

Summer 2017

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL



Editor's note



Clapper rail at Plumb Beach. Photograph by Marc Brawer.

The talents of the Brooklyn Bird Club's members continue to amaze me—not only as birdwatchers, of course, of which their gifts are prodigious, but as writers, photographers, illustrators, painters, and designers. I think this summer Clapper Rail proves that. This is now our third issue since a reboot—as we shoot for a quarterly publication—and the contributors here include some of our most dedicated so far (you'll recognize their names) and two wonderful first-timers to these pages in Sheila Friedman and Sam Dean Lynn, who read our voluminous Migration Issue and wanted to get involved. None of this work would be possible again without Tina Alleva and Angie Co, whose creative, ambitious, artistic direction shaped this issue.

This is your publication. As always, I encourage you to write for us and send us your ideas. Book reviews, ID columns, personal stories, trip recaps, favorite birds or patches...everything is fair game. Send us your photos, sketches, drawings, and illustrations. Our next issue is scheduled for the autumn. Contact us at newsletter@brooklynbirdclub.org.

Happy birding.

– Ryan Goldberg

Cover: Red knots at Floyd Bennett Field.
Photograph by Jennifer Kepler.

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the Swainson's Warbler

A SHOCK APPEARANCE IN PROSPECT PARK

By Tom Stephenson

Swainson's warbler. Photograph by *The Warbler Guide*.

Near the end of spring migration, we hosted a rare visitor to Prospect Park, a Swainson's warbler. It was first seen on May 24 by BBC member Ed Crowne, and stayed for a couple of days. It's rare here because the species nests primarily in the southern parts of the eastern U.S. There have been a few other records of this species in the New York area, including a bird last year in Central Park on April 29, and one in Queens' Forest Hills Park on April 14, 2005. Prior to that there was a recording in 1998 on May 2 and one in 1950 from May 6.

Usually vagrants that appear out-of-range north of their breeding grounds are "overshoots." They may ride an unusually strong southern wind or just get confused and keep going further north than is normal for their species. Swainson's warblers typically arrive in the northern parts of their breeding range in mid- to late-April, and most of the sightings in our area date from around that time, giving credence to the "overshoot" theory. Our last bird, however, was here in late May. Any self-respecting male Swainson's would have been situated on a territory well before this time. We know the recent Prospect Park bird was a male because he was singing and females don't sing. Also, he was very interested in a chip note I played, indicating that he seemed to still be in dating mode. It's a real puzzle why this bird was so late, but he might have been linked to some weather events or possibly just a late departure

from its wintering grounds in the Caribbean or eastern Mexico or Central America. He may also have been intimidated out of its first choice for a territory in the most northerly parts of their range and just started wandering around, looking for something suitable.

"Swainson's warblers are known to be very difficult to see."

Swainson's warblers are known to be very difficult to see. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, they are really drab. They feed on the ground, usually don't sing while feeding, and blend right into the dried leaves that are their main feeding target. As testimony to their lack of color, here are two quotes from the *New York Post* about one of the Central Park birds. "It looks like a sparrow to me," one [birder] said. "Not particularly remarkable," a British tourist scoffed. If the British think it's unremarkable that's a really bad sign! One of the best ways to find them is to walk quietly in an area they are known to frequent and listen for the rustling of leaves. They also do a silent, wing "shivering" behavior that is fairly unique for our warblers.

Warblers that sing and feed in the same general area are usually fairly easy to find. Not so the Swainson's. They have very large territories for a warbler, and usually sing for a few minutes without moving from one perch in a dense area. They then fly a long distance to another perch and sing again, marking their boundaries. I have listened to males making wide circles around an area, coming back to similar locations, all in such dense areas that make them tough to find. If you take the time to note their singing posts you can sometimes see them fly in and thus have a better chance of spotting them.



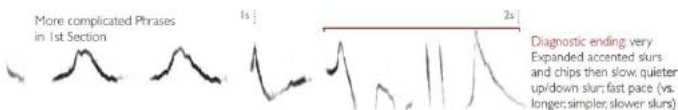
Swainson's warbler. Photograph by Tom Stephenson.

This species breeds in two very different habitat types. One is swampy lowlands with dense canebrakes. In this environment they are difficult to see. I've heard males singing practically underfoot without ever being able to find them. The other habitat is higher elevation Appalachian rhododendron forests, usually in hillsides associated with streams. They're easier to see in this environment, although still a challenge. The New River Birding Festival in West Virginia is a great place to see them along the beautiful streams in the area.

4 strong but fairly Compressed, simple downslurs



Typical Swainson's warbler song. Image by *The Warbler Guide*.



Spectrogram of typical and more complex Louisiana waterthrush song. Image by *The Warbler Guide*.

Although very rare, the population of this species is probably stable, and has been expanding into some other breeding areas including pine plantations in Texas and Virginia. I've seen them in the piney forests north of Houston where you can also see Bachman's sparrows and red-cockaded woodpeckers. They still stick to very dense habitat and remain tough to see. Here's a [study](#) on this new habitat expansion.

Swainson's warblers' songs are superficially like that of Louisiana waterthrushes. They start with a section of three or four clear, descending elements.

“Swainson's warblers' songs are superficially like that of Louisiana waterthrushes. “

Many times I've witnessed birders mistaking Louisiana waterthrush for Swainson's warbler. Unlike Swainson's, however, Louisiana's subsequent sections include short, expanded chips, and the songs include more sections in total.

Ed Crowne first heard this bird sing. Since he knew the Louisiana's song, and also knew they are early migrants, usually ending their visits to Prospect Park before May, he no doubt immediately realized he had found a rarity. Thanks to Twitter, Crowne spread the word so that dozens of birders from Brooklyn, Manhattan, and as far afield as Staten Island arrived in time to see this rare, secretive species.



Swainson's warbler. Photograph by Tom Stephenson.

Horseshoe crab monitoring is for the birds

By Jennifer Kepler

As birders, many of us participate in citizen science through the use of eBird, reporting rare species, and banded birds. While many of us aren't trained scientists, our sightings and reports—with support of pictures, recordings, descriptions and maps—are incredibly helpful to researchers and scientists who tap into the data we supply through our observations. There are a number of citizen science projects out there, and each year, I eagerly look forward to horseshoe crab

northward, with especially close ties to the red knot. Red knots depend on horseshoe crab eggs for food, and many studies have shown and support that crab populations affect their population.

With so many ecologists, biologists, and conservationists pointing at the horseshoe crab as an important species to their environment, this provides a great opportunity for naturalists of all stripes to participate in science. Horseshoe crab monitoring is an exciting way to see a 450-million-year-old tradition of horseshoe crabs coming ashore to mate and lay their eggs. It provides a unique chance to walk beaches safely at night to watch shorebirds and crabs doing everything we hope for them to be doing.

