



Sheryl DeVore and friend © Steve Reischel

You may have noticed a new subtitle for the “Dimensions” column: “Essays on Bird and Human Behavior”. Let me take this opportunity to explain a bit more about “Dimensions” and to invite you to submit stories and ideas for this column. As many of you know, “Dimensions” had its origins in the popular “Joy of Birding” column, which was edited for many years by Chuck Bernstein. Chuck’s column emphasized the human dimension of birding, and it focused in particular on the joy of birdfinding.

“Dimensions”, too, emphasizes the human dimension—indeed the many human dimensions—of birding. We look at the pure, primal joy of birdfinding, yes, but we also reflect on discoveries about oneself as a birder, about other birders, and about the lives and ways of the birds themselves. Through it all, our objective is to look at the intersections and interactions between birders and the birds they watch.

I welcome your articles, input, and suggestions for subjects in this still-evolving column.

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— Sheryl DeVore

Birding with Kalpana

by Cynthia Tuthill[†] and Carolynn Conley[‡]

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CT began birding in earnest when Kalpana Chawla handed her a pair of binoculars and a field guide. She has now joined a local birding class in the San Francisco Bay area and has created a bird-friendly back yard. Memorable treks have included Kauai for Laysan Albatrosses, Nebraska for Sandhill Cranes, and Arizona for Painted Redstarts.

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CC became interested in birds at St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, where she watched pelicans for hours. She’s working to improve her identification skills and enjoys listing her sightings after every trip.

It is a testament to her profound love of birds, as well as to her incredible powers of persuasion, that the Columbia shuttle astronaut Kalpana Chawla, who died tragically 16 minutes before landing on earth, was able to mold us into birders.

Over our years of friendship, we’d shared intimate times—flying, hiking, reading, ecological philosophizing. But for some reason, the two of us rarely thought about birds, nor considered that people spent hours watching them.

CT: Kalpana and I met in 1989, when we both were learning to fly small planes in Palo Alto, California. Our flight instructor introduced us to each other. We became close friends as we took long trips in our planes, slept

under the wing, and hiked the local hills. We shared an abiding interest in the natural sciences and dreamed of becoming astronauts (Kalpana was an aerospace engineer). We remained close even after she moved to Houston in 1995 to join the astronaut program.

In fact, she emailed me from her first trip up on the Shuttle, in 1997:

I suppose we are due for another trip together. Wish you had been able to come on this one.

The Earth view is magnificent.

Sunrises and sunsets are so dramatic ... as if in fast-forward, the colors change ... from black, to dark hues of violet and blue, and then orange and red ... sharp colors of sunrise with Moon hanging just below, the whole silhouette visible behind the crescent ... looking out the window, watching the Earth unroll its secret islands, beautiful atolls, much like jewels, and rivers and mountains; it's like a fairy tale ... night passes ... so calm ... august ... Earth covered with thunderstorms, lightning in soft instantaneous sprays, city lights peeping through ... and a star-studded dome of night sky ...

Curiously, I had not been aware of the depth of Kalpana's interest in birding until 2001, when she and I went hiking in Arizona.

Kalpana began her campaign subtly. Our first destination was the Oak Creek Canyon near Sedona. As we started along the trail, she halted under a stand of trees and gazed upward through a pair of binoculars.

"Oh, Cynthia ... there's a Painted Redstart!" she said.

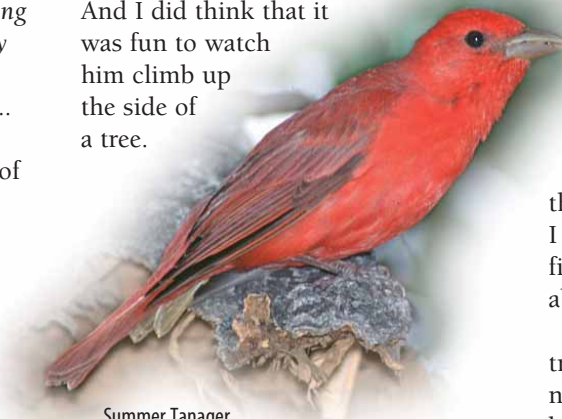
"That's nice," I replied. What was she doing? On all of our hiking trips, it had always been important to go fast and far. Halting had never been

an option, except to look at something spectacular. I had never thought of birds as something to look at. They were awfully hard to see, after all.



