



Three Stories

By Rob Bettaso

With our warm season winding down, my days of gainful, temporary employment are once again coming to an end. Beginning in May, we've conducted several months of productive biological fieldwork but now that most of the leaves are off the trees, it's simply too cold to be traipsing through the various high elevation streams. Not that the trout seem to mind; they're busy living out their lives whether there is ice on the creek or warm sunshine.

During these past six months, I have amassed so many observations from the White Mountain wilds that my mind is a bit jumbled with potential stories. I need to clear my head to keep from being grid-locked on the keyboard. Years ago, I recall hearing that we tend to get stressed when our minds are running too fast. Someone likened racing thoughts to a leopard on the hunt, suggesting that as the big cat slinks through the tall grasses of the savannah, he has to focus his attention on a single gazelle within the herd.

When the leopard is within three to four bounds of his target, he must muster all his concentration as he knows that the herd will spring into motion as soon as his kill-spurt is engaged. At that point, the mishmash of confusing colors and the leaping, zig-zagging flight of the antelope can easily prove so distracting to the leopard that his focus is broken and he misses his quarry even while dozens of prey are gyrating all about him.

A good solitary walk in nature is nearly always soothing to my mind so I decide to walk down to a local marsh where the other day I had seen a bird that I rarely encounter -- the Sora. This is the first of my three micro-stories; more like anecdotes, really.

Off the Rails

The nights have been dropping down below freezing and it is still cold at 8 a.m. so I walk at a brisk clip along the Rim Road. I'm following a trail that parallels the fence separating Navajo County from the Fort Apache lands and have to squint due to the low angle of the morning sun. A few weeks back, migrating Townsend's and Black-throated Gray warblers were flitting through these trees but today it is just the usual suspects (juncos, chickadees, nuthatches, et al.).

When I get to the marsh, I see that the Sora's cousin, the American Coot, is well represented and I watch their sleek, black-on-black forms glide across the surface of the pond, occasionally diving in search of food. Coots, along with moorhens and gallinules, are in the Family *Rallidae* which also includes the eight species of rails that inhabit the western United States. I stand for a while on the shore and glass the margins of the marsh, looking for a Sora poking about in the cattails.

Seeing nothing, I try a trick I learned years back and loudly clap my hands in an attempt to provoke a response "Keek!" from a cryptic rail (we have not only the Sora here but also the Virginia Rail). I try the clapping trick several more times but to no avail. Above and to the right of me, I hear someone ask: "Are you looking for a rail?" Startled, I look up and see that 30 yards up the hill, a woman is sitting on a bench situated in the ecotone between the woods and the marsh.

I ask if she's seen "the rail" (as if there can be only one) and she tells me, "No, but it looks like good habitat for a Sora and I wouldn't be surprised to find one here." I'm somewhat amazed that a) somebody else is here; b) that she just happens to know the same (relatively rarified) trick that I know for locating a rail and c) that I was so focused on the pond's water that I failed to notice another human-being close enough to monitor my ridiculous hand clapping behavior. Well, I thought, at least she's a fellow birder and seems to realize that I'm not a lunatic.

We exchange a few more pleasantries and then I shamble off to finish circumnavigating the pond. I never do see the rail but it's enough to know that he is here and I know that I will be back again to applaud him into an encore appearance.

I head back home but with my mind only slightly less cluttered with thoughts than when I had started out. Story *Numero Dos*:

A Cosmic Reminder

I am at my keyboard and I'm remembering back to one of our field days this past September. I'm out working with a guy...we'll call him Lazarus (I'm opting to protect the anonymity of my co-workers). Technically, he's a mechanic by training but he's helping the field crew this week as we continue our trout surveys.

Conducting trout monitoring in a small creek is not exactly "rocket surgery" but it does require some experiential skills. One person (me, on this particular day) straps a device, known as an "electro-fisher," to his back. This contraption, upon the flick of a switch, runs electrical current through the waters within a roughly 5-foot radius of the person wearing the "shocker" (the other name used for this particular piece of equipment).

The shocker jolts the fish into an immobilized state that allows netters to capture the stunned fish so that the fish can be identified, measured and placed in a bucket for eventual release. Today, because the stream was one of the smaller creeks we monitor, we only needed one netter -- namely Lazarus.

We were both in high spirits because, on the bouncy road into our site, we had observed wild turkey, elk and even had a fleeting glimpse of a goshawk as she streaked through the Ponderosa and aspens. At this stage of autumn, the aspens were still mostly blaze yellow and, if there is a happier sensation than looking at a mountain slope awash in fall colors, well then, please tell me where to find it.

As we collected and tabulated Apache and Brown trout, we were completely absorbed by the process of finding and capturing the fish. Oh, and let me quickly back up to the previous paragraph: gazing into a net containing a glorious, flashing trout is as beautiful a sight as anything nature has to offer, autumn aspens notwithstanding....

Because the shocker emits a loud, aggravating, beeping noise (a "safety feature"), I always wear ear plugs. As such, when the wind kicked up an hour into our labors, I was somewhat oblivious as it was blowing high up in the trees but not especially down along the creek. My attention was deeply focused on the water around the shocker's anode (the electrode that fish tend to swim towards when under the spell of an electro-fisher) when a massive dead Ponderosa came crashing across the creek not 50 feet upstream of us.

In my peripheral vision, I detected the wild leap made by Lazarus as he was compelled into drastic but feckless motion; a paroxysm of instinctive fear at the thunderous sound of the tree's impact. He was not wearing ear plugs so he undoubtedly suffered the greater aural shock.

Meanwhile, I felt a cold chill run down my spine and, for a split second, saw no future in my future. But then I realized what had happened, as a cloud of sawdust settled around the fallen pine, still reverberating on the ground ominously close to us.

