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| Ruff Love  A Short Story  By Maryanne Peters  We are a mixed bunch, us birdwatchers. I am talking ornithologists, not horny thologists. We watch the winged birds, although my binoculars have been known to wander. The fact is that birds are my passion – truly remarkable animals. There are about 10,000 identified species on the planet making them one of the most abundant animal times in existence. Because they are all around us, they are easy to take for granted, but they are truly remarkable. | Birds - Male Ruff (Philomachus pugnax) display during the... | Facebook |

Not to mention the number of extinct birds, and I am not talking about dinosaurs. Yes, dinosaurs are an early form of flightless bird, or put it another way – birds are the vestige of dinosaurs – the little ones survived. It turns out that dinosaurs are not really lizards at all – they are genetically closer to birds.

In our particular birdwatching group, I would say that perhaps only 4 out of the 20 have anything close to my depth of interest. Some just enjoy getting outside with a purpose. They don’t want to climb mountains or ride a bike – they are happy to sit in the tall grass and look at something, while the sun and the breeze and the scent of nature make them feel alive. How can I criticize that?

Then there are those who join for the social side, and that probably accounts for most of the women in our group. I should not be critical of that either, unless their incessant chatter disturbs the target of my interest. The chatter of seabirds I can accept, but the chatter of female watchers who are not paying attention can grate.

It was one of those women who invited Maurice to join us. He would have been the youngest of us, but the ridiculously pretty Jemma Lowerby was probably a little younger. She was a zoology student who tagged along during our trips to the estuary. Her interest was in migrating species and that was where most of them could be found. I think she had dreams of following the great migrations – travelling the world in the name of science, more for the experience that the building of our knowledge of the species. But she is young, and I can understand that.

As for Maurice, I had guessed that he was the other kind of bird watcher – the horny one. Apparently, he had met Jemma when she called upon the lady – his aunt, I think – and he had quickly become besotted. By joining us he could observe the object of his interest at close quarters, without the need for binoculars.

In fact his attraction to young Jemma turned out to be far more complicated, but more about that later. At this point I only need to say that Jemma was not in the slightest bit interested in this skinny, pallid young man, and to his horror she made it known without much subtlety.

So, now we need to discuss the ruff stuff.

The ruff is an Atlantic shorebird – taxa *calidris pugnax*. It is a native of Europe, but has strayed across the ocean in numbers enough to have it described by *The Aubudon Field Guide* as “most regular and widespread in its occurrence”. But as the Guide also goes on to explain – “Ruffs are best known for their bizarre courtship plumage and rituals”, which they are.

The male ruffs don’t have territories and invite females in, but instead win a mate through a competitive display in a communal performance area known as a lek. They have elaborate plumage in contrast to the drab females. They strut and show off their “ruffs” around their throats and generally try to appear more desirable than other males, while the females congregate around the edge of the lek, sometimes playing with one another and ignoring the males.

But studies about ten years ago revealed a true oddity. Among the drab females on the edges of the lek, there are male birds, who look entirely like females until you net them and turn them upside down. These “transvestite” ruffs were believed to be there to take advantage of the fact that they were surrounded by females to nip in a little insemination while the gorgeous males in the center of the lek were busy being gorgeous. Certainly, it is hard to imagine a better explanation.

But now I understand that doubt has been cast on this. No mating between drabs on the edge of the lek has ever been witnessed by me, and then I learned from an article in Earth Touch News (I will provide a reference) that there are two types of female mimic ruffs, the second type sporting huge testicles and apparently being accepted by other males as being male, albeit one appearing as female. You can read about it, and about wilsterflappers, faeders and autosomal-dominant alleles. It is all very interesting, which comes as no surprise to a keen ornithologist.

But back to our group - I found the courtship displays fascinating even disregarding what might be happening on the sidelines, and I took the step of setting up a blind near to a large lek in the marshes. A blind is a concealed area where birdwatchers like me can sit and watch the courting behavior of *calidris pugnax* Without the birds being aware of our presence. It could accommodate several of us, but I did insist on silence.

I had spoken within the group o the female mimicry phenomenon among this species. Perhaps Maurice took his lead from that? One thing that we cannot deny was that this young man was driven, quite possibly to the point of obsession, even madness.

Anyway, a few weeks after Maurice’s ardor had been dampened by a brusque Jemma his aunt introduced a new member to our group. She was introduced as Laura, Maurice’s older sister. The family likeness was obvious, but it seemed to me that those traits were far better suited to the female form. I for one, never would have guessed that Laura was Maurice dressed as a woman – a female mimic like the bird. She seemed to me the very essence of a woman.

It seemed as if this new creature had the same purpose in mind – to get close to the females within the group – or rather, one in particular, the prize hen as it were – lovely Jemma. And it seemed to work. Jemma warmed to Laura very quickly, possibly because Laura was already aware of Jemma’s dreams of travel following the flocks in search of warmer climes, an claimed to share the same thoughts.

