

The Broadwing



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Nebraska

President's Message December 2020

We will continue with our virtual meetings and virtual bird walks through at least the first few months of 2021. With vaccines on the horizon, we will hopefully return to in-person meetings early next year.

Once we return to in-person monthly meetings, the club will have to decide on The Broadwing schedule and whether we should continue with our Virtual Bird Walks as a second monthly virtual meeting

I want to wish everyone a happy, and especially healthy, holiday and New Year.

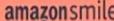
Sandy

**Next meeting: Wednesday, December 9
Virtual Bird Walk: Thursday, December 17**

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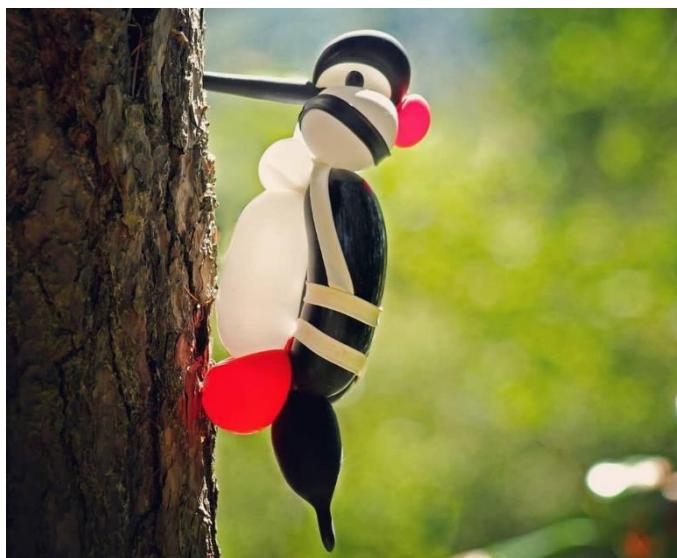
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Happy Friday

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Balloons





Concession Speech

If you rant enough, your audience will think you are trying to usurp the senior rant status of the late Andy Rooney on *60 Minutes*. For those of you too young to remember him, he had the patent on ranting, and he did it better than anyone else—except possibly Rodney Dangerfield who complained more than ranted. But to my limited ranting knowledge, neither addressed squirrels. For my part, I have conceded. The squirrels have won, and I am no longer in control of my backyard. The feed I carefully locate in my backyard is now recognized as tribute to the Squirrel Empire. I am now afraid of the repercussions for maligning squirrels, mostly because I think they were Soprano fans. My message is simple: I concede and will no longer attempt to channel Rooney. As Ebenezer Scrooge said,

“Good Spirit, “your nature intercedes for me and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shewn me, by an altered life and an acceptance of squirrels!”

I believe these lines were altered when the story went to print, but it is a good message anyway.

Birds and Bells

Rick Wright

It pleases me beyond measure that one of the most venerable of American bell foundries is the Verdin Company. It turns out, alas, that the 175-year-old establishment bears the family name of its original owner and not the species name of the penduline tit of the desert, whose nervous staccato tinkling is traditionally compared to the ringing of a tiny bell.



Rick Wright

What does it mean exactly to say that a bird's vocalizations are "bell-like"? Compare the hollow clonking of a bearded bellbird with the stirring trill of a goldeneye's wings, or the mock-ferocious tooting of a northern pygmy owl with the mellow trills of a wood thrush: they have nothing in common to my ear, but the calls and songs of all those species and many more, from magpies and eagles to field sparrows, have reminded some human listeners somewhere of bells.

I will grudgingly admit any of them to the roster of the tintinnabulous, but

only if we grant that the bells to which each is likened are all different ones. We have only a single word in



Rick Wright

English, unfortunately, "bell," to describe the variety of noisemakers those birds' sounds evoke, from the wooden thonk of the bellbird to the silvery jingle-bell whistle of the goldeneye. Some other languages are better off here. Compare the German *Glockenvogel*, for example, for the bellbird with *Schellente* for the sea duck: the first clangs like a church bell, *Glocke*, the second susurates in flight like distant sleigh bells, *Schellen*.



Sanford M. Sorkin

This much I can understand. And if we expand our definition of the bell to include the triangle — that musical instrument so beloved of elementary school teachers and put to such good and witty use by Liszt — then it makes sense to me, too, to call the chips of verdins and the tseets of black-throated sparrows “bell-like.” One bird, though, still puzzles me.

I’ve never seen a boreal owl. For that very reason, I have spent considerable time listening hard to recordings of the song. I even, for a while, and to the continual consternation of my field companions, used that slow liquid tremolo as the notifier on my mobile cellular telephone.



