View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Digital Commons

Cedarville Review

Volume 19 Article 2

4-26-2019

Ornithology

Caroline Clauson
Cedarville University, cclauson@cedarville.edu

DigitalCommons@Cedarville provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to dc@cedarville.edu.

Recommended Citation
Clauson, Caroline (2019) "Ornithology," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 19 , Article 2.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol19/iss1/2

Ornithology

Browse the contents of this issue of *Cedarville Review*.

Keywords
Cedarville, creative writing, Caroline Clauson

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview

Part of the Fiction Commons

This fiction is available in Cedarville Review: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol19/iss1/2

Fiction

ORNITHOLOGY

CARRIE CLAUSON

The volunteers hung cranberry suet they bought at the pet store in the strip mall, overpriced. There it had been, swinging gratuitously by a pink ribbon from a hickory limb behind the nets. Kristen knew sunflower seeds were better than suet. Furthermore, the Clark River Bird Observatory did not bait birds with feed as to catch ones that wouldn't have flown into the net willfully. The volunteers knew this. They ignored this. Kristen worked by herself most mornings, but all the volunteers were out so early with her now because it was the third week in July, a banding week. Kristen had pulled nylon out of feather barbs and fastened tracking tags around limbs for hours. The moon had seemed like a projection in a lecture, grainy and translucent, as if Kristen could see the sky through the craters.

That moon vision was a scientific impossibility, but for a moment, she did smell the sparrow flapping between her fingers—sweet straw then warm bacteria like kimchi. Kristen clipped seven moon-patterned and strawberry-patterned drawstring bags quivering with songbirds to her lanyard. Breeze and light carrying honeysuckle and the ponds and the algae was pushing through the hickories that bordered the wall of nets, cutting out shadows of chickadees, finches, warblers and sparrows from the bags. The nets looked like long barbwire fence from certain angles, or invisible straight on, or inhaling the wet breeze from where Kristen was. Her chest felt sharp, not because of the light or quivering bags or the breeze, which was already hot, but because she thought about how she loved birds. It was good to have a passion. Avian Research was publishing her study about tick-borne pathogens in Eastern songbirds. The journal emailed her yesterday afternoon; they would put it in the Fall issue, cover story. She missed spending whole days on this kind of research in the lab. It had been a controlled environment for her focused work, the bright overhead lights, the slick tile, the commercial freezer cooling her face when she retrieved specimens. Now, bags of birds twitched like haunted tassels around Kristen's waist as she walked back to the banding stations.

They dealt with the birds in the large white tent with a scalloped top edged with dirt, one side open when there wasn't rain. This was pitiful compared to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which had more birds, more technology, and more nets than here. Kristen had majored in biology at Cornell after she scored a 35 on the ACT. She stayed to earn two master's degrees in bird population studies and evolutionary biology because she loved birds. And she had survived by keeping schedules, consuming raisins and seven ounces of tomato juice every day before 7 am for all those eight years. Kristen moved back to Kentucky to write her thesis because apartments cost less than the open position at the Clark River Wildlife Refuge payed. A job with the Interior would diversify her doctoral application at least.

The volunteers were measuring birds at the folding tables with their oatmeal in thermoses and now the sun that turned them to shadows in canvas like the birds in the bags. They chattered to each other and to the birds—"you're a fat one, ready to migrate, Benton County passed stricter zoning laws, isn't he fat"—and ate cinnamon oatmeal with plastic spoons between measurements. They made jokes when they blew the breast feathers out of the way to guess the yellow fat and when they stuck the birds head first into the weighing tubes.

Ten or twelve volunteers usually came. They were retired and came with their spouses or were otherwise divorced and retired. Kristen realized birding merely supplemented bridge and Amish novels for them. At the beginning of the summer, she taught them everything they were now qualified to do there: how to set up the nets, hold birds, safely remove the birds from the nets, band them, and determine their species, wingspan, weight, sex, age, and fat. Some volunteers didn't have a college degree in anything much less this field, and Kristen knew a degree didn't necessarily matter. But they honestly knew very little about birds, and they made this evident.

