Fall 2020

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL

Inside This Issue

Cover: Pine Siskins in Green-Wood Cemetery. Photo by Ryan Mandelbaum. Next Page: American Kestrel. Photo by Mike Elfassy.

Editor's Note

The tradition and history of the Brooklyn Bird Club is long and storied, and one of the things I've loved the most about this community is the transmitting of that generational knowledge: local birding lore passed down by senior birders to newer ones, an act that keeps the club and our beloved greenspaces looked after and thriving. That tradition will continue with the 121st Christmas Bird Count this Saturday, December 19. It's an event whose importance and fun was conveyed to me as a new birder in 2016, and one which I'm sure many others are learning now.

Because as Linda Ewing writes in our lead story, this covid-19 pandemic has brought a host of new birders into our community. Perhaps it's one of the slimmest of silver linings during this terrible time, that watching birds could bring a measure of peace and happiness. It's also meant that the membership roll of the Brooklyn Bird Club, celebrating its 112th birthday, has never been longer. I hope that the same bonds of mentorship and camaraderie that pulled me in four years ago will do the same for this new class.

– Ryan Goldberg

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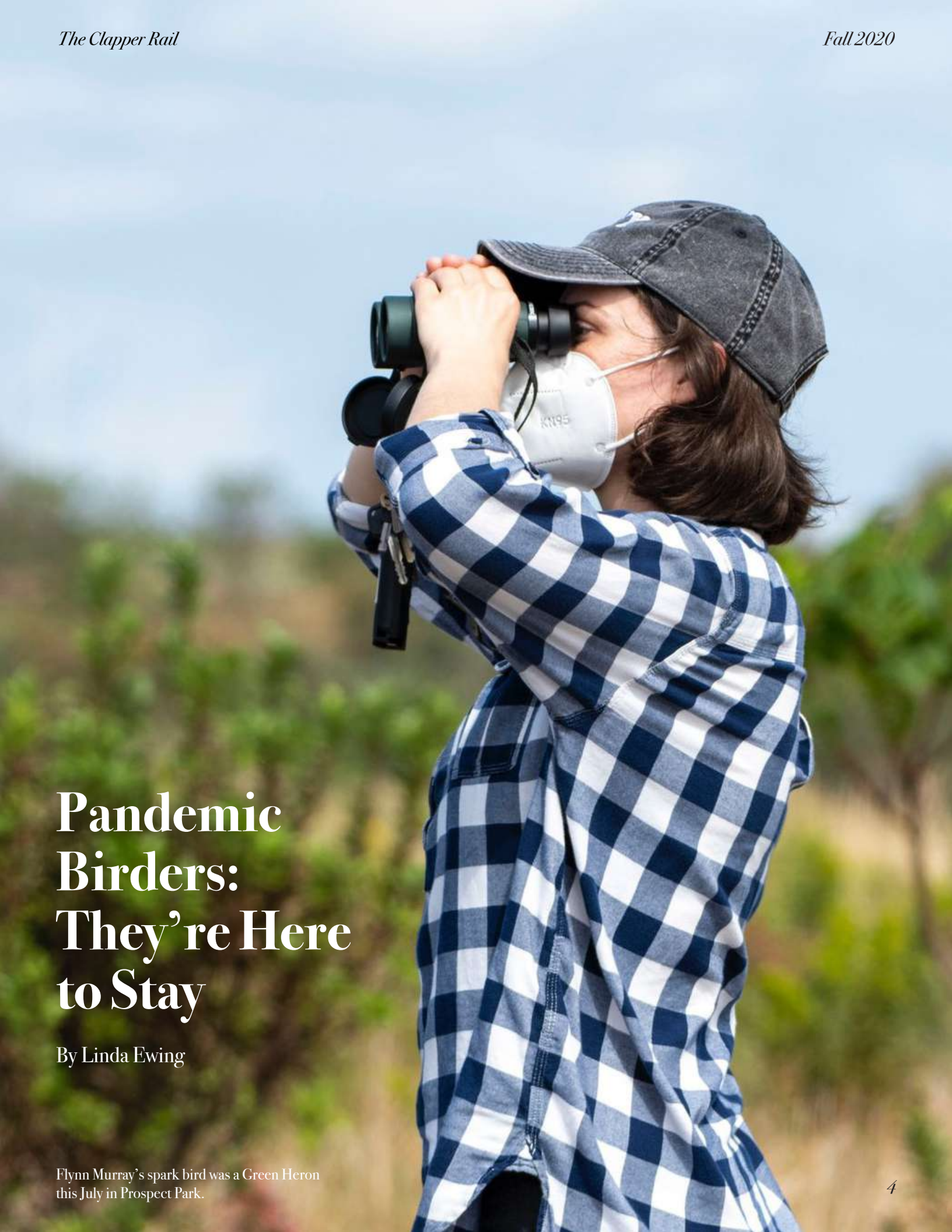

