

What about camouflage? Doesn't that help us fit in and keep the disruption to a minimum? I've entertained this question many times, often from bow hunters, but also from unarmed outdoorsmen, and I admit that I ham it up with my answer. "Well, let's think about this," I begin. "Most birds know what people look like. We may perversely use only two of our limbs for walking, and the other two may hang down to no apparent purpose, but those are our problems. Even when we're barging into the birds' world, we're a known quantity. But consider us from their viewpoint when we put on camouflage. *What in the world is this thing? It looks kind of like a bush, but what a funny-looking bush. And whoever saw a bush move? Or is it a pile of leaves? But whoever saw a pile of leaves move? And what about the way the eyes peer out from a hole in the lump at the top? This is really strange. What are you? Could you be Joe the hiker in expensive camouflage?* The large thing on the ground probably moves furtively, thinking this helps the cause, and it's probably tense, certainly strange. It cannot possibly be up to any good. Alarms ricochet everywhere, especially from the squirrels. *Go away! Whatever you are, go away!* And just think, Joe had paid several hundred dollars for these threads, the best money can buy."

If I've played my part well, everyone gets the point. To another human being, perhaps even to a deer who wanders into the scene, the camouflaged individual who doesn't move a single sinew *might* be pretty invisible -- until he *does* move a sinew. To the other creatures whose homeland has been invaded -- especially the birds and squirrels -- he's not invisible at all, movement or no movement. If one day I walk into my living room and see a pile of shapeless cloth on the floor, I'm going to notice, right? It may be camouflaged to perfectly match the design of the rug, but I'm not that unaware and dumb. In like manner, the woodsman lurking in camouflage is just as jarring a presence for the local denizens as the hunter in a Day-Glo orange vest. All the creatures in the forest speak and read two common languages -- bird language and body language -- and they react to new behaviors and shapes and vibes. The fact that clothing matches the background in a generic way is irrelevant. They're so far ahead of us in this camo game, it's not even funny.

More important, in the manner of the San Bushmen [of the Kalahari Desert in Africa], we must focus on recognition of, and respect for, all things. Outfits and gear are no substitute for this basic attitude. I always ask people to start not with camo gear, but with their attitude: Proceed with respect, pause frequently, turn the eyes away from direct confrontation, and walk with a relaxed body posture -- calmly, with a respectful routine of invisibility. Employ awareness, connection, recognition. Ease around birds who are feeding. Try not to disturb those who are singing. We can do better by invoking the golden rule. The more we adopt a respectful, aware attitude, whether it's in the yard or in the woods or the jungle, the more scoutlike we become, and the more respectfully we are treated in return. After, or even while, we learn "invisibility" as an attitude of connection and respectful conduct, putting on the camouflage can be quite valuable in certain circumstances and take us even further in bird language (or tracking or just about anything else outdoors). I just don't want anyone to think that it can be a substitute for the proper respectful attitude.

Jon Young, *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World*, pp. 168-9