

Common Ground

As I crossed the field, the form of my friend and World Series of Birding teammate Don Freiday separated itself from the twilight, sharper and more real with every step. We reached his porch in a tie.

"Beautiful evening," he said, for openers.

"Stellar," I agreed. "How was your day?"

"Pretty good," he replied. "Five woodpeckers including sap. Golden-crowned Kinglet, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, towhee, Fox Sparrow... But the best bird was an adult Northern Goshawk that blew right by me around three o'clock."

"No way!" I exclaimed. "I am so jealous. Did you get the Snow Geese?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Coming and going. Big flocks."

"Did you hear the Red Crossbills this morning?"

"Nooo!" he replied. "Now I'm jealous."

"You were just too far from the pines to pick them up."

There was a pause while the two of us mentally reviewed the bounty that constituted the accumulated memories of our day afield.

"See any deer?" he got around to asking.

"Doe and a yearling came up from below and went wide of me just after sunrise, traveling fast.

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Must have smelled me. Passed on a fork right underneath me around 4 p.m. Same deer I saw on opening day. You?"

"Had four adult does and a one-and-a-half-year-old six-point walk by about eighty yards out this afternoon. Probably coulda shot. Decided not to."

I nodded. "Is Northern Goshawk new for the tree-stand list?" I asked as I unslung my 12-gauge slug gun from my shoulder, working the action, twice, to be certain the chamber and magazine were empty.

"I think it might be," said Don, unslinging his gun and doing the same.



Huh?

At this moment, some of you are surely thinking: "I can't believe it. Pete Dunne is a hunter. This is terrible."

While I respect your well-considered opinion, I feel compelled to point out that your feelings about my choice of avocation place you squarely in a band of the human spectrum defined as: The Minority. Based on thirty years of sampling, I've found as many people opposed to hunting among the ranks of golfers, VCR owners, and people who like double-fudge brownies as I have among birders.

Another cross-section of ABA members will react to my revelation differently. "No kidding, Pete Dunne is a hunter, *too*. That's great."

Yes, I am. So are a lot of other birders. But it is more important to note that among the ranks of birders, I, you, and they also constitute a minority.

The reaction on the part of the majority of readers will be more like: "So Pete Dunne is a hunter. So what? And what's that got to do with birding?"

It's a valid question. And the subject of this essay.

Taking Issue

When "Sources" editor Rick Wright asked me to address the "issue" of birding and hunting, I confess I was somewhat at a loss. Being both a birder and a hunter, I have trouble framing the topic as an "issue". Both pursuits are avenues that allow me to engage the natural world. As I have expressed it elsewhere, when I carry binoculars I am a member of the audience, watching a drama on stage. When I carry a gun, I become an actor in the play. I am comfortable doing either.

Having a foot in both camps has given me a measure of insight into the perceptions, or, more accurately, misconceptions, that seem to divide hunters and birders. I think it's time to address them—first, because the common interests of hunters and birders unite us more than they divide us, and, second, because there are other competing interests out there whose ambitions would not just monopolize our common playing field, but destroy it.

Wouldn't they love to keep two natural political allies like birders and hunters estranged? Wouldn't we be stupid to let them?