Steven Katovich, US Forest Service

I am told that such things are called “ringtones,” a linguistic relic from the way-back days when phones still jangled. But the song of the boreal owl sounds nothing like a bell—not a jingle bell, not a sleigh bell, not a church bell or a desk bell or a school bell.

And yet, a quick rummage through the shelves yields this:

Linnaeus assigned it the scientific name Aegolius funereus for its mournful cry, like the “slow tolling of a soft but high-pitched bell.” Actually the call of the Boreal Owl is a sharp and chipper “hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-HOO!” in the same rhythm and pace as a winnowing snipe—Linnaeus may have been influenced more by folklore than careful observation. (Laura Erickson, *For the Birds*, 1994)

I’m gratified to find the author agreeing with my assessment of the bird’s unbell-like song: while I might have used different adjectives, her transcription works well enough for my ear and mind. But what about the claim that Carolus Linnaeus named the tiny owl “funereal” for its voice? Is he really the one to blame?

No.

A good first clue is how un-Linnaean the phrase “the slow tolling of a soft but high-pitched bell” is—not to mention the fact that it is in English rather than Latin. It’s easy enough, too, to determine that the Swede named the species not for its voice but for its somber plumage; the diagnosis in the *Systema naturae*—which, incidentally, does not use the name *Aegolius* at all, as Johann Jakob Kaup would not erect that genus for another 70 years—is limited entirely to the bird’s visual appearance: the head, writes Linnaeus, is small, the body plumage somber brown, the eyes yellow.

Neither in the *Systema* nor in his earlier *Fauna svecica* does Linnaeus adduce any sort of “folklore” about this species, and in neither is there any mention of the bird’s voice: indeed, as the *Fauna svecica* tells us, Linnaeus’s description was based exclusively on a bird he had seen only in a painting made by his teacher Olof Rudbeck. One assumes that that painting, like so many others, was silent.

If not Linnaeus, then, who was responsible for the notion that boreal owls sound like bells? A visit to the popular birding literature of the early twentieth century reveals a first clue. In 1907, Ernest Thompson



Ernest Thompson Seton

Seton heard “a new and wonderful sound” in the course of a six-month trip by canoe on the Athabasca River:

Like the slow tolling of a soft but high-pitched bell it came. Ting, ting ting, ting, and [so] on, rising and falling with the breeze, but still keeping on about two “tings” to the second, and on, dulling as with distance, but rising again and again.... Ting, ting, ting, ting, it went on and on, this soft belling of his love, this amorous music of our northern bell-bird.
("The Arctic Prairies," 1910)

Seton’s traveling companion, Edward Preble, identified the sound as “the love-song” of the boreal owl—or, more likely,

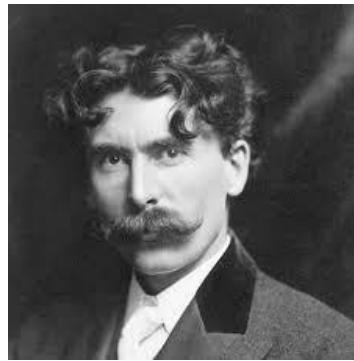
misidentified it as such. The description in Seton’s essay is much more closely reminiscent of the tooting

song of a pygmy owl than of the boreal’s very different dripping-water trill. Misidentification or not, though, that published description of the song, down to the very syllables “ting, ting, ting,” has remained a commonplace of the ornithological and the popular literature alike, where it is usually copied verbatim without attribution—or, as in the excerpt above, with the false attribution to Linnaeus or some other great name fetched out of thin air.

One of those works puts two and two together in a way that leaves the careful reader at sixes and sevens:

Latin funereus, funeral [sic], referring to the tolling bell-like quality of its voice. . . . The courtship call of this deep brown owl is a soft, pleasant, bell-like TINGG-TINGG. . . . (Helen Roney Sattler, *The Book of North American Owls*, 1995)

We know that *Aegolius funereus* owes its scientific species epithet to its



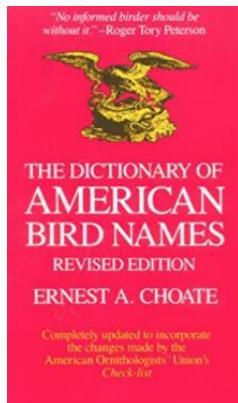
Ernest Thompson Seton

somber plumage. But when, as here, Seton's owl's *tinging* is combined with apparent ignorance of that fact, a tortuous and entirely fictitious backstory emerges. Sattler re-analyzes the "bell-like" song as a "tolling," the slow striking of a deep-voiced bell on occasions of great solemnity. Thus, she seems to conclude, the bird must logically be called *funereus* because its voice is funereal.

