



The Life of the Skies: Birding at the End of Nature

Jonathan Rosen

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Aerial delights: A history of America as seen through the eyes of a bird-watcher

John James Audubon arrived in America in 1803, when Thomas Jefferson was president, and lived long enough to see his friend Samuel Morse send a telegraphic message from his house in New York City in the 1840s. As a boy, Teddy Roosevelt learned taxidermy from a man who had sailed up the Missouri River with Audubon, and yet as president presided over America's entry into the twentieth century, in which our ability to destroy ourselves and the natural world was no longer metaphorical. Roosevelt, an avid birder, was born a hunter and died a conservationist.

Today, forty-six million Americans are bird-watchers. *The Life of the Skies* is a genre-bending journey into the meaning of a pursuit born out of the tangled history of industrialization and nature longing. Jonathan Rosen set out on a quest not merely to see birds but to fathom their centrality—historical and literary, spiritual and scientific—to a culture torn between the desire both to conquer and to conserve.

Rosen argues that bird-watching is nothing less than the real national pastime—indeed it is more than that, because the field of play is the earth itself. We are the players and the spectators, and the outcome—since bird and watcher are intimately connected—is literally a matter of life and death.

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