

## The Exact and Very Strange Truth

John Nichols

**B**ACK in the late 1960s, I read a very moving novel by the actor Ben Piazza, about a boy losing his innocence through sorrows, death, and mishaps to his many family members. It's called *The Exact and Very Strange Truth*. The title (which I've borrowed for this essay) comes from two lines on the last page of the book when the boy, Alexander, says, "Things change so sudden sometimes and that is the exact and very strange truth. Always and forever things change."

In October 1947, when I was seven years old attending second grade in Westbury, Long Island, New York, a fellow student asked me who I was rooting for in the upcoming World Series, the Dodgers or the Yankees? I knew nothing about sports, and had never heard of either team. Not wanting to seem ignorant, though, I took a wild guess and said, "The Dodgers." The kid punched me in the nose, I went over backwards, and, after cursing me, he ran away.

Instantly, I became a rabid Brooklyn Dodgers fan, and have hated the New York Yankees ever since. Also, instantly, I became obsessed by sports. If some of you are old enough to remember, 1947 is the year Jackie Robinson came up to the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking baseball's color barrier and a whole lot more. America changed and so did I. Robinson became one of my first serious heroes.

Who knows if that kid punched me for racial reasons, or just because he was a rabid Yankee fan. But I tend to believe, from that moment on, the trajectory of my life became different. Inside me, the possibility for complicated new awarenesses had been born.

Yes, my growth required years to develop and refine itself, but I've been grateful ever since for the sucker punch that started waking me up.

So: Here I am again, John Treadwell Nichols II, the now 80-year-old grandson of John Treadwell Nichols, my namesake, my grandfather, and founder of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, communicating with you all again. These days it's been many years since I've been able to flycast for trout on the nearby Río Grande, which is about as close as I ever came to "being an ichthyologist." And my walking skills have become so sketchy in recent seasons that I can no longer putter about the sagebrush mesas surrounding my hometown of Taos, New Mexico, keeping my eyes peeled for Prairie Rattlers, Gopher Snakes, and Collared Lizards, which always gave me the herpetology thrills that so enriched my existence.

I've explained to your Society on two previous occasions that those thrills were gifted to me by your founder, my grandfather, and by his youngest son, my father David Gleston Nichols, who was a serious naturalist himself.

As far as I know, Grandpa was not exactly a guy who embraced many changes during his lifetime. He didn't like driving, so he never learned to drive. He always purchased his seemingly pre-rumpled blue suits from Brooks Brothers in New York and reliably crucified them further with tobacco

crumbs and coffee stains. He shaved only with a straight razor, didn't listen to the radio or watch TV, and never attended movies unless they were about wildlife. The last half of his life, he occupied the same house in Garden City, Long Island, New York, and for decades boarded the same commuter train to work at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in Manhattan. He remained married to his first wife from their wedding ceremony until his death. Too, he relentlessly smoked a pipe all his days, giving the impression he had been born with it already in his mouth. When friends suggested he might be killing himself prematurely, he ignored them.

My father, David Gelston Nichols, was also taught by Grandpa to be an ardent naturalist. Dad very much wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. Toward that end, he spent a number of his youthful years as a field zoologist for the mammalogy department at the AMNH. I owe my deep and abiding love of the natural world to John T. and David G. Nichols.

Pop, however, was *not* averse to change. We moved around a lot when I was a kid, and I attended many different grade schools. Dad was married four times, switched his college major from Zoology to Slavic languages (Russian major, French minor), spent nine years working for the CIA (often debriefing Soviet defectors), then seven more years getting a Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in Psycholinguistics. After that he taught psychology at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs for twenty years, then retired with his fourth wife to Smithville, Texas, 43 miles southeast of Austin. That's about as far from his New England "swamp Yankee egghead" (as he put it) upbringing and academic accomplishments as he could be without winding up in the Falkland Islands or Outer Mongolia.

One thing Pop didn't change was his daily birding walks and the records he kept of every feathered critter he saw. Yes, Grandpa had taken those same type of walks and kept similar records. Though I was raised by Dad and Grandpa to venerate the entire natural world, there was a special focus on avian activities. For what it's worth, I believe John T. Nichols knew as much about birds as he did about fishes, and spent almost as much time studying (and writing about) them.

It's regarding those birds that I wish to tell two stories, which apart from giving you a chuckle may perhaps relate to ASIH's name change of this journal from *Copeia* to *Ichthyology and Herpetology*.

