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His & Her Birders?

.....One Man's Dogged Strategy To Turn His Wife Into a Super Birder

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Birders may divide themselves into two groups:

Ones who share a mutual interest in birding with a spouse (or significant "other" partner).

Other birders merely **WISH** their partner liked to bird.

Count me lucky. I'm in the former group.

Or, as my birding friends like to playfully suggest, I've been granted The Alladin's Lamp of Life's Three Wishes. One of my wishes has come true: My wife enjoys birding.

Not that avian curiosity was always the case for Linda. I failed initially to turn her into an Instant Super Birder. But I shouldn't be too hard on myself. It's the rare birding novice who gets bitten so fine, so deeply, that she shares your age-old passion for birding soon after being introduced to a pair of binoculars.

(Internal deck or pull quote: “It’s the rare birding novice who gets bitten so fine, so deeply, that she shares your age-old passion for birding soon after being introduced to a pair of binoculars.”)

Which is why I look back and view my initial proselytization effort as an unsuccessful crusade with, nonetheless, good intentions. I reckon there’s worse things a husband could coax his spouse to enjoy than birding. Besides, I’m accustomed to the role as a birding evangelist. Having taught birding field skills to a host of beginners over the years in adult education settings and at birding conferences, I’m expected to be an inspiring birding instructor afield. However, when it came to my own spouse, I, the avian teacher, executed a poor curriculum plan to my audience of one.

She quickly sniffed out my cunning plot to convert her into a birder while we were still dating. By surprising Linda one morning with the gift of an excellent pair of shiny new binoculars, I expected adulation and hugs of appreciation. Instead, I noticed disinterest. A slight furrow appeared on her brow.

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The following week, she hesitated before unwrapping another present: the latest birding field guide. I remained unrelenting, persistent, and, actually, oblivious. Because, soon after, I poured it on even more by giving her a custom birder's fanny pack and vest. Whoops. Wrong moves. Bad strategy. Gifts aplenty gone a rye.

All the birding gear festooned on her at one time was an overdose.

Weaning her with periodic flavorful sips of birding would have allowed her to gradually fall in love with it. Instead, I asked her to chug a potion heavy with an aftertaste reeking of my true intentions. In other words, Linda correctly interpreted my overtures as ones that would make her my clone — a *tours de force* with undivided binocular vision 24/7/365.

Of course, I denied any such intentions. I was *NOT* attempting to hypnotize her into all things avian, as she feared. Later, I fessed up to the truth. She had a point. Denial and defensiveness on my part were not going to help me coax her onto the trail.

What *finally* spurred her to accept my avian hand in shared binocular matrimony until death do us part?

Someone cute joined our family. She took a lot of my wife's constant care and attention. But the freshly-heard pitter-patter of footsteps in our house did not belong to whom you might think. There were no chocolate cigars passed out to friends and co-workers. Milk bones would have been more apt.

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Our new toddler was an angelic black lab named Sierra. We chose her from a motley crew of canine orphans at a local pet store’s annual Doggy Adoption Day. Promptly, Linda began to spend almost every leisure moment with her new furry play toy. Walking Sierra twice a day — once at dawn and again after dinner — became the perfect excuse for all three of us to spend Quality Time outdoors together as a family.

Binoculars included. (For those wondering, yes, it’s true our lab is amazingly dexterous with the focus knob, but she still has not mastered identifying flycatcher (e.g., Empidonax genus) family members from each other.)

Fortunately, our Curious Naturalist With Paws maintains impeccable birding etiquette on the trail. She’s obedient to the Bird-Dog’s Code of Ethics. (If it existed, that is.) Upon noticing a bird nearing our path, Sierra never gallops off the trail toward the feathered motion. Galumphing off trail could ruin a viewing opportunity for us, or, worse, trample plants while, during the breeding season, scaring the flushed avifauna off a nest could chill viable eggs.

Instead, Sierra sits quietly when we stop to identify the singers or eye-ball one bird after the next. We consider her to be the model of focused patience. She’s the opposite of a

Terrible-Two Ranter gone beserk. Even the best birders would do well to aspire to such Zen-like concentration while studying their feathered subjects.

Sure, I realize my gushing compliments for our pup may be somewhat overblown.

Perhaps she's a legend only in my mind. Afterall, plenty of dog owners believe their dog is Best Of The Show, an angel incarnate.

Nonetheless, how many dogs have you known that sometimes alert their owner to a bird gone undetected? Consider how Sierra will sniff out a raptor's pellet on the ground that I would not find. She does not eat or crush it. She lets me perform my own detective work as I attempt to identify the raptor who left the compact package of furry bones and (if I'm adept) the identity of its victim.

Similarly, when our inquiring canine discovers whitewash (uric acid from a bird's evacuation) on a tree trunk, it might lead me to look up to spot a Great Horned Owl's nest. Here's where the value added benefit becomes apparent. While birding, my Doggy In-Tow Advantage is not a result of my own effort to *see* the owl's whitewash. It's that I *never* would have spotted the whitewash on a trunk's backside because it was hidden from my gaze while walking on the trail. Sierra found the whitewash because she *smelled* it — an ability most people are unable to or never consider using while birding.

In turn, as our regular shared walks progressed, Linda began to show more curious naturalist symptoms. She began to regularly consult field guides after we returned home

from our forays afield. Soon, the new binoculars (as a bygone gift) were missing from the storage shelf. Undusted, they became a regular pendent dangling from her neck.

Then, Linda began joining me on my weekend birding forays. Inviting herself to our local annual Christmas Bird Count was next. The *coup de grace* was her suggestion that she'd help me on my annual Breeding Bird Survey. Pinch me: The happy birding couple, indeed.

What's the moral of this tail (sorry, misspelling and subsequent pun intended)? Dog comes to the rescue like Lassie to save an edgy marriage? Maybe. Pup serves as silent marriage counselor, thereby saving couple big bucks? Perhaps.

By the way, feel free to borrow my prescription for luring a spouse onto the birding trail.

Hey, whatever works, correct?

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