

Futures

Birding with my human

The best way to keep watch. By **Sylvia Heike**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

We're climbing the steps of the bird tower – the soft shuffle of Willa's sneakers on the wood ascend first, the dull metal march of my feet follow close behind. It's 5:30 on a Sunday morning, and we're the first ones here – unless you count the birds, which I will, very soon.

It's windy at the top, clouds rushing across blue, droneless skies. Willa adjusts the old fishing hat on my head, tugging at the frayed edges. It belonged to her grandfather, and she doesn't want it to be swept into the lake. She tilts her head, robin-like, and smiles. "It looks good on you."

I'll take her word for it.

Her leather jacket creaks as she lifts a pair of binoculars to her eyes and points them towards Gull Island. From this angle it looks deceptively long and narrow, despite being pancake-shaped. Hundreds of gulls stop here in spring, but by June, they have moved on, leaving the island mainly to waders and water

birds. An Arctic tern screeches above.

"No sign of the heron," Willa says. "See anything cool?"

The definition of cool varies from week to week. Some days she means rare sightings, other times any bird at all. The lenses in my eyes rotate as I scan the shoreline, every centimetre among the rocks and reeds. "Thirty mallard ducks, ten teals, six ruffs, four lapwings – a western marsh harrier soaring to the east."

"Where?" Willa turns her bare face to the sky, elbows on the railing, but it's already too late. Her binoculars can track a target, but only if she finds it.

"Gone. Landed on an artificial nest."

Willa sighs.

I prepare to activate the screen on my arm. "Would you like to see the video I took? Or pictures?"

"Maybe later."

"Perhaps my other findings will make up for the harrier you missed."

I tell Willa everything I see. Every avian

species and subspecies, down to their estimated age and sex. Some are individuals we've encountered before, based on leg bands or unique plumage patterns. I'm about to mention how when the wind blows just right, I'm able to see a duck's nest cradling seven cream-coloured eggs –

"That's enough." Instead of smiling, her lips are pressed together in a hard line. "I just want to watch birds for a while. Maybe you can do the same."

"That's what I thought I was doing."

"It's not your fault you're too good at this. Must be nice. You don't even have to try."

I process her words and tone, not sure how to respond. She's not wrong – it takes me seconds to spot, count and identify the birds in my field of view. Only a moment to upload everything to the cloud. Taking pictures comes as easily as blinking, and I can record high-definition video just by thinking about it. There's no challenge, no learning, no trying.

It's hard sometimes.

Futures

I have wondered, from time to time, how content people seem doing things in their slow and inefficient way. Take Willa, for example. Perfectly happy peering at the distant birds through her binoculars, the wind tossing her dark hair, a smile occasionally pinching the corners of her mouth – at least until I somehow upset her.

It isn't often I ask for anything, but the time has come. "Willa? I'd like to try birding your way."

"Really?" She seems surprised, but not unpleasantly so. "Sure."

Her eyes sparkle like the sun in the water as she tells me to shut down my network connection, ornithological databases, most of my camera mods. "Make yourself more like me."

I follow her voice commands until my eyesight approximates that of a 23-year-old short and spunky human. As the amount of input decreases, it becomes quieter in my head.

"All you need is your eyes and ears. And maybe a pair of binoculars."

Willa tells me how she used to come here with her grandfather before the tower was

built. "I still have all his paper notebooks. That's how he recorded things for decades. Can you believe it? No apps either, just a worn bird guide in his pocket."

"There's the grey heron! Finally." Willa offers the binoculars. "Want to take a look?"

I already see the bird, a tall thin ghost stealthing among the island grass. Barely visible until I borrow the binoculars and peer through them, seeing the creature – if not clearly, at least better. The grey heron going about its life, oblivious to being observed.

"Cool, huh?"

I nod. It's good to see Willa smiling.

A gust of wind blows from the lake, making me hold on to my hat. I never met Willa's grandfather, but I imagine him now, doing what we're doing in another time. Just him and the birds.

A small flock lifts from nearby bushes and flashes above. My first inclination is to zoom, scan and identify – but those functions are temporarily gone. I listen to the enthusiastic chatter of the swarm, knowing I should know it. I search the corners of my mind, my available memories. All the query returns is *small*

brown birds.

Something sparks and stutters inside me. Beyond that basic knowledge, I have no idea what kind of birds they are. They could be ... *anything*.

"The heron's fishing," Willa says, and I'm reminded of my job. Ready to serve my human.

"Would you like some pictures? I can turn everything back on."

Willa lowers her binoculars, giving me an enigmatic look. "Up to you."

Not the answer I anticipated.

I mull it over. It would only take a second to turn everything back on, snap a shot of the grey heron skewering fish right now. It would be a good picture – no, an *excellent* one. As clear and in-focus as the distance, weather conditions and my engineering allow. Nearly perfect by human standards.

Or I could just enjoy the moment.

Sylvia Heike is a speculative fiction writer from Finland who loves books, bunnies and birds. For more info, visit sylviaheike.com

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Sylvia Heike reveals the inspiration behind *Birding with my human*

The setting of the story is a real location in Lempäälä, Finland, where I sometimes go birding. There's the lake (Ahtialanjärvi), Gull Island (Lokkisaari), and a fancy new bird tower. I borrowed almost all the birds and their behaviour for my story from my personal sightings and experiences at this place. After all, it's where the inspiration first struck me.

I was climbing the steps of the bird tower when I randomly thought of a person going birding with an android or a robot, and how handy it would be. The tower stands far enough from the island that you can hardly see anything without some serious zoom, and even then, it's a challenge to find the birds you're there to see. My birding efforts often feel stumbling at best, yet that's part of the fun.

As for the artificial nest of the western marsh harrier, it's already a reality. Considerable effort has gone into preserving and improving the lake area — a Natura 2000 protected site — for waders and other birds. Similar efforts take place every day around the world. Although I love that people do this, it's alarming that it needs doing at all.

All the more reason to enjoy the birds around us today.

