

The Devil Wears Parula

An “Old Guy” Bay Area Birder Dares to Enter the Youthful Mob-taping Scene

On the use of “electronic pishing” in an age of changing birder demographics and evolving ethical dimensions

I lost my virginity on the 2023 San Francisco CBC. On Nov. 21 that year, I found a Northern Parula along the shores of Lake Merced, an adult male, certainly the same first-winter individual that was found the February before. This adult was reported off and on through December, thus spending a second winter within a small stretch of willows along the lakeside. It was a prime “target” for the upcoming CBC that year. But count day dawned blustery, and passerines were buried. By 9:30am, I had gone to the willow patch three times, seeing only a small group of uncharacteristically sullen Bushtits. Desperation to get the parula for the count got the better of me.

Somehow I found TUTI Mob.mp3 on my iPhone and played it, and the parula, along with a Townsend’s Warbler, instantly popped up. Definition: I was playing a *mob tape*, a record-

ing of small birds agitated by (“mobbing”) a small owl like a pygmy-owl or screech-owl. I had not contemplated getting the requisite “documentation shot” while holding my iPhone, and things did not go well. Not only did I miss the photo, but, fumbling with the phone, I activated a new iOS feature which speed-texted my boss with my real-time GPS coordinates. I was exposed for calling in sick that Wednesday, but at least he didn’t know my bigger transgression. Apple and Salesforce did, however, with ads instantly popping up for clothing and gifts for birders, a Sowo IPX7 bluetooth speaker ranked 4.7 stars for mob-taping, and a confessional near me. That evening, at the count compilation, I admitted to “what I’ll euphemistically call electronic pishing,” adding, “unfortunately, it worked.” A third of the room laughed, a third had no idea what I was talking about, and a third gave me the royal stink-eye. When I returned to my Prius, the windows were smashed and my scope was gone. Had I learned my lesson? No.

Earlier that fall, I was birding the San Francisco Zoo for the “Rare Bird Roundup,” a September event started by long-time city birders, to see how many rare birds could be tallied in one day. It was a warm and sultry afternoon, and birds were sleepy and scarce. But as I entered the Exploration Zone, I detected about 20 Townsend’s Warblers and Chestnut-backed Chick-

adees excitedly jumping about and figured I had found the flock. Hearing oriole chatter on steroids, I then noticed two young birders standing at ground zero of the commotion. The oriole chatter quickly stopped, one of the birders ducked a speaker under his shirt, and awkward hellos ensued. They thought I might be one of those old-guy Bay Area birders, adamantly disapproving of mob-tape use, or “mobbing,” as it has become known.

Relaxing the vibe with a wink and a chuckle, I brought up an incident of a few days prior. Another young mob-taper was riling up a squad of chickadees and followers when he glimpsed a rare warbler, which apprehensively

- A Northern Parula (top) started the author, desperate to record the bird on his Christmas Bird Count, down the slippery slope of using so-called mob tapes. “Electronic pishing” worked, but doing so was not without its subsequent reckoning. Reminiscing over a two-year span, the author, an “old-guy birder,” takes a frisky look at this controversial practice. By the time a second parula (bottom) appeared, the author had revised his perspective on the issue. *Top: Lake Merced, San Francisco Co., California; Nov. 21, 2023. Photo by © Peter Pyle. Bottom: Rose Memorial Park, Mendocino Co., California; Dec. 4, 2025. Photo by © Lisa R. Walker.*

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peered at the mob from afar, but then quickly disappeared into dense willows. About an hour later, some birders had the audacity to mob in front of, ahem, *m. ob.* (birderspeak for “many observers”), and a social-media meltdown ensued. “Popular birding locale held hostage by an opprobrious mobster gang (OMG!!!),” read one subject line. The original finder later lamented, “Perhaps the fact that owl calls were played almost continually from speakers here until dusk might have scared the bird off.”

I headed off to walk Ocean Beach, but, before leaving, one of the youth e-flipped me TUTI Mob.mp3 and said, “Try it some time, you might like it.”

Why the Fuss?