My initial story begins with Dad's first marriage, to my mom, a French girl named Monique Robert (pronounced "Row-bear"). She came from the Brittany region of northwest France. Monique first visited America in 1931 when she was sixteen. Six years later, November 1937, she met my dad at the American Museum of Natural History where they each held a volunteer desk, Monique's in Anthropology, and Pop's in Mammalogy.

They immediately fell in love, becoming engaged in March 1938. Monique then returned to Europe. Months passed, Monique tried to break the engagement, Dad jumped on a liner to France and won her back. They married in Paris on December 12, 1938, returned to the U.S., and settled in Berkeley, California, both attending the university there. Monique had left her country, France; abandoned her anthropology studies; and become a field zoologist alongside her husband. Those were big changes.

In 1939 and 1940, all Monique and David's spare time was spent driving around California and Nevada collecting small mammals, which they prepared as specimens for the AMNH and other museums. And they kept records of every single bird observed during their travels. What fun they had!

Eventually, pending my July 1940 arrival, they came to focus daily on all the (mostly water-) birds at Berkeley's Aquatic Park, a mile-long lagoon on the town's west side bordering San Francisco Bay. Dad felt that by seriously describing how the lagoon benefited its avian inhabitants and migrants, he and Monique could help Berkeley realize how important it was to the wildlife, and to the town's citizens, *to really take care of that park*.

Between 1940 and 1941 Monique kept their journals, writing the names and population numbers present at the lagoon on every day. The birds' names were written only in Latin. This project endured for almost a year until some months after I was born when Dad had to quit school and get a job. Then, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, my father was laid off, and he found another gig in New York with Pan American Airways, who quickly moved us to Miami, Florida. There Monique died suddenly, at age twenty-seven, of staphylococcal endocarditis on August 4, 1942. I was only two.

Pop sent me to live with his sister's family. He joined the Marines and wound up on Bougainville Island in the South Pacific. And as an intelligence officer for the First Marine Air Wing, almost exactly three years to the day after Monique's death, he found himself studying pictures, in the photo tent, of the atomic bomb's destruction to Hiroshima.

That's certainly an example of how things can *really* change, and how quickly some changes happen.

Five decades passed. David Nichols died at age 81 in 1998. After his memorial service, I decided to write a book about Dad's brief marriage with Monique between 1938 and 1942. I never "knew" my mom and hence had to do much research. As part of the book, I wanted to describe their project at Berkeley's Aquatic Park. Specifically, how many different species used the park, and the months when they arrived or departed.

I consulted Xerox copies of Monique's natural history journals, with all its bird names in Latin. Not knowing Latin, I opened my relatively modern field guide, which of course had both the Latin and common English names, but I quickly hit a wall. Often the modern guide had no Latin equivalents to the capitalized genus names Monique had written in those journals. Result? I couldn't identify many of the birds.

That bugged me.

Until, one day in our local second-hand book store, I noticed a *Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds*, copyrighted in 1941. Bingo! Every Latin name Monique had used was in that field guide. I was startled at how many genus names had changed between 1941 and my late 1970s Audubon field guide. Bufflehead had gone from *Charitonetta albeola* to

*Bucephala albeola*. Horned Grebe from *Colymbus auritus* to *Podiceps auritus*. Redhead from *Nyroca americana* to *Aythya americana*.

Suddenly, I could easily understand who the birds were that Monique and David Nichols observed, counted, and carefully recorded, building the data to make their case. For me, this was a real lesson on how, in science, names regularly change.

But that wasn't my first lesson, which goes back to a keynote address I gave on June 16, 1991, during the seventy-fifth annual meeting of ASIH at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. For the talk, I borrowed my title from one of Grandpa's unpublished essays, "What Is a Naturalist, Anyway?" The speech was great fun to research and then write and then deliver. That occasion at the museum filled me with happiness and pride. It's an important highlight of my life.

My remarks were reprinted in the December 1991 *Copeia*, and, slightly abridged, in *Natural History* magazine, November 1992. Participants at the meeting treated me with thanks and affection, and afterwards one of them led me back to where all the fishes were kept in bottles, and we found a bunch that had either been collected or named by John Treadwell Nichols.