Terry closed his eyes. He blew out a puff of cinnamon air and slowly raised his arms straight out with a cardinal in his fist and asked had they ever noticed how the crow sings the earliest in the morning all year round and never gets any credit for it.

"Smartest bird of any," Ann said.

"The whip-poor-will wakes me up at six," Barb said.

"Only in the summer though."

"The rest have too comfortable of down pillows on them to wake up."

"That's it, that's it."

Kristen had never caught a crow, all these years banding; a crow's call had never felt close to her, had always come from the tall white desolate trees in back of her parents' house. Bird songs were never as near or as real as Kristen's holding the birds themselves. But in the net or in someone's hand, they usually panicked a little and squawked generically. Songs weren't in her particular sphere of interest.

Terry flipped through his Guide to Birds of North America for the crows, but the 1966 edition. He'd written little poems beside some birds, rhyming "beak" with "seek." The pages detailing the small raptors were loose and the corners cracking onto the tarp, and a spread covered in Ospreys slipped onto the table—an Osprey hunting, an Osprey in a nest, an Osprey dropping a reptile into its chick's mouth.

"The older guides get some things a little wrong about the birds," Kristen noted.

"I can't recognize the birds by any other images than these ones," Terry smiled kind of impishly.

"Well they do photographs now."

"The photographs don't capture the personality of the birds. Try telling me the angles aren't all technical now," he laughed, but the high pitch in his voice told Kristen he wasn't kidding about it.

Some days after shifts the volunteers drifted through the grasslands and whistled bird calls. And even after Kristen told them the exact typical weight range of a species, they sometimes quietly Googled appropriate weights on their iPads, the extra big font reflecting in their glasses. On occasion, they brought back bats from the nets, and once, a very large beige moth. George had walked into the tent that day, eyebrows raised, pinching his bag by one corner.

Kristen had asked, "Did you catch a hummingbird?"

And George said, "no, better." He gently shook out dusty particles, a severed moth wing, and the naked body of an insect. De-winged, the moth did look almost like an owl with its horns and its black eyes gawking inside the soft face. Its struggle against the bag had killed it. Kristen had said "this isn't a bird," and of course George was aware. She was tired of reproaching mildly, but anything harsher would confuse the volunteers and stall her work and go against her nature.

"I'm letting the victims back to their nests," Ann interrupted their focus again. Ann, Terry, and Barb announced every time they finished a bird and would step outside the tent to release it. Sometimes they counted down, releasing them simultaneously, pitching the birds to the sky, laughing and pointing. This annoyed Kristen. Birds weren't fidget spinners. The whole thing was tacky and disrespectful to the birds and her mission here. Eight species living in the reserve were endangered. Cats were getting the others. An overpopulation of cats dashed around Benton, KY unnecessarily, yet the volunteers fed them sardines in the meadow. Kristen saw the cans in the trash bag tied to the tent pole.

Kristen could smile at the volunteers now though, feeling charitable again, remembering her publication and only one month left here. "Those finches are huge!" she said too loudly, meaning to seem impressed. She liked to admire their cute, hopeless infatuation with colors and songs. On the other hand, Kristen thought it was sad, really, and careless; she couldn't deny that it was sad. They couldn't escape their self-delusion, and it was unclear whether this rendered them culpable. She guessed retirement let people abandon intentional activity. Kristen's mom always said Grandfather joined the Moose Lodge and stopped giving tithes and offerings the weekend he received his third pension check.

Grandfather had kept a Parakeet in the basement, Kristen remembered. Also, a number of goldfish. He let the Parakeet out the window by the time Kristen was eleven, but she had respected it more than Grandfather did. She fed fruit snacks to it through the cage. She only collected the feathers that fell through the cage and never taught it to talk because she was afraid of Grandfather. And because it was a quiet bird. On the stool by the water softener she would sit for half hours at a time and watch it hop around in its water bowl. In second grade, she taped one of its unnaturally blue feathers to a page of her wish journal next to an essay titled "My Grandfather's Pet." Kristen displayed this at her high school graduation party under a banner that said "Ornithologist Since Age Seven" beside her National Merit plaque. She liked the idea that her maturing intellect had informed a consistent passion, and it had.