Pandemic Birders: They're Here to Stay

By Linda Ewing

Flynn Murray's spark bird was a Green Heron this July in Prospect Park.

According to the press, birding is having a pandemic moment. "Birdwatching takes flight amid coronavirus outbreak as Americans head back outdoors," the Los Angeles Times declared at the beginning of May. "The Birds Are Not on Lockdown, and More People Are Watching Them," the New York Times chimed in. In August, the Washington Post Magazine offered to tell its readers everything they needed to know "to tune in to the feathered soap opera outside your window." The birding boom has even inspired a bit of a birding backlash. "UFO Spotting Has Replaced Bird Watching as Pandemic Obsession," the Wall Street Journal harumphed in September.

For longtime Brooklyn birders, it's all a bit bewildering. "It used to be that when I saw someone with binoculars in the park it was always someone I knew," one commented. "Now I don't recognize anyone." This was not offered as a complaint, but in a tone of wonder and puzzlement.

So who are these pandemic birders? Conversations with half a dozen new birders in a carefully selected random sample (read: binocular-toting strangers I approached in Prospect and Green-Wood) offer a collective portrait. It's incomplete and impressionistic, of course, but nonetheless suggestive. For these new birders, birding is a source of comfort and connection, an infusion of much-needed normalcy, and an antidote to boredom – often, all those things at once.

"It makes me feel that I'm not in a pandemic," was the way one of them summed it up.

Here are their stories.

Flynn Murray and Ronnie Almonte

Pandemic birders include people like Windsor Terrace residents Flynn Murray and Ronnie Almonte, who have found solace in birding. Both consider it a form of "active noticing," offering many of the same benefits as meditation. Almonte lost his grandfather to the virus in April, one of several painful losses he experienced last spring. As a high school science teacher and union activist, he has witnessed firsthand the impact of the pandemic on his mostly Black and brown students and their families, and believes that resource disparities continue to put public school kids and staff at risk. Murray, deeply involved in organizing

Ronnie Almonte, a high school science teacher and union activist, started a bird club at his school.

for social and economic justice, remarks that "the more organizing I do, the more I bird." The quiet watchfulness of seeking and observing birds keeps them relaxed and grounded, better able to confront the enormity of the issues that motivate their activism.

The couple share a longstanding love of nature. For Murray, growing up in New Mexico, that love mostly took the form of fly fishing and rockhounding. Almonte, who grew up on Long Island, cherishes memories of going to the local park with his grandfather to feed the ducks ("I know, I know," he interjects, "I'd never do that now"). He had birded casually for much of his life but picked up the intensity this summer when Murray – armed with the new pair of binoculars he had given her – began birding as well.

Murray can offer the exact date she became a birder: July 12. That was the first time she headed to Prospect Park with the sole intention of looking at birds. The first bird she encountered? A Green Heron, by West Island across from the Vanderbilt entrance.

From that moment, she was hooked.

Over the months that followed, Murray and Almonte have racked up impressive life lists, including a Connecticut Warbler ("I literally jumped for joy when I saw it," says Murray), American Pipits, and Prospect Park's recent Common Gallinule. They share a fondness for the Butterfly Meadow, which is where my interviews with them took place (with frequent interruptions to check out a Brown Thrasher, sort through warblers, or watch a hummingbird chase away a Blue-headed Vireo). While the bird that re-sparked Almonte's interest in birding was an electric-blue Indigo Bunting, and Murray is smitten with warblers, both are looking forward to bundling up and heading for South Brooklyn's beaches this winter to learn about ducks and gulls.

