



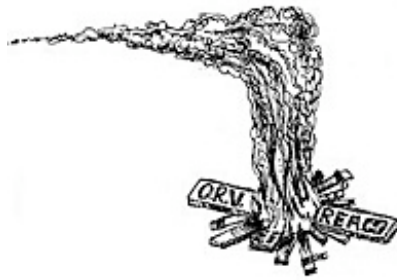
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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



Five Little Birds and Their Lessons

Ten years ago at the end of a three-week trip in Argentinean Patagonia and the rain-soaked, glacier-whittled southern Chilean coast, I took a nasty fall. After flying home to New Mexico, my back, which had never bothered me before, grew steadily worse over the coming months. I soon had to stop running six miles a day and cut back sharply on the weight machine. Then I had to give up my greatest love, backpacking, and I haven't been able to hoist a pack onto my back for nine years now.

Though my days as a wilderness trekker seem gone, thanks to fusion surgery, strong pain meds, shoving from my wife Nancy, and some help from my friends, foremost John Davis, I have done several long raft and canoe trips in the Southwest and in Arctic Alaska and Canada. Nancy and I have begun to scuba dive. Nonetheless, most of my time is spent working in the living room recliner where our feathered friends who visit our birdbath and spread of feeders endlessly enthrall our fluffy black cat Gila and me. I've tallied sixty-one species in and over our yard. I cannot overstate how thoroughly I need and love these birds—they are the wild things without which I would not want to live.

Thanks to my living room birding blind, I've gotten to know some birds and who they are well. They have taught me much, five birds most of all, and I think that they can teach my fellow *Cannots* much, too. (A *Cannot* is one like Aldo Leopold, who wrote that there were some who can live without wild things, and others like him who cannot.)

You will see that these birds are not those often held up as beacons of certain virtues such as eagles or owls. Nor are they bright flashes of many-hued loveliness such as orioles and hummingbirds. But in their behavior and mood they are anything but drab. As I have gotten to know them better, their true grit fairly blazes. So, let's meet them and hear their tweets of wisdom.



Bushtit—Grassroots

Bushtits are tiny, drab, and gray, but lively, lovable, and winsome in a way that springs out. They move through our neighborhood in a throng of twenty-five or so, swarming into a piñon tree and cleaning it of bugs and caterpillars, then—zoom—they are off in a straggling, chattering rush to another tree, without a blatant leader. They are not seedeaters but pack predators. Were they raven-size, Bushtits would be the fright of Earth.

I have had wonderful meetings with wildeors from leopards to wolves in sprawling, deep wilderness over the world. In the summer of 2010, I narrowly dodged being trampled and gored by a cranky bull musk ox on the banks of the Noatak River above the Arctic Circle. But one of my greatest wildlife run-ins was that same summer in my yard with a Bushtit. I was watering a little patch of Rocky Mountain Penstemons and went to scoot the sprinkler to a dry spot. As I lifted the hose with the sprinkler head drizzling down, I glimpsed a sudden flash of gray from a nearby New Mexico Locust. I looked down and there was a Bushtit winsomely perched on my toe and showering under the sprinkler. It fluffed and fluttered and flapped its wings for half a minute then flew off. I was in wild-bliss for what was left of the day.

As I wrote, Bushtits have no out-and-out leader. For all I know, some (grandma and grandpa?) may show leadership now and then thanks to knowledge, age, or wisdom, but overall their might is in the flock. They teach the strength of grassroots work. Historian Stephen Fox sees two traditions in conservation: Amateur and Professional (to wit: John Muir/Sierra Club and Gifford Pinchot/Forest Service). These pathways are not split by whether or not one is paid to do conservation work, nor do they have anything to do with how good one is. The cleavage is in feeling, with amateurs working for wild things out of love and professionals working to manage land and resources because it's their job. Some of us who have worked for conservation outfits all our lives are yet amateurs—such as Bruce Hamilton, the associate executive director of the Sierra Club. And there are those who have worked all their lives for a government agency who are also in the amateur pathway—such as Dave Parsons, who was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service team leader for the Mexican Wolf reintroduction. And—alack—too many heads and staffers of nonprofit conservation outfits are in the professional camp these days. It's not whether you have a buttoned-down job or not, it's why you do it. Cannots are truly amateurs.

