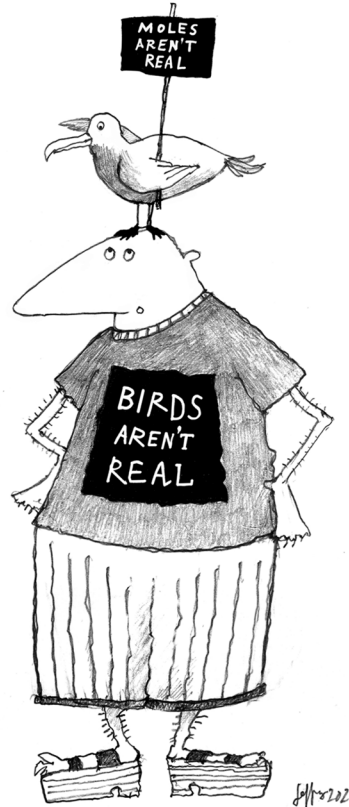


## STICKY WICKET

## Corona XLVI – Oh my, Omicron!

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - [www.peterjeffsart.com](http://www.peterjeffsart.com)

Hey there. And what a beautiful day! Freezing cold, with snow on the ground, and grey skies, but beautiful. Because I just learned of something that has given me real hope. Hope I have not felt since the results of the vaccine trials (and we know how some of that hope was dashed by the awful anti-vaxxers, who continue to fill ICUs and push our wonderful medical professionals to the brink of despair). And of course, it is not the news about Omicron, although at this point that news is better than we feared. Not that it's good, but it could be a lot worse.

For those keeping score, we skipped Neu in the 'name the variant of concern' game as the next VOC after Mu. The thought was that calling it the Neu variant would confound people who heard it as 'New variant.' As in, what is the new variant called? 'Neu.' That's what I am asking, what is it called? 'Neu.' Okay, don't tell me. (Abbott and Costello, a comedy duo from the last century, and one that I loved as a molet, did a hysterical routine called 'Who's on first.' Definitely worth looking up, even if baseball is as arcane to you as sports like cricket are to me). Apparently, we also skipped Xi, supposedly because it could be confused with a common name, but probably because it is the name of a leader of a major world power. (And

to not fuel the disgraceful 'China Virus' meme). Good idea, anyway.

Oh my. Omicron. It may be the most infectious variant yet. And certainly, the scariest. But so far, the word is that the symptoms appear to be mild (I hope this holds up – we will undoubtedly have a better idea by the time you read this, in my future). And the news of Omicron is driving more vaccinations, which is something. Hopefully, it will also drive better efforts to vaccinate the less developed world as well. I spoke with my friend, Professor Quokka, who ventured the possibility that Omicron might actually get us out of this – a highly infectious virus with mild symptoms (we hope) that might outcompete Delta and boost immunity. Hope can be a good thing, says Quokka. I agree.

Let's be clear about something. While viruses mutate and undergo evolution, viruses do not evolve to cause *less* disease. All a virus does is make more virus, which involves transmission to new hosts. The easier it is to transmit, the less the impact of morbidity and mortality in the host will be on its selection. And since this is a respiratory virus, coughing and sneezing increase its transmission. Now we have Omicron, which appears to transmit

extremely well, but if indeed it causes milder disease, this is a happy accident.

I can imagine a scenario where *everyone* who felt symptoms immediately isolated, completely eliminating the possibility of further transmission. In that setting, one could posit that a virus that could spread without any perceived symptoms would be positively selected. That would be nice, but we aren't there. Not even remotely. I'll get back to that.

But none of this is what has me in such a good mood. Actually, it is a conspiracy theory. Really. Last summer, I saw a huge sign with black words on a white background, that said only 'Birds Aren't Real.' I had no idea what it was (okay, what I really thought was 'WTF,' which as astute readers know is a TLA). But now I know. It is a conspiracy theory that says that birds do not exist. They are government drones sent to spy on all of us. It is a movement. The 'Birds Aren't Real' movement. And I think it's great.

The BAR movement is the brainchild of Peter McIndoe, who knows that birds are real. He also knows that his ridiculous assertion is no more ridiculous than the many other conspiracy movements that permeate the memosphere (I just made up memosphere – pronounced 'meme-o-sphere' and I hope it becomes a meme). Supporters wear 'Birds Aren't Real' shirts, carry 'Birds Aren't Real' signs, and shout 'Birds Aren't Real' slogans, like 'The birds work for the bourgeoisie,' and 'Bird watching goes both ways.' They hire actors and post videos, such as a (fake) CIA agent speaking about the drone project he supervised. And they gather where actual conspiracy nutcases prosecute their crazy positions, and 'out-crazy' them until the nutcases go home. Fighting idiocy with lunacy. And it seems to work.

Gen Z knows how insane the world has become, and they are responding with humor. It gives me hope.

There are a lot of very angry people out there. Punching someone for wearing a mask in a grocery store. Shrieking at school board officials, many of whom work very hard for free, about vaccine mandates (which we already had for other viruses and with no push back). Chanting about their 'freedom' (which seems to mean only

'my freedom, not yours'). Shouting back at them simply does not work, nor does reason, fact checking, or logic. I am pretty much reconciled to the fact that I will not change their minds.

But we may be able to limit their ability to permeate the memosphere. Side by side, the 'digital chips are in the vaccine' meme and the 'birds aren't real' meme both sound like jokes (and as I've mentioned, the second one is). But the more we laugh at this nonsense, the less attractive it might be. And maybe someone who is open to being swayed by the flood of misinformation will be less 'swayable' if all of it sounds more like a joke. There is power in parody.

So, I'm going to happily join the BAR movement. Oh, wait. I don't Flitter or Faceball, Instagoop or Tick Talk. I'm an insectivore. But you do. Spread the word. Birds aren't real. Were there ever birds? Yes, but in the 1970s the government destroyed them and replaced them with drone copies that spy on us. The next time I'm asked about whether I think Omicron is real (which is probably later today), I'm going to say, Omicron? Sure, but it's the birds you should worry about.

Perhaps it is time to up the parody. There was a short-term effort to do this with the idea that, in my country, liberals are spreading lies about the vaccine to prevent 'real Americans' from getting it in an effort to kill 'us' off. Like many meme attempts, this didn't catch fire and become a real meme. I suspect this is because, while it felt like a conspiracy theory, it failed because no one wanted to spread it. The great unvaccinated public didn't, and neither did we (indeed, many of us reflexively proceeded to debunk it, which was not the point). Gen Z has it right – it isn't a parody if it isn't funny. BAR is funny. We need something that will get people vaccinated and wear masks *and* be spread like a virus.

Like Omicron. Oh my. Maybe Omicron is just the meme we need. Too bad that the name isn't funnier. Too bad we didn't call it 'New' after all. Oh, and before you ask, yes, Omicron is real. It's the birds you have to worry about.

Oh, and birds don't want you to get vaccinated. The chips mess up their navigation systems.