Almonte's renewed interest in birding has inspired him to share the joy of birds with the students he teaches. Armed with his principal's approval and a donation of binoculars from Bird Collective, he's starting a birding club at his school.

Michele Truong

In October, when Michele Truong found a Belted Kingfisher entangled in fishing line in Prospect Park's Lullwater, she jumped into action. Truong had become a regular on Brooklyn Bird Club migration walks when they resumed in the fall, so her first thought was to call Tom Stephenson. After a few more calls by Stephenson and others, the bird was rescued and on its way to the Wild Bird Fund.

This wasn't the first time Truong had helped a bird caught in discarded fishing line. In the spring, while staying with her sister in North Carolina, she found a Barred Owl with line wrapped around its wing. She was able to get it help – and then returned to the site the next day to clean up fishing line and other debris.

The story of how Truong came to be rescuing owls at her sister's place is also the story of her introduction to birding. In early March, with her job on hiatus and her avocation, roller derby, canceled indefinitely, she realized the things that had brought her to Brooklyn were about to go away, possibly for a lengthy period. Not wanting to be trapped alone in the city, she headed for her sister's. There, looking for safe, outdoor activities to do with her young niece and nephew, she settled on birding.

Nature exploration had not played a big role in Truong's own childhood in northern Virginia. Her first pair of binoculars, she confesses, was purchased as part of a Halloween costume – she dressed as one of the central characters from Moonrise Kingdom – and then

Birds have changed the way Michele Truong looks at Brooklyn.

misplaced. But in April, with a new pair of binoculars, a collection of field guides, and an 8-year-old and a 10-year-old as her companions, she fell hard for birds. Barred Owls nested by the pond near her sister's home, and she and her niece and nephew watched the owlets grow up. The first time she and her niece saw a male Scarlet Tanager, they were stunned by the brilliance of its plumage.

Birds, Truong remarks, have given her indelible memories that evoke specific people, places and times; she will never look at a Scarlet Tanager without thinking of this pandemic spring, and of her niece.

Birds have also changed the way Truong looks at Brooklyn. Since returning in mid-July, she's gone for countless walks in Prospect Park, initially solo and later, with the resumption of Brooklyn Bird Club walks, with others. "I always liked the park," she says, "but now it means more to me." Birding in the city has taught her that birds are everywhere. In fact, she's had better luck finding warblers in the trees outside her Prospect-Lefferts Gardens apartment than in her sister's woodsy suburban neighborhood.

Truong's new passion for birds has affected her choices as a consumer. She seeks out certified bird-friendly coffee and can knowledgeably discuss alternative olive-harvesting methods. And while she sometimes wonders if birding is just a phase, hearing what birding has come to mean to her and how it's changed her relationship to nature and the place she lives, it's hard to escape the conclusion that she's in it for the long haul.

In fact, she's already fantasizing about post-pandemic birding trips: experiencing migration at Cape May, traveling to Colombia, or just breaking in her new wading boots at Jamaica Bay.

Toby Kasper and Amy Wang

When Toby Kasper and Amy Wang eloped last August, the destination for their mini-honeymoon was a no-brainer. How better to celebrate than to go birding in Maine's Acadia National Park?

It wasn't the celebration they would have envisioned before the pandemic upended their lives. As passionate travelers, Kasper and Wang had particular reason to feel hemmed in by the city's lockdown.

They'd gone from exploring the globe to being confined to walking distance of their Park Slope apartment. But at least they could walk, and more often than not, their daily walks took them to Prospect

Toby Kasper and Amy Wang both use the photographs they take to study field marks and hone their identification skills.

Park or Green-Wood. As they walked, they noticed birds – at Green-Wood, with its noisy abundance of Northern Mockingbirds, it's hard not to – and though she wouldn't (yet) call herself a birder, Wang found herself intrigued, even enchanted, by the mockingbirds' boldness and varied vocalizations. The couple resolved to start bringing binoculars with them.

By then it was late April, and spring migration was picking up. Looking at birds, in Kasper's words, brought a whole new diversity of experience that made going back to the same places over and over more interesting. Wang quickly made online birding connections, joining the New York Birders Facebook group. She also picked up a copy of Tom Stephenson's warbler guide. Her verdict? "This is so nerdy and cool!" As supporting evidence, she cites the spread depicting warblers' undertail coverts.