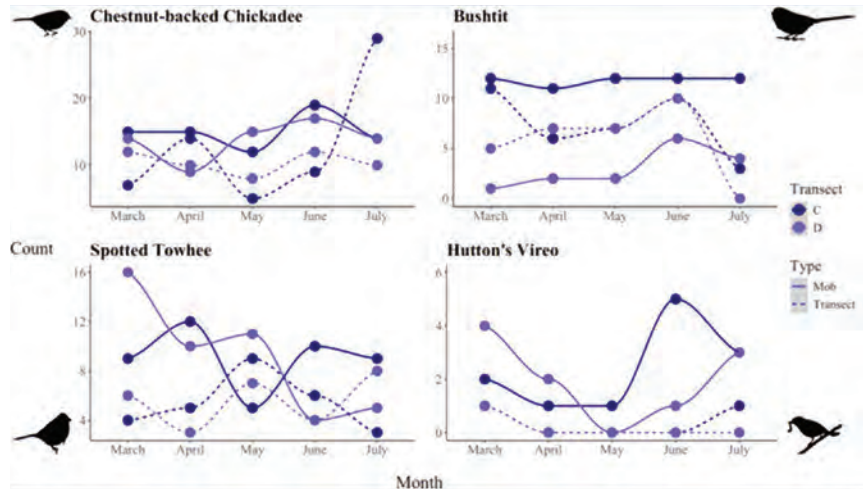
Once one loses one’s virginity, things quickly get out of hand—dare I say, “so to speak”? I never again mob-taped in birder-saturated San Francisco, but in Mar. 2024, having relocated to the remote Mendocino County coast, I bought the Sowo and started using it more...and more... and a lot more than I initially admitted. I did not breathe a word to local birders. Neither did I admit it to eBird. You’d think this would be important context for the checklist totals (more on that below), but I can count the number of times on my closed fist that I’ve seen “mob tape used” in eBird checklist comments.

Why? One reason is pride. “I’m a good birder...I don’t need the crutch of mob taping to find good stuff, my pishing is adequate anyway.” As a teenage birder, in Maryland, I quickly learned that imitating irritated Tufted Titmice brought in the birds, and I became somewhat good at it. In coastal California, Oak Titmice do not have the same cachet as Tufteds, so I continue to effectively imitate the latter and, behold, the stars of TUTI Mob.mp3 are indeed Tufteds. But I never became as good at pishing and hooting as some of my long-time birding accomplices, who might as well be walking mob tapes. Is holistic pishing more *Kumbaya* and therefore more

- At Stanford University's Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve ('Ootchamin 'Ooyakma), undergraduate Marty Freeland constructed Gower dissimilarity matrices to assimilate both binary presence-absence (from AudioMoth surveys) and continuous abundance (from mob and transect surveys) data, and found that the only significant result was an increase in bird abundance with mob-tape use. *Figure by © Marty Freeland, with assistance from M. Wilkins, D. Gomes, and A. Wilson.*

acceptable than turning to Big Tech? Maybe. But the effects that taping, pishing, and hooting have on birds and listing ethics are likely similar.

If mob-taping didn't work, there wouldn't be such a fuss. Which brings Marty Freeland into our story. Marty was an early adopter of this "technology." As a 13-year-old, he layered some scolds of Bewick's Wren, Gray Catbird, and vireos into the iMovie app, adding, "I think I also included jays, a bad idea." Now a junior at Stanford University [and with Isabelle Busch, "Frontiers of Field Ornithology" columnist for *Birding*. —Ed.], Marty continued this interest by conducting controlled experiments to assess the effects of mob tapes and other enticements on birds, at Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve ('Ootchamin 'Ooyakma) in the Bay Area. The only significant effect he found was an



increase in abundance with mob-tape use. The reserve manager allowed the surveys, but only after Marty compared his design to that of a previous experiment there that involved "shooting a fake Cooper's Hawk from a cross-bow thing at chickadees."

I distinguish mobbing for vagrants in fall and winter from playback for residents, or playing mob-tapes during the breeding season, for example, during the vagrant window in California in late May to early June. Disturbing a bird from nesting duties is a big *kapu* for me. David Sibley nicely summarizes this controversy at his blog (tinyurl.com/Pyle-Sibley). But is mob-taping for fall and winter vagrants truly less impactful to birds than playback or playing

mob tapes during the breeding season?