Living the Myth

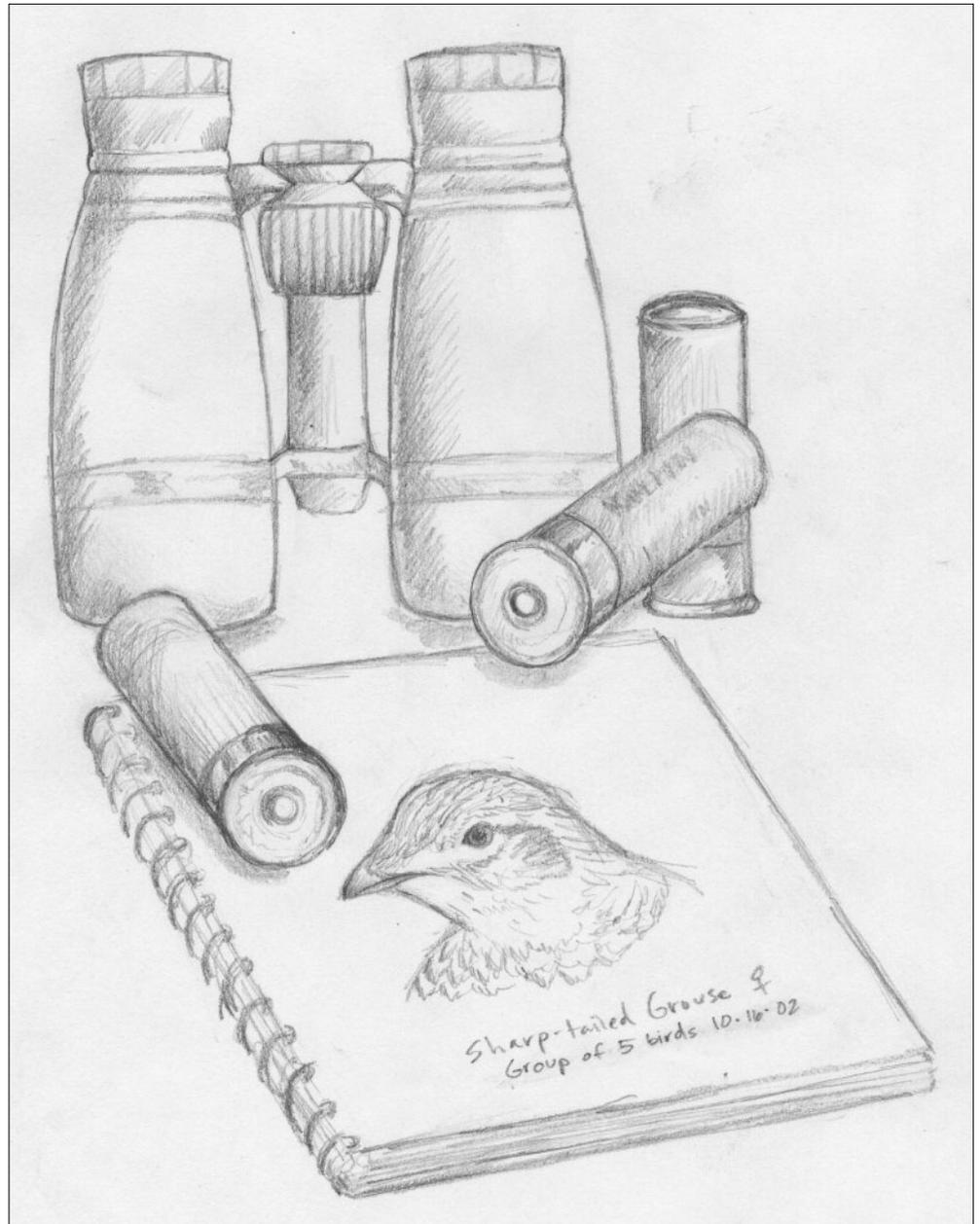
The common perception among hunters is that birders are, by the nature of their hobby, anti-hunting. I'm not sure how this attitude became so pervasive. But it exists, and it makes hunters both uncomfortable and defensive in the presence of birders.

My friend Clay Sutton (himself a former hunter) tells the story of running into a hunter at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area in Cape May. Clay was heading out of the parking lot; the hunter was heading back. Before the pair had closed to conversational distance, before Clay could offer so much as a "How'd you do?", the hunter started babbling about hunters being at the heart of the conservation movement... about how it's taxes on hunting equipment that preserve open space... about how sound game-management benefits all wildlife...

Sure, I get it. The guy expected Clay to be antagonistic toward his presence and his avocation, and he was nervous.

But the average birder would almost certainly have been moved to wonder why a proponent of any avocation would act so defensively.

Attention, hunters: When engaging birders in the field, try not to shoot yourselves in the foot.



Sharp-tailed Grouse. Colored pencil on matte paper by © Jennifer Brumfield.

Conversely, many birders are, simply put, uncomfortable with hunting. First, because they have no experience with

it. Second, because they don't know how to act safely or procedurally with hunters in the field. Third, because hunting involves guns—and guns, in twenty-first-century America, have become synonymous with violence.

I can't address the subject of gun violence. (You did see *Bowling for Columbine*, right?) But I can address the first two topics: estrangement, and field dos and don'ts. I think it will help birders feel more comfortable with hunting, and I think it will offer a background for what I consider the heart of this "issue".

Cooperation.

Roots and Branches

The dissonance between birders and hunters is not longstanding, largely because birding, unlike hunting, is a fairly recent phenomenon. In the 1800s, shooting birds and studying birds were almost synonymous (Audubon was unabashedly proud of his skills as a hunter), and the "Conservation Movement", the first national crusade to protect and restore North America's natural bounty, was orchestrated by a coalition of sportsmen, ornithologists, and a concerned and mobilized citizenry (also called "nature lovers") who were, in a sense, proto-birders.

By the time of the "Environmental Movement" of the 1960s and 1970s, hunters and birders were estranged, soon to be divided by bureaucratic labeling into Consumptive vs. Nonconsumptive Users of Wildlife.

What had changed?

