limit. To know and protect the birds we see here and now, it helps to know where these birds have been, geographically and historically.

The facts one can find in Forbush will remain useful as long as New Englanders care about birds, but what really got me was the man's style as a writer: effusive, at times overreaching, but often rising into lyricism, evoking birds in their habitats with rapturous precision. One of my favorite examples is his Winter Wren: "This little Brownie of the forest creeps like a woods mouse under the roots of trees standing on banks overhanging the water, in and out of brush

heaps and woodpiles along river bottoms and on the banks of woodland brooks, cautious and furtive—an absurd little creature, its stub tail turned up over its back at the least provocation, until it seems as if the bird would tumble forward, pushed over by the efforts of its own tail, or overbalanced by the bobbing of its head." People just don't write this way about birds anymore. Have we given in to some dubious belief that science and poetry must never mingle? Are we so scared of being accused of anthropomorphism, or some other intellectual sin, that we can't say what we love?

Not long after I began reading Forbush, I discovered that I'm not the first writer to value Forbush not just for his knowledge but for his literary style. It turns out that one of his most fervent admirers was E. B. White. Thirty years after his death, White remains best known for his children's books, including *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and his classic work on language usage, *The Elements of Style*, co-authored with William Strunk. A longtime contributor to the *New Yorker*, he was also a master prose stylist, among the most reliable essayists in American literature. And when White struggled with his own work, he often turned to Forbush. "When I am out of joint," he writes in "Mr. Forbush's Friends," published in 1966 in the *New Yorker*, "from bad weather or a poor run of thoughts, I like to sit and think about Edward Howe Forbush." For more than twenty years, since he first acquired Forbush's three volumes, White came back to Forbush again and again, for both "refreshment and instruction."

White sometimes wrote about birds, like his lighthearted poem on bird song identification, "A Listener's Guide to the Birds," but he wasn't exactly a birder. "Although not a student of birds," White confesses in "Mr. Forbush's Friends," "I am thrown with them a good bit. It is much the same sort of experience as being thrown with people in the subway. I gaze at a female, and am filled with curiosity and a wish to know more than I do about her nesting site, breeding habits, measurements, voice, and range." To satisfy his curiosity about women on the subway, White laments, he has "nothing to help me but my imagination," but if it's a bird that intrigues him, he can turn to Forbush "for help in comprehending what I have been looking at." White likes a lot of things about Forbush: the reliable information, the orderly, calming presentation, the pleasing representations of bird songs, and the "peerless illustrations" by Louis Agassiz Fuertes and Allan Brooks. He's also fascinated by the peculiar knowledge Forbush imparts, like the discussion of whether gluttony or intoxication causes the occasional haplessness of Cedar Waxwings. White is less interested in Forbush's fixation on birds' "Economic Status"—the repetitive attempts to prove, species by species, that creatures we love for their beauty or behavior will also eat our pests and spare our crops, but even here, where we see "Mr. Forbush the partisan wrestling with Mr. Forbush the scientist," White admires Forbush's determination to make a case for even the most unpopular birds, birds with police records, like crows and jays. "He was the champion of birds as well as their interpreter," White writes. "In his role as defense attorney for the birds,

Mr. Forbush is not merely spirited, he is wonderfully resourceful."

But what White most relishes in Forbush are the "Haunts and Habits" sections, in which Forbush cuts loose, "dropping his tight scientific detachment and indulging himself as stylist, enthusiast, and footloose reporter." As an example, he quotes Forbush's description of Holboell's (now Red-necked) Grebe, the first entry in the three volumes: "A bright clear day in January, a gentle breeze, a river mouth where the rippling flood flows into a sparkling sea, a lazy swell washing gently on the bar where a herd of mottled seals is basking in the sun, Old-squaws and Golden-eyes in small parties—such a scene at Ipswich is a fit setting for the great Grebe that winters on our coasts." Another example that White quotes is the entry for the Ivory Gull, or Ice Partridge, a marvelous bird that I myself have seen just once, a vagrant scavenging by a Massachusetts breakwater, far from its wild high-Arctic habitat. Forbush describes its native habitat this way: "When countless crowding icebergs rear their snowy pinnacles, when dark blue, racing seas, flashing and roaring in the clear sunlight, dash their foaming crests high up the pallid slopes of crashing ice; there we may find the Ivory Gull." The Forbush style, White concedes, may become self-indulgent—"a rich prose occasionally touched with purple"—yet the reader is won over by its vividness and an enthusiasm for birds that is never dulled or disenchanted. If the prose is "occasionally overblown," White says, "this results from a genuine ecstasy in the man, rather than from lack of discipline. Reading the essays, one shares his ecstasy."

White is also charmed by the reports on birds from "Mr. Forbush's large company of informers, or tipsters: people who at one time or another wrote him or phoned him to tell of an encounter with a bird—a strange doing, an odd fact, a bizarre occurrence." Some of these reports come from "professional bird people" and writers for nature publications, like Olive Thorne Miller, but most were passed on to Forbush by what White describes as "hundreds of amateurs and strangers, who by reporting some oddity of bird behavior or recording an unlikely arrival have achieved immortality; their names are embedded in the text of *Birds of Massachusetts* as firmly as a bottle cap in a city pavement, and they are for the ages." These tipsters, "bright of eye, quick to take pen in hand," are the "friends" in the title of White's essay, and he devotes a good half of the essay to condensed versions of their bird tales:

> Reverend J. H. Linsley. Opened the stomach of a gannet, found bird. Opened stomach of *that* bird, found another bird. Bird within bird within bird. No date.
>
> Mr. Stanley C. Jewett. Asserts that wounded red-breasted merganser at Netarts Bay, Oregon, dived to submerged root in three feet of water, and died while clinging there. Apparent suicide. May 1915.
>
> Mr. J. A. Munro, of Okanagan Landing, British Columbia. Watched male bufflehead, far gone in passion, dive under another male, toss him into air. Sexual jealousy. No date.
>
> Mr. George W. Morse, of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Saw great blue heron strike at small

> fish between own legs, tripping self up. Heron was carried downstream in capsized position with legs in air. It held on to the fish. No date.
>
> Mr. T. Gilbert Pearson. Lady of his acquaintance, while sitting alone in her room, was startled when beef bone fell out into hearth. Went outside, discovered turkey buzzard peering down chimney. Carelessness on part of bird. No date.
>
> Mr. M. Semper, of Mapes P.O., British Columbia. Was at neighbor's house sharpening a mower sickle, saw golden eagle seize neighbor's little girl, Ellen Gibbs, by arm. Mr. Semper kicked eagle with no effect. Girl's mother appeared, decapitated eagle with good effect. No date.
>
> Dr. H. F. Perkins. Found yellow warbler's nest six stories high with a cowbird's egg on every floor. The warblers, each time they discovered a stranger's egg in the nest, built on top of it, thus burying the egg. No date.
>
> Mrs. Olive Thorne Miller. Reported case of female tufted titmouse stealing hair from gentleman in Ohio for use in nest building. Bird lit on gentleman's head, seized a beakful, braced itself, jerked lock out, flew away, came back for more. Gentleman a bird lover, consented to give hair again. No date.

White doesn't discuss the reliability of the informants' reports, or the dangers in drawing lessons about bird behavior from anecdotal evidence, but, taken as a whole, the accounts illustrate how, long before eBird, birders acted as part of a loose information-sharing community of enthusiasts. Grouped together by White, with abrupt shifts from gannet stomach contents to a suicidal duck, the reports also oddly resemble certain modernist literary inventions in which themes emerge, with a cumulative emotional impact, from an assembly of small, seemingly disconnected stories. This is the format of Felix Feneon's *Novels in Three Lines*, for example, a collection of three-line news items that had been published anonymously in the French newspaper *Le Matin* in 1906. Feneon's tiny, true tales are self-contained, the characters in them unrelated, but, collected, the "novels" elaborate motifs of violence, political conflict, infidelity, and madness:

> A criminal virago, Mlle Tulle, was sentenced by the Rouen court to 10 years' hard labor, while her lover got five.
>
> Nurse Elise Bachmann, whose day off was yesterday, put on a public display of insanity.
>
> A complaint was sworn by the Persian physician Djai Khan against a compatriot who had stolen from him a tiara.
>
> A certain madwoman arrested downtown falsely claimed to be Elise Bachmann. The latter is perfectly sane.
>
> Reverend Andrieux, of Roannes, near Aurillac, whom a pitiless husband perforated Wednesday with two rifle shots, died last night.

> Women suckling their infants argued the workers' cause to the director of the streetcar lines in Toulon. He was unmoved.
>
> Scheid, of Dunkirk, fired three times at his wife. Since he missed every shot, he decided to aim at his mother-in-law, and connected.
>
> Mme Vivant, of Argenteuil, failed to reckon with the ardor of Maheu, the laundry's owner. He fished the desperate laundress from the Seine.

A cross-species comparison may seem fanciful—passion-mad Buffleheads vs. vengeful human cuckolds—and I wouldn't stretch it too far. Unlike Feneon's miniatures, the reports included by Forbush were composed by many individual informants, without design, political motive, or thought about what these anecdotes might signify if considered collectively, and they often depict behavior that is strictly comical or benign. Yet in the examples extracted from Forbush by White, the repeated instances of bird predation, rivalry, and apparent suicide exemplify both the emotional intensity of birds' lives and our own often amused fascination with mayhem and weirdness, whether human or avian.

One day in early April, after a long, fierce New England winter, I left my house with a mission: to find a Wilson's Snipe. In truth, I was searching for a new season, since snipe, like Eastern Phoebes and Red-winged Blackbirds, are among the first reliable proof that spring will actually return. At my favorite snipe spot, an always soggy field, I found another snipe seeker, who looked somewhat familiar, as I seemed familiar to him. It's a common experience among birders: faces seen once or twice in the field and vaguely remembered, but immediate recognition once names are exchanged. We're the descendants of Forbush's friends, but instead of sending our bird stories to a Forbush, we share reports on a birding listserv. I'd chased a lost goose my new comrade had found. He'd liked my post about a strange woodpecker sucking up the sugar water at our hummingbird feeder.

Side by side, we scanned the field with our scopes. Snipe are distinctive birds, long-beaked, pudgy, like pot-bellied Pinocchios, but cryptic, patterned with the colors of a wet spring meadow. Finally I spotted one, behind two Killdeer, a hundred yards out, subtly jerking as it probed for bugs. I gave directions, and my comrade found the bird too. I thought of E. B. White—the "pure pleasure" he found, again, in Forbush's description of a snipe: "When the spring rains and mounting sun begin to tint the meadow grass, when the alewives run up the streams, when the blackbirds and the spring frogs sing their full chorus, then the Snipe arrives at night on the south wind." For White, Forbush was a man for all seasons, a man who "carries his readers into seasons yet to come."

My friend and I scoped the rest of the field. Where there had been camouflage, now there were birds. "One snipe," I said. "Seven snipe. A field full of snipe. And a Solitary Sandpiper."

"Yes." He smiled. "Yes, it must be spring."