We looked at each other, wide eyed and utterly petrified. I used a few choice profanities to indicate that I was done for the day and was heading back to the truck. To my astonishment, he suggested that we would be safe now as it was unthinkable that another tree could possibly be blown down again so close to us. The odds were simply against it, Lazarus claimed.

I couldn't believe my ears, the plugs now removed, at what he was saying. "Are you (expletive deleted) crazy?!" I protested. I wanted to shake him by his collar and talk some reason into him but, and I kid you not, miraculously another large snag came crashing down the slope, this time more like a couple hundred feet away.

That was all it took. Moving as quickly as our wader boots allowed, we hot-footed it up the grade that would take us to the road which would lead us back to our truck. Our day was over. Or, would be over as soon as we drove out of that forest with its field of wildly swaying tall trees. "Quaking" Aspen my ass, these trees were positively flailing in the now howling winds. On the drive out that day, we had to put the truck in 4WD to get around three sizable trees that had blown down on the road sometime after we had arrived at our monitoring site.

The day was a wash, work-wise. But we made it home in one piece. And so now, I will close with my third and final micro-tale.

An Old Man Takes a Long Walk

Ever since I moved to Pinetop in 2005, I have thought that someday I would hike as close to the summit of Mount Baldy as non-tribal members are allowed. You see, the highest point in the White Mountains is on the Fort Apache lands and is off limits to all but the native Apaches. That's fair enough, as one can still get within a quarter mile of the summit, without trespassing, just by staying on the well-marked trails of the National Forest lands.

Most of the people I met in my first years up here had either already climbed Baldy or were simply not inclined to do so. When my retirement came and I had lots of time to go hiking and biking, I began to push myself a bit so that one day I might be fit enough to tackle the 12- to 18-mile (depending upon which trail one uses) route to the highest point in Arizona, excluding the San Francisco Peaks.

While I had recently met a few people who were likewise avid to scale Baldy, I knew that they were all so much younger than I that there would be no chance of my keeping up with any of them. As I didn't want to slow anyone down (let alone cause them to have to turn back some distance shy of the goal), I decided to heed the words of Kipling, who lived by his adage that "he travels fastest, who travels alone." That has pretty much been the story of my life anyway. And while at age 60, I may not be a speed demon, I do alright moving at my own plodding pace.

Just a few weeks before it became unsafe (due to weather) to climb Baldy, I made my move. It was essentially an impulse decision to take the hike, as I had spontaneously awoken very early and knew that the weather was unquestionably going to be gorgeous all day. I loaded a day pack with dried fruit, chocolate, boiled eggs, and a bagel. I had my usual survival gear, a GPS, plenty of water and a camera I had borrowed weeks ago from Anne (publisher of this, our monthly guide to outdoor adventure).

By 8:10 a.m., I was headed up the West Fork Trail to Baldy. A marker at the trailhead informs that the public summit is 8 miles ahead, nearly all of which is naturally uphill. Hopped up on coffee and a Hershey bar, I was raring to go and started off at a swift clip. The trail runs near the West Fork of the Little Colorado River, the headwaters to a stream that eventually makes it to the Rio Colorado, through the Grand Canyon and finally, and historically (before we sucked it dry), all the way to the mythic Sea of Cortez.

Although I found the hike to the top to be surprisingly easy (and naturally, quite beautiful), I don't really have much to say about the walk as I encountered neither fellow hikers nor rare wildlife. It was just me and the jays and the squirrels. The walk gave me plenty of time to think and many of those thoughts seemed to focus on how utterly wonderful it was to be alive on such an extraordinary world as Earth.

When I got to the saddle, which is the highest point on the public land, I met a group of four guys about my age. They were eating sandwiches piled high with lunchmeat, laughing and in no particular hurry to turn around and head back down the trail they had just come up -- the East Fork Trail (EFT).

I asked about the EFT and they warned me that if I opted to hike the full loop (the West, which I had just come up; the EFT; and the "Cross-over Trail" that would take me back to my truck) that I would not finish my hike until after dark. Well, I thought, I have a headlamp, a GPS, and the trails are very well established so I doubt I will get lost. As such, I bid the foursome good-bye and started off down the trail; peeling an egg as I began my descent.

On the way down, I soon passed the cowling that was part of a B-17 that crashed on the mountain back in 1943. I also began to encounter more and more hikers, all in groups of two or more. About half way down I began to feel the first aches of fatigue but by then I was committed so did my best to ignore the growing protests of my joints and muscles, as well as the hot-spots that were becoming more and more noticeable on my feet.

By the time I reached the Cross-over Trail (COT), I was fairly done-in but knew that it was “only” another 3.5 miles back to my Toyota. There was still plenty of light as I had maintained a steady and fairly quick pace and stopped to rest only a few times; none of my breaks amounting to more than five minutes at a stop.

The COT wound up and down small gullies and seemed, at times, to be going in completely the wrong direction. But I persevered (there wasn't much else I could do) and finally re-united with the West Trail and hobbled the final stretch back down to the parking lot.

As I drove home, I felt a surge of exhaustion but that particular physical response to my day had to push against the overwhelming emotional sensation of accomplishment and gratitude. There was no doubt which of the two conflicting states-of-being was the stronger: a mind at peace almost always trumps a tired body.

But I will admit that when I got home, I didn't waste any time falling into bed. Before consciousness left me, I felt an odd mix of emotions and then slipped off into sleep. The last thought in my mind, before there were no more, was really just a question -- Does all this beauty that is life really have to come to an end?

In the morning, I woke up wondering the same thing and then I started my day.