



# Befriending ‘SMEAGULL THE SEAGULL’

A true story of a man, his wife and an unexpected friendship with a seagull

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 REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

**Y**es, it was the same seagull, Mark Seth Lender asserts. The same seagull, appearing at the same time, at the same house (his) at the same hour, looking for food.

How does Lender know the bird wants food?

The gull asks for it, that’s how.

Lender’s newest book, “Smeagull the Seagull,” (Sea House Press) is the story of a seagull that comes to his house in Clinton and knocks on his sliding glass door at regular intervals. Lender, familiar to radio listeners as the producer of “Living on Earth,” responded by feeding the gull. First, fish scraps and then, as Lender and his wife, Valerie Pettis, who illustrated the children’s book, grew more familiar with the bird’s preferences, mackerel and smelts.

“When we first got to know him, he would come, and I started going to the fish market and picking up the discards,” Lender said of the 2007 encounter. “Once, I gave him a little piece of halibut. I handed it to him, he walks to the end of the deck and goes, ‘pffft,’ and drops it off the edge of the deck. Then he looks at me over his shoulder as if to say, ‘I don’t want this.’”

“Smeagull the Seagull” is an evocatively illustrated book about a bird that began arriving at Lender’s house, knocking at his

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“That animal, he said, is the gull — often called a

“seagull” (a misnomer, according to the Mass Audubon Society). A gull includes any of more than 40 species of heavily built web-footed seabirds of the gull and tern family.

“When you say to a child ‘seagull,’ if they live in Iceland, if they live in the Falkland Islands, there is an analog,” Lender said. “They’re common and wild

and accessible and intelligent and easy to identify.” In other words, the gull fit the bill, pun intended, of an animal through whose story Lender could introduce young readers to wildlife.

Lender, a self-taught writer and nature photographer, writes a regular feature, called Wild Life, at Shoreline Times. For years, he has worked as producer, essayist and website photographer for Living on Earth, broadcast on public radio.

“What do we mean when we say ‘human’? These are the things that have preoccupied me,” said Lender, who calls himself an “unreconstructed radical.” “People say I’ve got a trained seagull. Who’s training who here? Valerie and I are trained humans.”

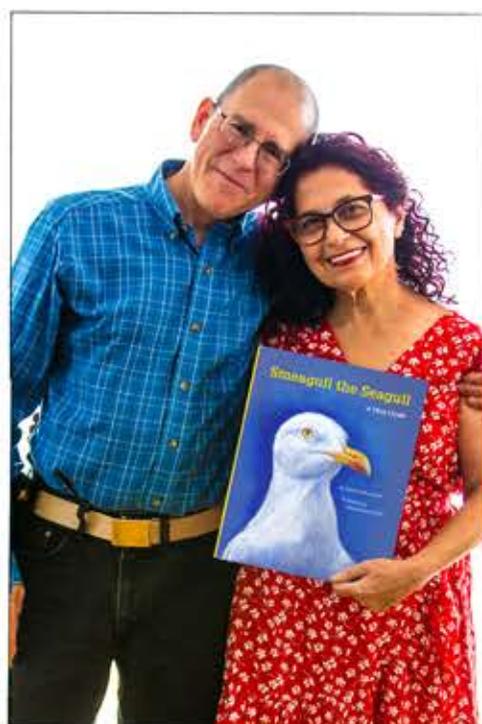
Originally from Boston, Lender grew up in nearby Newton, Mass. His father was a mechanical engineer, and, from a young age, began working in metals, making his own tools. “I grew up in this rich, intellectual environment and where you argued things and figured out things. From the age of 14, I was active in the student non-violent movement. Those things seemed correct to me.” His heroes included Bernard Malamud, William Styron and Ernest Hemingway.

He studied anthropology at Goddard College in Vermont and later studied linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He continued his studies at Brandeis University, where he earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree in anthropology. His field work focused on small-group fisherman. But he did not go forward with a doctoral degree, landing instead on Martha’s Vineyard, where he opened a business as a goldsmith.

“I’m one of these people who is, in a lot of ways, all over the place,” Lender said. “I’m lucky in that what I’m interested in is the synthesis of disparate parts. That was looked at through the lens of anthropology for a long time — how do things fit?” For 14 years, he worked as a goldsmith on the Vineyard before being bitten by the art bug and moving to New York in the mid-1980s. His sculpting effort ended badly, he says, and he turned to short fiction. In 1988, he began writing for Shoreline Times. A friend pressed Lender to specialize in wildlife writing. “This is where your heart lies,” she told him. “This is what you should be doing.”

He began adding high-speed still photographs to his newspaper column, ultimately making wildlife his specialty.

“Smeagull the Seagull” is the story of a relationship that Lender and his wife, Pettis, established with a gull that habitually “knocked,” with its beak, at their sliding-glass door. The couple eventually bought a new freezer to store all of the fish that they were buying. The book has just been trans-



CONTRIBUTED  
 The husband and wife duo, Mark Seth Lender and Valerie Pettis, worked together to create their new children’s book ‘Smeagull the Seagull.’ Lender wrote the story and Pettis illustrated the book.

lated into Mandarin.

The state Department of Environmental Protection strongly discourages the feeding of wildlife. “DO NOT FEED WATER-FOWL!” it states on its website. “Waterfowl are wild birds that can locate natural food sources throughout the year. Supplemental feeding by people is unnecessary and potentially harmful.”

Although he recognizes the prohibition against feeding wildlife, he says only, “It’s not a perfect life. What I’ve learned from my relationship with this gull far outweighs the peccadillo of feeding seagulls. We are occupying habitat that used to support hundreds of thousands of animals.”

Lender is pessimistic about the future of the planet.

“We are in the process of losing life on earth,” Lender claimed. “I do not see how we can lose the entire biota — all the life that is so like us — and survive. It defies logic and probability.”

The book for children, he said, “is a statement for hope.”

“They are living in a heroic age,” Lender said. “They are, by definition, living in a heroic age because so much is at stake. The fight that’s being fought may or may not be won, but it has to be fought. We have to engage.”