

In Search of the Painted Bunting: (Mis) Adventures of a Birdwatching Family

Eldon N. Spady

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Humorous notes on family outings disguised as bird-watching adventures illumine the bonds of family.

In Search of the Painted Bunting: (Mis)Adventures of a Birdwatching Family is a humorous chronicle of an extended family bouncing around the back roads of America in rented twelve-passenger vans. The purpose is bird watching, but the result is a roster of typical family vacations where what can go wrong does go wrong. It is a loving look at family and its foibles.

Eldon N. Spady is the author, ringleader, and driver of the various vans in the family's true adventures. He writes with an almost slapstick sense of humor, belittling himself ("I'm Eldon and, well, the less said the better"), the family's purpose, the places they sleep and eat ("We finally settled on the Pizza Inn as the least scary of the lot"), but not the birds. Here, birds are king, in all their variations.

Spady addresses seven trips taken by his family of bird lovers and, in the process, he provides useful information: directions to state parks, Audubon areas, preserves, and, believe it or not, people's homes, where their gardens or feeders have become renowned on the bird circuit as productive places to stop and watch.

Most of the adventures are American road trips—via rental vans and inexpensive motels—but the family's trip to Costa Rica breaks the mold of the commonplace with a packaged expedition that caters to birders by pampering them with guides, good food, and elegant lodging. Spady makes the point that the business of tourism has recognized the potential of bird watching as an economic activity.

The joy that can be family rings true in this book. The family members here, like all relations, love bickering, complaining, shouting for food from the back row of seats, and never letting rest the fact that Spady, while driving through southeastern Arizona, runs over an acorn woodpecker. Humor is the real voice of this book, but like all strong traits, it can be both positive and negative. In the long run, it becomes predictable and takes away from the narrative unity of the book.

"Now I must explain something embarrassing about my family birding group. Just by showing up, we seem to instantly turn a hot birding area into a mediocre one." This statement may be for effect, not fact, for each chapter that recounts the misadventures of a particular trip concludes with a list of birds seen on the tour. The lists are not slight, and at the end of the book, Spady has included a consolidated look at sightings amounting to a full six and a half double-columned pages.

In Search of the Painted Bunting is a lighthearted and light-handed book with an undercurrent of handy data for the birder. As Spady says, "Everyone defines fun in his or her own way, but for me and my family, fun is the result of getting together and spending time being ourselves. In our case, birding is our excuse."

PETE WARZEL (October 1, 2013)

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