Painted Redstart.
Santa Catalina Mountains,
Arizona; September 1992. © Rick and Nora Bowers.

Kalpana handed me her binoculars, but the bird she'd seen had moved. Later she pointed out Cliff Swallows, and I tried, but couldn't manage to see them as they moved so swiftly. That day, the only bird I actually saw in the binoculars was a Brown Creeper. It moved slowly enough for me to catch a glimpse. And I did think that it was fun to watch him climb up the side of a tree.



Summer Tanager.
Morongo Valley, California; May 1995. © Brian E. Small.

That seemed unusual and interesting. Still, this was so different from the serious, exhilarating marches (or "hikes from hell", as my husband Jim used to call our rapid—even rabid—hiking style) that I had come to expect.

The next day we drove up to the

Grand Canyon. Now we would get back to the usual. But again, Kalpana was wearing her binoculars and continued to stop every few minutes, *oohing* and *aahing* quite a bit.

At this rate, I thought, we were going to have to spend the night at the bottom of the canyon. Luckily there were still beds available at the Phantom Ranch when we arrived late in the afternoon, and we were able to climb back out of the canyon the next day.

But in the meanwhile, Kalpana was wandering about the canyon floor with those binoculars. At one point I insisted that she put the binoculars down to answer a question, regarding what kind of tea she wanted. She was incesed.

"Now you've made me lose the Summer Tanager," she said. "And you've got to find it again."

She handed me the binoculars. I laughed, thinking she was joking. She wasn't.

"But how could I possibly find one particular bird among all the millions of trees at the bottom of this canyon? He's probably flown miles away by now!"

"Well, then, you'd better start looking," she said. "It's red."

It took me quite a while to find this red bird, and I was a bit irritated. I couldn't imagine why it mattered to find it, and I couldn't imagine being able to find it.

But then, I saw a flick of red in a tree nearby. It was a bird, and it was not flying away. It was sitting on a branch. I put the binoculars to my eyes, and focused them ...

The bird was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen. I had never known how attractive birds can appear, when you focus on the details. Field guide in hand, Kalpana showed me how this bird matched the drawing, from the remarkable rosy-red of

its body, to its shape and stature, and to the overall size that separated it from other birds. She pointed out other major “field marks” to look for on birds—eye-stripes, wing color, bill and leg color. Her inquiring, scientific mind spilled over into her hobby.

As we hiked out of the canyon early the next morning in the dark, Kalpana shared her fascination with birds and her love for them as fellow creatures on this planet. Birding was another aspect of her deep appreciation of the natural world, of her interest in ecology and in protecting the environment.

As soon as we returned, Kalpana recommended I buy binoculars and the National Geographic Society *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*.

CC: Kalpana and I met after she moved to Houston for her astronaut training. We worked in the same building at the NASA Johnson Space Center. We were both vegetarians, and we both loved the outdoors. We lived less than ten miles from each other, which made it convenient for us to meet before dawn to go birding.

In India, where she was born, Kalpana showed an early love of nature and birds. She spent hours with her childhood friend, Daisy, playing outdoors. For Kalpana’s sixteenth birthday, Daisy gave her the book, *Xenia Field’s Gardening Week by Week*. Kalpana carried this tall, oversized book to America, when she came for graduate school in aerospace engi-



Grand Canyon, Arizona; 2001. © Cynthia Tuthill.

neering in Texas in 1982. She kept it with her birding and gardening books. It gave gardening tips and plantings for each week of the year, week by week. She gave this treasured book to her oldest sister in recognition of her sister’s growing interest in birding, gardening, and the environment. Kalpana eventually developed a library of books on trees, bulbs, wildflowers, habitat and shade gardening, ponds, annuals, and birds’ habitats and nests.

