



First published March 1, 2016... Contact Hart at hartrufe@gmail.com



The Reddish Egret uses the canopy method of stealth.

STEALTHY BIRDS

It was big and black and it blotted out the sun. It came in low and silent, just above the horizon, and even though the Navy's newest version of the Stealth Bomber was just coming in for a landing several hundred yards from the road we were travelling upon next to the US Naval Station at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, it briefly darkened the sky, and was very ominous and awe-inspiring. One could easily comprehend the fear it would create in enemy souls below who would realize that it meant to do them harm. Perhaps like the Peregrine plummeting from the

sky on the poor hapless Pigeon, one could well imagine the dove's last view of daylight, briefly darkened, just before its lights went out forever.

Stealth has been an important element of warfare ever since man began fighting with his fellow man. Certainly "shock and awe" and overwhelming might and firepower have always been important; but equally important has been the element of surprise, the sudden shock of an unexpected attack out of nowhere. History is full of examples of much larger forces being defeated because a small stealthy force, utilizing the element of surprise, emerged victorious by catching the larger army off-guard. Here in Fort Pierce, Florida, where the US Navy Seals first began their development and training during World War II, the Navy Seal Museum stands as testament to arguably the most effective military use of stealth in world history.



In the bird world, there are two kinds of birds:

those that survive by catching and eating other living organisms, such as small mammals, fish, insects, reptiles and herptiles, and even other birds; and those that survive by eating foods that are stationary and not able to escape, such as flower nectar, plants, seeds, fruits, nuts, snails and crustaceans and even carrion from road kill. The everlasting dance between predator and prey bird species undoubtedly has been going on since birds evolved from dinosaurs. And in that dance, predators rely on stealth and the element of surprise as a key to their success, while prey species rely on alertness and constant awareness to survive.

I will never forget the day I was in my photography blind by our bird feeders when a Cooper's Hawk made a surprise attack on the feeding birds, scattering them in all directions, except for one poor hapless Brown-headed Cowbird, that was carried off in the hawk's talons. The attack was so quick and sudden that I was not even able to press the camera release to record the event. I can only imagine the degree of stealth the hawk, a relatively large bird, must have exercised to get in position, unobserved, to launch its attack.



Stealth attacks take different forms with different species. Some raptors tend to cruise the skies, often typically at different altitudes until appropriate prey are found, at which time they dive or swoop, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. This Bald Eagle (*above, right*) appeared to be cruising for fish when suddenly he dove on this poor Common Gallinule and carried it off, just affording time for a quick photo.

More typical stealth activity is that of the Northern Harrier (*above, left*) which cruises low over fields searching for small rodents, dropping quickly as the opportunity arises. Some species, such as kingfishers (*left*), Kestrels, Ospreys and terns, often hover in place until prey comes into view, and then dive down after it.

The Reddish Egret (*top*) uses a technique called "canopy feeding" -

spreading its wings over its head, thereby shading the water. The shade attracts small fish out of the sun and provides an easy meal for the bird. Yet other species simply lie in wait until prey comes along unsuspectingly. This Green Heron (*right*) was in this standby, ready for a strike position, at Viera when we first saw it early one morning, and was still there in the same identical position and pose an hour later when we made our second trip around the refuge. We don't know if it had a meal in between or not.



Flycatchers typically station themselves at a good vantage point where they can swoop out and grab a passing insect, and return to the same perch to devour the meal. While this Scissors-tail Flycatcher (*left*) looks like an outfielder ready to catch a fly ball, it actually flew out from this fence wire, caught the bug, and returned to the same spot. It played briefly with the insect just before this photo of tossing it in the air and down the gullet.

But the very essence of stealth, to me, is exhibited by the American Bittern, (*right*) which is capable of creeping along very slowly and silently in search of whatever it was looking for. We never did find out. View the video



(below)
to see
why I
believe
this is
true
stealth.

Stealth is
not a



illicit or anti-social behavior. But I must admit that when my neighbor, who is an excellent cook, bakes a scrumptious cake, or delicious cookies, I do entertain thoughts of surreptitiously sneaking into her kitchen and sampling some, without getting caught. Unlike the birds, I probably couldn't pull it off.

For a Stealth Bomber video, see: www.cnn.com/videos/us/2015/10/26/b-2-stealth-bomber-hi-def-northrop-origin-vstan.cnn

7 American Bittern, Viera Movie



Click photos for larger versions

Get all of Hart Rufe's columns from beginning to mid-2015 in *Birding in a Hart Beat*, a 292-page full-color large-format book