

Message on the Mountain

How could I ever figure out what to do with my life?

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"I'll bet I know a bird you've never seen," my friend challenged me. He knew that as a wildlife artist, I'd sketched many birds, written and illustrated a botany and forager's guide, even lectured at the Museum of Natural History and taught at the Smithsonian Institution. "The spruce grouse," he continued, "A bird that lives in the far North."

"I did," I told him, thinking back. "In the Canadian Rockies."

It was back when I was a recent college grad. I had just received a degree in art from the University of Maryland, and yet, with all of that education, I didn't want a regular nine-to-five job. Like many young people out of school, I wondered, "What now?"

After traveling along the Pacific coast I made my way to British Columbia and the edge of the Rockies. The peaks of the mountains loomed overhead, and I felt an urge to climb to the top. I packed a lunch, my sketch pad and pen and headed toward the slope. There was no trail. I bushwhacked my way up the mountain, through brush and forests. Despite the struggle, I felt exhilarated by the anticipation of making the summit.

Finally, I reached a high rocky ridge, but the peak I wanted to climb was still so far in the distance. *I'll never make it before nightfall. I'll have to turn back*, I thought, disappointed.

I was going back down into the timber when I was startled by a sudden *whir-r-r-r-r* of wings. I'd flushed a bird, a large one. But instead of flying off, it landed on a branch hardly 10 feet away. It looked like a partridge, with red wattles on each side of its beak, mottled brown feathers and a chestnut-tipped tail.

It stared at me and made a soft sound: *Ko-o-o-ok, ko-o-o-ok, ko-o-o-ok*. I waited, spellbound, for it to fly from the branch. But it didn't. It kept looking at me, uttering, *Ko-o-o-ok, ko-o-o-ok, ko-o-o-ok*. Almost as if it was talking to me. I eased out my sketchbook. Quickly I drew a rough sketch, hoping that he'd stay. And he did. He just curiously bobbed his head, watching me. I'd never known a bird to act like that. It was as if he wanted to pose for me. I made another sketch, and another with a few more details. I felt myself caught up in the excitement of drawing this strange and beautiful bird.

This is it! This is it! Here I was combining my love of the outdoors with my training in art school. *I'm a wildlife artist!* I realized. It seemed like the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Later, I identified the bird in a guidebook as one rarely seen because of its wilderness habitat. A spruce grouse.

Funny, it had flown out of my memory until my friend mentioned it now.

"Do you know what Native Americans say about him?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "What do they say?"

"We call him the messenger bird. He often brings an important message."

A message that had shaped my life.