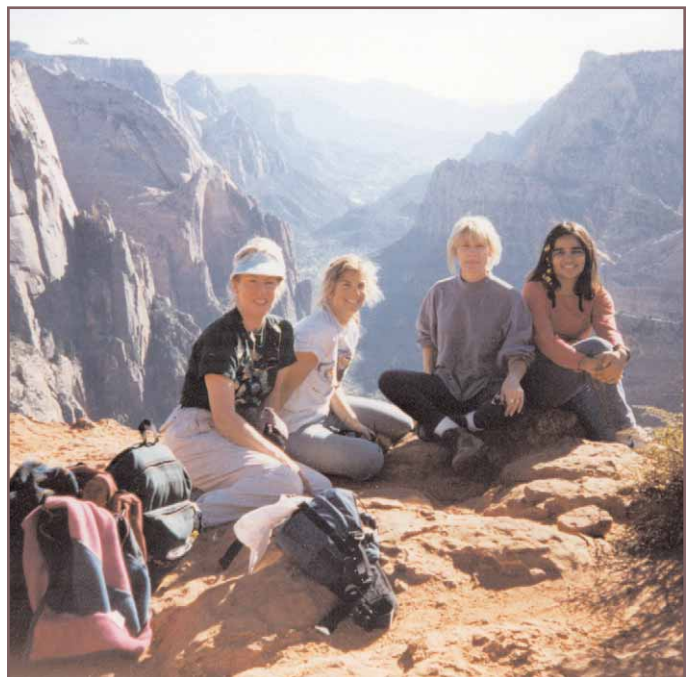
Kalpana and her oldest sister started birding about the

same time, half a world away from each other on two different continents, North America and Asia. Their interests grew slowly and gave them wonderful moments to share with each other via email. Kalpana enjoyed birding—even if it was just outside her office window at her first job with the NASA Ames Research Center in northern California. Outside her office window, in a tree, was a bird’s nest. She watched the whole affair, from nest building, through the

hatching and all the feedings, to the flight of the offspring and the proud departure of the successful parents.

CT: Kalpana loved her neighborhood birds. For her home, Kalpana found a true birder’s-paradise. In time she installed up to a dozen bird feeders. At first she and anyone she could lure over to the window would get lost at the bird feeders. There were huge plate-glass windows facing out toward the backyard, filled with foliage, water baths, and bird feeders of all types. Inside the house was a special station for bird watching: two comfortable sling chairs, with a short bookshelf running along the floor laden with bird books, various pairs of binoculars, pads of paper, and pens. We sat and watched the birds for hours, drinking tea, and talking amid the Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Tufted Titmouses, Blue Jays, and Carolina Chickadees.

CC: Kalpana grew from the lessons she learned from birds. She got information from the Texas WaterSmart



Kalpana Chawla and friends. Zion National Park, Utah; 1995. © Cynthia Tuthill.

program about conserving water and reintroducing native plants. She let part of her yard go natural, which is difficult to do in Houston, with so many strict home owner association rules and laws. She reintroduced native plants—those that would attract birds and butterflies.

CT: Kalpana didn't confine her birding just to her backyard, of course. She loved going on birding trips. She once took Jim and me to Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, on the Texas coastal bend, where we reveled in the huge flocks of ibises (Glossy, White-faced, and White), herons (Tricolored, Little Blue, and Great Blue), egrets (Snowy and Great), Roseate Spoonbills, and Sandhill Cranes. We saw undulating lines of flying Snow Geese, and we spotted a Northern Harrier gracefully flying over the fields. And there was a Crested Cara-cara, an American Kestrel, a Purple Gallinule, and a Boat-tailed Grackle.

Kalpana inspired me to take my son on a birding trip to the Rowe Sanctuary in Nebraska one March, to see the Sandhill Cranes. We delighted in the sight and sound of tens of thousands of cranes settling along the river, just as Kalpana had delighted in them earlier.

Once, during my earliest days as a birder, Kalpana visited me in California and suggested we go for a run out at the Palo Alto Baylands. It was pouring rain, so we walked more than ran. She pointed out some coots in the waterways, and I was impressed. How did she *know* they were coots—from so far away and in the rain? I thought she was being modest when she said that it really wasn't a difficult identification, and instead of laughing at me, she patiently pointed out the salient marks of the bird—the shape and color of the beak, the overall body shape, and the behavior.

Kalpana was an extremely patient teacher. She didn't mind if your level of knowledge was abysmal. She was always helpful and generous with her time.

CC: I also had this experience with Kalpana. On one of our early outings she would have me describe every de-



Zion National Park, Utah; 1995. © Ellen Kane.

tail of a bird while she looked between books until she found the exact species. To keep in shape for her backpacking trips, she sometimes would carry a backpack filled with bird books. She liked to read *The Birds of Texas* by J.L. Treten. And she loved the possibilities for seasonal sightings of migrating birds in Texas.