She hadn't actually decided on her major until a meeting a month before graduation with Mr. Peters, her guidance counselor, a tall man with wispy gray-gold eyelashes who talked about careers like they were self-propelled vacuum cleaners. He pulled a spreadsheet of careers from his desk and ran his leather thumb down to Science and Mathematics.

"One of my buddies from Kentucky U did ornithology. Great guy, he really loved it. You could really go into anything with your test scores, which, phenomenal scores by the way, congratulations. There aren't very many people who do birds for a career. You could be the next James Audubon, or I guess Jam-ie Audubon. We don't have enough girls in STEM."

When he said that, Kristen thought of the feather, how much she had always loved birds. She considered herself blessed to be confident and to have firmly identified a calling so quickly while other gifted students thrashed around, having excelled indistinctly in every discipline.

Also, it humbled her ahead of time to know she would use her gifts and abilities preserving wildlife for her society. She had always excelled.

Two hikers were passing by the tent, pale-ribbed men in cargo shorts. They must have come upon the observatory accidently. "Bird shit everywhere," one said to the other. Their skin jerked over their ribs like tissue paper when they laughed. They hadn't said it so that Kristen would hear, and if they had, they would have expected her just to smirk at them. But their flippancy made Kristen indignant, for the birds. Fecal samples that the bird observatory collected offered indispensable data about avian disease, habitat, and habits. The armpits of her Interior shirt felt wet and itchy now, as if she were ashamed, as if she could really believe she were a mere custodian over fields and test tubes of bird shit. The men were watching her, and what else could she have done?

"This robin's wingspan is 15.6 inches, which is pretty long for a robin," she said, then a toothless smile, then stretching out the long wing. For a while afterward, she'd replay this impulsively, hissing stupid stupid stupid in her head to block it out. Then it embarrassed her too that she'd care so much and need to berate herself like that.

Kristen made the volunteers survey the forest on the last shift, not that they didn't want to. It was 11:45 am. Birds mostly laid in the trees at noon in summer, Kristen knew. But the men had agitated her, and she wanted to research alone. She told the volunteers to look for injured birds, check the ponds, stop by the net to collect stragglers, leave the measured birds on the tables in the bags, she would let them go. They shuffled into their unexplored shade like a flock of adolescent geese, a single chattering line.

The volunteers wouldn't have liked seeing her take feather samples from the birds anyway. They wouldn't have understood, but the method met protocol in every way. She might explain, if they came back and saw, "it's like plucking eyebrows," although the volunteers were in the stage of either drawing theirs in round and red or taking secret pride in prevailing wisps. The brown thrasher Kristen was holding pierced its bill into her wrist, and before she could dab it with a tissue, her blood dripped into the thrasher's cloudy down. She hardly ever made these mistakes. Kristen rubbed alcohol on her wrist gash. It entered her mind that she might have looked like a poacher had the volunteers been there, blood soaking into the skin she'd plucked from. She scrubbed the bird's stomach with alcohol too until it was a mere discoloration.

As Kristen threw the thrasher to the sky, Ann emerged from the woods too soon, her arms pumping out of sync with her pigeon-toed steps. She had the openings of two bags bunched up in one hand, another opening tucked into her button-down. Her dreamcatcher earrings wobbled hysterically, and she started speaking farther away from the tent than she had probably intended.

"The chickadees have crud all around the eyes!" Ann wailed.

"Like crusty stuff?" Kristen said and then thought that sounded stupid. But then, she thought it was nice that she knew how to speak their language. It was probably conjunctivitis, which the birds probably caught at the suet the volunteers bought at the pet store. Kristen appeared as sad as she would have been, but she had never witnessed an active bacterial disease on the field.

"Yeah it's all crusty, and the eyes," Ann's own brown eyes seemed magnified, "its eyes look bloody with the stuff all in it, like some only have half an eye." She rummaged around in one bag, pulling out a black-capped chickadee with a bad bander's grip.

The crusty eye reminded Kristen of a medical drama she watched some in high school. In one episode, the female forensic scientist told the intern that he'd never get a promotion if he didn't even care to clean the sleep out of his eyes in the morning. That had stuck with Kristen. It made sense that scientists should stay tidy as they approached the wild.

