

A Meeting of Minds

by Haven Wiley @HavenWiley1

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I have spent much of my life watching birds, especially trying to understand their behavior, but do I ever really know what is going on in the mind of a bird? Anticipating a bird's behavior or recognizing its predicaments is something I can do, at least on occasion. Yet these hints are not enough for me to feel like I know what a bird is thinking, or even *if* it is thinking.

Perhaps this frustration comes from studying wild birds. A domesticated pet, or even a tamed bird trained to feed from your hand, permits more detailed mutual interaction. Still, it seems to me, even this sort of relationship is not an understanding of minds. Instead it is one of mutual convenience. Each party, the human and the tamed animal, adapts itself to the other, by learning or perhaps by evolution, but in either case the result is a reciprocal delusion, in which each party comes to believe the other is like itself, when actually each seeks its own special gratification.

Perhaps I am just too skeptical about knowing other minds, even birds' minds.

Yet, there was one occasion when I had a meeting of minds with a bird -- a moment when a bird and I knew exactly what each was thinking. It was the day a little Bufflehead duck and I got really close -- it involved no touching, so our interaction was entirely mental.

To comprehend what happened that day, you first have to understand what a Great Black-backed Gull can do to its hapless prey.

On one of my trips with my class in Avian Biology over two decades ago, we learned the gruesome capability of great black-backs, in excruciatingly extensive detail. It involved an American Coot. Coots, which are numerous in eastern North Carolina in winter, often gather in dense flocks at Lake Mattamuskeet, where my class happened to be watching some. Dense flocks provide protection for coots from predators like Bald Eagles, which routinely swoop low over a flock to see if a lame or sick or inattentive individual is too slow to keep up with its flock as it scurries out of the way.

Coots are not notably endearing birds. With their jerking heads they seem like little swimming chickens. They can be fun to watch though. When feeding they sometimes hang out with Canvasbacks, big ducks which, like coots, feed on underwater vegetation. When a diving canvasback surfaces with some edible tidbits carelessly dangling in its

bill, a coot can scoot forward and snatch them. Coots can dive, but not with the celerity of canvasbacks, so coots let the canvasbacks do the hard work. At other times coots feed among flocks of Tundra Swans. With their long necks, the swans, which also feed on submerged vegetation, can reach the bottom of Lake Mattamuskeet. Coots hang out alongside a feeding swan to catch edible snacks that float to the surface as the swan roots around for the best bits on the bottom. Most of the time though coots pack themselves into big flocks and don't do not much of anything.

That day, as usual we paid little attention to the tiresome packs of coots at Mattamuskeet. Always on the lookout for something interesting to show my class, I instead had my attention drawn to a nearby Great Black-backed Gull, which was behaving strangely. It repeatedly hovered then swooped to the surface of the lake. A quick check revealed that a coot was evading each of the gull's swoops, by diving and swimming a ways under water. My class began to watch the goings on. Obviously the gull could see the coot under water in the shallow lake, and it swooped again each time the coot emerged. The gull wouldn't quit.

It all seemed idiotic -- gull swoops, coot dives, over and over again -- until we noticed that the coot was getting tired. It swam shorter distances underwater, and evidently had too little time to breathe in its moments above water before the gull swooped again.

Once this realization had sunk in, the possible result did not look good. My class and I became mesmerized watching the ineluctably unfolding drama. We felt like cheering for the coot, but it was not looking like we had a winner.

After some fifteen minutes of this duel, the coot no longer had the energy to dive. The gull instantly shifted to pouncing. The desperate coot, to parry each pounce, rolled onto its back and scraped and jabbed with its short claws and small beak. It was not long though before the gull managed to grab it by the neck and hold its head under water. This gull had no finesse, nothing like a falcon or eagle, either of which can dispatch a coot with a single crush of its talons.

The coot's struggles with its head submerged soon subsided. The gull, despite cries of outrage from my class, then swallowed the coot's head. And then proceeded to gulp down its neck and foreparts. For a moment, I thought, "OK, this stupid gull has bitten off more than it can chew. It cannot possibly swallow a coot whole." The harsh reality supervened in about one minute as the gull proceeded to do just that, albeit with ungainly contortions, gulp by gulp, until my class and I could see nothing but the coot's quivering feet, one dangling from each side of the gull's mouth, and then nothing but the distended neck of the satiated gull.

I have rarely seen one of my classes stunned into utter silence, but this was one of those occasions. We weren't just shocked, we were shaking. This experience had been brutal; we could find no empathy in any degree for anything. All we felt was the ruthlessness of life, unexpurgated, and our own helplessness.

