

# Myths, Second Chances and Elvis

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It was chilly, with the wind blowing a light rain onto my face and I could not have been happier. I was standing on the Alum Creek trail in the Smoky Mountains looking at a rock formation called the eye of the needle. The rain, mist and clouds gave the place the feel of a spot far higher and more wild than the Smokies. A feel of the West. And I was listening to harsh metallic screams. The scream of a raptor. The eye of the needle is hole in a sharp rock ridge on Little Duck Hawk Ridge. The ridge is well named. Duck Hawk is the colloquial name for a Peregrine Falcon which historically nested in the eye of the needle. Then came DDT. Peregrines were never common in the east. In the 1940's there were between 300-400 nesting pairs east of the Mississippi and roughly 4000 nesting pairs in North America. By the mid 1970's, roughly the time I became seriously interested in birds, Peregrines were expatriated east of the Mississippi and populations were down 70-80% in the rest of the world. The bird was fast becoming mythical. To me it already was, or at least had been when I was growing up.

I had heard that Peregrines *might* have returned to the eye of needle where they had historically nested and I hoped but did not really expect to see one. Focusing my binoculars on the eye of the needle I saw first one and then the other Peregrine return to the nest. If not for the nestlings cries I never would have seen them. These were not my first Peregrines but they were some of the most memorable. Birds I never thought I would see. My first Peregrine was also memorable as first's often are but in a completely different way. The setting was more prosaic. I saw it while

looking out of our kitchen window when we lived on Inglenook Place. It was under our bird feeder calmly devouring a pigeon. Inglenook was also the scene of the parrot incident. Claudia who would soon be my wife was drinking wine on the back porch. I came out to join her and she exclaimed “there’s a parrot in the bush”. I cut her wine off immediately and assured her that the bird was not a parrot. Not in Ohio. But it was a parrot, very clearly and plainly, sitting in the flowering bush dining on the flowers. The parrot turned out to have escaped from one of our neighbors who unbeknown to us kept it as a pet. We were renting the Inglenook house, and under the feeder we had installed, birds and bird seed left a bare patch in the lawn. When we moved out we planted a Rose-bush to cover up our crime. Our landlord may have wondered why a rosebush had suddenly turned up in the lawn but she never said anything.

Growing up in central Indiana much of the world seemed mythical. Aside from corn and soybeans there was not much to see. As a very young boy I had of course learned to identify all the common dinosaurs because well, one never knew, and if a dinosaur wandered by you certainly wanted to be able to identify it. In the same spirit I learned to tell the difference between a Pileated Woodpecker and an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Not that I had ever seen either one. In truth I had as much chance of seeing an Ivory-billed Woodpecker walk up the driveway as I had of seeing a Brontosaurus. Eventually Ivory-bills along with Peregrines joined the long list of things things that seemed mythical.

I didn’t fit in very well in the small elementary school in Brookston, Indiana where we moved when I started third grade. This was not helped when on my first day my teacher started the day by leading us in prayer and I replied that the Supreme Court said I didn’t have to pray. It turned

out that the Supreme Court didn't carry much weight in Brookston. I had another dispute with my teacher about the existence of negative numbers. I was in favor, she was against. I lost that one too. My refuge was reading which was strongly encouraged by my parents. I read anything and everything. I knew about the wider world. I just didn't experience it.

Like many families of the time we did not go much of anywhere. It was mostly a car trip a couple times a year to visit my father's parents in Warren, Ohio. A boring car trip during which my brother and I squabbled in the back seat, resulting in my poor sister being put between us in a universally unsuccessful attempt to stop the squabbling.

I didn't know it but my world was about to expand. First with a year in England and a summer in Europe during my father's sabbatical and then with two vacations at the summer places of my father's agent. The first year was at Block Island where my brother and I, both strong swimmers, engaged in frequent long open water swims in the ocean. Completely unsupervised and often alone. It never crossed my mind that this was a dangerous or foolish thing to do and my parents certainly knew about it. But, you were allowed more freedom as a child in those days.