This past May, utilizing a methodology in which NYC Audubon provides training, we counted male and female crabs, recorded crabs we saw with tags,

and at the end of the sample period, tagged individuals and released them. There were four beaches to choose from: Big Egg Marsh, Dead Horse Bay, and Plumb Beach East and West. Teams were organized into pairs, where one worked as a pacer (who placed the quadrat, a square frame, down at each sample site) and the other worked as a recorder equipped with a data sheet and clipboard.

All monitoring sessions took place around a new or full moon and always at high tide. It was a chance to also recognize that science is methodological. At most locations, we abided by protocol, used sampling methods, and were not allowed

to lengthen or shorten our stride, for even zeroes on a data sheet are still important. After all these seasons of monitoring, I still find it so exciting and rewarding when you finally get animals in your quadrat sample.

When we finished gathering a hundred samples, we then tagged crabs. We collected ones that weren't clasped to a female and that weren't buried in the sand as they could be laying eggs. If we tagged a female, we had to mobilize and go to her as it is important to avoid disturbing them as little as possible. Tagging



Horseshoe crab monitoring. Photograph by Jennifer Kepler.

monitoring with New York City Audubon.

Horseshoe crabs are marine invertebrates and plentiful in Jamaica Bay, Coney Island Creek, and Marine Park. While crab in name, these arthropods are in a subphylum with other chelicerates, making them more closely related to spiders and scorpions than crustaceans. Birders know this animal for being a keystone species in the avian ecosystem, supporting thousands upon thousands of birds on their migration

involves identifying the sex of the crab (by looking at its first set of walking legs), then using giant calipers to measure the diameter of their carapace, across their compound eyes, and finally assigning a tag number and tagging them. A small drill fitted with a cork stopper was used to drill a small hole in the left, back part of the carapace and then we inserted a white circular tag into the hole. Tagged crabs were

“I encourage people who love and admire shorebirds to try this at least once.”

then released back to the water.

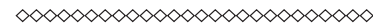
While horseshoe crab monitoring ends in mid-June, there are still chances to participate in being a citizen scientist. First, if you see a tagged crab, dead or alive, just like a banded bird, you can report it. It helps scientists know where they go and where

they've been. For your report you get a certificate and a snazzy horseshoe crab pin in the mail along with information about the crab you reported. Anyone can sign up to monitor crabs in the coming year, and NYC Audubon hosts training in April before going out to monitor in May and June.

I encourage people who love and admire shorebirds to try this at least once. Since many of the programs I teach at work are about horseshoe crabs and their importance to our local marine ecosystem, it is fulfilling to be connected to the work I do in conservation education. Projects such as this aid in the survival of the animals and birds we enjoy watching.

For more information:

- [How to report crabs](#)
- [How to become a citizen scientist with NYC Audubon](#)



Horseshoe crab monitoring. Photograph by Jennifer Kepler.

By Bobbi Manian

In total, 132 species were cumulatively recorded across Brooklyn. Congratulations to all participants and sincere appreciation to all of the supporters. The other teams were:

- The donations continued to roll in through May, June, and early July. I delivered the checks to WBF's development liaison Darcy Hector and co-founder and director Rita McMahon last month and visited their wonderful facility. Besides the expected pigeons, sparrows, and other city birds, they were also hosting two herring gulls, a scaup, and a great blue heron. Thank you to the donors and birdathoners for helping make this year so successful. You can read more about Wild Bird Fund's excellent work in the May issue of the Clapper Rail as well as on [its website](#). See the Club Gallery for photos.



By Gus Keri

My concerns were amplified by a turbulent personal life. I was burning many bridges to my past. I was weary. Would this adventure bring me more troubles? I had felt good when watching birds in



At the time, I had applied for U.S. citizenship after living in this country for 26 years and undergoing myriad struggles and tribulations. I had encountered all kinds of obstacles. I was Patriot-Act'ed, NSEERS'ed, ethnically-profiled and discriminated against, fraudulently sued, exploited and abused in many aspects of my life. And my interview with the naturalization officer hadn't gone well. I was having nightmares.

Eventually, everything was resolved in one magic touch.

I'll always remember the morning of June 8, 2013. It was my first morning as an American citizen and so, imbued with hope and a renewed drive, I decided to join my first-ever birding walk. I owned a pair of binoculars that I had bought a few years earlier and only ever used to watch the static Manhattan skyline from my apartment. Now, they had a new purpose, and a livelier focus. I grabbed the binoculars and marched on to Prospect Park.

I arrived 30 minutes early and, to my extreme pleasure, nature had already organized a beautiful surprise for me. I was walking alone next to the Boathouse when I saw a turtle walking out of the water and onto the grass. I watched closely and suddenly it started digging a hole in which to lay eggs.

I was stunned. I remembered a friend who once told me that she had traveled all the way to southern states to watch a sea turtle lay eggs. And here I was—a neophyte in the natural world—watching a turtle lay eggs in the heart of New York City. It was a good sign, an omen.

I watched with amazement and took photos with my cell phone. Like a bird I started jumping with happiness. After all of my sufferings, I felt as if destiny had finally smiled on me. Hope reigned again, I thought, and the stars had aligned for me.



The birding group started to form at noon. Michele, the leader, arrived and greeted us with a smile. I introduced myself simply as Gus. Luckily, there were no personal questions. I liked it this way. She began by teaching us how to focus the binoculars.

I immediately felt welcomed. Michele took her time explaining things. She introduced me to names

like “starling” and “robin.” I didn’t know that there was a “house” in house sparrow and that there were many other species of sparrows.

There is always something special about your first teacher. They leave lasting impressions, good or bad. I was lucky that Michele was my first birding teacher. I will always remember her and what she taught me fondly.



I enjoyed the walk and the people I met made it a wonderful experience. But my mind, as hard I tried, occasionally drifted to the events of the day before, when I had attended the citizenship ceremony and taken the oath of allegiance. It was supposed to be a day of celebration, a day when the stars and the moon burst in fireworks. Instead, my mood was somber.

At night, I had been having a recurring dream: walking barefoot in torn clothes through the streets of New York; then, skin cracked and bones broken, crawling to the Upper Bay and crossing the turbulent water to reach Liberty Island. I would lay down underneath her majesty, Lady Liberty, and my eyes would come across the inscription at her base: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” Tears streamed from my eyes. “What took you so long?” I asked her, my voice trembling. The green-tinted lady extended her arms and pulled me gently into her lap. She hugged me like a mother. She told me it was the end of my suffering. Here forward, she said, there would only be green scenery for me. I fell asleep.

Driving home after the Prospect Park walk, I thought about what had happened in the past 24 hours. Could birding be the answer? Is this the new life I’d longed for? I couldn’t help but feel positive; birdwatching seemed so promising. I decided to

continue.

I kept returning for the beginners' walks, building new bridges in an attempt to replace the ones I had burned. I felt refreshed. Birders, both beginners and experts, were some of the best people I'd ever met. I think there is something mysterious about loving nature that brings out the best in people.