Had you asked me to observe over the few weeks, then I might have concluded that Laura had a lesbian attraction to Jemma who was mildly amused by it but did not truly return it. But it was very clear that after a while Jemma was “leading her on” to the extent that it appeared cruel. It seemed that Jemma did not think that Laura presented herself properly, and she encouraged Laura to take steps to improve her appearance. It seemed to me that she was promised to show more affection if Laura showed more cleavage. I did not know at the time that this would not have been possible, but then suddenly there were Laura’s breasts on display.

Now looking back, it seems that Jemma must have been aware of Laura’s true status and was just being cruel. It may well have been that Jemma was a lesbian and that she hoped to make Laura one by taking away whatever was male about her, but I doubt that. I have to say that while I did not like Jemma, and thought of her as shallow and manipulative, that seemed just too much.

Laura on the other hand, fascinated me. How could she let it go as far as it did. I learned later that she was a crossdresser and that our birdwatching group was not the first time that the Laura persona had stepped outside, so no wonder nobody would have guessed. But learning that was later. I am only talking about Laura in her pursuit of Jemma, or at least the woman I thought Laura was.

Maybe there was something about her wife-eyed devotion to Jemma that excited me and made me wonder what it might be like to have a woman feel like that about me. But at the time it seemed to me that she was gay.

I have no problem with homosexual attraction. It is a fact in the animal kingdom including birds. Even our group of ruffs, there would be mountings in the middle of the lek. Ruff sex is not confined to cock on hen. Cock on cock does happen, so maybe hen on hen?

There are even examples in the animal world of long term “gay” relationships, in particular in birds. The graylag goose is a good example. The birds form pairs that are usually life-long partnerships, but for some unknown reason, one fifth of all those relationships are between to male geese. It is puzzling from evolutionary viewpoint – it hardly helps to the further the species. But it is yet another reason why birds are so interesting, don’t you think?

I suppose I am not alone among men in falling for somebody who may never feel the same feelings towards me, and perhaps not alone in thinking that I might persuade her to change sexual orientation. But it seemed that all I could do was be close, for the moment that everything would crash and burn.

All I new was that Laura had gone in for some kind of surgery. It sounded serious but it seemed to me that Jemma was distinctly disinterested. She seemed almost relieved that Laura was not around. But then she was suddenly in a state of high excitement but she was not bringing me news of Laura’s recovery.

Instead, she explained that one of the many universities she had written to had agreed to include her in a major field trip studying migrating birds. That very day she was packing her bags to fly several legs through to Kamchatka Peninsula - in view of present circumstances in Russia I should add that this was some years ago now. She was asking me to visit Laura in hospital and tell her that she was gone. That was the word she used – “gone”. She left me in no doubt that it was final. Whatever there was between them, it was over.

I was both excited and fearful at the same time. There might be hope for me, but there would be grief first.

When I appeared in the hospital nothing seemed to make sense. There was reference to Laura’s “life-changing surgery assuring her of a life of happiness”. I am no fool but I must have appeared to be one then. But slowly the parts of this story fell into place. I was more than surprised. I might even have been horrified. But I had agreed to do a job, and I was there to do it.

I consider myself a sensible and practical person, but in many ways people like me are ill-prepared to deal with despair in others. All I can remember about it was her sobbing in that hospital bed and me finally coming to the conclusion that I needed to hold her. She clung to me as if she would never let go.

Love can be rough.

But relationships can be forged from such situations , and practical men like me simply get on with things. It doesn’t matter to me that Laura cannot have children. I am too old for a family and too set in my ways. I have my work and my passion – ornithology.

I used to dream of having somebody look at me the way that Laura used to look at Jemma. Now I think I see it, or just glimpses of it. I look up at a magnificent flight of geese and I point it out to her in my excitement, and I look across and there are those big eyes looking back at me, and a little smile on those pretty lips.

To me anyway, that is love.

The End

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Erin’s Seed: “A young crossdresser is given a referral by a friend to a group of birdwatchers who seem to be all old biddies except for one lovely young chick who piques his interest. In order to get close to her he uses his female identity to join the club, passing quite easily as a mature woman and the object of his affection seems to return his interest but when he uses his info with the birdwatchers to meet the girl in his male self, he gets the cold shoulder - Miss Birdie is only interested in his older female self. Nevertheless, he persists and they end up having tryst after tryst each more romantic than the last. He’s being driven wild being with his love but not in the way he really wants. Then she confesses that she has known his secret all along and just wanted to find out how far he would go, and the doctor told her that the swelling should go down in only a few days … he was apparently willing to go the whole way.”

I remembered hearing something about a transvestite bird, so I picked this up and did a little research.

https://www.earthtouchnews.com/natural-world/animal-behaviour/in-the-world-of-ruffs-a-male-bird-thats-sneaky-and-well-endowed/

https://www.livescience.com/11125-birds-gay.html