The second year was in the Adirondacks. This was the scene of the toad incident. Although central Indiana was confining, both of my parents had always encouraged an interest in the natural world. One or the other of them could identify most of the local birds, insects, and snakes. Turtles and frogs were seen as good things. So when my brother, I take no responsibility here, found and caught a large toad it was natural for him to bring it inside to show my parents. The adults, my parents, my father's agent and several important American literary figures, whose

names I do not remember, if I ever knew them, were at table. Enjoying after dinner drinks and smoking. Us children had either been sent away or left on our own accord, out of boredom. The table was set with a white tablecloth and covered with the detritus of dinner. My brother walked in, trailed by me, with a large toad in his hand which he held out to show my parents. The toad jumped out of his hand and promptly peed on the previously white table cloth. My parents seemed remarkably unfazed by this. I am not sure about the host but in any event we were quickly ushered out.

Then, between the summer of my junior and senior years in high school I went to Alaska to study Bald Eagles. Like Peregrines, Bald Eagles were also mythical as far as I was concerned. I had never seen one and like Peregrines they had essentially been expatriated in the lower 48 by DDT although eagles were still common in Alaska. They both got a second chance. In 1972, less than a year after I was in Alaska the EPA banned DDT. In 1973 Canada followed suit. At the time there were about 500 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the lower 48 and essentially none in the east. Today there are about 15,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the lower 48 and there are more Peregrines in the East than in recorded memory. When I got the chance to go to Alaska I jumped at it. My other choice was a summer in a chemistry lab at the University of Michigan and sensing that I might spend the rest of my life in a lab I thought I should go to Alaska. I was right about going to Alaska, but wrong about labs. Early on in my academic career my professors determined that I was not an experimentalist.

In the inland waterway in Southwestern Alaska there were eagles everywhere. Our job for the US Fish and Wildlife service was to determine why the mortality rate among immature bald eagles was so high. With eagle populations plunging in the lower 48 there was great concern

about the Alaskan population even though it appeared healthy. The answer turned out to be simple. Being an eagle is hard. Most young eagles weren't very good at it and could not compete with older eagles, but the population was healthy and stable and remains so. Alaska not only had eagles but there were bears. Bears, I had always wanted to see a bear and now there were bears. A great many bears in fact and some at close range but none of them threatening. I am sure that none of them had ever seen a human before and we were each curious and yet wary of one another.

Returning from Alaska led to a long hiatus from the natural world. As a student I was buried first in textbooks and then research papers. And as an undergraduate, then graduate student and finally a post-doc, I was poor. I could not have traveled even if I had wanted to. Finally with a real job at UC I discovered the West. Well, Alaska is west, but Alaska is it's own beast and unlike any other place I have been. My family never traveled to the west. I come from a family of snobs. It's just a fact. Europe was the place to go. If traveling domestically one went east, although Chicago was permissible. By the time I was a post-doc both my mother and father were traveling frequently, although being divorced, traveling separately. And never to the American West which my mother in particular scorned. Ironically in her 70's she actually went to the West, fell in love with it and traveled there frequently in her 70's and early 80's.

My journeys to the west began after I met Claudia and we began visiting the American west and western Canada. I have always thought that no place is truly wild unless it has bears, preferably grizzly bears. The west had bears. Bears are magnificent creatures. Big, powerful, fast and at the same time graceful they remind you that your position in the food chain has suddenly slipped.