I was told about fall migration and that the BBC organized walks for the more advanced birders during this time. One birder said to me, "You'll enjoy seeing warblers." I asked him, "What's a warbler?" "These are some of the most beautiful birds you'll ever see," he said. I thought cardinals and blue jays were as good as it gets. How wrong I was.

Once again, like rising from middle to high school, I had doubts and fears. What will the expert birders think of me joining their walks? Would they answer my questions in a friendly manner like Michele always had?

My anxiety only grew when I learned more about the guides: Rob, the Tuesday head and the president of the club, and Tom, the Thursday leader, and a world-renowned expert on warblers. I had only just figured out that starlings weren't crows.

All my fears were baseless, of course. It turned out that Rob and Tom were humble and down-to-earth and loved to teach. They had remarkable patience in answering my questions no matter how basic they were. They even laughed, politely I'm sure, at my not-so-funny jokes. I again felt welcomed.

Bobbi and Kathy covered some of the Tuesday walks and later on, Dennis kicked off his Saturday walks to accommodate those who, unlike me, couldn't make midweek walks. I enjoyed getting to know these wonderful people and I was elated to learn from and spend time with them.

I still had so much to learn. Birding, it became clear, is not only about seeing. Listening is equally important. I was lucky to walk with two of the best ear birders in Tom and Dennis. If it wasn't for their supersonic

hearing and complete knowledge of birdsong, I would have never seen a number of species. My hearing will never be that sharp.

I knew how fortunate I was to have such incredible teachers—to think, that Brooklyn possessed such distinguished birders. Among fellow birders as passionate as I was, I felt free for the first time in my life. I expressed myself without reservation. Everyone was tolerant and understanding. I felt like a kid who wanted to experience everything at once. And they put up with me like parents do for their teenage children and all their idiosyncrasies.

I began discovering a new world inside New York.

Before long, I started birdwatching on my own in other city parks and beaches. I visited every hotspot in Brooklyn many times over. I started reading extensively about birds and began posting my sightings on eBird. I basically quit living for the love of birding. I went out almost every day unless weather grounded me. I didn't take breaks, not even summer vacations.

Last month, I celebrated my fourth anniversary as a Brooklyn birder. It was as if I had graduated college. And just like any departing senior, I find myself at a crossroads, unsure of what happens next. Will I continue

on my birdwatching journey—seek more degrees? Or should I seek another challenge in life? I'm always in search of a new frontier. I've been told by an expert in my native language that I have a talent for creative writing. Could this be next?

Whatever the answers, I'm certain of one thing. I'll always look back on the Brooklyn Bird Club's walks with fondness—a time when life was, once again, simple and free of stress, when I became part of a small community that restored some of my faith in humanity. I will always go birding.



Naturalist's column: Butterflies

By Nancy Tim

Butterflies you say? Well yes. Spring bird migration is over and you need something to do now that you have all of this free time on your hands.

Butterflying may be the answer as it will continue to keep you in tune with nature, and these beautiful insects can be fun to photograph.

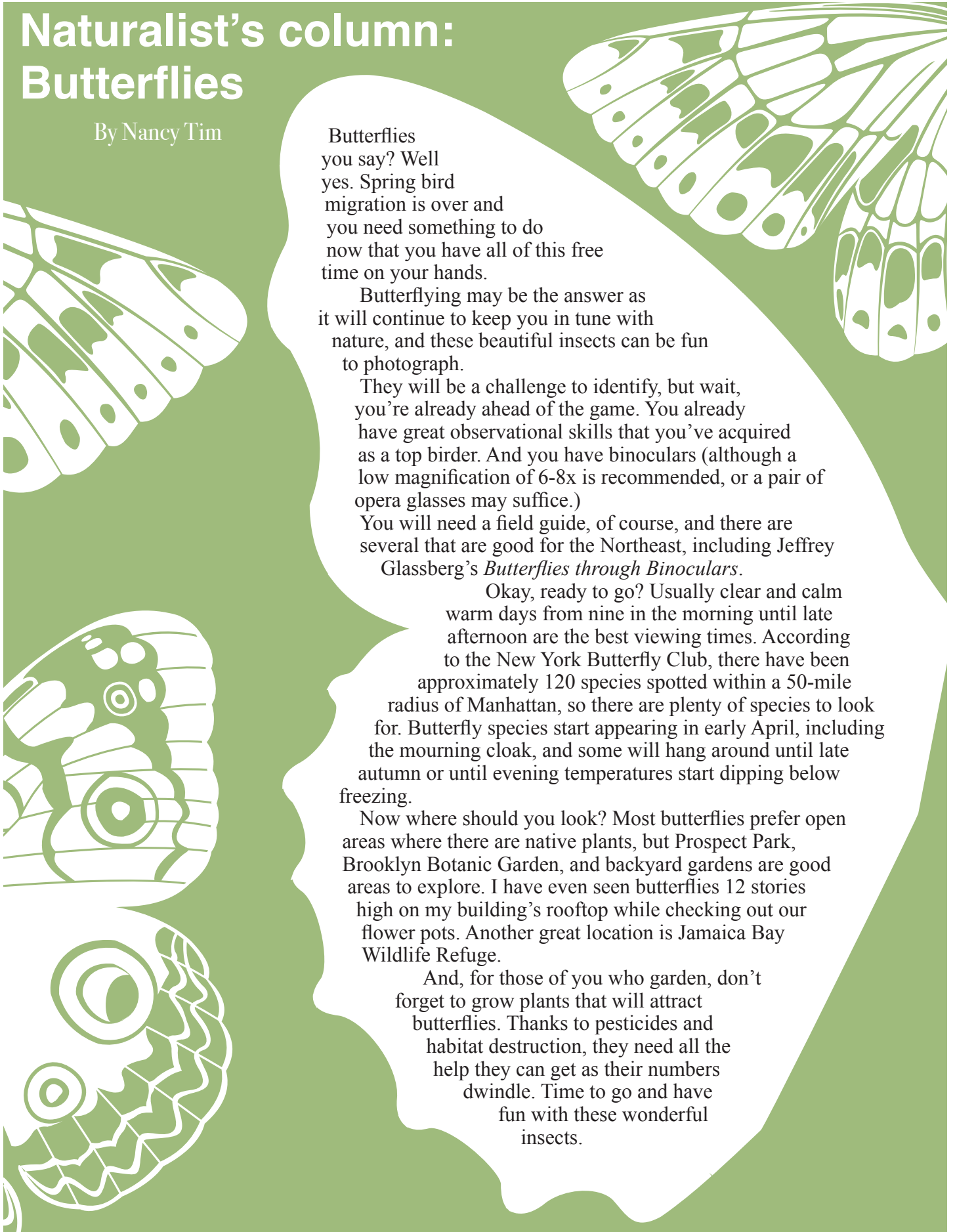
They will be a challenge to identify, but wait, you're already ahead of the game. You already have great observational skills that you've acquired as a top birder. And you have binoculars (although a low magnification of 6-8x is recommended, or a pair of opera glasses may suffice.)

