

The Square-Billed Sapphire

Cast of Characters

BIRDER #: A middle-aged woman or man, dressed for bird watching*

BIRDER #2: A middle-aged woman or man, dressed for bird watching*

HUNTER: A middle-aged man, dressed for bird watching and wearing a hat and sunglasses

* The BIRDER roles should be played by two men or two women, but not one of each. Male pronouns have been used in some instances during speech but can be changed. Characters can be played by any race/ethnicity.

Set and Prop Requirements

- Two pairs of binoculars (one for each BIRDER)
- One birding guide
- One toy rifle (need not be at all realistic looking, cruder is better)
- A tree(s) – optional
- Two badges

Sound Cues

- Chirping birds and other “nature” sounds at rise – optional

SETTING: A forest

AT RISE: BIRDER #1 is looking upward through a pair of binoculars.

BIRDER #1 is holding binoculars and looking up intently; they briefly remove the binoculars, then put them back on. BIRDER #2 enters, not exactly noisily, but not silently either. BIRDER #2 gets within a few feet of BIRDER #1, who lets go of their binoculars so that they hang around their neck.

BIRDER #1: (*Sarcastically*) Thank you for that.

BIRDER # 2: Excuse me?

BIRDER #1: I had it in sight, I think, but I can't say for sure because *you* came blundering by and scared it away.

BIRDER #2: Well, I didn't know, I uh . . .

BIRDER #1: Evidently.

It was a *Square-Billed Sapphire*.

BIRDER #2: Oh.

BIRDER #1: That's once in lifetime.

BIRDER #2: Yeah, I know what it is.

BIRDER #1: So you *knew* that an SBS had been seen in this area, but you figured you'd stomp around like a maniac anyway.

BIRDER #2: Well, how'd *you* get here? I bet you walked from the road just like I did.

BIRDER #1: Yes, but *mindfully*.

BIRDER #2 Oh . . . well, *mindfully*, of course.

BIRDER #1 An SBS, that would've been the pinnacle of my birding career.

BIRDER #2 If you're such a keen birder, why don't you pick up your binoculars and stop running your mouth.

BIRDER #1 Oh, what a concept, be quiet while you're in the forest. I'll have to try that sometime.
If I hadn't been standing here like a statue for the last two hours, I wouldn't have seen the Square-Billed Sapphire in the first place!

BIRDER #2 Try and let go of the SBS, it'll do you good.

BIRDER #1 Easy for you to say.

BIRDER #2 I come here to enjoy the wonder of these beautiful birds, and not just the rare ones. It's not about ID-ing this or that particular bird, they're all in a guidebook anyway. The experience is what counts, just being present.

But I guess for people like you, that's not enough; it's all about bragging rights: *I* saw an SBS, and last year an Agitated Wing Flapper! Birding is just another form of competition and one-upmanship.

BIRDER #1 Please tell me more about my personality and philosophy on life since you seem to be an expert on the topic.

I'd been peacefully contemplating this sylvan scene for hours, I was in *flow*, and then you stagger past, upset everything and scare the SBS, and *I'm* the jerk.

This is ... *wow ... this* is what's wrong with our country.

BIRDER #2 I'm not even going to unpack that remark.

And you know what, it probably wasn't even an SBS; I bet it was a juvenile Throat Crusher, they look very similar.

BIRDER #1 Exactly, *that's* what I was trying to determine, you moron!
BIRDER #1 attacks BIRDER #2, and they begin sparring, wrestling.

HUNTER enters carrying what is clearly a toy rifle. HUNTER stands watching BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2 fight (they are unaware of his presence).

HUNTER makes a clicking sound like a gun being cocked and holds the rifle so that it is pointed upward.

BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2, still on the ground, separate from one another and look up at the HUNTER.

HUNTER: Can I help you two?

BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2 stand up.

BIRDER #1: Help, no ... we're just uhm—

BIRDER #2: Yeah, we're uh—Why are you pointing a gun at us?

HUNTER: I'm not (*gestures with gun indicating that it is aimed upward, not at the two birders*).
I heard you two from a mile away. Who goes out and wrestles in a forest?
Pathetic.

BIRDER #1: I guess we got a little carried away.

BIRDER #2: Please put the gun away, it's not hunting season.

HUNTER: I'm trying to line up one of those Square-Billed Sapphires, an SBS.

BIRDER #2: You want to kill it?

HUNTER: Not keeping it as a pet.

BIRDER #1: But it's so rare, why would you possibly—

HUNTER: Exactly, that's why I want it.

BIRDER #1: It's tiny; if you shot one, there'd be nothing left. They only weigh an ounce or two.

HUNTER: Doesn't matter, all I want is the beak.

BIRDER #2: Only the beak! But this is one of the world's rarest and most beautiful birds, I can't understand—

HUNTER: There's a fashion, among a certain set of people, to use SBS beaks as ornamentation. They might inlay a tray or writing table with them, stuff like that. Some guy in Dallas even used them in a pattern on his pool deck.

BIRDER #1: What a sick world!

BIRDER #2: What a monster you are! How many of these precious creatures are killed so that some kajillionaire can decorate the outside of his coffee mug, or his *pool*, with ...

HUNTER: Look, I bag 'em and sell 'em to a broker; after that it's not my business.

BIRDER #1 My God!

HUNTER: I'm with you, I think it's crazy, but I'm just responding to demand. If it wasn't me, it'd be somebody else.

BIRDER #2: The classic justification. That's what every pusher, pimp and environmental criminal says, if it wasn't me ...

HUNTER: Hey, get smart buddy. It's how the world turns. A thousand bucks a beak, I'll take it. I work for it too, believe me. You know how hard it is to shoot one of these little bastards? They're small, fast, and rare, and just when you think you've nailed one, turns out you've wasted a shot on a juvenile Throat Crusher.

BIRDER #2: That's the dirtiest money I've ever heard of.

HUNTER: It takes a lot of hours to make that dough, believe me. With expenses, I barely break even. You know what bullets are going for these days?

BIRDER #1: (*Sarcastically*) Oh what an ordeal for you!

Think about the Square Billed Sapphire!

BIRDER #2: They're already under siege from habitat loss, pesticides, and global warming and now mercenaries like you are running around trying to blast every last one of them out of the sky.

HUNTER: Are you finished?

BIRDER #2: Actually, I'm just getting started—

BIRDER #1: (*Talking over BIRDER #2*) What you're doing is a crime against--
HUNTER *holds hands up facing outward in a "stop" gesture.*

HUNTER: So you two are on the same page on this SBS thing.

BIRDER #1 Of course (in unison with BIRDER #2).

BIRDER #2 Of course! (in unison with BIRDER #1).

HUNTER: Glad to hear it, because it sickens me when birders fight. When I heard the hub-bub coming from you two, I knew I had to intervene.

BIRDER #1: What?

HUNTER: Did you actually *believe* what I just told you? Look at my gun ... I'm going to shoot something with *this*, really?

Plus, the SBS's tiny brown beak is completely unremarkable and could easily be counterfeited. And how could I possibly find that many? We've just been talking about how rare they are.

BIRDER #2: I agree it's crazy, but *you're* the one saying it. Who *are* you?

HUNTER strikes a profile pose with his binoculars pointed straight ahead, then angles them three quarters of the way up, then turns to face the audience with the binoculars pointed straight out. He lets them drop to dangle around his chest and takes off his hat and sunglasses.

BIRDER #1: You're the Birdman!

HUNTER: Yup.

BIRDER #2: I've got your book (*takes a book out of their backpack and looks at its cover*). I can't believe it's you. You signed this to me at the World Birding Expo last year! I'm sure you don't remember, there must have been hundreds of people in that line.

So why are you . . . ?

BIRDER #1: Pretending to be an SBS poacher?

HUNTER: We've seen a rise in aggressive birding lately, including troubling incidents of birder-on-birder violence.

Lately, I've been using my platform to urge birders to be more respectful of others in the forest, human and non-human.

BIRDER #1: Oh.

HUNTER: Anyway, my outreach has not been very effective. I did a little thing for YouTube—"Let's Be Peaceful in the Forest"—as well as a Facebook ad and a TV spot . . . but I don't know if anybody sees that stuff, or cares.

So I said, screw it, my passion has always been field work, and that's what I decided to do with aggressive birders. I've been going out and monitoring hotspots.

BIRDER #2 Is it that bad?

HUNTER: Yours is the second fight I've broken up today.

BIRDER #1: Geez, I had no idea, I just thought that—

HUNTER: *You* were right, and *he* was a wrong, and *he* thought the reverse.

Listen, as birders we have to work together. Look at all the divisions in our society; if we birders can't get along, what hope is there for the rest?

There are so many challenges facing birds. We need to unite and bring a message of environmental stewardship to the world, not squabble amongst ourselves.

BIRDER #2: I can't argue with that.

BIRDER #1: Same.