Although the overall perception is that mobbing is exclusive to the tech-savvy birding youth ("born doing eBird," as one San Francisco young birder once told me), even old-timers are beginning to partake. I recall a time in the city, not long ago

- "Stop, children, what's that sound? Everybody look what's going down." Even old-guy birders, who may have rebelled to Buffalo Springfield's tunes, are starting to explore mob tapes. And resident Anna's Hummingbirds are catching on, being "mobbed out" in some popular birding localities. *San Francisco Zoo grounds, California; Apr. 7, 2023. Photos by © Peter Pyle.*



• For reasons that are unclear, Bullock's Orioles (upper right) and Nashville Warblers (lower right) are relatively common in Fort Bragg, Mendocino Co., California, in winter. When present for months at a time, birds like these respond to mob tapes. Vagrants just passing through are disinclined to respond, though. *Upper right: Dec. 21, 2024. Lower right: Nov. 21, 2025. Photos by © Peter Pyle.*

at all, after a couple of pints at the Pig & Whistle, when two long-time San Francisco birders admitted, in hushed voices, to trying mob-taping for migrants in birderless locations on rare occasion ("It works!"). Even

BELOW: • "Checklist-initiation bias" occurs when an eBird checklist is started after a rare bird is found. The author is guilty, but in a perhaps unexpected way. He has a well-known fondness for "messy" birds—worn, molting, and so forth—and will often initiate an eBird checklist upon discovering a beauty such as this one-year-old Western Gull. *MacKerricher State Park, Mendocino Co., California; July 31, 2025. Photo by © Peter Pyle.*



in Mendocino, a couple of long-time birders told me they tried mob-taping at Miner Hole Road, although in this case “with absolutely no response from any bird.” One young mobster related: “An old-guy birder took a recording of me playing a mob tape and pishing over the tape, and made his own mob tape! He was quite proud of himself.” And, hey, if Superb Lyrebirds can mimic mobbing to attract mates (see tinyurl.com/Pyle-Dalziell), why can't we use it to attract vagrants?

Other Bay Area birders take a more circumspect approach. For instance: “Not for me. Bird numbers are plummeting. We already intrude in their world in multiple, unnatural ways.

LEFT TO RIGHT: ● Orange-crowned Warbler (nominative *celata*, “Eastern”), Summer Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Black-chinned Hummingbird. These vagrants to Mendocino Co., California, passing through and/or recently arrived, were found without the use of mob tapes. Dec. 7, 2024; Dec. 21, 2024; Nov. 11, 2025; Aug. 28, 2025. Photos by © Peter Pyle.

Cars, rodenticides, windows, our land use, etc. Besides, I like the challenge of the hunt. So I might miss some birds, *qué será, será*. The first time I saw the high-alert, adrenalized response of the birds, my reaction was, ‘How much food energy does this burn for our amusement?’ There are a lot of people in this avocation who are only here to play bingo. Do they care about birds? Are they the most likely to use playback?” Countering these sentiments, one mobster rationalized: “But it’s okay, the birds would be doing this anyway and most of them are also gleaning and feeding once drawn in. So maybe it’s actually beneficial to mob tape during migration season!” Another San Francisco birder takes middle ground: “I’ve never mobbed myself, but I’ve been in the vicinity of mobbing and intense mob judgment. Anytime I step on a branch and invite the stare of a Great Horned Owl or watch a Hermit Thrush tilt his head to the sound of my camera shutter, I’m aware of how my presence impacts the birds. I try not to disturb them, but we’re always intruding on nature in a million little ways each day.”