You will need a field guide, of course, and there are several that are good for the Northeast, including Jeffrey Glassberg's *Butterflies through Binoculars*.

Okay, ready to go? Usually clear and calm warm days from nine in the morning until late afternoon are the best viewing times. According to the New York Butterfly Club, there have been approximately 120 species spotted within a 50-mile radius of Manhattan, so there are plenty of species to look for. Butterfly species start appearing in early April, including the mourning cloak, and some will hang around until late autumn or until evening temperatures start dipping below freezing.

Now where should you look? Most butterflies prefer open areas where there are native plants, but Prospect Park, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and backyard gardens are good areas to explore. I have even seen butterflies 12 stories high on my building's rooftop while checking out our flower pots. Another great location is Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.

And, for those of you who garden, don't forget to grow plants that will attract butterflies. Thanks to pesticides and habitat destruction, they need all the help they can get as their numbers dwindle. Time to go and have fun with these wonderful insects.



Sparks!

By Sheila Friedman

I first noticed the squawking on a hot July morning in 1999 as I walked up the block toward my house in Ditmas Park. The sound got louder as I approached the driveway. It seemed to be coming from the towering fir tree alongside the house. I looked up and spotted a flash of yellow-green. A parrot? In Brooklyn? Had someone's beloved pet flown away?

Wait! There wasn't one parrot. I counted two, three, six, eight, until I could no longer keep pace. I tried to count them all but they were fluttering around the treetop, moving from branch to branch. Questions filled my mind. Could they have escaped from the pet shop? I had to know what these unusual birds were doing right in my yard.

I called the Environmental Center in Prospect Park. The woman I spoke to was matter-of-fact. "Oh, yeah," she said. "They've been around for a long time. I think they're called Quaker or Conure parrots. You should call the Long Island Parrot Society."

I called the Long Island Parrot Society and learned that they were called monk parakeets. I turned to the 1980 edition of Peterson's *Field Guide to Eastern Birds*. Native to Argentina, monk parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) were categorized as escapees. There were

317 parrot species globally, I learned, and only one native to the eastern United States: the now-extinct Carolina parakeet.

Peterson's guide continued on, stating that many species had escaped, mostly in Miami and New York. The monk parakeet "has attempted to nest in a number of states, but probably will not become established."

Contrary to Peterson's prediction, more than twenty years later the monk parakeet is here to stay. Sibley's *Field Guide to Eastern Birds of the U.S.* states that monk parakeets have "established scattered colonies throughout eastern North America as far north as Chicago and Massachusetts."

Most birders in Brooklyn have fielded questions from non-birders about our local monk parakeets. They've become local celebrities, and the colony at Green-Wood Cemetery is perhaps their finest stage. New York City Audubon gives tours of this impressive colony. The parrots have been able to adapt to life here because they build huge communal nests made from sticks and twigs, and stay warm through a northern winter in their many-chambered nests. Unlike other parrot species, monk parakeets don't nest in cavities. This helps them adapt to changes in their habitat while other species decline due to habitat loss. They erect nests of varying sizes on lampposts and power lines for warmth in the winter. They don't drive out native birds but rather live alongside them. The Connecticut



Monk parakeets. Watercolor by Sheila Friedman.

Audubon Society notes that monk parakeets will even share nests with other species, such as starlings, finches, ospreys and even great-horned owls. An article in the *Journal of Raptor Research*, in 1992, reported great-horned owls nesting in a monk parakeet colony in suburban Connecticut!

Monk parakeets continue to expand their range. They are herbivorous, eating mostly seeds, nuts, fruit, leaves and flowers. The birds, however, aren't universally beloved. Argentina viewed them as an agricultural pest and tried to eradicate them. When that failed they exported them to the U.S. New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation had a secret plan to eradicate the parakeets in the early 1970s. And on several occasions this decade, bills were introduced in the New York State legislature to protect the birds from illegal poaching and killing, although none have passed.

Large communal stick nests in Brooklyn? At one time there were about six of these huge nests built on the light platforms surrounding Brooklyn College's football field. Those nests were removed and the platforms were lowered. The parakeets obviously didn't like this, and they found sites to nest elsewhere. They relocated in trees along Albemarle Road near the college. There are many smaller "outposts" throughout Brooklyn.

Wherever they're living now, the parakeets leave their nest in the morning to search for food. Every time I see them flying over my neighborhood in loud squadrons of a half-dozen, I think back to the first morning I saw these brilliant, noisy birds. I had never really noticed birds before then. It took these avian expats to ignite my curiosity and passion for birds. Now I'm always looking up.



Least bittern in Prospect Park. Photograph by Janet Zinn.

Federal duck stamp



Federal duck stamp 2017 - 2018.
Canada Geese painting by James Hautman.

The Duck Stamp is a Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp issued yearly by the U.S. federal government. The stamp is required to hunt waterfowl, and 98 percent of its revenue goes to the acquisition and conservation of wetland habitat. A current Federal Duck Stamp also serves as a free pass to any national wildlife refuge. Read more about the Federal Duck Stamp, its history, and its annual art competition at the [US Fish and Wildlife website](#).



Canada geese mate for life. Mixed media drawing by Sam Dean Lynn.

Easy ID points: white-rumped versus semipalmated sandpipers

By Tom Stephenson

Ed. note: The original version of this article was published on [The Warbler Guide website](#). Additional information and photos can be found there.

