

Big Birder: Ted Eliot's Romance With Robins, Jays, Crows - and More By Jonah Raskin

He doesn't have an umbrella with him today, though he's wearing a rain hat and a raincoat. The weather report says rain and the sky says rain, too. It's rained every day for the past fourteen days, but the rain, floods, and winds haven't stopped Ted Eliot from watching birds. Like the proverbial postman who isn't slowed from his appointed rounds by snow, sleet, or rain, nothing meteorological stops him from grabbing his binoculars and stepping outside his house on Sonoma Mountain to keep an eye on the birds that nest nearby, or that are only passing through. He calls himself a birder and he might well be the biggest birder in his neck of the woods. He has seen 3,666 different species of birds and he's still counting.

Or course, he'll be counting birds once again this year, along with thousands of other birders who go out with binoculars and with the naked eye from now until January 5, 2013. It's the big bird event of the year; it's called The Christmas Bird Count and it's sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Ted Eliot couldn't ask for a better Christmas present.

Birders will go nearly anywhere and at anytime to see a bird or two, he explains, whereas bird watchers, like his wife Pat, wait for birds to come to them before they take an interest. With Ted Eliot, crows, hawks, cranes, jays, robins, and even turkey vultures are much more than a casual interest. "Birds are my obsession," he tells me as he sips his morning coffee in a café on the plaza in the town of Sonoma where almost everyone stops to say hello. "I can't get birds out of my head," he continues. "When I can't sleep at night I don't count sleep, I remember bird songs. I play them in my head and before long I'm sleeping soundly." Later this year, he'll travel to Brazil to see tropical birds he's never seen before.

He was a birdwatcher when he worked as a career diplomat for the United States in the former Soviet Union and in Afghanistan, too, where he served as our ambassador in the 1970s. There were lots of birds to see there in the 1970s. To follow his passion, he's been to Antarctica, Mongolia, and to Africa, and from California marshes and mountains to New England woodlands that he first knew as a boy.

Birding didn't come naturally to him, though his father was a birder and took him on expeditions into the wild. Eliot remembers

sitting in a car on a rainy day while his father went tromping through the woods. Ted couldn't be bothered about birds. But when his father came back raving madly about the rare bird he'd just seen, Ted Eliot decided he might step out of the car, plunge into the woods, and find out what the rumpus was all about.

Even as a teenager he got it. At Harvard, he would have liked to have studied ornithology, but there didn't seem to be many jobs counting and tracking birds, and the Audubon Society wasn't recruiting on campus, either. "I found one person at Harvard who shared my interest in birds," Eliot explains. "We were in the stands at a Harvard football game. I noticed a bird hovering above the huddle – a rather unusual sight – and mentioned it. A student who was sitting close by saw the bird, too, and shouted out the name. From then on we were friends."

It's hard to say precisely why he picked birds or they picked him, except that he's amazed at the vast distances – sometimes thousands of miles - birds fly to find food and for survival. His wife, Pat Eliot, is wild about horses and has been ever since she was a girl growing up in Sonoma, riding horses on Sonoma Mountain. "Everyone seems to have a passion for something," Ted says. "I know that my passion for birds led me to become an environmentalist and a conservationist. I try to make it contagious by lead bird trips and by introducing young people to birding." On this grey morning, he's carried away. I almost expect him to take wing and soar over the plaza. "Birds constantly surprise me," he says as the rain begins to fall again. "Springtime in the woods around here is filled with the music of birds – young owls asking for food, jays warning of danger, and males singing to stake out their territory and to attract females. If you haven't heard their music I suggest you do."