That class did recover, if I recall, and after awhile I forgot about the incident. After all, I had never witnessed such an extended and loathsome struggle of bird exploiting bird, and I reasonably expected never to witness such a scene again.

Yet several years later, with another class, it all came back to me. We were studying the assemblage of ducks in the corner of North Pond at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge on the coast. I was in the driver's seat of one of our three vans. Everybody stayed inside the vehicles so we would not disturb the nearby ducks. I used our radios to help the class sort out the dozen or so kinds of ducks on the pond. For the time being, we were paying no attention to the gulls nearby.

Yet, like a troublesome dream, the antics of one gull soon awoke my slumbering memories. It swooped repeatedly to the surface of the pond. It was a great black-back. Abruptly my usual loquaciousness with a class ceased. My speech became barely intelligible. Somehow the students in my van realized what I was watching, and

somehow the radios notified the rest of the class in the other two vans. Breathless, I squawked, "My God, it's after a female Bufflehead."

Now, let me explain, coots might have few friends among humans, but not so Buffleheads. These little diving ducks are spunky, tough, and beautiful, particularly once you see the purple iridescence on a male's bustle-like head. A female lacks the color, but they are equally spunky and, with a flashy oval swoosh of white on a puffy head, they are cute, for sure.

Buffleheads are great divers, but North Pond offered no scope for the female we watched. The water was only two or three feet deep on the side of the pond near the road. The hovering gull could watch the little duck under water, so none of her evasive moves fooled the gull. Furthermore, the gull steadily maneuvered the Bufflehead into shallower water. The little female desperately tried, but failed, to reach the groups of other ducks in deeper water. And its dives were becoming shorter and shorter.

I am not sure whether or not my class was following all of these details, because I was too stunned to explain it clearly. Were we -- indeed was *I* -- going watch this Bufflehead's quivering legs go down that gull's gullet?

It was looking desperate. The little Bufflehead was being maneuvered into ever shallower water on the side of the pond near us. The gull was redoubling its efforts. Are we ever able to predict the future with finality? This time it seemed to be possible.

By now my class was fixated on the drama playing out before us. "Stay in the vehicles", I radioed to the three vans, as I opened my door. I walked straight to the edge of the pond, waving my hands and shouting as loudly as I could. Ducks farther out scattered away. The gull however did not flinch. Some people hunt Buffleheads, so I guess these people think they are good to eat. Surely this great black-back was preoccupied with the same thought.

Suddenly something astonishing began to unfold. The little Bufflehead quit dodging the gull. Instead with its last breaths it swam under water straight toward me. The gull was on her tail, but as she came closer, the gull had second thoughts about approaching this screaming person at the edge of the pond. Perhaps its ancestors had experienced what John James Audubon painted long ago -- a bloody Great Black-backed Gull writhing in agony after a shotgun had hit it. At any rate, with the gull holding back, the little Bufflehead, now swimming on the surface in its final effort, came directly toward me. The gull hovered in the offing, watching for another chance.

The little duck swam right to my feet and crawled into the grass at my toes. I mean, right between the toes of my boots. There it nestled down. I think it looked up briefly once, but I did not move my feet. I continued shouting and waving my arms for another two minutes, until the gull, no doubt in disgust, flew away down the pond.

I felt a little sheepish. I don't make a practice of interfering in the course of nature, to say nothing of standing outdoors waving my arms and yelling like a banshee. I looked back at the vans for the first time.

Everyone was cheering! If for me, it was misplaced, but I like to think they were cheering for the little Bufflehead. She stayed where she was, perhaps wiggled into the grass a bit more. After another five minutes, with no sign of the gull returning, I slowly backed away. The little Bufflehead stayed put. I returned to the van, somewhat out of breath myself, and not particularly coherent.

My class gradually resumed observations of the other ducks, all the while keeping an eye on the spot where the little Bufflehead hid. Eventually she crept out of the grass. We watched long enough to see that she had reached deeper water and other Buffleheads farther out. We moved on.

Later I began to think about what had happened when that little duck nestled between my rubber boots. If I have ever been in a situation with another individual, in which I knew what she was thinking, and I knew that *she* knew what *I* was thinking, that moment was it. I am not sure how often that depth of mutual comprehension happens even with other people, although you would think that between humans it might occur more often. But it surely doesn't happen often with other species. Not in my experience!

Haven Wiley teaches biology at the University of North Carolina -- Chapel Hill.

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