Even a black bear does this but a large grizzly really drives the point home. I have seen several hundred bears split about equally between black bears and grizzly but bears never get old. Most of the bears have been at a distance or while in a car, but some, the most memorable have been close. I confess that I retain even at this advanced age much of the small boy who learned to identify dinosaurs just in case one walked up the driveway. There wasn't a bear in the last meadow, or even the last hundred but maybe, just maybe there will be one in the next. And sometimes there is! Rounding a corner and seeing a bear in a meadow or in the bushes is exhilarating. Claudia does not feel this way, she wants her bears at a distance or from a vehicle. Meadows are better than bushes. A bear in a bush can be uncomfortably close and you might surprise the bear, which is bad. Maybe very bad. And in a meadow you get a better look at the bear. Despite several dozen close encounters, with bears the situation has turned tense only once. While trail running in Glacier I startled a young grizzly bear. I saw an indistinct brown shape out of the corner of my eye and stopped and turned around to see what it was. The brown shape, now clearly a bear hopped onto the trail and walked toward me. This was bad. Bear's usually move away from you. Occasionally they watch you and some times they just ignore you but I had never had a bear walk toward me. He followed me down the trail as I backed away and I could not get him to break contact. Even when I walked toward him and told him he was a bad bear he only stoped, he didn't move back. As soon as I backed away from him he moved closer. We repeated this several times, I would tell him he was a bad bear and then try to back away. With each cycle he got closer. After what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than five minutes I ran into two other people as I backed down the trail and seeing there were three of us the bear ran off. The bear was more curious than threatening but it was still a distinctly unsettling experience and the only time I have ever had trouble with a bear.

Wolves, like bears remind one of one's place in nature. Wolves are not threatening, they are majestic and ghost like. Bears remind you that you are not at the top of the food chain, wolves remind you that you are in a place where they are more at home than you. I have seen only a few, all memorable. None more so than the wolf that Claudia and I saw hiking Primrose Ridge in Denali. It was fall, the meadows were turning red with blooming fireweed and as we hiked through the meadow a single wolf trotted into view. He or she saw us and stared at us as it moved along. The wolf clearly thought we were worth keeping an eye on but unlike other wolves we have seen did not fade away. It moved along watchful, but seeming unconcerned and eventually trotted off into the distance.

Denali is where I saw my only Lynx. It materialized from the bushes, sauntered across the road and disappeared. It was all over in seconds and is likely the only Lynx I will ever see. There is one road in Denali, its dirt, not paved and dead ends after 92 miles. Private vehicles are not allowed on it. Access is only by bus, either a tour bus or a National Park Service bus. You want the National Park Service bus. The National Park Service buses are old school buses with crappy seats and worse suspensions but on a National Park Service bus you can tell the driver to stop and get off and hike anywhere you want. Except for a couple short trails near the park entrance there are no trails. You hike wherever you want. When you want a ride back you walk back to the road and flag an outbound Park Service bus down. No one gets off the bus. We have been to Denali twice, both times for several weeks and I have seen people get off to hike only a couple of times. You get strange looks when you get off. Especially if you are hiking alone. Looks that say, well, he will never be seen again. At least not alive. I am fine with that. The fewer people

who get off the bus the better. I don't want to see people when I hike. That was true even pre-COVID. You meet some interesting people on the bus. A geologist sitting next to me tutored me on the geology of Polychrome. Polychrome is named for its multicolored cliffs. Its geology is unusual, the rock cliffs on one side of the road are 100 million years older than the rock cliffs on the other side. Another seat mate, an engineer with the Alaska Department of Transportation explained why the section of the road we were on was so bad. The term road was generous, it was just a narrow dirt and gravel band scraped into the cliffside with a thousand foot drop on one side. And a large sloping dip. The dip the engineer explained was because of melting ice. Buried underneath the road was a huge mass of permanently frozen ice. It had been permanently frozen, now due to global warming the ice was melting. The park service was working on the road but these attempts the engineer assured me were doomed to failure. The only solution was a German engineering company, apparently only they could do the job, and the cost would be enormous. This was only, pun intended, the tip of iceberg. He asked if we had driven the Parks Highway on the trip from Anchorage to Denali. We had. Had we noticed a number of large dips in the road. Not only had Claudia and I noticed them, we had commented on how odd they were given that the road surface was otherwise in good shape. Melting ice underneath the road bed he explained. The ice was so extensive and deeply buried that digging up the ice was not an option. You had to drive piles at each edge of the ice, dig up the road bed and string cables from which to suspend the road bed which then had to be relaid. All of which would require the Germans, at great cost.

