

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

An Osprey in Central Park

It seems to be a law of nature that the sharpest view you get of a place often comes through the eyes of an outsider.

Alexis de Tocqueville visited this fledgling democracy before our primary feathers had grown in and wrote a definitive analysis of what would and wouldn't fly in the new United States.

Alistair Cooke has lived among Americans for a long time. He still speaks with a British accent, but reports like Charles Kuralt.

And the Old Man, who learned his English from Life magazine, eventually discovered more walleye bars in the Three Lakes area than the congregation at the American Legion could ever believe.

"You anchor on one bar too long," Steady Eddy says, "and the visiting firefighters will find all the hotspots."

Now comes yet another migrating bird

with the eyes of an osprey, Donald Knowler. Knowler is a British journalist who went to New York allegedly to cover the United Nations, but who discovered that 834-acre chunk of urban sanctuary, Central Park.

Knowler's 180-page journal, *The Falconer Of Central Park*, was originally published in 1984; a softcover Bantam edition has recently been released. This soon-to-be-classic book details Knowler's sighting of 131 species of birds in the park and his encounters with drug dealers, vagrants and Lambert, the Central Park sage.

Steady Eddy insists that we share a few passages with you. He says he hasn't been so moved by a book since the Seven Foot Nun threw a catechism at him. "Luckily," Steady recalls, "she threw a curve."



"A Central Park bench," Donald Knowler wrote, "offers the perfect antidote to the United States' largest city. It was from a bench on the Great Lawn during 1982 that I surveyed my life, a wandering existence very much like the winding rambling paths of the park. I had been a journalist for my entire working life, some 19 years, working on some very good and some very bad newspapers. In recent years, I had traveled to Africa as a roving correspondent....on what I told myself would be a year-long working holiday. I had stayed on the continent for nine years. The wildlife of Africa, its abundance and easy accessibility, persuaded me to stay every time I had thoughts

about moving on. I had grown blasé about the sight of a pride of lions or a 300-strong herd of elephants, and when it was finally time to leave I thought I was an expert, I knew it all and, anywhere in the world, I would be something of a wildlife guru, with all that African experience behind me, all those African tales to tell. A latter-day Kipling.

"Many times I held court in the boat-house cafeteria on subjects that ranged from 'what to do if you come across a hippopotamus out of water' (run) to 'the first step in treating a gaboon viper bite' (amputate). But my knowledge and understanding of the workings of nature, its complexity and continental interdependence, was shallow and superficial. Lambert knew a thousand times more than I did, although I had visited a thousand more places. I could not compete with a man who had seen more than 200 species of birds in Central Park or who had identified a greater number of butterfly and moth species on Manhattan than are found in the entire British Isles. My African stories finally stopped when Lambert read me a quotation from an author I had not heard of before, the late Hal Borland: 'He knows most about the world who knows best that world which is within his own footsteps. Not all hills and valleys are alike, but unless a man knows his own hills and valleys he is not likely to understand those of another....'"



"The birders claim victory," Knowler exulted. "The Parks Department decided not to attack the moths with a chemical spray. Instead, 'biological agent,' a bacterium that attacks only gypsy moth caterpillars, was being used and this, said the department, would prove non-toxic to humans and other wildlife.

"In my mailbox was a letter from Lambert, the letter bearing a crayon-and-ink drawing of Roman gladiators carrying off one of their dead. The corpse bore a striking resemblance to the Parks Commissioner.

"The armies defeated, the city abandoned,' was the hastily scribbled caption under the illustration."

A craggy policeman, Knowler reported, the first police officer he had seen on 'a routine patrol' in the Park, asked him what he was looking at through his binoculars. Knowler told him it was an osprey circling the reservoir. On its second sweep, the officer caught sight of it. Knowler's account is a page out of Damon Runyon:

"'Can I look?' he said pointing to my binoculars and reluctantly, I let him have them. I wanted to look at the osprey myself.

"'You sure dat ain't no bald eagle?' he said.

"'No, it's an osprey.'

"'You sure it ain't a bald eagle? I read all about dem when I was a kid.'

"'No, I can assure you it's an osprey, which is similar,' I said, trying to sound like an expert.

"The osprey came around a third time, hovered, and did just what I feared it would do. It plunged into the reservoir, scattering the gulls, and rose with a big, silvery fish.

"'Goddam, did you see dat?' said the policeman.

"'No, you had my binoculars,' I replied, digging my toe into the cinder of the reservoir footpath. I could not recall anyone, not even Lambert, seeing an osprey fish in Central Park."

The last paragraph in the book belongs to Lambert: "When you get past the traffic, buildings and turmoil the real world remains. There is not a great deal left but enough to let us retain our optimism." ■