

## Sublimation and the Psychodynamics of Birding

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**An adventure in extreme birding prompted the psychoanalyst author to reflect on “why do people do this?” Like myriad human interests, vocations, and avocations, the activity of bird watching is a socially acceptable activity that is the final pathway for multiple motivations that are likely to have a long history in the individual’s development. It may have origins in basic survival skills. Various psychological defense mechanisms may be involved, the most mature and successful one being sublimation. Success of a defense-like sublimation may be viewed in terms of freedom from anxiety or from obsessive extremes that interfere with the individual’s well-being, important relationships, or physical or financial health. The author considers whether the characters in the film *The Big Year* exemplify such success or the lack of it. (*Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 2012;18:287–290)**

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It’s another hot and humid day in the Andean forests of Colombia. The shade of the canopy mitigates the heat. The lush foliage transpires and cools us somewhat, although it provides abundant hiding places for our quarry—an immense variety of brilliantly decorated birds that often tease us with their calls. Some are our familiar Northern summer residents (Blackburnian warblers everywhere) there for the winter. We are on a stony road, occasionally stepping aside for people walking or riding motor bikes or horses, some trailed by donkeys with milk cans or wood on their backs. We have spent several of our 10 days in rattling four-wheel drive vehicles piled precariously high with our luggage lurching through foot-deep potholes or crossing the face of landslides. A 4000-meter mountain pass lies in the days ahead. Our nights are sometimes spent in picturesque and comfortable hotels or inns, but several have been in sparsely furnished bunk houses with six people shar-

ing a single bathroom. Hot water for showering is never a sure thing. Oddly, the food is tastiest where the accommodations are most primitive.

Today has been especially frustrating. Our guide, the only Colombian we’ve met here who speaks English at all well, is working hard to find us several really rare birds to augment our life lists. Enchanted with the more common birds around us, some members of the small party have strayed away from him and he is irritated. My wife and I find our binoculars, sighting skills, and memories sorely inadequate to the challenge, although we are trying hard. I revert to doing something I do almost automatically in my profession—trying to figure out, why are we here, doing this?! Why do all the others do it? At least in this line of thinking, I have some competence—thus I can soothe my sense of inadequacy. And so germinates this article.

The origin of bird-watching probably lies deep in the history of our species, at least to judge from the appearance of birds in cave drawings. As a survival skill, it probably originated from early man’s reliance on keen eyesight and hearing to detect both prey and predator. Perhaps it evoked in our prehistoric ancestors the sense of awe and beauty that birds inspire in us today. That may have led at least some humans to enjoy watching rather than killing birds. Curiosity and the drive to study natural phenomena, whether for survival or for the gratification of obtaining and systematizing knowledge, led to the science of ornithology to which some people devote their whole professional lives.

Birding is a very serious form of bird-watching, engaged in by people from all walks of life, in which the aficionados go to great lengths to see as many species of birds as possible in their lifetime. They tally their finds in a “life list.” This inevitably

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becomes competitive—usually but not always a friendly competition.

It was in a pack of veteran birders that we found ourselves in Colombia. The group included eight people plus the guide. Several were in pursuit of enough birds to bring their life list to 3000, around a third of all the identified species in the world. One was in a scientific field that had taken him to every continent, and most of the rest had traveled widely in their leisure time on professional or in one case business incomes. We had become friends with one couple in Trinidad and Tobago 8 years earlier and had joined them in Ecuador several years later. That friendship led to this venture in Colombia, where we were told we would have the possibility of seeing as many as 350 species—which in fact we did, if we counted the times we saw the tail of the bird disappearing from our binoculars. Two birders had excellent spotting scopes, a great boon if the bird was inclined to sit still on a branch; the greatest coup was watching a bat-falcon consuming a bat on a snag a hundred or so meters away (and my wife spotted the bird first!). Exotic bird names ranged from the ant-pitta and the supercilious hemispingus to the booted racquet-tail and bearded helmetcrest hummingbirds.

