

I have a very clear memory of the first time I saw the temples of Tikal, their impossibly evocative roof combs rising from a green sea of tropical forest. For me—and for many of you, I’m sure—it was near the end of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, when the iconic Mayan ruins in Guatemala served as the location of the rebel base. If you’re not up on your *Star Wars* history, perhaps it’ll jog your memory if I tell you that episode four was actually the *first* one to be released, way back in late May of 1977, and that the rebel base was where everybody went at the end to celebrate after they blew up the Death Star.

In any event, my point is this: For a middle school kid in Delaware in the late 1970s and perhaps for you, too, Tikal seemed so exotic and foreign as to be entirely believable as something out of another world.

A few weeks ago, when I was passing through the airport in Guatemala City on what was, if I’m remembering correctly, my sixth trip to Mexico’s southern neighbor, I saw a lovely poster-sized photograph of Tikal’s Grand Plaza. Looking closely at the finely detailed picture, the first thought



Jeffrey A. Gordon. Photo by © Rona Talcott.

that popped into my mind was not of spaceships or wookies or anything extra-terrestrial or imaginary. It was, “Oh look, there’s that fig tree where Bill and Julie and I spent so much time photographing euphonias, guans, parrots, and toucans—I wonder if it’ll have any fruit on it this time.”

As it turns out, that particular fig tree was bare and birdless this time. But I still enjoyed all the wonderful, now-familiar sights and sounds of Tikal, from Ruddy Woodcreepers and Gray-headed Tanagers battling for position at the head of an army ant swarm to placid trogons, motmots, and puffbirds calmly surveying the foliage to the hair-raising baying and barking of howler monkeys.

This is how far birding has brought me: from the fantasy of the *Millennium Falcon* slicing through the sky over Tikal to the even more fantastic, now-familiar reality of Orange-breasted Falcons doing the same.

But birding isn’t only about the foreign becoming familiar; just as potently, perhaps more so, it’s also about the ordinary becoming wonderful and strange. Those army ant swarms in the Petén lowlands don’t only draw the interest of woodcreepers, but they also are attended by Hooded and Kentucky warblers, perhaps the great-great-grandchildren of the ones that migrated to my old stomping grounds along Brandywine and White Clay creeks in northern Delaware.

What about the Wood Thrushes and American Redstarts, those cherished symbols of intact forest who chastely keep to the understory and canopy, respectively, when they come north to breed, teasing us with echoing songs and flashing colors? Well, in Guatemala they become something else entirely, brazenly bathing in a trailside puddle just feet away, or visiting outdoor cafes where they flit among the tables, searching for a leftover bit of tortilla or some errant grains of rice. It’s like running into a teacher you thought of as rather

prim doing jello shots at an especially raucous off-campus bar.

And of course, one needn’t travel far, or anywhere, to enjoy these same sorts of perspective shifts. How many people have you heard remark on the number of colorful birds that inhabit their home areas—finches, buntings, orioles, and so on—that they never even suspected existed before they caught the birding bug? Do you remember how you felt when you first realized that not only are there hawks (or, even more magically, owls) living in close proximity to most of us? Not only that, but there are lots of them! You can enjoy them every day, if only you know how to look and listen.

On the flip side, it doesn’t take much in the way of observation to start noticing odd and marvelous things about birds that one sees every day. That distant kestrel hovering over the weedy lot I zoom by on my way to work? I happen to know it’s hunting voles by looking for the ultraviolet light reflected by the dried patches of urine that give away the location of their lairs. I also know that the next time I stop and take a good, close look at that kestrel it will be as beautiful as an orchid. And I know that kestrels are in trouble, declining in many areas, which reminds me of the need to ensure that they still have places to nest and to hunt. Finally, I know that some populations of American Kestrels are resident and that others are highly migratory; it’s entirely possible that one of my friends in Guatemala, or Mexico, or Panama, or Argentina is also looking at a kestrel. I think about all these things as I watch that hovering form and feel the richer for it.

It’s entirely fitting that this issue of *Birding* features Louise Zemaitis’s rendering of an American Kestrel at Tikal. It’s an image that I think captures just how far birding can take you.

—Jeffrey A. Gordon

President, American Birding Association  
jgordon@aba.org