A couple of things; but first and foremost, the development of the binocular, birding's defining tool. It offered users a way to engage and to gain an intimacy with wildlife, which had up to that point required a gun. It ushered in an age when just seeing a bird was reward enough, and, unlike hunting, birding was something that anybody could do, anytime, anywhere.

Another, related development had to do with demographics—specifically, the suburbanization of America. Hunting depends on large tracts of woodland, open farmland, or marsh. Suburbia kills open space and undermines hunting both functionally and culturally. But suburbia opens the door to a whole host of new devotees to the natural world—suburbanites! That's because suburbia is precisely the overlap zone between people and nature.

People move to the burbs. They put up a birdfeeder or sit on the patio. They see this ... this ... this strange *bird* in *their* yard. They are driven to find out precisely what it is, because it is in *their* yard. Bird leads to birds. Birds lead to...

What am I telling *you* for?

So now we have two "user groups"—hunters and birders. One is fairly new; one has a long tradition. One is rapidly growing in numbers; one is slowly diminishing. But both, ultimately, are losing. We're losing the battle to protect natural areas because ours are not the only interests in town. If the recent vote to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration wasn't a wake-up call to both hunters and birders, then we are all destined to die in our sleep.

A Matter of Life and Death

Our common ground—open, natural areas—is also the site of contention and competition. I know birders who are resentful when hunting season begins, because they feel prevented from visiting natural areas they frequent at other times of the year. I know hunters who are resentful when birding groups visit state and federal game lands, because, after all, many were purchased with revenue generated from the sale of hunting licenses and taxes on sporting goods.

But these are superficial matters. The fundamental impasse between hunting and birding has to do with life and death.

Or did you think I was going to dodge this bullet?

I believe that an increasing number of non-hunters (not just birders) are simply uncomprehending of people who engage in an activity that involves the death of living things. Once, when the majority of North Americans lived down on the farm, death was a matter-of-fact element of the human experience. As John Steinbeck's character Samuel Hamilton put it in *East of Eden*: "Let any gay and hopeful thing happen to a man and some chicken goes howling to the block".

Today, most people fail to recognize death as a natural part of life, to view hunting as a mechanism that makes people an integral part of that natural process.

Case in point. Many years ago, I wrote an essay on hunting for *Wildlife Conservation* magazine. It was as thoughtful and balanced an exploration of the subject as I will ever craft. It is a credit to the publication and its editorial staff that they chose to explore the subject at all.

The manuscript was distributed to several editors, whose comments were returned to me. The summation of one editor constitutes the most poignant and chilling misapprehension I have ever confronted.

"Oh, I get it," wrote this editor from the footing of her estrangement, "hunting is like *playing* predator."

I wondered then, and as I write these words I wonder now, how anyone could diminish the death of living things by calling it "play".

Spanning the Gulf with a Wing

Several years ago, I was standing with thirty other birders at a place called Turkey Point, New Jersey. We were part of the Cumberland County Raptor Festival. Turkey Point, owned and managed in part by the New Jersey Division of Fish & Wildlife and in part by the Natural Lands Trust, is a great place to see raptors and wintering waterfowl, and we were enjoying both.

An SUV drove up. Two waterfowl hunters got out. Studied our group. Went into a huddle. Began to speak in hushed voices until, near the end of their caucus, one of them decreed: “It would only be the Christian thing to do.”

The “Christian thing to do”, it turned out, was to come over and ask us if it would disrupt our observations if they boated out into the marsh to hunt Snow Geese.

In keeping with the religious theme, my answer was either “Hell, no” or “Heavens, no”—I forget which. And before they set out, the two hunters joined us on the platform for looks at perched eagles, harriers, and Rough-legged Hawks.

It's examples like this that make me confident that birders and hunters can co-exist. Here's another.

Autumn Field Skills 101

My birding workshop group pulled up at the Beanery and parked next to the two SUVs already there. As we got out, the sound of distant beagles was punctuated by a shot. Sounded about a quarter of a mile away.

“Shouldn't we leave?” one of my participants urged.

“Why?”

“They're hunting,” she said, about two octaves higher than the occasion called for.

“They're hunting over *there*,” I said, pointing. “We'll go over *here*. Closer to the buildings. In New Jersey, you cannot discharge a firearm within 450 feet of a building.”

“But they've got rifles,” she asserted.

“No, they have shotguns,” I corrected. “The range of a shotgun, loaded with small shot, is less than 150 yards.”

“How do you know they aren't using rifles?”

“Because,” I explained, “they're using beagles, which means they're hunting rabbits, and, in New Jersey, you can't hunt rabbits with anything but a shotgun.”