Kasper and Wang almost always bird together and find each one's skills complement the other's. Kasper's spotting ability is excellent – he approaches birding the way he once approached safari trips during his years living in Africa. Wang is the stronger ear birder (she also does a mean nuthatch impression). They both use the photographs they take on their walks to study field marks and hone their identification skills. As lockdown restrictions have eased, the couple have become regulars on Brooklyn Bird Club walks.

While they recognize that the special circumstances of the pandemic made their introduction to birding especially intense, they expect to be birders for life. When she sees older birders, Wang confesses, "I think, that's going to be us."

Chris Allieri

Birding was a big deal for Chris Allieri when he was growing up in New Jersey, but not because he was particularly interested in birds himself. His father was the bird nut in the family, and during summers on the Jersey Shore, Allieri would tag along as his dad spoke with rangers at Brigantine, or the Edwin B. Forsyth National Wildlife Refuge, about the Piping Plovers that nested there. While that experience instilled in him a passion for environmental protection that he would carry into adulthood, it did not turn him into a birder.

Sure, Allieri owned a pair of binoculars that he took with him on frequent work trips to San Francisco – his parents' favorite city – where he'd look at sea birds from the Presidio. Doing so made him feel connected to his father, who died in 2016.

And sure, driven by his commitment to animal rights and welfare, Allieri served on the board of the Wild Bird Fund.

But it wasn't until the pandemic hit that Allieri began to observe and document birds in earnest, on his own account. In mid-March, with the city's shutdown looming, Allieri celebrated his birthday by going out to look at birds.

He hasn't stopped.

Allieri's particular pandemic project was to post images of wildlife on Twitter every day. His first image, posted on March 26, was of a male Northern Cardinal seen from his Brooklyn Heights window. The choice reflected the folk belief that cardinals represent the spirits of deceased loved ones, a source of comfort during a time of grief. More images followed – pigeons, an American Robin, then less common birds seen around the city. Allieri enjoyed the way people connected with his images, often expressing amazement that New York City was home to so much wildlife. In truth, Allieri was amazed as well. "I had no idea there was this diversity of birds here," he says.

When he began the project, Allieri had no goal or end date in mind. Somewhere along the way, he settled on 100 images over 100 days. His final post, dated July 6, was of a Red Knot at Breezy Point. It was a fitting conclusion, recalling those childhood summers on the Jersey Shore. Seeing that lone Red Knot, or plover chicks, or swirling flocks of terns and skimmers, he could feel his late father's love of birds in his veins.

Allieri says that birding during the pandemic has connected him more deeply to the city he's lived in since 1996. "This grounded me in new ways," he says. "Before, I could probably count on one hand the number of times I'd been to Prospect Park. And I'd never been to Jamaica Bay, Plumb Beach, or Green-Wood."

It has also deepened his activism. "I can't just enjoy the beauty and keep checklists and share images," Allieri says. "I'm compelled to do something to protect these beautiful species."

Through his involvement with the Wild Bird Fund, Allieri was already outspoken on the danger of window strikes and the importance of bird-safe glass. This summer, spurred by his concern for the Piping Plovers that nest in the Rockaways, he drew on his background in public relations to pitch stories on the plovers to local media outlets; if you read any plover stories this summer, chances are you saw Allieri quoted, along with his photographs of fluffy plover chicks. Looking

ahead to 2021, Allieri brims with ideas about how to better protect the plovers and other shorebirds and is committed to being part of the solution.

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Spend even a few minutes talking with these new pandemic birders, and the joy they find in birds is palpable. So, too, is their passion for conservation and habitat preservation. And perhaps because they took up birding during a difficult and tumultuous time, building a welcoming and inclusive community was a recurring theme in our conversations. Without exception, each brought up Christian Cooper's frightening encounter with the white owner of an off-leash dog in Central Park. His experience provoked strong emotional reactions in this group: about the right of Black, Indigenous and people of color to experience nature without fear; about the need to broaden the birding community; about committing to justice as well as birds. Several spoke appreciatively of Black Birders Week, as well as the American Birding Association's initiative to reduce financial barriers to participation by BIPOC birders. At least one has made a point of reaching out to friends and family to encourage their involvement.

