

ADDITION TO THE WOODCOCK COMMENTARY

On the day before Thanksgiving 1999 I flew to Houston to join Caroline (Cina) Forgason and her husband Mark for a weekend hunt and holiday dinner at the Norias division of her families' famous King Ranch. The ranch itself was still a five hour drive south of the city. Cina picked me up at the airport while Mark ran some last minute errands in downtown Houston. We were to rendezvous at Mark's family ranch west of the city before heading south in the notorious holiday traffic. After picking me up, Cina deposited me at the Houston Museum of art and immediately went back to the airport to pick up her Washington friend Nini Ferguson, a beautiful lady with the whitest teeth I ever saw.

Cina and Nini met me out in front of the art museum and we drove over to the nearby Houston Museum of Natural Science to see Scott's recently installed thirty-seven foot long mural of the Aztec Templo Mayor that was a part of the museum's impressive new pre-Colombian art display. The mural, a digitalized photo rendition of one of Scott's paintings was so beautifully displayed that I felt as if I were actually in the sacred precinct.

While we were enjoying this, Cina got a call on her cell phone. It was Mark. He told her about the oddest event that had just occurred. While stopping by an optometrist's shop in the middle of downtown Houston and accompanied by his small terrier, he let the dog out into the parking lot while he went inside to pick up a new pair of dark glasses for the weekend. As Mark walked into the store, he noticed his dog running around the back corner of the building as if it had seen an alley cat. When Mark came back out a few minutes later there was his terrier sitting by the front door, wagging its tale and with a bird in its mouth!

"I think it's some kind of plover or snipe. Maybe even a Woodcock." Mark said.

I asked Cina to inquire of Mark if the bird were still alive?

"Yes, but pretty roughed up. I'm taking it out to the ranch so you can see it when you come to pick me up."

It was almost sunset when we finally got to Mark's place, a beautiful ranch with his parent's handsome house bordering a pond surrounded by cattle. And all around thick stands of pines. Mark and his parents were in the front yard to greet us. After our brief hello's Mark retrieved a red plastic egg box. There huddled in a corner was an adult Woodcock eyes wide open and terrified, but nonetheless not looking too frazzled.

Mark Forgason and his mother and father are hands-on ranchers with a mild almost old south way about them. But clearly they were excited about their new prisoner and the fact that it had been retrieved in the middle of all that asphalt and cement of downtown Houston! We all speculated that it must have been flying through town to some distant swamp and had hit a window. It was not the first bird brought to me that had suffered that fate. But a Woodcock in downtown Houston?

It was an oddity to be sure. Mark's parents wanted to keep

the bird to show it to friends and relatives later that evening or the next day. I didn't think it would live that long and said so. I asked if I could examine the Woodcock outside of its improvised cage.

It put up no resistance when I reached into the box and picked it up. It showed some signs of having been mouthed by Mark's terrier, but upon close examination seemed to have no broken bones, no signs of blood. Only an incredibly fast beating heart and beautiful eyes that never blinked.

"I think this bird is ok," I said. "It would probably survive if we let it go."

Mr. and Mrs. Forgason looked somewhat disappointed. They gently hinted that they would like to keep it at least for a little while. They graciously relented, however, when I told them that the bird might die of shock that night. Mark agreed as well.

I wanted to see how well it might fly on its own so I did not gently toss it up into the air. I merely opened my hand. The Woodcock flew out of my hand like it had been shot out of a cannon. It winged straight away into the nearby pines. No zig-zagging like its cousin the snipe, but a direct and unaltered straight line to the woods. I was delighted. So were Cina, Nini and Mark. Mark's mom and dad were, I think, somewhat disappointed.

A few minutes later we were on our way to Norias and trapped in long lines of slow mowing traffic. Although some grand dining awaited us at the King Ranch the only food we had in the car was a small bag of fritos that I had purchased earlier. No body said anything when I opened the bag, but in a few minutes the aroma of fresh fritos filled the air. It was our driver Cina who asked for a couple of fritos at first. Soon the small bag was passed around to everyone even Cina's dog. So our first pre-Thanksgiving feast was a single small bag of fritos.

I really believe that in a state known for its friendliness and hospitality nobody seems more so than these wonderful, very individualistic people of ~~our~~ ^{The} state's south coastal plains. The nearness of Mexico pervades the atmosphere and good spanish was spoken by all I met there and strangely not as a second language but as if both english and spanish were simply one continuous means of communication.

At Norias we were hosted not just by Mark and Cina but by Cina's mother Helen - la gran patrona. Her aristocratic bearing concealed a nature that was very adventurous. She was with us all the time on our safaris, even barefooted with us in the coastal sand dunes. I had the privilege of being her dinner partner in the evenings. (We all dressed for dinner almost in the English style though not in black tie). And much of our conversation was in spanish. It never seemed to bother her that my spanish was poor. Our Thanksgiving dinner, an evening affair, was warm and familial, filled with toasts and good humor, not to mention a holiday turkey shot on the ranch. And lots of gossip. Nini Ferguson, Sotheby's representative in Washington and a dedicated fox hunter, seemed to know everybody and some of her personal observations on the rich and famous had us almost

falling out of our chairs. There was Mollie Hipp, director of development at the Austin Museum of Art, beautiful, fun to talk to and though not a hunter or bird watcher seemed to enjoy our long daily trips enormously. Her companion Ford Hubbard a businessman representing some big construction company in Houston was witty, surprisingly knowledgeable about the local fauna.

Others came for the day or for dinner to add to the party. I particularly enjoyed the visit of Anne and Tobin Armstrong for dinner when I had the pleasure of telling them that Scott and I were dedicating this book to their daughter Katherine. I had already told Cina about including her in our dedication at Thanksgiving dinner the night before. This long weekend was one of those special times you treasure the rest of your life. When I returned to Fort Worth I sent one of our folio prints of the Woodcocks to Mark's mom and dad to replace the live one they lost.