In college, I was a regular at Bruce Springsteen concerts, the human equivalent of a mob-tape experience, and I still hear versions of Rosalita Mob.mp3 on live-concert radio. As a freshman, I sat wide-eyed in the bleachers, but by junior year I was diving into the mob. Am I worse off for it? I don’t think so. But there’s a bit of personal bias involved here, and others may question my mental equipoise. I will concede that mob-taping may not be all that bad for the birds, used with discretion (see Sibley’s piece), especially given other practices employed by birders to avian detriment, such as launching stuffed Cooper’s Hawks at chickadees. One veteran birder told me: “I would rank mob-taping during migration down at, oh, #4,892 of all the things humans do that are bad for birds and their environment. Birders’ priorities can be wacked-out on these things. I once saw someone lambasting a kid who may have gotten too close to a pygmy-owl. Well, the kid rode his bike to the stakeout and lived minimally with four or five housemates, whereas the lambasting guy had driven



his Chevy Suburban (or whatnot) from his McMansion with a five-car garage to see the owl. The lambasting guy's entire existence was bad for the birds!" Bird abundance is in well-documented decline, and I dare agree that mob-taping is not one of the top 10 causes.

Mob Out

A sidenote involves birds being "mobbed out" at heavily birded migrant and vagrant traps, as dejectedly confirmed by several Bay Area mobsters. The birds learn to ignore the mob tapes, even when switched around *in situ*. One mobster confessed that he carries twelve mp3s. I experimented with this, mobbing heavily at the Westport Beach RV Park and Campground, much to the amusement and curiosity of the RV/BBQ set there, but refraining from mobbing in the vegan gardens of the posh Stanford Inn, where the one-percenters would have looked down on me with stern disapproval, if not abject terror. Sure enough, birds became inured to both taping and pishing at the campground, but they responded well to pishing throughout the fall at Stanford Inn.

Could mob-out be a good thing? The birds become less affected, birders grasp this ineffectiveness and stop mobbing at these locales, and perhaps there's a natural adaptation in the "bird-birder ecosystem" that could smooth things out in time. I suppose if a real Northern Pygmy-Owl started tooting, the mobbed-out songbirds might ignore it, and the owl could nab one. But this is only a detriment from the songbird's perspective, certainly not the owl's. That said, there is something unseemly and self-absorbed about birders walking around mobbing at popular vagrant traps. Marty opines: "The effect of an ordinary mob is a waste of a few minutes; the effect of mob-out is the deadening of a kind of vocal signal that is pretty darn universal among passerines and has probably existed for millions of years." Another mobster contributes: "I am scared of the world where I show up to a popular migrant trap and I hear two pygmy-owls going and neither are real!" Let's just not use mob tapes at popular birding locales, please?

What about eBird checklist bias,

which I teased above? As I said, mob-tape methodology is rarely reported as part of eBird survey design. There is a well-documented bias related to birders initiating an eBird checklist, or not, depending on whether, or not, a rare bird is found. Guilty as charged. More important to me, I'll often start a checklist only after getting a nice photo of a worn bird in molt, a rare and precious commodity at the Macaulay Library. In a paper published in 2025, Louis J. Backstrom and coauthors constructed statistical models to identify and control for such checklist-initiation bias (tinyurl.com/Pyle-Backstrom). Might we do the same with mob-tape (including mob-out) bias? In the Bay Area, models could statistically adjust data for anomalously high totals of, say, Anna's Hummingbirds, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, given the effects of date, location, weather, observer, and other variables. That is, unless the mobsters purposely suppress their totals of these species, "to eliminate this bias from the data"—in other words, to not draw attention to their use of mob tapes. Fancier models



might be able to account for attempted bias elimination, as well as mob-out, so rich are eBird data.

Do Mob Tapes Really Work for Vagrants?

This past September, I accompanied a conscientious mobster to Usal, a remote, rugged, coastal campground north of Westport, California, in the foreboding King Range. Usal is a challenge to access and infrequently birded, so we figured it'd be OK to mob-tape. I was educated on some mob-taping skills. "Bring in the chickadees with CBCH Mob.mp3, which includes Northern Pygmy-Owl, then switch to something else to bring in the periphery." In my case, the something else has become Oriole.mp3, which Marty had given me to find orioles on the CBC; for some unfathomable reason, a lot of orioles, along with Nashville Warblers, winter in nearby Fort Bragg. True to hush-hush form, we did not mention mob-taping in our eBird checklist

comments. This reluctance was justified by the mobster with tales of negative anti-mobster experiences and irate online hostility, but he has also received plaudits for helping observers see a vagrant with his skilled pishing and hooting. We failed to tape in any vagrants, despite favorable location, date, and weather, plus plenty of excited chickadees and Wilson's Warblers to draw one in. Then, on Nov. 11, 2025, I returned to Usal with a couple of local birders. We did not use mob tapes, but we did manage to rile up a flock of at least 23 Ruby-crowned Kinglets with pishing alone. I also pished in a vagrant Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

A theory began to rattle around in my head.

