

Published September 13th, 2023

The art of birdwatching highlighted in book of poetry

By Alison Burns

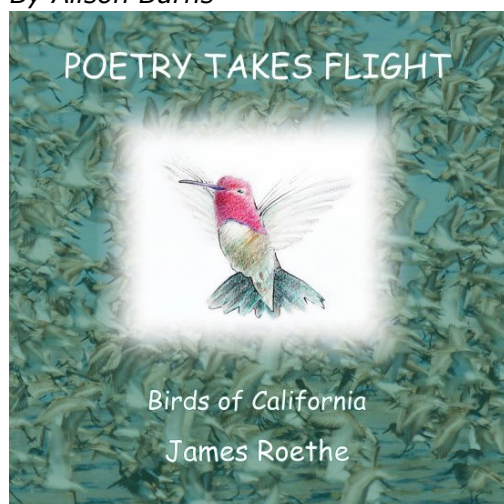


Image provided

In 2020, as the world learned to adjust to the COVID-19 lockdown, wild bird seed suddenly began to disappear off pet shop shelves, while sales of birdbaths and hummingbird feeders almost doubled. The rest of the world had discovered what Jim Roethe, longtime member of the Golden Gate Audubon Society, had known for decades: the BP-lowering, stress-relieving, endlessly fascinating art of birdwatching.

Roethe, a semi-retired attorney, has spent around 50 years hiking and birding in the East Bay Regional Park system, and on Aug. 5 he was joined by a rapt audience at Orinda Books to present "Poetry Takes Flight: Birds of California."

This latest book is Roethe's sixth, and the first to showcase his self-penned poems, which feature alongside the photographs and captions of the 77 birds featured in the book - each of which has been spotted by Roethe either on his NorCal walks, in his Orinda backyard or during the Audubon Society's North Orinda Christmas Bird Counts that he sometimes leads.

Roethe spoke of waking in his boyhood home to the sound of birdsong and discovering that his morning soundtrack came from the Red-winged Blackbird. Roethe's accompanying video clip, borrowed from the internet, featured a mile of trees, on whose bare branches sat half a million blackbirds in full-throated song, "like a river of birds flowing."

Anna's Hummingbird came next, with a PBS video clip that will probably make it hard to glimpse this demure little bird ever again without recalling the male's kamikaze mating ritual: traveling at 400 times its own length every second, he dives toward his mate so fast that the air produces a sound which the female apparently finds irresistible, lending a whole new meaning to the idea of "speed dating."

Roethe told a tale of walking the Orinda Country Club golf course and, seeing an empty hollow in a nearby tree, drew close to look inside. His poem begins: "Hollow tree I see up yonder, what could be its use I ponder/Might the tree be sick I wonder, or just a slight on tree's décor?"

His head in the hollow, our plucky poet was forced to leap back several feet when an enormous Mama Turkey Vulture shot out straight into his face. However, once over the shock, Roethe braved another inspection and discovered two fluffy fledglings staring back at him, photos of which appear in the book.

Stanza three concludes with the words "Mother watching patiently/Wants me gone forevermore."

Roethe spoke about his varied writing style throughout the book, revealing that in this case he was aiming to write "to the meter of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven.'"

He also took a stab at writing Japanese haikus, the three-line unrhymed poem with a five-seven-five syllable pattern. It's a difficult poetic form to master but Roethe obviously studied it well, ensuring that his final line concluded with the traditional "cutting word" and bestowing this unique cadence on America's national bird, the Bald Eagle.

This time, Roethe showed a video of a Bald Eagle hovering over water, its eye on a huge hake below. Seamlessly, the bird dives down, grabs the massive fish (estimated to be the same weight as the eagle) and soars back up into the sky. Apparently there's fast food . and then there's not-quite-fast-enough food.

There are many more fascinating birds in this book, each with its own unique story. Why, for instance, is the Common Poorwill unfairly labeled a "goatsucker"? Which well-camouflaged bird possesses the unique talent to put itself into a state of torpor for minutes or even months? And whose elongated white and orange bill has earned him the moniker "Skunkhead Coot"?

Jim Roethe's passion for his subject is evident on every page, and that passion surely ignited the same feeling in his audience: one woman asked how to get started with birdwatching. After several moments, Roethe replied "get out of the house ... get onto the trail, buy a pair of 'not too expensive but not cheap' binoculars - and just be observant."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA