



***Soaring with Fidel: An Osprey Odyssey from Cape Cod to Cuba and Beyond* (2007), by David Gessner.** Beacon Press, Boston. xii + 289 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover).

If passion for Ospreys comes by the bushel, David Gessner is carrying truckloads. Gessner claims not to be an expert birder. He often stresses his non-scientific background. But he is a writer with a gift for conveying his unbounded devotion for the “fish hawk” and a playful, childlike curiosity hitched to an urge to search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Because he wears the outer appearance of a grownup, he is free to wander and learn. His writing sweeps us along on his enlightening journey.

In Gessner’s first Osprey book, *Return of the Osprey*, he shared with us his dedicated observations of various Osprey pairs raising their broods during a Cape Cod nesting season. Through sensitive and eloquent prose, he conveyed the urge of all living creatures to connect to a place that will ground them. Ospreys and humans, as well as other animals, approach this urge in various ways. In the end, though, they all share that desire for a home territory that ultimately energizes the orderly and cyclical persist-

ence of life.

At the opening of Gessner’s second book, *Soaring with Fidel*, we are back on the cape with his favorite bird. But this time it is late summer and the Ospreys have started to move south. Gessner prepares us for what will be a very different experience from the one he shared previously. “While before I’d seen these birds as relatively sedentary, as nesters, I now wanted to know their other, more flamboyant selves,” he writes. “I wanted to see the year as a journey, a long precarious trip, a cycle of exodus and return. I felt an old excitement stirring.” A journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step but even before that first step, Gessner needs to stop for hose socks to relieve the varicose veins in his right leg, the result of many years playing ultimate Frisbee. Thus begins a long string of serendipitous events on the trail of the birds.

Gessner is intrigued by the news that Ospreys have been discovered to move through Cuba in *flocks*, and he has decided that this will be the focus of his quest. Soon afterward he learns that the BBC is poised to make the same trek—for the same reason, but with satellite-tagged birds, proving a proverb often quoted in my house: “When you have a good idea, someone else has just thought of it.”

The rest is a David and Goliath epic, but David’s comparatively smaller source of funding doesn’t detract from the quality of his questing, nor does it diminish the journey’s action scenes. Gessner’s garrulous and resourceful personality connects us with a diverse cast of characters that help move him along the Osprey flyway. These range from virtual birders who record observation data via the new technology of the Osprey cam, to revered conservation pioneers who orchestrated the comeback of the fish-eating hawks, to

*artesanos* who sell their wares to the tourists on the cliffs of mountains where Teddy Roosevelt and Fidel Castro made history, to scrawny teenage captains who expertly maneuver dilapidated boats through tropical lakes and toward dozens of roosting birds. Liberated from political boundaries like the Ospreys themselves, we follow a network of migration enthusiasts across borders, finding that passion and admiration for this bird is expressed in a universal language. Amazingly enough, Ospreys *do* move across Cuba in flocks!

Gessner sprinkles his observations with reflection on the connections between bird and man. This time the underlying question is not what grounds us in a place but what drives the desire to soar and move on. While standing on a rock cliff above the city of Santiago in Cuba, he imagines an encounter with a BBC-tagged bird named Bluebeard. This is the Cape Cod bird he has been following and has rechristened Fidel. He writes, “As I stood there on the prow of my rock ship, staring out nobly at the endless mountains and sea, a small shape would appear out of the orange blaze above the city. There it would be, flapping slowly and strongly as it rose: a single Osprey, heading right toward the rock. It would be visible only with binoculars at first, but then it would grow larger and larger, this magnificent loner, and finally it would glide right toward me as if it wanted to impale me on its hooked black bill. But I, desiring contact but maybe not quite that much, would step aside like a matador and watch it pass by, listening to the hushing swish of its wings. Then, for one moment, one glorious and—why not?—Whitmanesque moment, I would be the bird and not myself.” Whitman, yes, but there is also a bit of Huck

## BOOK REVIEWS

Finn here, lying along the shores of the Mississippi pondering life on the river. Maybe Huck had also found what Gessner calls the Religion of Osprey. I know I did.

Patricia Paladines

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