So why were we there? My wife and I don't keep a life list, though if we wanted to take the time we could put one together from the dozens of checked bird lists and books in our travel stash. We don't count them—we just love to look at them. And it is exciting to see a new one, especially if it's uncommon or colorful. Birding has provided a focus for many trips to beautiful parts of the Americas and Europe. The landscapes of Andean Colombia are breathtaking (especially while traversing a landslide in a rickety four-wheel-drive.) We haven't had the time or gigantic lenses to spend hours or days or countless megabytes to get just the right photograph of most of these beauties, but we do luck out from time to time with a keeper. For us, birding is part of a love of nature, amazing landscapes, and curiosity about other places. It's no surprise that most of the birders we have met are ardent conservationists with deep concern about deforestation and human-aggravated climate change.

A knowledge of one's full motivations, back to their roots, is approachable only with very deep psychoanalysis, but we can glimpse some of them maturely without shame. The basic pleasures of infancy evolve and extend throughout life, even though our adult

egos tend to mask their origins—the pleasures of looking, tasting, bodily functions, exploring the delightful albeit scary new sensations of our body and our environment. The love of “Mother Earth” and her wonders may hit at a line of development that started with the first emotional and physical bonding of infancy. From the reaction formations of our anal phases we draw the mastery entailed in counting and organizing our observations. From the phallic-oedipal phases come the curiosity to see what is usually hidden from view, the voyeurism of watching the sex lives of the birds, the competitiveness of seeing more than our rivals each day and comparing our life lists. (This may also remind some of the tally of conquests bragged about by some adolescents and swinging singles.) People glance enviously at the long lenses of the other birders...

Identification with parents or teachers may have steered us to a strong emotional investment in nature and in finding and identifying its creatures. Or a powerful motivating force could be the undoing of an overwhelming trauma or childhood cruelty involving birds. The defense mechanism of reaction formation blunts the sexual excitement of looking at the private activities of exotic birds in their mating plumage or the murderous aggression of killing ducks as they migrate. With the instinctual aspects sufficiently neutralized, we develop a sort of scientific detachment but that still allows us the surprising delights of exploration. Practically everything we do in maturity is the outcome of this kind of transmutation of childhood motivations through natural defense mechanisms and integration with ego and superego functions. We are rarely fully aware of what led us into our occupations, our choice of a mate, or our hobbies and interests.

Where we are in adult life also influences our interests. An avocation like birding helps us deal with our life issues. While reveling in the profusion of migrating spring birds such as warblers, orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and cuckoos at a preserve in western Ohio where they concentrate in mid-May before crossing Lake Erie, I became acquainted with a retired pediatric pathologist who, like many other birders there, had come a great distance for the display. He had taken up birding only a few years earlier after he retired. He now had a superb camera, top-notch binoculars, and 200 bird books in his collection. He took high-resolution photos by the thousands and would pore over them to find the best. He said he had come

to the realization that adjusting to his retirement had been difficult and that, lo and behold: he was now deeply immersed in a hobby that entailed looking through powerful optics to discern small differences and to identify and name what he was seeing. Just like being a pathologist, expressing the same motivations. He perceptively realized how he had constructively coped with his loss and his mourning.

Some folks go on birding trips just because it's an opportunity to go to an unusual spot. Some good friends went with us to Trinidad mainly because it was a chance to return to the site of their long-ago honeymoon. For other birders we have encountered, a birding trip, like any vacation, can be an escape from a burdensome situation at home. Although it brings great pleasure and rejuvenation, such a respite may be tinged with anxiety and guilt because one can't wholly leave the worry and sense of responsibility behind. The sense of inner conflict is painful.

Like any other deeply invested human activity, birding is subject to excesses. When it becomes such an obsession that it intrudes on one's close relationships or work life, trouble looms. Great feats have been accomplished by those who sought to climb to the top of the world, reach the poles, sail or fly around the world, explore the powers of radiation—but many people have destroyed their lives in such efforts. There is a price.