A not entirely lucky guess leads us to the author who first misled generations of birders by putting Seton's song description together with the Linnaean name *funereus*. Experience teaches that unattributed etymologies are almost always dependent on Ernie Choate, who writes of the boreal owl's name—quoting but not crediting Seton—that it is

funereus, "mournful," as its call has been likened to the "slow tolling of a soft but high-pitched bell." (Ernest A. Choate, *The Dictionary of American Bird Names*, 1985)

But it turns out that this is not the only creative commingling of Linnaeus and Seton waiting to confuse the incautious reader.



Both John K. Terres and Edward Gruson also claim that the species epithet refers to the bird's voice—not, however, to its tolling peal but to an otherwise unattested funereal scream,

as if wailing the dead. (Edward S. Gruson, *Words for Birds*, 1972)

In his *Audubon Encyclopedia*, Terres rather surprisingly attributes this explication to Elliott Coues. (Gruson simply quotes Coues without crediting his source.) Happily, a look at the sources absolves Coues of this particular sin: he does indeed write that the Latin adjective in question could be

applicable to an owl, either regarded as a bird of ill omen, or with reference to its dismal cry, as if wailing the dead,

but he is here discussing the names of a different species entirely, the northern hawk owl. (Elliott Coues, *The Coues Check List*, 1882)

In either case—the owl as funeral bell, the owl as keening mourner—some careful reading and critical thought would easily have resolved the confusion. Sometimes that appears to be too much to ask, though, especially when mere modest truth threatens to get in the way of a good story.

Rick Wright leads *Birds and Art tours* for Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, ventbird.com. Friends and members of the Montclair Bird Club are invited to join Rick on a VENT tour of South Africa in September 2022.

First Bird

Sandy Sorkin

In preparation for the December bird club meeting and thinking about stories I might like to tell, a few memorable birding experiences came to mind. One, however, stands out because it was my first and helped me realize that I enjoy being outside with a purpose that extends beyond simply going someplace else. I believe the outing was around 1972 on a pleasant Saturday morning. In those days, weekends were about the only times I had time from work. Many years later I had the epiphany that you could bird in the early morning on weekdays because no one has 5:00am plans, other than possibly sleeping.

I owned binoculars, but beyond that I was completely unprepared to go birding. My friend Jim and I went to a wetlands area he was familiar with somewhere along Route 80. My unpreparedness included not looking at the weather forecast for the day we were out or remembering that there were very heavy rains earlier in the week. More experienced people know better than to hike in a wetland area when there is a good chance the water level will be exceptionally high. But as I mentioned, I wasn't one of those experienced people.

We parked the car close to where we thought a boardwalk began. The plan was to walk the length of the boardwalk and then take a wooded trail back to the car. The promised boardwalk was there, but it wasn't quite what I expected. My idea of a boardwalk was formed during my youth visiting Atlantic City. This boardwalk wasn't nearly 60 feet wide. It consisted of a pair of 12-inch side-by-side planks secured on posts that we couldn't actually see due to the depth of the water. Because of the earlier rains, the plank-boardwalk was approximately 4 inches above the water. The water level was a non-issue until we had gone a reasonable distance and realized the plank boardwalk had a downhill slant. In short order we were slogging through water about a foot deep, but not so deep that we couldn't see the wooden path. I made a mental note that birdwatchers were very dedicated people. I should also note that I hadn't actually seen a bird yet.

Trudging through the water became a little more problematic as we continued downhill. I still wonder if I would have seen some birds if I had not been concentrating on walking. When the water was calf-high, the side-by-side planks became a single 12-inch board that necessitated an improved balancing act. Then, on a piece of higher ground close to our plank, a Virginia Rail stepped out of the grass, stood completely motionless, and stared at me. I don't remember if the bird moved its head, but I tend to think he was shaking it a little side-to-side, wondering why grown people would be balancing on a narrow piece of wood in the middle of a swamp. We stared at each other until the bird realized he had more important things to do and pivoted back into the tall grass.



The Gray Cooper Encounter

Anna Karapin-Springorum

Facing the warmth of the first morning rays of sunshine, a Cooper hawk perched on my neighbor's deck. It looked out over our two yards, occasionally preening, and sometimes rotating its head so it could look over its shoulder and stare down at the ground. It seemed content to sit there, enjoy the sun, and keep a weather eye out for breakfast, perhaps a small bird hoping to find something to eat at the nearby feeder. Most of the usual feeder visitors seemed to have caught wind of the hawk and didn't show themselves.



