



The Silva Field Guide to Birds of a Parallel Future
by [Claire L. Evans](#)

In an old growth forest along the Oregon coast, an ornithologist is hiking across a loamy bed of pine needles. She is three weeks into a census, cataloguing birds in the deep woods. Every night, she's pitched tent in damp boughs along the thundering, craggy sea. The spotted owls are up. The vesper sparrows are down. White-grey sky and the smell of cedar.

She stops. The woods are dense with moisture. She is alone with the music of the trees; far above, in the canopy, a gentle rain falls, the sound like papery chimes. The forest groans under the weight of itself. With binoculars, she scans the low-hanging branches until she spots a nest. It appears to have been built drunkenly, the weft of twigs at improbable angles, a deflated parallelogram. She looks again. Unusual. Perhaps it's been tampered with. But she's far off the public trailheads, alone in these woods.

The nest, she determines after hiking closer and half-scrambling up the tree, has not been tampered with. Its form is strange but natural, built with the focused precision of a roosting animal. It's marvelous, though—like a sculpture. Against her better scientific judgement, she reaches for the nest. It's nearly weightless, and as she is pulling it from the branches, the clouds above the canopy begin to clear, pouring sun through the leaves onto the forest floor. In the new light, she notices a kind of iridescent hum, shifting as she cradles the nest and turns it around in her hands. There is something *inside*.

That night, she tucks the nest near her pillow, wedged against the edge of the tent, wrapped in a blanket. The hum keeps her awake. She doesn't know what to do. It seems insane to leave it behind, but carrying it with her feels like a kind of madness, too. Drinking gritty campfire coffee in the morning, she mutters to herself, weighing her options: she is afraid to open it, afraid to leave it behind, afraid of it.

Somehow, she continues the census, recording bird calls, counting terns, plovers, sandpipers and hawks, the mysterious nest growing heavier and heavier in her backpack each day until it's impossible to carry and she must leave it in her tent, at the foot of a gnarled Sitka spruce, checking back every few hours like a mother hen.

Seven days later at dawn, the nest moves. She is already awake and she sees it happen distinctly. It shifts and crackles, brushing against the nylon tent wall. She pulls up close to the nest, sleeping bag up to her ears, frozen with horror and awe. She senses a metallic tang beneath the brine in the warming morning air. Slowly, the nest falls away, shedding its delicate architecture.

Coiled like a snake inside is a humming geometry. A warped, mechanical thing with opalescent planes where its wings should be. It undulates like a manta ray, and the planes shatter into shadows, ghosting trails of probability in spirals around its body. It seems to exist in several states at once. She sits up, and as she moves the thing blinks in and out of sight, like a one-sided coin, disappearing with a glint as it's tossed. The forest and the roar of the ocean fall mute.

Somehow she knows what the thing is—not here, but somewhere. She reaches over the shattered nest and slowly unzips the tent. She throws open the flap, letting in a whiff of salt and pine, light, the world. The thing makes an alien screech and flies away into the forest; each wing flap lasting a century. For a long time she watches it. In her tent, by her pillow, it had been the size of an apple; now it aged as it flew, molting and transforming around an invisible mold. By the time it's only a few feet away, it has the wingspan of an albatross, an airplane, the universe wrapped around a feathered heartbeat.

At the exact same moment, elsewhere, a robin's egg cracks open. A new life flutters into existence, dewy, feathers matted from birth. It peers above the edges of its nest. It's not a nest at all. The egg has been laid into a non-Euclidean world, where clouds whorl in ribbons, without origin, without end. Quantum sound waves ebb on the horizon, growing smaller as they approach, larger as they recede. There is a glow in the air; it tastes metallic. A forest of quivering forms bend like fractals in the hot Möbius wind.

The robin knows nothing of the difference. It rustles and unfolds its wings. It perches on the sloping edge of a Penrose triangle and sings.