Just as Cannots need to hew to the amateur pathway, conservation outfits should think of themselves as clubs or teams of like-minded folks, not as institutions or corporations, though they might be legally set up as such. And for those blessed to be paid by a conservation outfit, wild things should come before one's career, job, or the organization for which one works.

As folk conservationists in the Cannot Club, let us be a flock of Bustits.



Western Scrub Jay — Vision

The Corvid family—jays, crows, and ravens—are the smartest birds and Western Scrub

Jays might be the smartest of all. Their recall is staggering. A Scrub Jay knows where it has hidden upward of a thousand nuts. It goes beyond sheer recall, however. Research shows they have a so-called “theory of mind,” which means they understand that other beings also think—that there are minds other than one’s own. Such studies have found that when a Scrub Jay hides a nut, but knows another jay is watching, it will go back later and put the nut in another hiding spot when the other jay isn’t watching. I put out peanuts for the four jays in my yard and have watched them do this trick. They not only have to watch to see if one of the other three jays sees where they hide a peanut, they also have to watch for Curve-billed Thrashers, who gladly scarf up on jay-hidden goodies. There are thousands of peanuts hidden all over my yard, some in the most outlandish spots. I wonder what my neighbors think when they find a peanut stashed in a lawn chair?

Scrub Jays are smart, strategic, farsighted, and visionary. We can learn much from them. A blend of paths to keep wild things is good, but all of them—from that of the Sierra Club to that of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society—need to be steered by thoughtful strategy. Key gains in wilderness and wildlife keeping have come from great visions. The 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act gave us more than 100-million acres of National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, Wilderness Areas, and Wild Rivers. Thousands of CANNOTs from all over the United States put in many hours of work on the bill, building support for it and lobbying their members of Congress. Behind all that hard, slogging grassroots work, though, was the daring and wonderful vision that began with a handful of women and men who knew well the wilderness of Alaska. Likewise, bringing back wolves to Yellowstone National Park came from much grunt work both in federal agencies and wildlife clubs. Before the work, though, was the foresight and boldness of a few who saw the need to bring wolves back to the wilderness from which they had been killed out seventy years earlier.

One vision, of which I’ve been proud to be a player, is that of The Wildlands Project (now called Wildlands Network). When we began in 1992, we called for networks of National Parks, Wilderness Areas, state parks, and such brought together by wildlife-movement linkages—or Wildways. We also called for putting back big, wild hunters, such as wolves and big cats, owing to the scientific research showing that without top carnivores ecosystems crumble. This vision, which came to be called Rewilding, was shunned and put down at first, even among many conservation biologists. But now it is the wonted path on all continents, among government agencies, scientists, and grassroots conservationists alike. True, it is not always carried out or carried out well, but the vision just a few of us had twenty years ago has taken hold.

Let us be, then, like Western Scrub Jays. Think. Plan ahead. Have a vision.



Curve-billed Thrasher—Toughness

Curve-billed Thrashers are among my most-loved Earthlings. Their orange eyes and the madcap way they run about on the ground notwithstanding, they have a loftiness and steadfastness about them that cows me. It cows the other birds in our neighborhood, too. Though jays, robins, and doves outweigh them, thrashers are the boss birds. They own our yard. I put both peanuts and sunflower seeds in one small tray feeder outside my front window in the winter. I watch it while drinking my first cup of coffee and petting my lap-cat Blue. There might be four brassy jays swooping in and out with peanuts to grab and hide, but when the Curve-billed Thrasher settles in to munch sunflower seeds, Scrub Jays sit back and wait.

Curve-billed Thrashers are tough and won’t be shoved aside. We need to learn that better. Sometimes I get a feeling that conservationists are almost apologizing for asking for what we want. We should never be shy or afraid. We in the CANNOT Club are on the most righteous mission in the world—to care for other Earthlings, to let them live their lives in their wild neighborhoods, and not to be elbowed off our blue-green ball of rock and water by our greed and shortsightedness.