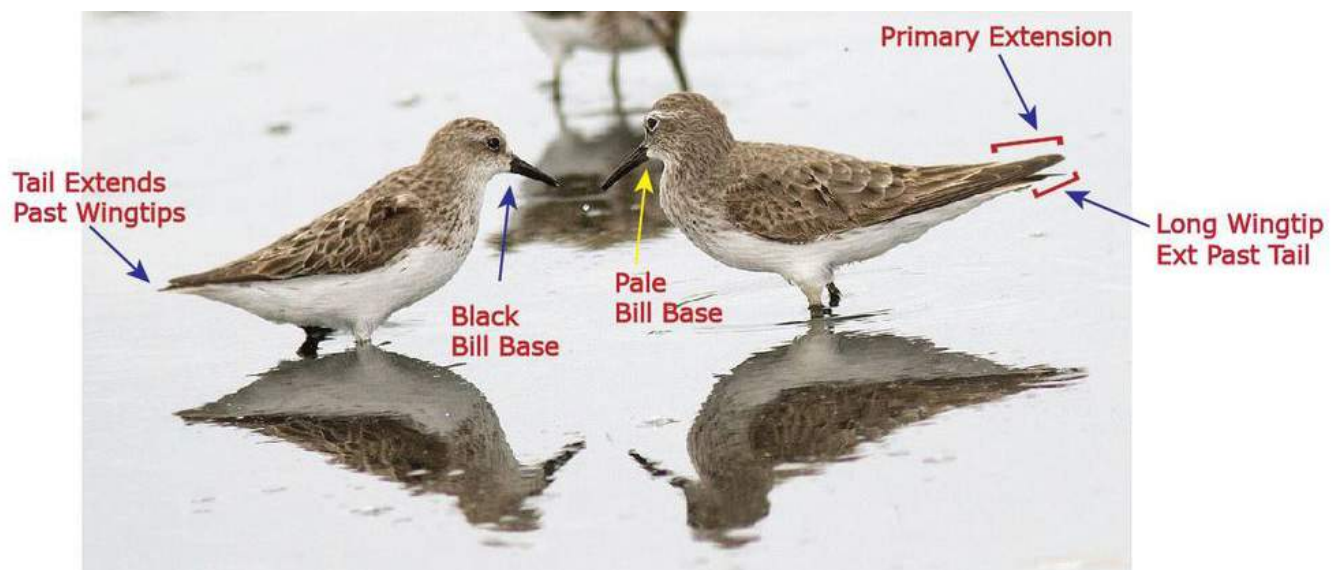
During fall migration, finding a white-rumped sandpiper amidst a large flock of semipalmated sandpipers can prove challenging. Usually, once a white-rumped has been found, its larger size, longer, more attenuated shape, and long primary extension are obvious. When this comparison is available, confidence in the ID process is restored and all is well.

However, relying on just the traditional ID point of white-rumped's longer primary extension can often be difficult and lead to confusion.

This photo-article proposes a few additional ID points that are sometimes easier-to-use, especially with isolated birds, or with semipalmateds that are extra worn or molting or are showing longer-than-expected primary projection. This article references fall birds that are in worn breeding plumage or beginning their molt into basic plumage.

The additional ID points for this article are:

- The length the wings extend past the tail.
- The pale base of white-rumped's bill.
- The contrast of white-rumped's more uniformly dark head with the white supercilium and chin.



Notes: White-rumped's more uniformly dark head, nape, and cheek contrast with longer, whiter supercilium and white chin.

For isolated birds, or when searching a flock of semipalmated sandpipers, the main issue is that any one bird's primary extension can be difficult to see, to gauge, and can even sometimes be fairly long. I've seen this lead to "false positives" many times.

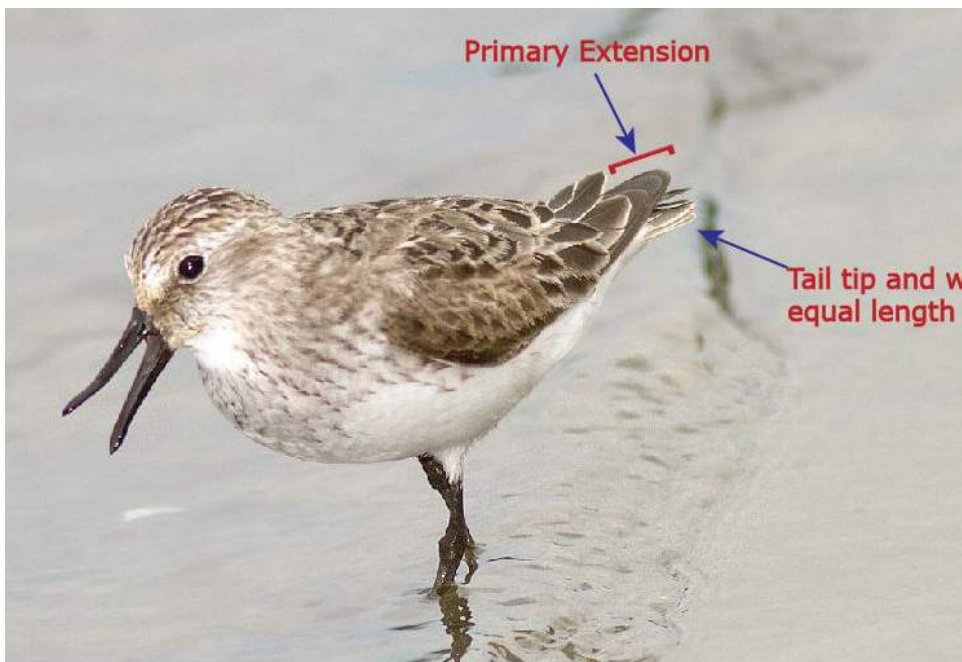
The other ID points outlined in this article are often easier to use with confidence, and can help prevent these uncertain guesses or false positives when searching for white-rumps.

I'll start with some annotated photos and then present a number of photos of both semipalmated and white-rumps for study.



Notes: This semipalmated's longish primary extension could be confusing. It's easier to see:

- Wingtips don't extend past the tail
- Bill base is black
- Lower contrast supercilium and chin



Notes: This semi's longish primary extension could also be confusing.

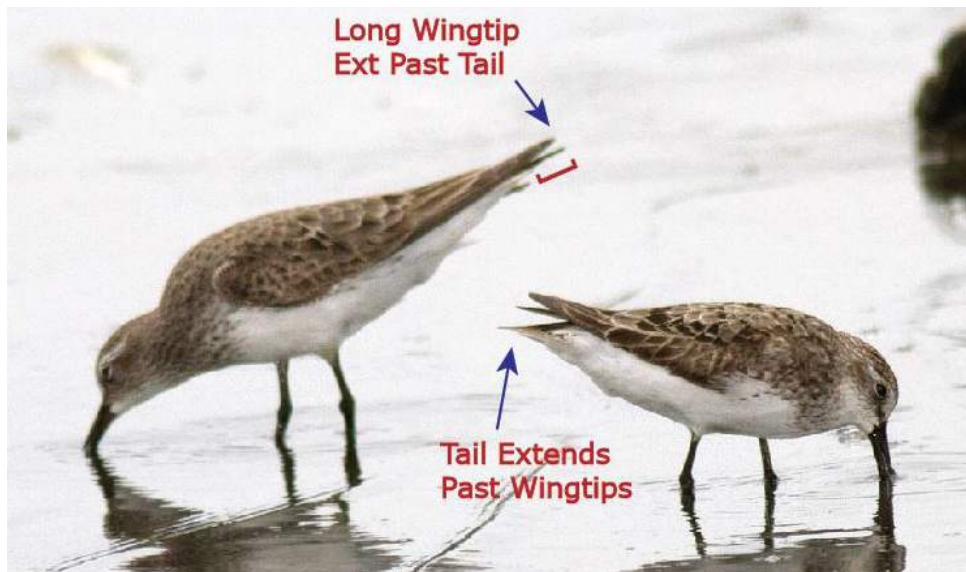
Note again:

- Wingtips don't extend past the tail
- Bill base is black
- Lower contrast supercilium and chin



Notes: All of the above points about the confusing primary extension hold for this individual semi as well.

