

Bird, Interrupted

At sea, the bird that stopped for a rest seemed like a being from another world. I could relate. BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

"Out here, you know, we must think of birds as teachers."

— from *Blues* by John Hersey

WE WERE ABOUT 10 HOURS OUT OF Block Island, southbound for Cape May, New Jersey, when the weary traveler arrived. The bird was no bigger than half a muffin, dun-colored on his back and bright yellow below. He looked whipped. There wasn't much breeze at that point, and the rain that would usher in a late-summer nor'easter hadn't yet begun. But who knew how long he'd been alone out here?

He clutched the mainsheet, which lay across the hatch. His eyes squeezed shut. He rested there briefly, then flitted down to the cockpit floor. I got a bowl of water and some crackers for the kids to crumble. He didn't want the crackers, but when we



Perched on *Osprey's* mainsheet, the tiny bird paused, a fellow wayfarer on the less traveled offshore path.

flicked some water onto the teak, he raced for it and took a long drink. Then he stopped right there and closed his eyes again.

Where had he come from, I wondered; where was he bound? What was he, how old was he, was he even a he, or was he a she? How would he fare through the coming night? How would we? So many questions on the dusky back of one tired little bird.

The bird made me think about how our lives become so different when we're out here on the water, so separate from the ordinary. Sailing on *Osprey* all summer, I often felt like a foreigner when I ventured onto land. Things that seemed so critically important on American terra firma (Is Britney fat? Is Larry Craig gay? And *who* will be the next American Idol?) seemed inane at best. Mostly, they just felt alien. What a weird way to live, obsessing about people and events that would never affect your life even obliquely. On *Osprey*, we obsessed about the weather, stars, *Eldridge*, amp hours.

Just such a disconnect had happened on the day before we left Block Island. At about 0100 I awoke, feeling *Osprey* slewing around suddenly. We were on a town mooring in Great Salt Pond, so I wasn't too worried, but something was up. NOAA had predicted the passage of a front that night; this must be it. A wall of northwesterly wind slammed across the pond and built steadily. Within minutes, the water roiled with whitecaps. Boats careened in the dark like frightened horses. The wind was gusting at 35 to 40 knots, boats were dragging all over the place, the lights of towboats and the harbormaster's boat flashed, and the VHF crackled with panicky voices.

It was a long night. My husband, Johnny, and I watched for dragging boats until finally the wind eased to about 20 and seemed willing to stay there. Then, at first light, came the bell for Round Two, and this time *Osprey* yanked the mooring east a few feet. We put the engine in gear to hold her in place for a couple of hours until the wind let up again.

Later that day, as I moved about on shore among people who'd slept through the night in their rock-steady beds, I felt like a stranger in a strange land. I was bone tired, and when the kids and I walked to a playground nearby (no rest for the weary when you cruise with kids), I fell sound asleep under a tree whose branches whipped with what was, to everyone else there, just a brisk breeze with an annoying capacity to blow one's hat off. I woke up flustered and vaguely mortified at crashing in a public park, like some kind of homeless person. A clutch of moms nearby eyed me suspiciously. "I'm here on a boat. You know, cruising," I could've said. "Wild night out there." But the explanation didn't seem all that useful.

Looking back on it, I realize that at that moment, I had more in common with our worn-out bird than with those moms and their uneasy eyes. That bird knew what it was like to be a part of the weather and sky, thrilled and vulnerable. His life was chiseled down to what mattered, as was ours: a 14-ton, 45-foot steel cutter and what it took to run her, the tides and water, and us.

I'd never know much about our hitchhiking bird; he flew off when accidentally startled. The people I encountered in Cape May, some 20 hours later, would probably wonder about me as I swayed down the street, reluctantly trying to regain land legs. They might look at me a little askance and consider whether I was "normal" within their carefully proscribed bounds of that word. No, I'd be happy to tell them, I don't believe I am.

Now back in Annapolis, the Clarks and *Osprey* are on the hard for the winter. For more on the bird, read an exchange between John Wilson, *CW's* copy editor, and *CW* alum and serious bird-watcher Nim Marsh at our website (www.cruisingworld.com/0208bird).