The speech was a homage to Grandpa and to my dad for the gift of nature they had given me. One paragraph in it reads:

"A principal activity of naturalists at the Mastic place [when I was seven or eight in the 1940s] was simply walking and observing. Myself, I followed and I listened. Whenever a bird went 'tweet,' my dad or grandfather said, 'Hmm, there's an Ovenbird,' or 'Yup, a Red-eyed Vireo,' or 'Hear that Hermit Thrush?' Naturally they added absentmindedly, '*Seiurus aurocapillus*' or '*Vireo olivaceus*' or '*Catharus guttatus*.' If I picked up a feather, they almost immediately gave it an identification: 'Towhee,' 'Blue Jay,' 'Osprey.' In fact, almost anything I stumbled upon they could identify, quantify, or categorize, be it animal, vegetable, or mineral."

Everyone who attended my event saw no problem with that cheerful paragraph. No one at *Copeia*, which reprinted the essay word for word, noticed anything amiss. And the *Natural History* fact checkers never let out a peep.

Yet among all the naturalists, zoologists, ornithologists, ichthyologists, and herpetologists who heard me that evening, and reprinted the talk, and read my words, and sent me and my dad kind letters praising them, there was one individual, and only one, who *did* let out a "peep."

My father, David G. Nichols, was appalled that I had "accused" him and Grandpa of telling me, a small boy in the late 1940s, that the Latin moniker for a Hermit Thrush was *Catharus guttatus*, when any fool would have known the proper genus and species name for the bird back then. It was *Hylocichla guttata*.

As far as I know, nobody else in the *world* noticed my mistake. Pop was offended, though. He felt that I had embarrassed Grandpa and himself by inadvertently mocking their ornithological expertise. And Dad wrote seven different letters to folks at the AMNH, at *Copeia*, and at *Natural History* magazine pointing out my humiliating blunder in no uncertain terms.

That was probably one of the more emphatic (and mortifying) lessons I ever got on how things change.

I admit, I was heartbroken that my homage to Grandpa and Dad had gone awry. I don't know in what year many thrushes were switched to the genus *Catharus*, but I do have a guide that tells me a monotypic *Hylocichla* remains: the Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), which looks to me like a slightly larger *Catharus guttatus*, but what do I know?

In the end, Pop forgave me (I *think*), chalking up the error to my stupidity, or at least my scientific ignorance. Occasionally he joked about the goof, and we laughed. After he died, though, I did find in his archives a handful of letters to various of his personal friends mentioning my *faux pas*. I suspect it grated more than he let on.

Moral? Changing scientific names can be difficult *and* traumatic.

I cherish my distant, yet intimate, connection to ASIH, through my grandfather, through *Copeia*, and, through the kind people at the Society who have welcomed me again to the fold. The name change of this publication makes perfect sense to me, and I'm grateful I was invited to participate in the launching of *Ichthyology and Herpetology*. To me it's the right move. And I imagine Grandpa commenting on the change, while exhaling tobacco smoke into my face, by saying, "What *took* them so long?"

What takes anything so long? In 1997, fifty years after Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, every major league baseball team in America (and Canada) honored Robinson by retiring his uniform number, 42. A powerful film about Jackie's life, called *42* and starring Chadwick Boseman, was released in 2013. And although I myself grew

up as an isolated Puritan and white, my current extended family of sisters-in-law, a nephew, a son-in-law, and some granddaughters are mixed race, and we're proud of our diversity. I might even say that my nose doesn't hurt quite so much from that punch I took at age seven.

It still aches, however.

Our country has been on a long road, and a long road lies ahead. But the positive changes we struggle to make are always filled with hope. That is certainly true for *Ichthyology and Herpetology*. It might be said that *Copeia* has now "quit smoking its pipe." (And to celebrate for my grandfather, John Treadwell Nichols, the journal's editors might even throw in an occasional rogue article about birds, which Grandpa loved and knew so much about. I mean, aren't all birds distantly related to reptiles anyway?)

Once again, for the third time, I'm addressing you all, feeling a great honor and also poignant sadness at realizing this essay will no doubt be the final occasion on which I'm able to communicate with you, because my life is about to go through a major change itself. I.E.: I'm old, I'm very frail, my heart is failing, and, like your journal's old name, I'm obviously perched on the brink of eternity and about to "move on."

But before I do, thanks for letting me congratulate ASIH on moving forward. That, too, gives me a thrill.

John T. Nichols II  
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