THE SOLUTION IS TO USE ADDITIONAL ID POINTS



Notes: This semi on the right has a more contrasting supercilium than the other semis pictured. The contrast is still less than that of the typical white-rumped in this plumage and the supercilium is shorter and narrower.

Also note the base of the bill is black and the tail extends past the wingtips. The wingtips of the white-rumped on the left extend well past the tail tip.

Long Wingtip Extension
Past Tail

Notes: Crossed wingtips are often given as a field mark for White-rumped. However, semis can also show this characteristic, as in the bird on the right.

Note the more strongly contrasting supercilium, and long extension of the wings past the tail in the white-rumped on the left.



Notes: Even in virtual silhouette, when size, color, and even primary projection can be difficult to gauge, the wing extension past the tail of the white-rumped in the front is obvious compared to the equal wing and tail length of the semipalmated behind it.

Review: Cuckoo, Cheating by Nature

By Janet Schumacher

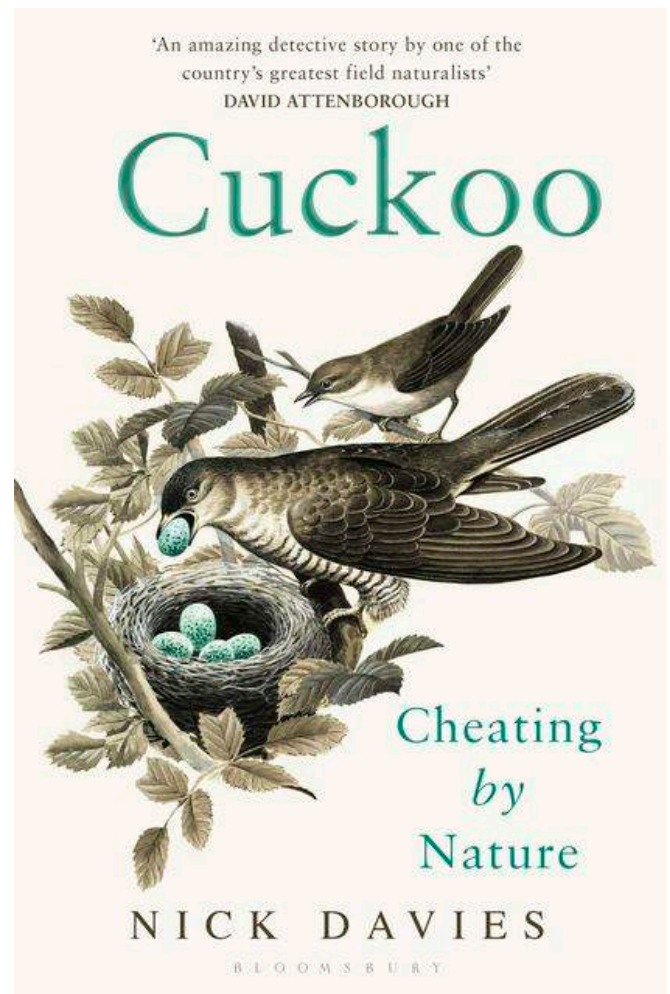
Observers have long been intrigued by the absurdity of a small host, such as a reed warbler, feeding a cuckoo fledgling ten times its size. How the common cuckoo manages to trick its host is the central theme of 2015's *Cuckoo, Cheating by Nature*, written by Nick Davies, a fellow of the Royal Society and professor of behavioral ecology at the University of Cambridge. His observations of the common cuckoo in England present a dynamic picture of natural selection.

Our yellow-billed and black-billed cuckoos almost always build their own nests and care for their young themselves. But the common cuckoo is an obligate brood parasite, never building a nest. Brood parasites don't randomly lay their eggs in any nest. In Davies' study of an English fen, or wetland, common cuckoos were most likely to parasitize smaller birds such as reed warblers and meadow pipits. Each cuckoo usually targets one species and may make adaptations specific to that host, such as egg coloration pattern. The host, in turn, may change the shell pattern in an attempt to increase detection of foreign eggs.

A number of factors determine the success of this brood parasite. For starters, it must choose a host that also feeds its chicks. Seed eaters will not do. The cuckoo and the host's spring migration patterns must be in sync even though their migratory paths may differ. The cuckoo is most successful if it lays its egg when there are only one or two eggs in the host's nest; if the cuckoo lays the first egg into an empty nest, it is likely to be noticed and discarded.

In 1921, Edgar Chance, a wealthy British industrialist, ornithologist and egg collector, was fascinated by the cuckoo's behavior. He set up a blind and enlisted a newsreel cameraman to wait near a pipit nest in order to record this fascinating behavior. A common cuckoo was filmed laying her egg (within eight seconds!) and then, after hatching, the cuckoo chick was filmed ousting the host pipit egg while the clueless female pipit watched. The cuckoo hatchling struggled but succeeded in ejecting two pipit chicks. Chance's 12-minute silent black-and-white film (called "The Cuckoo's Secret") "was shown to great acclaim in packed picture houses across Britain and then in New York," Davies writes.

In Davies' own study fen, the female cuckoos established territories and then hid in nearby trees carefully observing prey hosts. The hosts laid eggs in the morning and then left to find food. The cuckoo waited until afternoon before swooping down, picking up a host egg, laying its egg, and then flying off with the host egg and eating it. This cuckoo was swift to avoid detection—the entire process took less than 30 seconds. It has been suggested that the host bird may be reluctant to attack the parasite because the striped



underside of most cuckoos mimics a hawk.

Davies notes that while the cuckoo waits hidden, its egg descends the oviduct, allowing the cuckoo to quickly deposit it; a typical bird may take hours to lay an egg. The cuckoo's egg is relatively small compared to its size—just slightly larger than the host's egg. And the shell is very hard, making it difficult to destroy.

The cuckoo egg generally has a shorter incubation period, often being the first chick out of the shell in the nest. And the naked, blind cuckoo chick sumo wrestles any remaining eggs and any host chicks out of the

nest. A nest that is shallow is an important criterion for cuckoo selection. The host bird seems incapable of noticing any of its live chicks being thrust out of the nest.

The cuckoo chick mimics the begging call of the host chicks, and amplifies this call as it grows, which Davies suggests is an important trigger for the host to feed the parasite chick as much as a nest full of its offspring. The host is seemingly unaware that it is only feeding one large mouth. The cuckoo chick takes about two weeks longer to fledge, thereby depriving the exhausted host the opportunity to establish a second nest.



Common cuckoo. Photograph by Lee Hunter.

In ideal conditions, female cuckoos may parasitize more than ten nests. In an aside, Davies reports that the brown-headed cowbird is able to parasitize up to forty nests. Male cuckoos have no role other than inseminating as many females as possible. The female common cuckoo is a carefree early migrant back to Africa, where it spends 70 percent of its life.