"Oh," Ann sobbed almost, terrified again at the half-eyes. She squeezed her own eyes shut and cupped the chickadee in her hands and held it close to her cheek for a second. Ann always reacted excessively.

More volunteers returned with diseased chickadees until they had fourteen or fifteen. At the table stations under the tent they were popping latex gloves over their hands and squirting water mixed with Morton's salt into all the red eyes. They worked solemnly and hoped the birds would live. "His eye is opening, look," they'd say and slip a band around the survivor's leg. The oatmeal thermoses were clustered together outside the tent absorbing thick heat, a shrine to the perhaps-dying.

Kristen also worked on the birds. She had never heard of an outbreak so sudden, and no one at Cornell had seen these red eyes on chickadees—only goldfinches, house finches, and not many purple finches. A team at the lab tracked avian disease exclusively, and they had never seen this. Cornell would award her a grant to head up new research on conjunctivitis in species other than finches if she wrote a report. She'd collect a sample of the likely-infected suet and swab a bit of discharge from the eyes. No birds had died yet—she was pleased—but the lab would also expect a post-mortem sample.

At Cornell, aviation stations across the Eastern U.S. shipped specimens overnight, dry ice still steaming out of the boxes in the headlights of the FedEx truck. The students would say "the parts are here," snidely. Then they would unwrap a cold bird or feet or feathers or plasma or kidneys or heads, pull the Kleenex out of the beak and run the precise tests. Kristen would pin the robin to the corkboard and examine. In the next-door room there'd be jars of birds preserved in solvent lining the shelves, the alcohol illuminating the colors of their wings, their heads tilted coyly toward the room at the bottoms of the jars.

Deceased specimens taught them how to sustain living birds. At least one would die out here. Conjunctivitis always left birds blind and starved.

George brought back a chickadee folded up in fern leaves. Its eyes were sealed and the life of them drained and dried on its white cheek plumage. Its cheeks were much thinner than the standard weight range would have accommodated. He said he found him mixed in with pine cones at the base of a tree, had thought he was a pine cone because he didn't move.

Kristen told him its wings were just shaking in the breeze, it was dead.

"I thought he was," George said and condensed his lips into a crease, gazing down just past the bird in the leaves. In his other hand were three rocks he thought might have been geodes. He clinked them together, angled them in the light, checking vaguely for iridescent specks like he'd done so many times before.

"Will we band him?" George asked.

"It's female." Kristen said, flipping the bird upside down. The feathers had fallen off the chickadee's stomach for the purpose of insulating some nest, some pile of rust-speckled eggs up in a tree somewhere—chances were, falling out of that tree, or too cold now.

"Then will we band her?" George corrected himself. "No." Kristen said.

"Why?"

"It's dead and we have it." Kristen shook her head a little sadly, but death was vital to a productive and thriving ecosystem. Decomposers ate flesh, birds ate decomposers. This chickadee could provide useful data for the species. It was not quite dead, but, it was true, only the breeze was shaking its feathers. "It's dead, why would we?"

"I just thought to kind of mark it special. Don't we do that?"

Kristen loved birds. She did. She had loved them. She loved oily wings and beaks and hot, dense, pulsing torsos in her palms. And limbs. How many perfect limbs had she touched. She loved, in some sense of that word, the people who came there with cheap binoculars and Audubon phone apps and pavilion lunches. They were sweet; their self-perception was that they tried and cared. And when Kristen tore the hooked beaks of chimney swifts out of the nets and caught birds banded years ago in Ontario and generated pin drops for them on the migration map, when she measured the RNA of ten birds in one sitting, something reactive and full burst inside her stomach until her skull ached.

Kristen lifted the chickadee from the leaves and fastened its neck between her middle and pointer fingers in a proper bander's grip. She faced outside the tent toward the forest, ponds, and nets where the birds were. It was really nearly dead. Pressure, then a little more pressure. Then, the soft neck cracked—it cracked so gently, the bird did not feel it. The volunteers did not hear it, Kristen barely did. It had been sleeping, its eyes completely shut. The vulnerable stomach, the brood patch, shivered twice but not again. And she tucked it in a canvas bag patterned with strawberries.