

Tales of a budding birder

by Todd Eskelin

As our children grow up and head off to college, they are often seeking advice on what direction in life they should go with their schooling and careers. We are routinely asked by younger folks when we knew what profession we were going to choose. The kids are always worried that along the way they may miss their true calling. So we are asked to look back and think about when we knew we were going to be a pipefitter, an engineer, a plumber, or biologist. For most of us there is no clear cut answer about who influenced us or when that calling came.

For me, I can remember both the person and the time when my true calling arrived. It was the summer of 1978 and I was your typical 9-year-old growing up on the Kenai Peninsula. School was out and I was trying to find something to do besides the chores I was responsible for. I don't remember the exact date, but it was early summer. When I was told to go take the trash out to the garage, I noticed a large sheet covering something in the garage. I quietly peeked under the sheet when nobody was looking and discovered my Grandma Rohrbeck was hiding under the sheet. After my breath returned to my body, I was informed that Grandma had flown up from Washington, and that she and I were embarking on one of our adventures the following day.

This was no ordinary adventure. We left the next morning for Anchorage. From there we caught the train to Denali National Park. Grandma Rohrbeck was notorious for her adventures. Her appreciation for natural beauty took her to the far stretches of the world, photographing the beautiful places and things that she saw. On this trip we were exploring the natural beauty of Denali N.P. that is an icon of what is everything Alaskan. We did all of the events that the park has to offer including hikes, dog sled rides, and sleeping in the old train bunks that had us stacked like cord wood with curtains separating all the patrons. All of these activities were eventful, but it was the bus ride to Eielson Visitor Center that was the memory that would eventually shape my career in natural sciences.

At the visitor center I loved watching the caribou, but it was a brood of Willow Ptarmigan with which I was most enamored. I followed them and listened

to their little clucks and peeps as they informed each other about my direction of pursuit. Then, there it was on the trail; the most beautiful grasshopper I had ever seen. As I tried to grab it for a closer look, more appeared. By the thousands I was flushing them off of the trail in front of me. I went back to Grandma and got a raisin box so I could take some home with me. That is what 9-year-old boys have to do. Grandma encouraged me to leave them for everyone else to enjoy, but you know how far that argument went. I was determined. After successfully collecting a handful of hoppers and storing them alive in my little raisin box, we were forced to get back on the bus. I was so happy I had souvenirs to take home back to Soldotna.

Along the bumpy road back to Park Headquarters my raisin box fell on the floor. I climbed down to retrieve it, only to discover that it had opened and my new friends had escaped. I looked back under the seat and saw none of them. I looked forward and on the back of an elderly woman's leg were two of my six colorful grasshoppers. I would love to tell you the tale ended with the grasshoppers continuing to climb, but it didn't. When my grandma saw me sitting there with the empty box, she was mortified. I was returned to my seat and did not move until the bus reached our home base.

I forever remember that trip and can honestly say that was the beginning of my fascination with science and the natural world. The point of the story is that you never know what adventure you expose your kids to that will give them a path to follow. There are opportunities out there that may just be the piece of the puzzle their little forming brains need to pick a path and travel down it for a while.

Today marks the beginning of the 12th annual Great Backyard Bird Count. This program started by the National Audubon Society and Cornell Lab of Ornithology is free and easy. You simply take a little time and count all the birds that come into your yard. This may be an hour, it may be all day, it is up to you. Or if your neighbor has a bird feeder, take the kids over and help them count and identify the birds at the neighbor's house. It is super easy to go online and enter all of your info; you can find everything you need at

the webpage: www.birdcount.org. Who knows, this may be the adventure that your kids remember for a lifetime.

Todd Eskelin is a Biological Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and

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