

'I saw a halibut in a field, honest!'

Each year, more and more people are struck with the urge to track down a bird and slap it with a scientific identification. Ornithologists estimate the number of bird watchers in this country at 20 million. And judging from the number of bird clubs, the total has been increasing.

Eugene offers prime birding territory. Local fields and lakes breed hundreds of bird watchers. Each morning and evening, when birds go about their business, bird watchers attack.

They attack in the swamps. They attack on the lakes. Anywhere there's a bird, a birder will go on a safari with his field guide and tape recorder.

Birders list several bird watching hot spots. And almost every day of the week birders from the Audubon Society, the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club or University and Lane Community College classes take a hike.

The Fern Ridge Reservoir has one of the biggest mobs. Saturday morning's crowd included a University bird class. The class was stalking the wild Rail.

Rails are seldom seen. They hide in lower bushes and make strange calls. The instructor got out his tape and played the Rail song.

From a thicket 20 yards away came an answering call. "Koo Witt." It was the real thing. But it was a poor imitation of the ponder. But it was a poor imitation of the tape, so we fired the real Rail and instead listened to the tape some more.

I spotted a great white bird taking off in the distance. It had an unusual call. I stood watching it for some time, in awe and wonder. It was taking its time about getting off the ground, as though wounded and in need of first aid.

I asked one of the birders to mark its pattern of flight and look it up in the field guide, so we would know its physiological structure during surgery. But she was an expert bird watcher, and identified it on first glance as a big truck. It was a remarkable truck, though, one well worth getting up at 7 in the morning to see.

So far I had seen and identified two dead possums, a telephone pole containing a bird, a truck and a halibut. I

don't recall seeing the halibut, and it seems an unlikely thing to spot in a farmer's field. But it is in my notes, and I claim it.

I remarked to one of the birders that birds must be taking the day off. On the

able to pick out these differences. A bird watcher cannot look at a bird without charting the shape of its beak, the size of its body, its color, and its spare parts.

He looks at a rare part on a bird with the appreciation and enthusiasm an

The last alert went out when someone spotted a solitary sandpiper in Corvallis. Sandpipers seldom venture from the coast. The Rare Bird Alert went out and a vigilante committee arrived on the scene.

The sandpiper must have known it was doing something unusual because it waited for the bird watchers to arrive and give it applause before it left.

Ted Finnell, who runs the Rare Bird Alert, has to be careful. In order to avoid calling an alert every time some novice reports a stray halibut, Finnell only uses the bird hot line when he hears from a reliable bird watcher. He may send a bird investigator out to the scene of the rare bird, just in case.

The Oregon Bird Committee, consisting of a group of appointed bird watchers, acts as the Supreme Court of the bird world. This group will hear and try the validity of rare bird discoveries.

Sometimes rare birds don't wait around to become a spectacle. Many discoveries have been lost because the rare bird team didn't get there in time. When the Rare Bird Alert phone rings, birders will drop anything to get to the spot and catch the rare bird in the act.



contrary, he said, he had already identified 29 species and was working on number 30, which he was now in the process of shooting down in a thicket several miles away.

Back in the days when Christ was still corporeal, the bird family divided and sub-divided. Birds in different environments developed different parts and accessories. A good bird watcher must be

auto lover has for a twin carburetor.

Rare and uncharted species add spice to the bird watchers life. Any time a new species — or an old species doing an old act in a new way — pops up, a Rare Bird Alert goes out.

The spotter calls the Rare Bird Alert hot line — 343-7428. From here the message of the strange bird flows through a bird communication web flowing throughout the state. Within hours the state's top bird watchers will converge on the rare bird, and make it confess.

Owl watching has become one of the most popular branches of birding. Owling hikes bring out full crowds even on the worst of nights. One hike last week drew 75 people. When the 75 people started traipsing around local fields, farmers called the police and tried to have the owl watchers arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Bird Hike leaders aren't sure why owls have such a drawing. They suspect it has something to do with the owl mystique, similar to religious mystique but with feathers.

Owls fly by night. They look almost human. And they regurgitate pellets: balls of fur, tails and feet. This show appeals to owl watchers.

It takes an hour to get to the coast range off Crow Road, where short-eared owls live. Our bird group arrived too early, while it was still light; and so several of us went off to sit on a cliff and enjoy the scenery. The forest was mellow. It had spent many years trying to get

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Thursday, May 25, 1978