

George Rossman

At the end of the Caltech bird walk, we encounter memorials to (mostly) recently deceased faculty members posted on the flag-pole at the southern end of the Millikan reflecting pool. This week there was a note commemorating George Rossman, a long-time professor in the Division of Geological and Planetary Sciences and I was asked if I knew him (we hail from the same Division, so it was a logical query). I demurred, but this was a dodge. I just didn't feel, within that moment, that I could talk about George. Even the walk had been a pensive shadow in his absence. It is still too raw, but, yes, I knew George and I will try in this note to give a sense of him from a mostly birding perspective.

George came on the Caltech bird walk only when school was out of session and he happened to be in town, and he never went more than once or twice a year. Yet George's Caltech bird walk was like the coming of Christmas for a six-year-old. He would mention it with fond anticipation months before it happened. George didn't have the big participation numbers of Alan or Vivica and yet he was a highly anticipated walker with an avid interest in birds. He read the bird walk reports religiously and was interested in any special species acquired during the walk, often pestering me for pre-report highlights.

George and I would share "best birds," if we hadn't interacted in the previous week or two, but best bird interactions could happen anytime. If one of us had a particularly interesting bird, he would stop the other in the middle of the hallway and blurt out "best bird"! The victim of one of these attacks would struggle to come up with something mildly interesting while the other would launch into his latest exotic travel or yard bird. One week it was a Honduran yellow-throated toucan. I countered another time with a British cuckoo. George had a stellar's sea eagle. I had a parasitic jaeger. He had an Adelie penguin. I had a bar-tailed godwit. He had an Iceland gull. I had a slanging match with a long-tailed grackle that I lost. George had a blue-footed booby and the orange-red globe of a frigate bird, not seen in full, but unmistakable.

Although the exotic may be salient, most of our best birds were local and often observed in or from our yards. George's favorite was a scarlet tanager who, for several years, faithfully returned to his yard. The tanager was not quite a vagrant. You can find southern California dots for them in species maps, but he was still a regional rarity and George never tired of describing sightings. For me, it was August, a great-horned owl (and, yes, I gave him a name), who nested in my yard for several years until a big Santa Ana wind knocked down the abandoned hawks' nest he'd been using. August was a relatively common bird for southern California, but he had a great character, aside from the annoying fact that he wouldn't eat any of the rats that passed through my yard. I would encounter the odd cast

pellet of bone and gray fur, telling me that other yards were a lucky part of the greater August rodent reduction program.

Sometimes a “best bird” would be a bird-related observation instead of an odd bird. One example led George to come into my office and note that he had cleaned out his bird boxes over the weekend, something one should do annually, and every one of them was stuffed with sticks. This was a classic example of spoiling by a wren. A male house wren, having attracted a mate to one hole, will often proceed to spoil every other potentially competitive hole within 20 meters or so by filling the cavities with twigs. I had a house finch story. One day, I saw a pair of house finches next to the patio door. They were lifting off from a standing start and flying up and backwards in a loop. I thought this was very strange behavior until I noticed a juvenile finch in the planter next to the house. He was stuck on a twig and trying to get off it by flapping wildly, which wasn’t working. His parents were trying to tell him that he could get off that stick by flying up and backwards. He wasn’t getting the message, but there was still a happy ending as I went out and snapped the twig underneath the juvenile. After recovering from the shock, he flew off and, I hope, had a long and fine finch’s life. Another time, George noted that his local, red-shouldered hawk had taken to perching on the corner of his roof. He got on a ladder to see if there was an obvious attraction and discovered an excellent view of his neighbor’s classic bamboo-fed, drip pool. Eventually, he mentions this behavior to his neighbor and a bush appears to break the line of sight. The red-shouldered hawk leaves to find another, more productive, perch.

Although our observations emphasized the living, dead birds also had a place. We both had dirty windows to cut down on bird strikes. When I first moved into my house, I kept the windows clean and killed two or three birds a year; with dirty windows it was more like one every four or five years. George once encountered two dead juvenile red-tailed hawks on a walk near his home. Neither had been eaten but they both had slashed throats. Our conclusion was that this likely reflected a great horned owl cutting down potential competition for rodents. That’s hard to match, but I described a western shriek owl that had been struck by a car and then there were gifts from Hank, our neighbors’ ginger cat. Once he left a rat (I never told Kathleen about that one), but usually he would leave small birds, all with beaks and tails carefully lined up in the runnel between two bricks and perpendicular to the door. My only yard bird “sighting” of a vesper sparrow was one of Hank’s victims.

Although I have emphasized birds since this is for the bird walk group, I don’t want to leave the impression that George and I only talked about birds. We coauthored more than a dozen papers on new minerals in meteorites, so I was involved in a statistically significant (but small) part of his scientific output. In his world of science, George was basically a

spectroscopist and he pursued color and structure with passion. Many of his stories were mineralogical, rather than feathered, and our interactions driven by his latest acquisition for the Division through a trade or a donation from one of George's seemingly infinite collection of friends and contacts in the exotic mineral/jewelry community. One morning there was a donated tray of strangely orange garnets that drew me into his office. Another time, he looks up from his desk, sees me and waves me into his office. He holds a little Cheshire cat's smile as he pulls out a box with dozens of little diamonds covering a kaleidoscope of colors that he had obtained in trade for a very nice copper crystal held by the Division. "It was gorgeous," he said, "but we still have nine of equal quality". Then there was a slab of lavender(!) jade that a general from Myanmar's junta had given to him. He had stories of slinking through a rough-cut muddy tunnel in Brazil ending in a massive cavity filled with amethyst or watching his Myanmar guide, the head of Mines in Myanmar, dicker for a cup of mineral chips that George wanted, some of whom eventually wended their way into George's publications.

To me, George epitomizes what a scientist is supposed to be. There is a scientific niche used to gain insight within multiple fields common to many high-quality scientists, but George also found ways to bring color to others outside that insular professional community. George's annual gem show in the chemistry department was legendary and he gave many talks to local mineral clubs, somehow always finding the right level of discourse. George took his interactions with students very seriously and he introduced generations of them to spectroscopy and color, but the most telling student interaction for me was watching George go into Mr. Science mode for a pair of nonscientific parents. It wasn't something you would normally expect of a faculty member, but it was something that came naturally to George. To the best of my knowledge, George was the most outwardly and comfortably engaged personality among the Geology faculty. He found practically everything and just about anybody interesting.

As I look at the anecdotes listed above, I can feel the interludes of passing time they capture and some of the tangencies of our lives, but they still seem to form a growing cloth. Ah, George. I try, but I cannot halve a word for you. I pause beside. I mouth the unpalatable. I touch the sorrow and walk away, but it follows me, unrelenting until, at last, I concede what I cannot grasp. It is just

George

was.