The point of relating this conversation is not to make someone look dumb (the person's questions were valid), but to point out that much of the anxiety that birders have about hunting is inflated by a lack of understanding. I'm not saying that birders need to understand firearms ballistics, but an awareness of your state's hunting regulations,

and what game is, and is not, in season, will help you make better decisions in the field. (You can get your state's game regulations by walking into any sporting goods store or by calling your state game agency.)

Most small game (rabbits, pheasants, quail, grouse, etc.) and all waterfowl are hunted with shotguns, which have limited range. If you are in an open area, where you can see hunters working (often with dogs), it won't disturb them and it shouldn't disconcert you to be several hundred yards away. If you see them working toward you, be a good sport and move out of their way—both for safety and courtesy.

Most large-game animals (deer, moose, elk, pronghorn, sheep, etc.) are hunted with rifles, which can have ranges exceeding a mile. Caution, particularly in areas where vegetation and terrain may leave you fully or partially hidden, is well advised.

Bow-hunting (mostly for deer) is popular, and seasons are often early and extensive, covering several weeks and coinciding with prime fall migration. The risks to you from bow-hunters are almost negligible. Most hunt from elevated stands, and they need a clear shot at short range (less than fifty yards) to loose an arrow. The potential disruption you pose to them is more considerable. If you see a truck or car parked along a roadside during bow season, chances are there is a hunter in a tree stand within easy walking distance (or dragging distance) of that vehicle.

Two places you want to bird that morning? Go to the other one first. Many bow-hunters leave their stands after mid-morning, when animals have bedded down for the day. If you go back later, you may well have the place to yourself.

Gun safety, and this means *your* safety, is the absolute responsibility of the hunter. But this doesn't mean that a person going into the field during hunting season should court unnecessary risk. If you remember nothing else about this article, remember this: During hunting season (including spring turkey season), *wear blaze orange*. Most states require hunters to wear this very bright, very conspicuous outerwear. The most convenient and visible garment is an orange cap or hat.

What effect does blaze orange have on birds? In my tree stand, wearing full camo but an orange hat (as required by law in New Jersey), I regularly have curious chickadees, titmice, kinglets, woodpeckers, etc., approach to within arm's length. Maybe they're curious about me, maybe the cap. The point is, the cap doesn't deter them. Turkeys, crows, raptors, and sometimes waterfowl, however, seem less confiding.

I repeat, *wear blaze orange*. Not only will it protect you and give you an added measure of confidence, it will also help hunters maintain the level of safety that is part of their ethic and their discipline.

Another thought. Call it an act of faith; call it common ground. If you are a large landowner and your woodland understory is being clearcut by deer, why not strike up a partnership with a hunter to hunt your land? Not only will the hunter thank you, but so, too, will a whole host of understory nesting birds whose populations in many places are being greatly impacted by an overabundance of deer. One of the tenets espoused in a recent New Jersey Audubon Society “white paper” on forest management is that reducing deer populations by hunting can be a valuable means of restoring and maintaining forest health.

You say you’d consider it, but you don’t know how to find a responsible hunter you’d feel comfortable asking to hunt your property. Why not try your bird club’s newsletter? Chances are, the person you want is someone you already know.

Of Idiots, Slobs, Jerks, and the Rest of Us

A number of readers are, at this point, no doubt getting restive because I have addressed things that birders should do to keep order on the natural playground, while I have said little about what hunters can and should do.

There is a reason. It has to do with audience. If I were writing this piece for *Gray’s Sporting Journal* or *American Hunter*, be assured that the content (but not the message) would be calibrated differently.

For example, I might point out to a hunting audience that a suburban mom driving her kids to school is going to be challenged to put a positive spin on a bumper sticker reading “Happiness is a warm gut-pile.” To be sure, a few hunters desperately need help with their public outreach efforts.

Also, many, perhaps most, readers have been suppressing (or maybe not suppressing) memories of encounters with hunters who were, even by the most generously applied standards, idiots, slobs, and jerks—the very last people anyone would care to form an alliance with.

Yep. Slob hunters are out there and there are too many of them. But you should know that slob hunters are unqualifiedly decried by responsible hunters who are, like responsible birders, the majority. The reason you overlook the good hunters is precisely because they are behaving in a responsible, unobtrusive, non-deleterious manner.

But I don’t have to counsel birders about stereotyping, do I?

I also know that there are individual hunters, and even some organizations and agencies, who are tacitly or actively opposed to an alliance with birders, fearing that such alliances would redirect money or result in partnerships in which the interests of birders would supersede those of hunters.

Me? I think the important thing is that two groups whose interests and future are both dependent upon preserving natural lands forge an alliance which accomplishes precisely that—and that we do it *now*. With land in hand, the details of the time-share agreement can be worked out later.