Over the past two falls, I have had some luck finding vagrant landbirds along the Mendocino County coast: Black-chinned Hummingbird; Eastern and Tropical kingbirds; Orchard Oriole; Cassin's Sparrow; Clay-colored Sparrow; Chestnut-sided, Black-and-

white, Lucy's, Tennessee, and nominate *celata* Orange-crowned warblers; American Redstart; and Summer Tanager—not a single one with mob tapes. But many by pishing. Then, during November, I joined some master mobsters at work along the Mendocino County coast. They brought out the big guns: Tropical Mob.mp3, Wrentit6 Mob.mp3, and Mob 25.mp3, the last one for sparrows. Our only vagrant was a Tennessee Warbler, found without the use of a recording. We played a tape nearby and attracted two Nashvilles, but the Tennessee would have no part of it!

Migrants and vagrants are just naturally wary, unfamiliar with the dynamics of their surroundings. They avoid local brouhahas. Think of a wandering tourist stumbling upon an Oakland sideshow, or a Dead Kennedys show at the Mabuhay Gardens, or the running of the bulls in Pamplona. Or even a Springsteen concert. They might look on in curiosity, but only briefly, and from a distance. One mob-



Swallow-tailed kite by Bruce Wunderlich

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ster mentioned that “Red-eyed Vireos are especially wary; they come in briefly, quickly discern the situation, then split, so you have to be ready with camera.” Maybe mob-taping, as we currently practice it, is not that useful for vagrants? I’m sure the mobsters have stories to counter this sentiment, but I’m guessing that the number of vagrants observed by most of us is not increased much, if at all, by using mob tapes over pishing.

The Devil Returns

On Nov. 26, 2025, the devil wearing parula returned, to Rose Memorial Park in Fort Bragg, but this time with a result that supported my budding hypothesis. (Film buffs, who will recognize the theme of this essay, are likely glad it wasn’t wearing Cerulean. Although I would have been!) I heard a soft *tip* note, I pished, and the parula briefly popped up. To get the documentation shot, I played TUTI Mob.mp3, and both the parula and a Tennessee Warbler “bolted from the bush like bats out of hell and flew into the pine and *Banksia* to the East.” Twenty minutes later, the parula was back in the bush. Pishing again brought it up, this time for a photo. It was a first-fall, or formative, male which, I theorize, elicited a less-assured response to the mob tape than that of the adult spending its second winter at Lake Merced. That sealed the deal. I’ll stick to pishing. Or at least that’s what I’ll say.

Then again, mob-taping has become an important part of the young-birder experience. If it inspires teens and twentysomethings to get out and bird, instead of streaming sports or binge scrolling, that is ultimately much better for birds. Several of the mobsters have gone on to study ornithology, write scientific papers, do valuable conservation work, and mentor other young birders—a net positive for avian welfare.

So this old guy is okay with mob-taping for migrants in fall and winter. But not during the breeding season. He also recommends relaxing and employing *Kumbaya* pishing for vagrants—

unequivocally so at popular birding locations. And if you miss a vagrant? *Qué será, será*. As with many issues these days, opinions on mob-taping have become too feverish and inflexible, given other Anthropocene events. Mob-taping, in my opinion, is much more of a human-disturbance problem than a bird-disturbance problem.

Acknowledgments

I thank Marty Freeland for sharing his research. And I thank Marty again, as well as several other anonymous tipsters, informants, and mobsters, for providing me grist for this mill. Ted Floyd patiently advised on an earlier draft—and might even be one of the anonymous informants. 🐦



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