Despite its parasitic ways, the common cuckoo is a beloved harbinger of spring in England, writes Davies. He notes with regret that the common cuckoo is in dramatic decline in England, despite the increase in some host species. One major factor is the sharp decrease, due to climate change, in the cuckoo's favorite food: the caterpillars of moths and butterflies.

With many new discoveries in ornithology, particularly in speciation, being made by DNA analysis, Davies shows that patient field observation still leads to intriguing scientific discoveries.

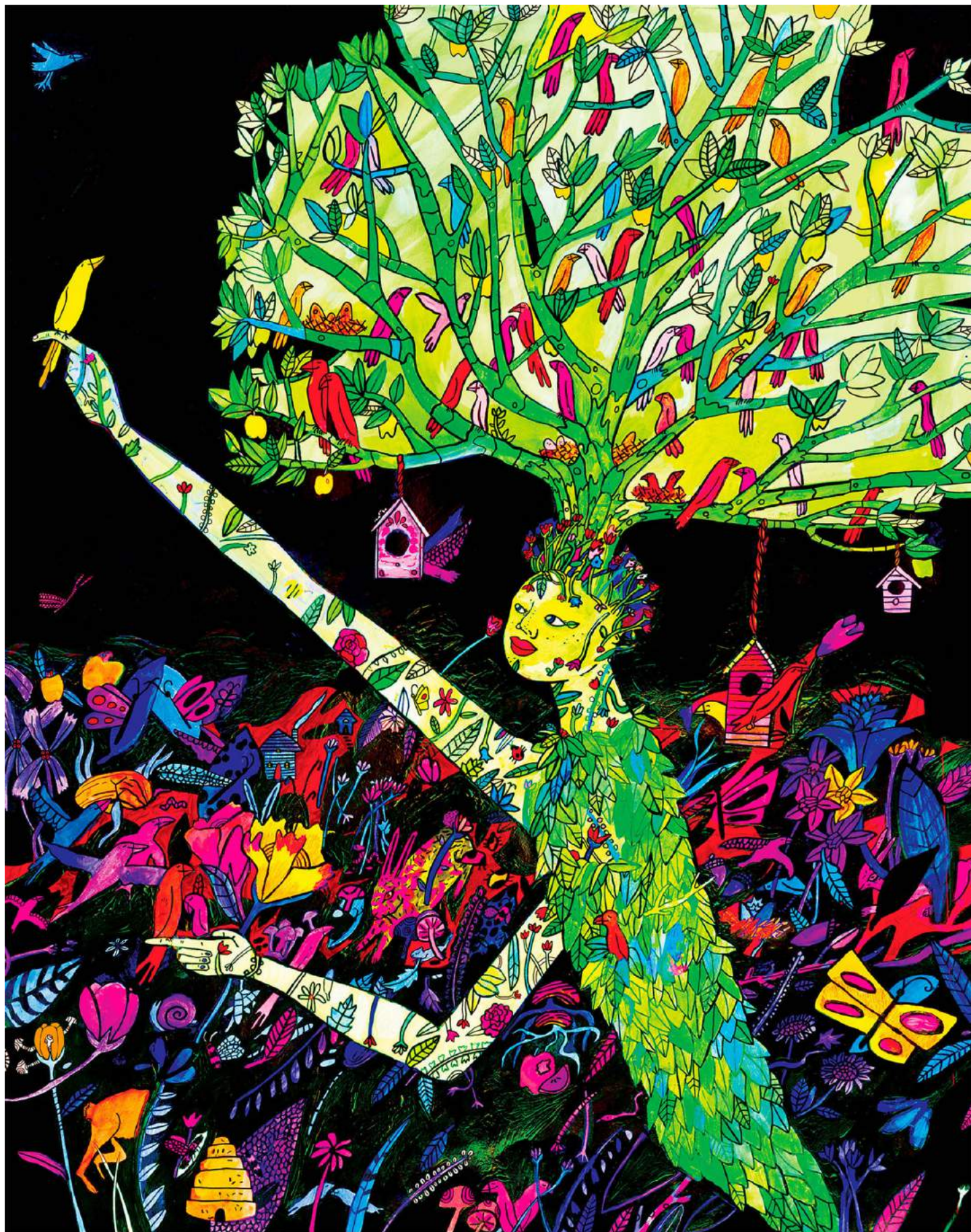
Tired of podcasts?

Need something to keep you awake on the subway? I recommend these audio books available from the Brooklyn library.

I found *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, written by Andrea Wulf, to be an eye-opening account of the influence of one man's genius in the early development of scientific thought. Humboldt's obsessively accurate observations of the natural world during a journey to South America in 1799 informed his central insight that the world is a vast, interconnected web. His extensive writings influenced Darwin, Emerson, Thoreau, and John Muir. His opposition to the cruelty of Spanish rule in the Americas affected Simon Bolivar and resulted in the East India Company refusing to allow him to climb the Himalayas, his greatest desire. More than two centuries ago, Humboldt warned how human mismanagement of forests and rivers could impact climate change.

The Soul of An Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness, written by Sy Montgomery, is an interesting look at the intelligent and mysterious giant octopus. Montgomery introduced herself to each octopus at the Seattle aquarium by allowing them to "taste" her arms with their many sensory discs on each tentacle, observed their strength and curiosity, and marveled at their ingenuity. She also gives a behind-the-scenes view of the workings of a large aquarium and its role in educating the public about ocean life.





Apple Lady. Mixed media drawing by Sam Dean Lynn.

American Birding Expo

By Janet Schumacher

Are you thinking about upgrading your binoculars, but find the choice overwhelming? Or perhaps you'd like to take a birding vacation, but you're not sure where to go? The third-annual American Birding Expo, which begins in Philadelphia on September 29 and runs for three days, presents a great opportunity to explore these options and much more.

The expo will take place at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center. Bird Watcher's Digest editor Bill Thompson III founded the event in 2015 in Columbus, Ohio, seeking to emulate the same spirit and sense of community created by the successful Birdwatching Fair in England. It was moved to Philly this year to cater to the East Coast's many birding enthusiasts.

Almost 150 exhibitors will sell their wares, including the major binocular vendors Swarovski, Zeiss, and Kowa, as well as the lesser known but moderately-priced U.K.-founded Opticron. The vendors will have staff ready to answer your questions and perhaps can help with any pesky problems with your current binoculars. As every birder learns—sometimes the hard way—the opportunity to handle binoculars is essential. Five years ago, in deciding on a new pair, I winnowed the field to Leica and Swarovski based on their optic quality, but ultimately chose the latter because of its comfortable hand indentations.

