



Brunswick Wildlife A Birding Trip That Never Happened

On September 11, I visited Carolina Beach State Park, The NC Aquarium, and Fort Fisher. My target birds were southbound, migrating songbirds.

This area and down to the tip of Bald Head Island forms a “migrant trap” like Cape May and the Eastern Shore of Virginia, only on a much smaller scale. When migrants, including raptors that follow the coastline, see a large body of water ahead, they may land, stay over for a day or so, and fuel up for the next leg of their journey. The migrant trap effect tends to concentrate birds at the end of peninsulas.

This trip turned out to be not much of a trip. One of the few migrants I saw was this first-year Baltimore Oriole. I know it does not look like orioles on baseball caps...just give it until next summer. The other photo is of a non-migrant but very cooperative Northern Mockingbird.

I passed a Carolina Beach fire station on the way home and saw a massive American flag flying from a fire truck’s extended ladder...an instant reminder that it was Patriot Day or “9/11” as most of us call it. It was also a reminder of a birding trip that was not to be.

On September 10, 2001 I flew to Lubbock, Texas to work on a consulting project for my client, a large healthcare system. No matter how I traveled, it took at least eleven hours to go from Wilmington to Lubbock. Eventually I decided that driving to Raleigh and flying Continental, with a plane change in Houston, was the best.

A horrific wreck on I40 near the airport almost caused me to miss my plane and my lateness was responsible for my luggage not making it to Lubbock. For the record, my luggage was eventually delivered to my home in Leland the following Sunday.

The next morning, I rounded the corner into the hotel's breakfast room and found my colleagues and others riveted to the television watching live video of the first tower that was hit and soon to watch a plane hit the second tower. A scene none of us will ever forget.

Our hearts were not in our work that week so we hung on waiting for the airports to reopen. My experiences and grief pale in comparison to the suffering and grief of those who died, their families, and the heroes who stepped forward. My sense of loss and grief, however, was not trivial...all Americans experienced a profound loss that day.

By Thursday, I decided to drive my rental car the seventeen hundred miles back to the Raleigh/Durham airport. A colleague from Chicago also decided to drive home. She rode with me to the rental car facility at the Oklahoma City airport to pick up a car. Seeing the heavily armed National Guard troops patrolling the ghostly airport was a shock! It was a tangible, real world experience unlike the televised reports.

I always take my binoculars on business trips, finding time before or after work to do a little birding. The Texas Panhandle is one of my favorite locations for birding. I was introduced to west Texas during my Air Force service at nearby Cannon AFB, New Mexico and enjoyed birding there during my long association with my client.

This trip the binoculars stayed in my briefcase. Part of my rationale for driving back to Raleigh was that I could stop at a few National Wildlife Refuges just off I40 along the way. The birding stops just didn't happen.

By Thursday afternoon, there were banners and flags draped from most overpasses and heavy equipment dealers had parked cranes bearing huge American flags near the interstate. As I drove I listened to the memorial service led by Billy Graham from the Washington National Cathedral.

Though we were isolated in our metal bubbles, there was a growing realization by all that many of us were driving rental cars home. No matter where you pulled off the interstate, you spotted other rental cars with out-of-state license plates...with drivers sharing a silent state of grief.

I stopped only for a few hours of sleep just across the river in Memphis. Then I pushed as hard as possible to get home...needing to be home...to grieve at home.

John Ennis