“Okay, now tell me about its eyes. Is there a ring around them? What color is the eye-line? What colors go around the neck? Any color on the front of the wing, the shoulder, the rump, the tail?”

What a keen sense of observation she had.

CT: As I became more and more interested in birding, Kalpana helped to “groom” me. She recommended that I read a little book called *Rare Encounters with Ordinary Birds* so that I wouldn't forget to enjoy even the typical garden-variety birds that we can see in our own backyards or within city limits. She never “looked down” on any birds. I pointed out a starling to her once, and she responded, “What beautiful plumage!”

Kalpana had a deep and serious interest in ecology and in the protection of birds and other animals from human encroachment. I know that, as part of her legacy, she would have wanted for this imperative to be passed on. She suggested that I read *The Ghost with Trembling Wings*, a lovely and poignant story of endangered birds, by Scott Weidensaul, as well as another similarly poignant book, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, by Christopher Cokinos.

One of her favorite books was *The Eye of the Albatross* by Carl Safina. After reading the part about the Laysan Albatrosses having returned to Kauai, now that there is a biological reserve there, I got the chance to go to Hawaii last January with my family. Kalpana and I had so longed to see albatrosses. Imagine my rapture when Jim and I not only saw albatrosses, but also met them on a lawn, where they preened and tapped their bills together and allowed us to enjoy their company at rather close range. I was so excited that I sent an email to Kalpana, who was then up in the space shuttle, with an attached photo of the gorgeous birds' faces and eyes:

I've really been enjoying watching you up there, and I feel very close to you. Thank you for being such a wonderful friend. Also, we were so lucky to have some really

close personal time with two albatrosses on Kauai ...

Being near these birds touches people with something so profound it seems spiritual "... embodying the slow sweep of deep time in the splendor of their magisterial seascape... being in their presence infused a penetrating sensation of ... serenity ... truly awesome envoys of the magnificence of life on this ocean planet" (Carl Safina)

And her reply, sent from the shuttle:

"You! No ordinary mortal, you!" [It was a quotation, referring to seeing an albatross for the first time, that both of us knew.]

I brought Safina's Song for the Blue Ocean with me. Haven't opened it yet. It is with me.

You are sweet. There are so many red deserts out there, Cynthia. So many oceans. So many islands. What about the wildlife? One can't sense it at all from here. There is an amazing beauty from here. And an amazing lack of a connection with the wild. I think about it a lot.

More than just the birds themselves, Kalpana taught us that birding is also about people and relationships. She was so deeply touched by this magnificent community of souls. She loved sharing her experiences and learning from others. And it was because of her keen enjoyment of the company of birders that I signed up for birding classes for Jim

and me. On 1 February 2003 we were driving toward our first birding class field trip, when we were called home. I had been sad that I wasn't going to be able to watch the shuttle landing that morning, but I knew that Kalpana would have approved of my missing it due to a birding adventure.

CC: The day that Kalpana passed from a sparkle of light on earth to a



Laysan Albatrosses. Kauai, Hawaii; 2003. © James Orr.

glow in the heavens, I was waiting at the NASA Kennedy Space Center landing site to watch her safe landing. In shock, I did not want to drive, so I spent the day wandering through the visitors' center. To honor her, I spent several hours at the youth education center, doing the hands-on experiments. The in-

structor even let me sit through a lecture and demonstration after the high school kids voted to continue the program in recognition of what the Columbia crew stood for. After the class I walked around the small lake by the Astronaut Memorial. Half way around I was faced by a Great Blue Heron. There was a two-foot-high fence between the heron and me. I crawled up to the fence

and gazed at the bird, which was only about fifteen feet from me. After ten minutes, I left. The bird remained and flew away a little later. On nature walks with Kalpana, I had seen many Great Blues, but I had never been this close to one.

CT and CC: At the memorial service for the Columbia astronauts held in Houston, a woodpecker remained in a tree behind the podium during the entire ceremony, uttering its characteristic chatters and calls throughout. Later we talked excitedly with Kalpana's sisters about it: We knew that woodpecker was Kalpana's spirit. She was here, and she

will always be here. We see her in the petite and ever-alert Horned Larks, with their quiet little tinkling noises, as we hike Mission Peak. And we felt her presence as the vultures circled in intricate designs overhead just after the memorial we held for her in Zion National Park.