You never know what you will see in Alaska. Hawk Owls are fairly common and unlike other owls they hunt during the day and obligingly perch on the tops of isolated trees. Much like hawks and thus the name. This behavior should, and does make them easy to see, but they

compensate by living where people don't. In Northern Boreal forests. In short, in places like Alaska or Northern Canada. It is possible in good winters, good here meaning cold, to see Northern Hawk Owls in Michigan or even the most Northern parts of Ohio. But I never I have. I have seen four Hawk Owls, all in Alaska.

When I spotted a Hawk Owl from the bus in Denali there was British birder sitting across from me. He and I were equally excited. For me it was only the second Hawk Owl I had seen. For him a life bird and maybe the only one he would ever see. Experiences are relative however. At Magee Marsh in Northern Ohio, Claudia and I and several other birders watched a Scarlet Tanager. They are not rare, we see several a year but they not common either and are beautiful birds. One birder ignored the Tanager, intently watching a Cardinal. He was from Seattle and they don't get Cardinal's there. For him it was a life bird, for me a yard bird. The shoe was on the other foot in Scotland. I was in a park in Edinburgh watching a pair of European Goldfinches. Beautiful, colorful birds that I had never seen. A Scottish birder standing nearby could not understand why I was watching European Goldfinches, yard birds for him, as a pair of Peregrines were circling over head.

A bird I hoped to see in Denali was the Long-tailed Jaeger. These birds breed on the northern tundra and when not breeding spend their time on the open ocean. Non-breeding Jaeger's are nondescript birds. If you saw one you would probably mistake it for a large, dark aggressive sea gull. Breeding Jaeger's are magnificent with a very long tail composed of long twin streamers, looking like kite tails. They nest on the ground and aggressively defend the nest against all

comers, large and small. Screaming and flying at intruders all the while streaming their long tails. Any one coming too close to a nest is likely to be dive bombed and may end up with a gash in their scalp. We were fortunate enough to see them on numerous occasions while hiking in Denali.

One bird that I had been especially keen to see since I was a child was a California Condor. My odds growing up did not look good. There are no Condors in the midwest and never have been. In their heyday they ranged from Vancouver to Baja California and east to western Colorado. Not close to Indiana. And by 1980 there were only 22 birds in existence. Condors were never numerous and habitat loss, hunting and lead shot took their toll. Ranchers shot them, assuming from their huge size that they were apex predators preying on livestock. Condors are in fact apex scavengers and this made them vulnerable to lead shot. Condors eating carrion shot by hunters ingested the lead shot and failed to reproduce or died. In 1987 all 27 existing birds were captured and put into a captive breeding program. This was controversial, some argued that a captive bred Condor could never be a real Condor and that we should let nature take its course. The breeding program which took great care not to let the condors imprint on humans was a success and Condors were rereleased in the wild in 1992. Condors are still critically endangered but today there are more than 410 Condors in the wild. In 2006 Claudia and I saw one. We had gone on a winter vacation to the Grand Canyon. Winter is the ideal time to hike the Grand Canyon. True, days are short and the North Rim is closed, buried in snow and ice. But the crowds are few and the weather is good. You start out bundled up in the cold and maybe even snow, but as you hike down toward the canyon floor it warms up. By the time you eat lunch it's a pleasant 50 degrees, not the 110 it would be in the summer. The light is more dramatic and the

canyon is spectacularly beautiful when winter storms sweep in. Historically Condors inhabited the Grand Canyon and with their reintroduction in the wild they had returned. We hoped to see one. On one of our early hikes in the canyon we looked up and there was a Condor. Circling low over head. Had it been summer and 110 degrees, this might have been cause for concern. We watched for maybe 10 minutes before it drifted off. Since we had seen it so early in our trip I assumed that Condors were now relatively common in the Grand Canyon. A ranger assured us that this was not so and that we had been very lucky. We have never seen another Condor.

The bird I lusted after was the Ivory-billed woodpecker. Unfortunately the bird was thought to be extinct. Largely due to habitat loss. The last sure sighting of an Ivory-bill in North America was in 1944. Then in 2005 came news of a paper in Science. Ivory-bills had been found in remote area of Arkansas. And there was a video. The video quality was beyond poor. But watching it, I was convinced that the bird was an Ivory-bill and the world suddenly seemed a better place. For a short time at least. A few months later another article appeared in Science. This one claiming that a frame by frame analysis of the video pointed to the bird being a Pileated woodpecker. Which was the other possibility, but one that I was sure was wrong. I had after all taught myself to tell the difference between an Ivory-bill and a Pileated woodpecker as a young boy because, well one never knew when you might be called upon to tell the difference. Never mind that the last reliable sighting had occurred ten years before I was born. I had seen lots of Pileated woodpeckers and the bird in the video was not a Pileated. Unfortunately reality began to sink in. The lead author of the second paper was David Sibley. Sibley, author of the leading field guide to North American birds and the foremost bird illustrator in America had also seen a lot of Pileated woodpeckers. Way more than I had. As had the other authors on the paper. If they

thought the bird was a Pileated it probably was. Still one could always hope. In the years since, additional searches in suitable Ivory-bill habitat have failed to turn up the bird. Sadly, in this case it appears that Elvis has indeed left the building.

In early March of 2020 Claudia left for an art workshop in Portland. The workshop was a week long and I was to follow the next week which was UC's spring break. The plan was to spend a week in Portland, Oregon, a city we love, exploring the downtown, eating in restaurants with a trip to the coast and maybe a day in the Columbia River gorge. It seemed like such a good idea when we planned it in late 2019. By the time Claudia left for Portland it was clear that our world was about to change. I drastically underestimated by how much. I shouldn't have. It is true that I did not, and could not, have foreseen the total failure of leadership at almost all levels or the unwillingness of the public to take even the most simple of precautions. However, I did understand the mathematics of epidemics and I should have been more of a scientist and less of an optimist. I tell myself that won't happen again. I wonder if that is true. We did not grasp the seriousness of the situation but things were starting to get weird by the time Claudia left for Portland. She worried that her workshop would be canceled and I worried that my flight a week later would be canceled. About the time Claudia left for her workshop the word came down from the UC administration. We would be going remote after spring break. For three weeks. No one I knew believed that it would only be three weeks. I immediately ordered an HD web camera for teaching from home. This proved prescient as they shortly became unavailable. I read that the demand initially came from sex workers who realized that they too would have to be remote. A week later I left to join Claudia and by this time things had gotten really weird. Or so I thought at the time. In March COVID was believed to mostly spread through surfaces and I pawed through

our camping supplies for hand sanitizer which was suddenly unavailable. My next door neighbor, an administrative nurse at the VA whose job had suddenly become stopping COVID at the VA, filled a small bottle of hand sanitizer for me and said “ you will be OK on the plane, they have really good air filters. Just don’t touch anything and wash your hands a lot”. I looked into upgrading to first class for the flight out, figuring that in first class I won’t be packed in like cattle. Upgrading was too many miles so I didn’t do it. First class was packed on the flight out. Tourist was empty. Not only did I have the row to myself there was no one in the rows ahead or behind me. I tried not to touch anything. I got to Portland, rented a car and picked Claudia up from her hotel. It was snowing and unusually cold for Portland. We had a long list of places we wanted to eat in Portland. Still trying for some semblance of normality we headed for the place I had picked for lunch. It was packed. We ordered food inside and ate at a table outside and froze our butts off. And we changed our plans. We were staying in a place where we could cook, so we did. Restaurant meals became a thing of the past. Plans to visit favorite places in Portland scrapped. Instead we went birding. There are lots of great birding spots near Portland. We birded, temporarily forgetting the outside world and saw lots of good birds and few people. Portland shut down around us. We returned home to a world without toilet paper.