HUNTER: Will you join me in Birdman's pledge?

BIRDER #2: Pledge?

HUNTER: Repeat after me (*raises right hand*):
I, Birder.

BIRDER #1 & BIRDER #2: (*in unison, with right hands raised*) I, Birder.

HUNTER: Pledge to support birds and their habitats.

BIRDERS #1 & #2: Pledge to support birds and their habitats.

HUNTER: And work to secure healthy bird populations wherever they may be.

BIRDERS #1 & #2: And work to secure healthy bird populations wherever they may be.

HUNTER: And affirm that birds constitute our rulers and masters, and that I must at all times follow their directives and orders, in so far as I am capable.

BIRDERS # 1 #2 (*Tentatively and increasingly weakly as they repeat previous*): And affirm that birds constitute our rulers and masters, and that I must, at all times, follow their directives and orders, in so far as I am capable.

BIRDER #1: Birds are our rulers and masters? Isn't that a little ... much?

BIRDER #2: Follow their directives and orders, what would those even be?

HUNTER: That's what I'm trying to uncover!

You know the arctic tern, to take just one example.

BIRDER #2: Sure, I've heard of it.

HUNTER: OK, well it migrates from the Arctic Circle all the way to Antarctica and is able to sleep as it flies. One side of the brain rests, the other directs flight. Crazy, right?

BIRDER #1: That *is* incredible, but I don't see—

HUNTER: Exactly, you *don't* see. I think there's a lot more going on with birds than we can observe.

BIRDER #1: Maybe, but—

HUNTER: What does bird watching mean to you?

BIRDER #2: Mean?

HUNTER: Literally, what does it mean?

BIRDER #1: That you're watching birds?

HUNTER: What if you turned it around? It's not bird *watching* (points index finger outward), it's *bird* watching (points finger back at himself).

I think that *they* may be watching *us*!

I call this the Copernican theory of birding, a total revolution in the way we (*makes air quotes*) see birds.

BIRDER #2: You really think they're able to ... like ... *watch* us?

HUNTER: Yup, I think it's very possible. They (*points up and around*) are probably evaluating this very interaction.

Given birds' advanced powers, and their paradoxically precarious position, I feel the need to serve them whenever, and wherever, possible.

BIRDER #1: That sounds kind of crazy, I mean it's great that you're helping birds but—

HUNTER: Nah, nah, ... it's not *helping*, that would suggest charity.

It's my duty, my obligation. I have to do right by the birds because they *know*.

BIRDER #1: Know?

HUNTER: Yeah, they know.

What I've shared with you is lifechanging. You've taken the pledge, now you can go forth and spread the bird word.

BIRDER #2: I'm not sure that—

HUNTER: Sit with it.

Anyway, gotta be going, bird work. There's *no* time I'm *not* serving the birds.

BIRDER #1: Thanks, Bird Man.

BIRDER #2: Bye (*waves*).

HUNTER waves and exits.

PAUSE

BIRDER #1: Hey, so ... uh, sorry I was so aggressive when you walked by before, I was a little keyed up I guess.

BIRDER #2 I was out of line too. I should've apologized.

BIRDER #1 I guess we have Birdman to thank for setting us straight.

BIRDER #2: Yeah.

You think it's true, that the birds are *watching* us?

BIRDER #1: It's not verifiable, but there's truth *in* there, you know?

If humans did live according to what benefits birds, that would be good for them, and probably us too, right? Maybe it's worth consid—

BIRDER #2 taps BIRDER #1 and points upward.

BIRDER #2: (*Whispering, barely audible, but mouthing the words very clearly*). S-B-S!

BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2 take-up their binoculars to look. BIRDER #1 gives BIRDER #2 the thumbs-up sign.

A few moments pass as BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2 remain rapt, staring upwards

HUNTER REENTERS, LOUDLY.

HUNTER: *(Loudly)* Hey! Glad you're still here. I forgot your badges, you get them when you take the pledge! *(Holds up his hand with badges in it).*

BIRDER #2 *(Lets go of his binoculars and gestures upward to where they were looking).* That was an SBS, we *think*.

BIRDER #1 Just a few more seconds and we could've made a positive ID!

HUNTER: What's important is that the SBS—or Juvenile Throat Crusher—might have been a young Crusher, saw *you*, not whether *you*---

BIRDER #1 and BIRDER #2 *(in unison, angry, and waiving their fists):* **AHHGGH.**

***BIRDER #1 AND BIRDER #2 CHASE HUNTER OFFSTAGE AS
BLACKOUT.***

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