

Al Burt Papers

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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"Bird Watching"

Annual Meeting of the Florida Audubon Society, Homosassa Springs, Florida, November 8, 1986

After the last political campaign, and months of watching some rather strange birds on TV, it is a relief to be here with the Florida Audubon Society – where bird watching is closer to being a religion than a disinformation campaign, and where serious bird watchers have more than 30 seconds at a time for each look.

You hear a lot of things during a campaign. But the most memorable concession speech I ever heard of was attributed to a California politician. When it was over, and he lost, he took it philosophically. "The people have spoken," he said, "the bastards."

One fellow described the campaign as a blatant appeal to the stupid vote. But that's over now.

I have worked for *The Miami Herald* for 31 years – and for the past 13 have been a Florida specialist. I have devoted all my time to wandering around the state and trying to write about the people and places and things that are important but not demanding enough to make the news. I make an effort to clock some of the shock, disorientation and reformation that take place in a state that more than doubles its population in 25 years. I rarely go to press conferences or commission meetings or sidewalk protests.

During these past 13 years, I have developed an immense respect for the natural things of Florida, and also for the organizations like the Florida Audubon Society whose presence and activities have such a positive influence.

Part of my increased sensitivity to natural things comes simply through being exposed to a greater range of the state, and part comes from the influence of where we live. Gloria and I have a home in the woods by a clear lake near a small north central Florida community called Melrose. That has impact on our views. We travel out of there to all parts of the state – from Pensacola to Key West.

In Melrose, we have become novice bird watchers. We have learned that in Florida, birds represent a special blessing. We have so many – everything from hummingbirds to eagles – fluttering about the upper edges of our lives and adding grace to them.

I have decided that the sight and sound of birds – when you take them seriously – add scale to our horizons. The movements of birds suggest the rhythms and purposes of nature. Once you catch on to their beauty, the world adds another dimension. The sky seems more down to earth and it is almost as though you have developed another eye – one that reveals new mysteries and delights that have always been close at hand. When someone comes fresh to a serious appreciation of birds and their environment, I suspect they also find in themselves an improved appreciation of manners and civility in human affairs. Anything that does that makes a major contribution.

Let me tell you about three birds that have affected our lives in Melrose. First, there was a tall white egret we called Biddy, a Great Egret or American Egret. She came into our life late in 1974 – and taught us many things. First she came to snack on little bream that we caught with a cane pole and threw up on the beach. After that, she took up residence and we could not catch fish fast enough for her. Gloria, after some experimenting with our groceries, found that Biddy would eat strips of raw beef kidney. So when we ran out of fish, we bought beef kidney for Biddy.

For us, Biddy was like a missionary from the wild. She brought behavioral messages that we spent many an hour trying to decode. Around Christmas, she always sprouted beautiful, long nuptial feathers and she developed an enormous appetite. Around February, she left us each year on what we supposed was a maternity leave.

Biddy educated us. We would be sitting there on the porch and suddenly there would be a flash of those great white wings and she would sail gracefully out of the sky and land at our feet like a mischievous angel – a hungry one, begging for food. She would come when we called her. Gloria's call to her sounded like a cross between a hog call and Jeannette MacDonald singing the Indian Love Song.

Biddy would roost on our roof at night and in the mornings she would peer down into our bedroom. When we woke, she would fly to the kitchen door for breakfast. If she got hungry during the day, she would walk around to my office window and stare at me until I got up and went to the kitchen to feed her. When she was scared, by the presence of an eagle or perhaps a stranger, she would hover near us until the danger passed.

We had Biddy for nine years, and then one year Biddy did not return from maternity leave. Gloria called every egret that came into sight – the neighbors began to wonder about her – but none of the egrets ever responded. We think old age or an alligator must have gotten her, for we are sure she would not have abandoned us.

Biddy sensitized us to natural things in a thousand ways. When we lost her, we lost something valuable. She took the most simple and commonplace things and turned them into nourishing, gratifying wonders. In my book *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes* there is a story about Biddy – and a picture of Gloria and her.

With Biddy gone, our favorite bird has become the sandhill crane. Their flocks go yodeling across our sky during winters, and they settle in the pastures and prairies. In flight, you can hear the call of a sandhill crane for a mile or more. It makes a sound like a Swiss yodeler gargling. We think the crane

has a genteel beauty with that red crown slung over its eyes like a beret. It stands about four feet tall, grayishly feathered and plump in the middle, with a seven-foot wingspread. We learned that it has special yodeling equipment – a windpipe that makes loops as it trails down that long neck.

In season, it has become prime entertainment for us to go out to a pasture or a prairie and watch the sandhill cranes do their famous dance. It is a marvel. The movements resemble a ballet but they are more accomplished than any dancers you ever saw on stage because they can use the lift and the whirl of their wings to defy gravity.

We were pleased to learn that the cranes do not dance merely for courtship. They dance to work off nervous energy. They just like to dance. For the genteel sandhill crane, it is a matter of art, not mere sex. That fits our image of it as a special and noble bird.

The other bird that has had a special impact on us has been the white ibis. Late in the afternoon, we like to go down to our gazebo by the lake and sip a little wine and throw some breadcrumbs to the fish. Last winter, the ibises showed up. About sundown each evening, a flock of maybe 200 – sleek and swift and flying low – would race across the lake in a ‘V’ formation. They came in below the tree line on the horizon, so that we rarely saw them ahead of time, and suddenly burst upon us – directly overhead. They had a startling effect. The setting at that moment seemed almost spiritual – the sunset colors, the woods turning dark all around us and suddenly that white swarm of birds. There would be no sound except the beating of their wings. All we could hear were the muted sounds of those hollow bones and feathers beating powerfully against the wind. That is a stirring experience.

There are different chapels for different religions, and a time and a place for each. Not all of them need stained-glass windows or lovingly worn altar rails or gleaming brass and candlelight to strengthen the sense of infinity that can exist in a tiny place.

The sunsets and the magical flights of the ibises turned our gazebo into a kind of chapel for us. The services were determined by the sun, not by the diocese, and the messages came from the ibises, not from a priest, but the effect was spiritual. It always stirred in us a kind of wonder and gratitude. We do not question it or try to define it too closely, for fear that we might spoil something beautiful.

Maybe there was an Indian somewhere in my family background, for I tend to have an Indian’s sense of nature and religion as one. For me they involve similar appreciations and balances and leaps of faith. Our little chapel in the sky – where nature and the ibises preside – seems to offer more direct communications than many chapels I have been in. These are not filtered messages. We get this communication directly and personally.

This is the kind of thing that an enlarged appreciation of nature, and a study of birds, can do for you. This is my way of explaining to you what it has meant to us to be able to live where we do, and to explain what sort of mental framework it gives us as we travel around Florida trying to decipher what is happening to this state. That experience prompts us to measure things in more ways than mere numbers. We try to go beyond those.

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