Much of the humor and pathos in the movie *The Big Year*, released in 2011, is drawn from the way flawed human beings engage in the competitive nature of big-league birding. It is based on a true story. Three men set out to win the title of seeing the most birds in North America in the course of a new year. With a "big year" count of 732, Kenny Bostick (played by Owen Wilson) is the reigning champion, a ruthlessly competitive, vigorous, handsome man who is condescendingly good-natured to the other birders, but crafty. When his pre-eminence is threatened, he resorts to dirty tricks to impede the others' access and stretches the limits of "the honor system" on which the competition rests. His phallic narcissism dominates his world. Birding has already cost him one marriage and, in the movie, he blindly but callously destroys his current marriage to a beautiful and loving woman who wants a baby. One suspects that he cannot yield center stage to a wife or child. He asserts that he is "the greatest birder in the world" and that "this is what I'll be remembered for." Indeed so. Birding for him is not a sublimation but rather a

total investment in a desperate defense against profound insecurity and a hollow sense of self, with poorly developed object relations.

Stu Preissler (played by Steve Martin) is the CEO of a business "empire" in crisis. But he is struggling with a personal conflict between the zest of beating his rivals in business and a longing to retire to his family and his interest in birding. Going for the top count in a "big year" would be a wonderful compromise through the defense of displacement—leaving the business world but still having the narcissistic gratification of being the top dog. Enormous business deals are pending and his lieutenants are frantic, repeatedly trying to get him back to participate in crucial, hard-nosed negotiations. His wise and understanding wife, perhaps a bit crafty herself, encourages him to go for it with the birding. "Carpe annum!" she says; "when men stop competing they die."

The story is told through the voice of Brad Harris (played by Jack Black.) He is a somewhat passive man, a drop-out from graduate school, divorced, bored, and unsettled in a string of technical jobs, almost broke and dependent on his parents. For him, the birding competition seems to be a way of reaching for something special to escape from his drab existence, feelings of failure, and low self-esteem. It's the one thing that turns him on. He has a special talent for bird calls and knows them all. His grumpy father derides his passion for birding, but his mother quietly supports it and helps him with his travel plans, suggesting some oedipal undertones.

As the year progresses, the three birders become aware of each other's efforts and a cut-throat rivalry develops—sometimes friendly and good-natured, sometimes ugly. The two challengers eventually collaborate in the effort to defeat the narcissistic hunk who holds the title. Their friendship is strained when they discover that they both are surreptitiously competing for the "big year" title, but Stu visibly mellows when he begins to understand Brad's situation. He pays some of his expenses and encourages him not to give up his ambitions both for the birding title and for the affections of a quirky, cute fellow birder who can match him bird call for bird call but already has a boyfriend. Stu becomes a father figure for Brad. As the year passes, he himself becomes a grandfather and takes time from the competition to meet his namesake in a new phase of the life cycle. Brad's relationship with his own father improves greatly when his father, recovering from a heart attack, catches the competi-

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tive spirit of the “big year” and has the delight of finding a rare bird for Brad—an oedipal resolution.

Inevitably, the movie is more about the people than the birds, although the birds play a starring role, including a dazzling roll of photos of the 755 birds that eventually win the competition. In this way, all of the principal characters struggle with their own natures, what birding means to them, and how it affects their lives. If you want to find out who wins, see the movie. It's safe to say that sublimation becomes more “successful” as a maturational step for Stu and Brad than it does for Kenny.

On a less grand scale, our patients come to us with painfully disrupted lives when balance is lost in the pursuit of a strongly invested activity, whether birding, building a huge model railroad layout, pursuing an unattainable love object, or sailing around the world. The task of the psychotherapist is to collaborate with the patient in honestly exploring the moti-

vations and consequences of such an intense mental investment in order that the patient—and the patient only—can make fully informed choices. We are there to help the patient deal with disturbed thinking and emotions but not to run the patient's life.

In psychotherapy, no part of human life should be immune from tactful inquiry. What a person is most invested in is likely to be closest to the root of the problem. What are the associations in memory? What are the conscious and not-so-conscious motivations? What are the sources of pleasure and guilt and shame? What went wrong? What defenses are involved, and what do they defend against? What benefits accrue from the activity? What are the conflicts and how can they be resolved without losing those benefits? Considering these questions may bring relief and ease the way for our patients to pursue their passions with less anxiety-producing conflict and collateral damage.