



This white egret posed against the dark waters of the Kingsland Creek at the Meadowlands Environment Center in Lyndhurst proved a perfect lead-in to David Sibley's talk on bird identification last Thursday evening. In fact, Sibley related a comical tale of how he once mistook an egret for a loggerhead shrike!

David Allen Sibley's Talk on Bird Identification: 'I Know What I Saw'

By C.L. ANDERSON

On the night of Thursday, October 6, two members of our staff attended David Sibley's talk on birding at the Meadowlands Environment Center at 2 De Korte Plaza in Lyndhurst. As we looked east from the parking lot, we saw the lights of several emergency vehicles stopped on the turnpike (another accident?) and behind that, a view of the profile of New York City at dusk. We then walked out upon the platform suspended over the Kingsland Creek. The night air consisted of the heady mix of tidewater with a faint hint of sewer gas.

We walked into the large auditorium, and eventually the entire space was filled with what we suspected to be "hard-core" birders. We're low on the hierarchy of real birders. We're simply bird lovers and nature lovers, taking time out as often as possible to appreciate the lives of all the little creatures around us during our perambulations in our neighborhood or in our state parks. Nevertheless, we're always willing to be educated on the subject of birds, and the talk given by David Sibley focused upon a topic that involved psychology, perception, philosophy and human foibles involved in the arduous and challenging process of bird identification in the wild. We've often been frustrated upon hearing an interesting or unusual bird sound, but we're not able to see it even to try and identify it, as these creatures have the

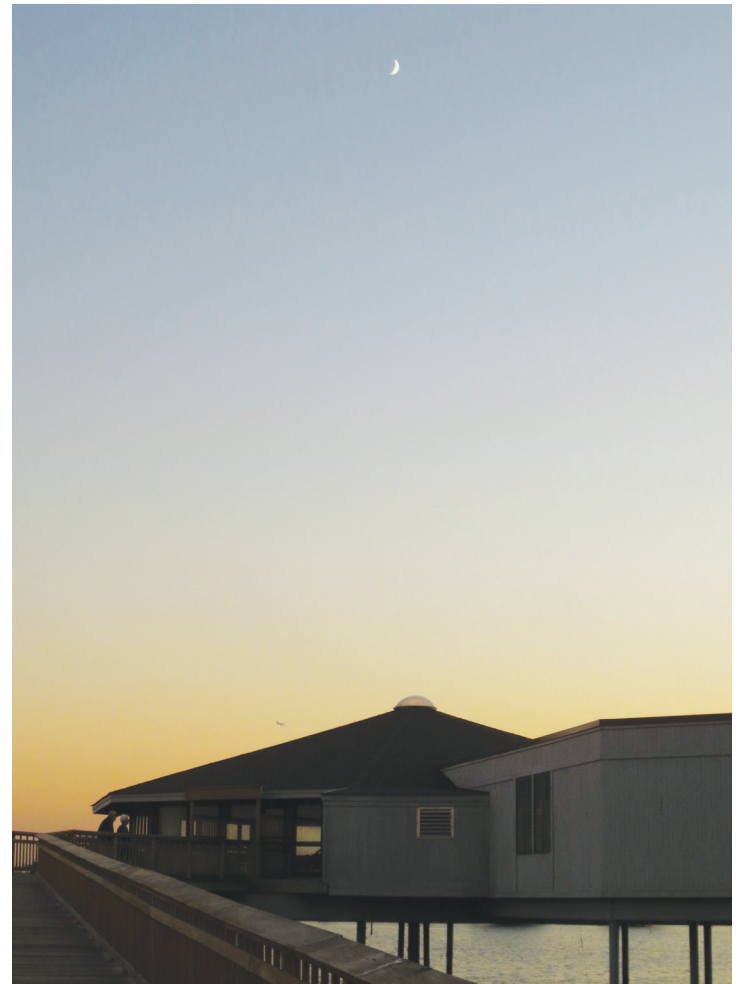
annoying habit of often being rather elusive and shy.