For those of us who like to travel, major players like Field Guides, Tropical Birding, and Rockjumper will be there with their glossy and enticing catalogs. Also interesting will be the tour companies and lodges representing more than 35 countries, including Babita (India), Bellbird (Australia), Beaks and Peaks (Honduras), Sierema (Argentina), and Wrybill tours (NZ). Representatives from several U.S. birding festivals and non-profits such as Birdlife International will also be present. You'll be able to purchase the latest squirrel-defying bird feeders, evaluate the newest bird guides, and enter contests to win optics or travel packages. Look for discounts on purchases made at the Expo.

There will be free bird walks and workshops every morning; in the evenings, speakers. On Saturday, Sept. 30, Scott Weidensaul will present his research on Project SNOWstorm, which tracked the influx of snowy owls a few years ago. There will be daily raffles and a silent auction. The registration fee is \$10.

Another purpose of the Expo is to promote conservation of wild birds and their habitat. Raffles and contributions, from sponsors and individuals, go to the Expo Conservation Fund and then conservation research. Past recipients include Birdlife International's efforts to protect the endangered hooded grebe and the American Birding Association's work with the threatened red knot.

Schedules, directions, a list of exhibitors and registration information are available at www.americanbirdingexpo.com



Make new friends at the American Birding Expo. Photograph by Erika Scott.

Birdwatching in Puerto Rico

By Molly Adams

This past April, I traveled to Puerto Rico during spring break for an unforgettable 10 days of birdwatching. If you can avoid traveling when the masses are vacationing, flights are cheaper and the sights are quieter, but even for those like me whose trips depend on the school calendar, Puerto Rico has dozens of peaceful chunks of birding paradise.

During our trip, my boyfriend Corey Rubin and I recorded just over 100 species of birds, including either seeing or hearing 13 out of the 14 endemics that are known to only inhabit the small, island territory. This was accomplished with a rental car, stays at three different locations, frequent visits to eBird, and two days of birding with guides.

Before flying into San Juan, I took some time to study the eBird hotspots in addition to booking two full-day tours with Birding Puerto Rico. I booked an airBnB for our first three days just outside El Yunque National Forest in the northeast, another for three days on the southwest coast in Cabo Rojo, and the final two days in a hotel in San Juan. We drove a loop around the entire island, seeing its numerous ecosystems and the birds inhabiting them.

Once we arrived at our first destination, I contacted our tour guide to see where we should meet her in El Yunque the next morning. To our dismay, the night before the guided tour, she canceled due to illness. We frantically looked at eBird to study recent lists and I emailed another guide, Julio Salgado, who had once worked with a friend of mine on avian research. He was



Puerto Rican emerald. Photograph by Corey Rubin.

able to set up a last minute half-day trip, but not until the day before our departure. Slightly disappointed but still excited, we spent the next day observing several species on the property we were staying at and a nearby beach. We watched black-and-yellow bananaquits and gray kingbirds hop back and forth across a river, and sandwich terns, brown pelicans, and magnificent frigatebirds flock at a nearby beach.

The following morning, we arrived in the tropical rainforest when the gates opened at 7:30 with our binoculars, a few pages of scribbled notes, and *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, by Herbert A. Raffaele. When we pulled up to the first overlook at one of the highest points in the park, there was one other car there: a large white van with a dozen binocular-wearing folks donned in khaki or olive-green. They had come from all over the world on an organized trip, and



Puerto Rican bullfinch.
Photograph by Corey Rubin.

their guide was kind enough to point out a few species and offer us looks in his scope. We saw huge, perched, scaly-naped pigeons, nesting Puerto Rican orioles, and a Puerto Rican woodpecker. After we parted ways, we tracked down a lush trail full of Puerto Rican todies (known as “San Pedrito,” or Little Saint Peter), Puerto Rican tanagers, and green-throated caribs. The day proved that identifying never-before-seen birds without a guide was doable and rewarding. That night, as we used eBird on our deck, planning the next leg of our trip, we heard the faint whistling calls of the endemic Puerto Rican screech owl.

On our drive to Cabo Rojo, we stopped at the Guánica National Forest and heard the calls of the Puerto Rican nightjar and saw our first mangrove cuckoo and Adelaide’s warblers. It’s important to visit this dry southern forest as early as possible before it gets too hot. Once we reached the western part of the island, we explored mangroves and salt flats that were brimming with shorebirds. The best places we

The Clapper Rail

visited on our own included the Cabo Rojo National Refuge for troupials, Cabo Rojo Salt Flats for snowy plovers and hundreds of black-legged stilts, Cabo Rojo Lighthouse for brown boobies, Boquerón Bird Refuge for nesting gallinules, and Cartagena Lagoon (if you're prepared to drive through the mud) for clapper rails, bitterns, soras, and more. As we were leaving the final reserve, we saw a huddle of birders lugging scopes heading our way. It was the same group we had run into three days before—on the other side of the island—and confirmed for us that we were hitting the right spots.

Our fortunes only improved. We spent a half-day birding in the southwest with Sergio Colon, an eBird moderator, Christmas Bird Count coordinator, and friend of the owner of Birding Puerto Rico. Incredibly knowledgeable and friendly, Sergio brought us to see a number of elusive endemic species in the forest of Maricao—elfin woods warbler, a very rare subspecies of the sharp-shinned hawk, the Puerto Rican lizard-cuckoo, green mango hummingbird, Puerto Rican spindalis, Antillean euphonia. This was one of the highlights of our trip and birding with Sergio is highly recommended for any visitors.

Looping our way north and then east toward San Juan, we met Julio Salgado and visited several wonderful locations on the northern side of the island. We snuck up on Key West quail-doves in Cambalache forest, found saffron finches and an African collared-dove in Puerto Las Vacas, and observed a nesting colony of bridled terns on the beach at Cueva del Indio. Julio is a young, passionate birder and an excellent guide who was willing to take us out on short notice on Easter morning. Before we parted ways, he convinced us to drive an hour on our own to the endangered Puerto Rican parrot's captive breeding location in Río Abajo National Forest.

Visitors aren't allowed on the grounds, but the wild parrots can sometimes be seen before sunset when they visit those being bred in captivity. After we had walked a mile or so into the trees, we started hearing thunder and it grew very dark. Approaching the gate, we heard loud screeching above us, a wild-parrot chorus that lasted a few minutes before they dispersed and the rain started to fall. Our quest to find traces of this once nearly extinct species was a gratifying way to bring an end to our Puerto Rican birding adventure.

Mango hummingbird. Detail of print by J. J. Audubon.



Club Gallery



A New York tableaux: Baltimore oriole harasses a red-tailed hawk as it eats a rat in Prospect Park. Photograph by Erika Scott.



Wild Bird Fund co-founder Rita McMahon (right) and Development Liaison Darcy Hector receiving the BBC's Birdathon proceeds at their Manhattan headquarters. Photograph by Bobbi Manian.



Bobbi Manian and Ben the cardinal at the Wild Bird Fund. Photograph courtesy of Bobbi Manian.



Black-and-white warbler. Pencil drawing by Jennifer Kepler.