Unafraid of the large and novel predator, however, were two squirrels. Endowed by evolution with curiosity often bordering on recklessness, these two furry menaces took it upon themselves to take a closer look at this new development in their backyard domain. They approached from opposite sides, climbing up the deck to reach the rail the hawk was sitting on.

Having underestimated the distance between the hawk and the spot it climbed to, the first squirrel was a little spooked to see the bird only a few feet away once he reached the top of the deck.

The squirrel and the hawk eyed one another for a few moments until the squirrel got cold paws and vanished the same way it had come.

Our second squirrel was not so easily deterred, however, and continued to approach the hawk, albeit from a greater distance. It got closer, its tail twitching nervously. The hawk turned to look at it. The squirrel froze. The hawk looked away. The squirrel crept closer. It was less than two feet away from the hawk.

But the hawk had had enough. With a big sweeping flap of its wings, it rose into the air. It only flew up a foot or so, but the sudden movement startled the squirrel which launched itself off the railing, plummeting far away from the hawk as quickly as possible.

Unimpressed, the hawk alighted back on its original perch and leaned forwards to watch the squirrel scamper off. The incident must have irritated the hawk, however, since it looked around a few more times before spreading its wings and flying off towards the rising sun.



Please feel free to email **The Broadwing** with any items you would like included in future issues. Please include pictures and any other news that will reduce anxiety and make us smile:

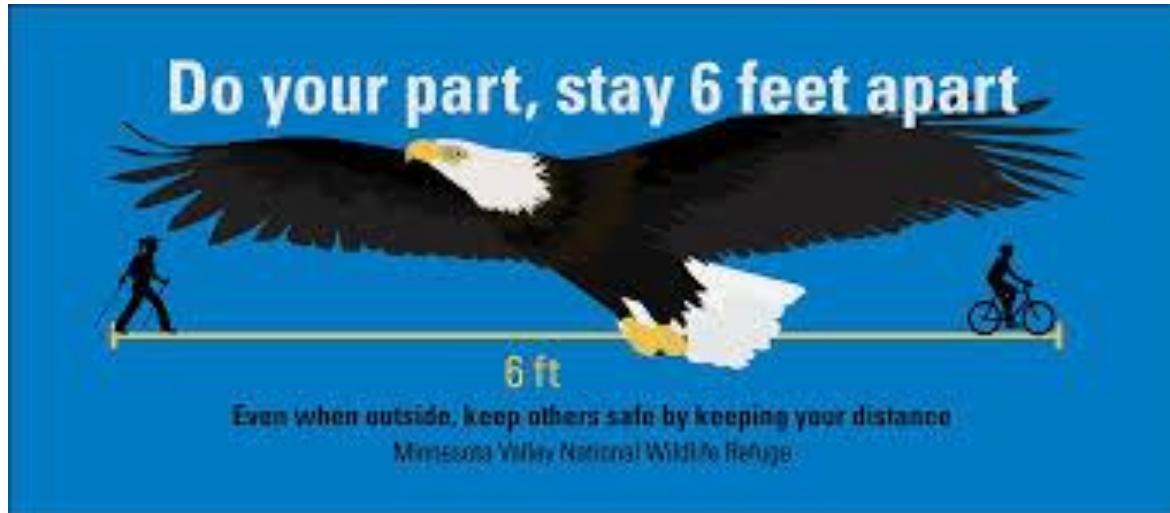
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- Page 5: Boreal owl
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- Page 8: Virginia rail
- Page 9, 10: Cooper hawk

Rick's VENT schedule through September 2022

- April 20 - 28, 2021 [France: Birds & Art in Provence](#)
- April 29 - May 9, 2021 [France: Birds & Art in Burgundy](#)
- May 12 - 20, 2021 [Poland: Birds & Art in Royal Krakow](#)
- July 18 - 31, 2021 [Circumnavigation of the Black Sea](#)
- August 19 - 28, 2021 [England: British Birdfair & Coastal Norfolk](#)
- September 8 - 17, 2021 [Spain: Birds & Art in the Northwest](#)
- September 19 - 28, 2021 [Germany: Birds & Art in Berlin & Brandenburg](#)
- September 27 - October 14, 2022 [South Africa: Birds, Wildlife & Culture](#)
- May 12 - 20, 2022 [France: Birds & Art in Provence](#)
- May 20 - 30, 2022 [France: Birds & Art in Burgundy](#)
- May 30 - June 9, 2022 [Germany in Spring: Birds & Art in Berlin & Brandenburg](#)
- September 7 - 22, 2022 [Hungary & The Czech Republic: Birds & Music from Budapest to Prague](#)



The MBC Bulletin Bird

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BROADWING

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**Send photos, field notes, or articles to the editor:
MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com**

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