Don Torino, the head of the Bergen County Audubon Society, now celebrating its 75th year, introduced us to David Sibley, the author of many books on birding and recently, a book on trees. According to Sibley there are 47 million birdwatchers in the United States. His father, Fred Sibley, a Yale ornithologist, introduced his sons to birds and birding when they were children. David Allen Sibley is both an illustrator and author of many books on birds and birding, and acknowledged that he was self-taught and received no formal training in ornithology. Nevertheless, this unassuming and soft-spoken autodidact held the audience captive with a rather esoteric and expert talk on the challenges of bird identification. Using illustrations on a screen to prove his points, Sibley described how human perception can be unreliable, mainly because humans identify what they see by using colors and patterns and shapes that they are familiar with. At the end of his talk, Sibley did reassure his audience that most of the time, bird identification was accurate, but that birders should be on the lookout for misidentification of birds based upon false assumptions and wishful thinking.

Giving a simple example, Sibley stated that most people thought that crows were all black in color, when in



fact they are mostly black but their feathers are also tinged with many kinds of colors (blue, purple, green, white). So, the first way birds can be misidentified is on the basis of color. Sibley tested the astuteness (or lack thereof) of his audience by flashing a series of playing cards on the screen that were misidentified on the basis of color or as well as shape (red spades were mistaken for hearts, for example). Our erudite speaker explained that in terms of bird identification, there are "pet field marks" based on the shape of a head or color of a tail that might lead an observer to misidentify a bird. Sibley provided several examples of how distance, shape and color influence the way human brains interpret reality. In one case, three elephants were positioned at different distances on the screen; the closest elephant seemed to be the smallest, the next in line a bit bigger, and then the elephant the furthest away seemed to be the largest. And yet, all three elephants, when lined up next to each other were exactly the same size. Sibley recounted a personal anecdote in which he mistook an egret for a loggerhead shrike. He believes (and we agree with him!) the premise that humans can create something we simply want to see based upon shapes, patterns and colors. The case of the purported sightings of the long extinct Ivory-billed



Dusk at the Meadowlands Environment Center in Lyndhurst last Thursday evening. Barely perceptible are the crescent moon high in the early evening sky directly in the center of the photo, and a jet plane on the horizon, just appearing over the top of the building.

woodpecker was discussed during Sibley's presentation. The chances of the 2004/2005 Arkansas sightings of the third largest woodpecker as genuine are apparently very low. The bird was not sighted after 1944 and was believed to be extinct. After viewing the blurry video of the controversial sighting, Sibley was convinced that it was a sighting instead of a pileated woodpecker.

We humans are programmed to read word meanings and spellings "holistically." When we read a paragraph with some words in jumbled order, we interpret the meaning of those misspelled words correctly (we can fill in the blanks from the context of the whole paragraph). Nevertheless, we have trouble making sense of a single word whose letters are jumbled (for example, pclae=place/uesdnatnrd=understand) when they are taken out of context. We also interpret faces holistically. In a single line sketch, we might be able to perceive a bird facing left, or

a rabbit facing to the right (although we cannot maintain the concept of both simultaneously!). This way of interpreting faces might account for a white plastic bag taking on the features of a white snowy owl.

The psychology of bird identification involves how we perceive objects. Evidence for identification can be tainted by our tendency to form a concept of an object based upon its distance from us and its colors and shape. To make matters a bit more difficult, even when we're not exactly certain of what we are looking at, Sibley stated that humans believe that they are "99% sure" that they are correct. Humans don't like to doubt the accuracy of their perceptions. We might have thought we saw one thing, but in fact it was another. And yet we are absolutely determined to cling to the original misperception, despite all evidence to the contrary. We might yearn for the return of the Ivory-billed woodpecker, but it's wishful thinking.

RE/MAX
Infinity

Sonia Andriani
Broker Of Record
201.937.7908
sandriani@remax-infinity.com
www.soniasellmyhome.com

1249 PATERSON PLANK RD. SECAUCUS, NJ 07094
OFFICE: 201.325.0033 | FAX: 201.325.8883 | REMAX-INFINITY.COM

WHEN YOU WANT THE **BEST** FOR YOUR HOME
CALL THE REALTOR WHO WILL DO THE **MOST!**