In the United States, we Cannots have come up with the best tools in the world for keeping other Earthlings hale and hearty. They are National Parks, the National Wilderness Preservation System, and the Endangered Species Act. We should never back off from holding these up as marks of American greatness just as we do with the Bill of Rights.

We should never back away from our best tools for shielding Earth's wild things; we shouldn't switch them or water them down for new fads or political/cultural nudging. We need to stand up for what is right with the same pluck as that of the Curve-billed Thrasher.



Ladder-backed Woodpecker—Doggedness

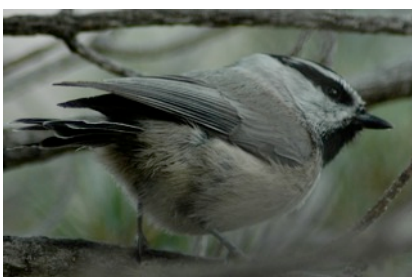
I once watched a Ladder-backed Woodpecker in our yard drill into a tree trunk for thirty minutes until she got what she was after. These little woodpeckers work harder than any bird I know. They are dogged. When they hear or otherwise know a beetle or grub is under bark or in the wood of a branch, they keep pecking away at it. If one drill hole doesn't reach their prey, they hammer away at their target from another. They don't just dumbly keep pounding their heads against a trunk; they stop and cock their heads to see or hear if they are on the right track. They shift if they need to, but they doggedly keep at it.

It should be the same for us. If one path doesn't work, try another, but never back away from warding wilderness and wildeors. It took Howard Zahniser eight years to get Congress to pass the Wilderness Act. Polly Dyer, now in her nineties, is still working after sixty years to get more Wilderness Areas and National Parks in the North Cascade Mountains in Washington. I'm a whippersnapper—I've worked on getting some Wilderness Areas for only forty years and haven't given up. We lovers of wild things win against mightier foes time and again thanks to sticking to it.

Owing somewhat to the world of speedy computers on which we now depend, many conservationists expect things to happen quickly, and I see it all the time with foundations backing wilderness clubs. They have no patience, no understanding that it can take years to get a Wilderness Area bill passed by Congress. They hound the clubs they fund wanting new Wilderness Areas in each state every two years. Some funders don't seem to realize how long it takes to build a constituency for a Wilderness, how long it takes to sidetrack local foes. Badgering from some funders leads even the best to cut quick and questionable deals to get any Wilderness bill passed to make the foundation happy. This peevishness, this lack of knowledge about the need for long-haul, dogged work is a tide I see in conservation that undercuts real gains and plays into the hands of members of Congress who don't want to fight hard battles. Landscalpers are learning that slowing down a Wilderness Area bill for a few years will often lead funders and conservation outfits to lose interest in it.

Had this been the case in the 1950s, I don't know if Howard Zahniser would have been given the eight years it took to get a good Wilderness Act passed and signed by the President.

The best conservationists are like Ladder-back Woodpeckers. We never, never give up.



Mountain Chickadee—Own Sake

I've never heard anything happier and merrier than *chick-a-dee-dee-dee*. When these snazzy little gray birds with the sharp black stripe through their eyes show up and tell all the world—*chick-a-dee-dee-dee—We are here! And we are chickadees!*—I can't help but smile and *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* back at them.

Mountain Chickadees have a good time. Why? Because they live for themselves. They don't see themselves as a mirthful show for me; they don't see themselves as any kind of good or help for Man. No, they are chickadees and that is all they need to be to answer for their lives and what they do.

And so, the Mountain Chickadees popping into and out of our winter neighborhood carry the most worthwhile teaching of all for us. They believe they are good-in-themselves. We do not need to weave complex ethical theories on how wild things might have inherent value. Chickadees tell us so. Chickadees laugh in our mugs at the outlandish gall that only we—the upright ape—can give something worth.

Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!

It means that wild things have worth for their own sake.

And when we sing back:

Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!

It means we have the wisdom, the generosity of spirit, the greatness of heart to let beings be.

Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!

Dave Foreman
In my recliner



(Note: This is taken from my talk at the Western Wilderness Conference in Berkeley in 2010. I dedicated the talk to Polly Dyer who was there.)



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