Two conclusions seem inescapable. The first is that pandemic birders are here to stay; the second, that birding is better off for them.

In mid-March, with the city's shutdown looming, Chris Allieri celebrated his birthday by going out to look at birds. Piping Plover chick at Breezy Point. Photo by Allieri.

Dogwood Delights: A Fall Birdathon Report

By Benjamin Garron-Caine

Golden-crowned Kinglet at Green-Wood Cemetery. Photo by Mike Elfassy.

On Saturday, October 10, I participated in my fifth ever, and first fall Brooklyn Birdathon. My team, which included Mike Elfassy and Katie Cox, birded in four locales, and finished the day with 85 species of Avian.

We started at Plumb Beach, hoping to nab Nelson's, Seaside, or Saltmarsh Sparrows in the marsh grass; we missed all three, despite repeatedly seeing little brown birds crest over the grass. We scored a Clapper Rail calling, a single female Northern Harrier, and a huge number of Royal Terns hanging out on the beach. Good birds all, for our list, but I think we left the beach disappointed with our initial tally.

We then stopped at Marine Park, hoping for an acceleration. Again we got teased by sparrows which darted into the grass before we could interview them. But Katie helped get our eyes on a Blue-headed Vireo and Lincoln's Sparrow, and with some warblers hanging out by the entrance upon our exiting, we left feeling not so futile.

On our way north towards Prospect Park, we stopped at a front yard on East 17th Street in Midwood, where I had seen an explosion of warblers earlier in the week in a small but intensely producing Kousa Dogwood tree. The same birds were there once again – a Cape May warbler in his subdued fall colors, a Northern Parula, and male and female Black-throated Blue Warblers working the ground for fallen fruit. I wouldn't mind a yard with a Kousa Dogwood some day.

Arriving at Prospect Park, we were able to add some expecteds; not abundant, but not rare birds that you wouldn't like to leave off an all-day list. Mike

helped pick out a Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Tennessee Warbler on the side of Lookout Hill, and we added a Green-winged Teal. Our list was becoming respectable, but we would soon encounter a bird phenomena I don't think any of us expected.

After a few good additions at Green-Wood Cemetery, we headed back to the car. Before we got in, we noticed a large tree with lots of bird action, concentrated on the lower trunk. Walking closer, we were taken aback by what we saw. A swarm of birds – kinglets, parulas, Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers, Red- and White-breasted Nuthatches – all swarming the surface of the trunk in a frenzied concentration like I've never seen before. A hatchout likely, of some insect in the furrows. And typifying what makes natural observation, amongst hobbies, so unique; that an experience like none previously is at any moment possible.

Above: Cape May Warbler on a Kousa Dogwood in Midwood. Photo by Benjamin Garron-Caine.
Below: Royal Terns at Plumb Beach. Photo by Mike Elfassy.

Letter from the President

By Dennis Hrehowsik

What a year it's been. I hope this finds you and your loved ones healthy and happy. It has been a challenge for all of us on many fronts and the BBC has had to adapt to our new reality to continue delivering our programming to you. I was thrilled to be able to once again lead the fall migration walks; seeing you in person, hearing how much the BBC means to you and feeling the love and support of our community was a bright spot in a tumultuous year.

We now number 300 strong – the most active members we've ever had! I'm beaming with pride that so many of you – 98 in total – came out for the trash cleanups we organized in Prospect Park this summer and that a number of you continued this work on your own. Our members volunteered 174 hours and picked up 150 bags of trash.

As I write this, the fall Birdathon pledges have reached more than $9,000. The windows at the Salt Marsh Nature Center have now been treated with bird-safe anti-collision film and we're making arrangements to begin work on the visitors' center at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. We're also looking into a third site, and one possibility is the AirTran stop near the refuge, which as it turns out is a hazard to shorebirds. We've begun talks with the Port Authority about treating this location. Thank you to all the teams and donors!

We were able to revive our evening presentations virtually, via Zoom, and plan to continue that way for the rest of this year and into the next.

And we've planned the 112th annual Christmas Bird Count for Saturday, December 19. There will be no carpooling and no compilation dinner, unfortunately; however, we plan to meet via Zoom to tally our observations.

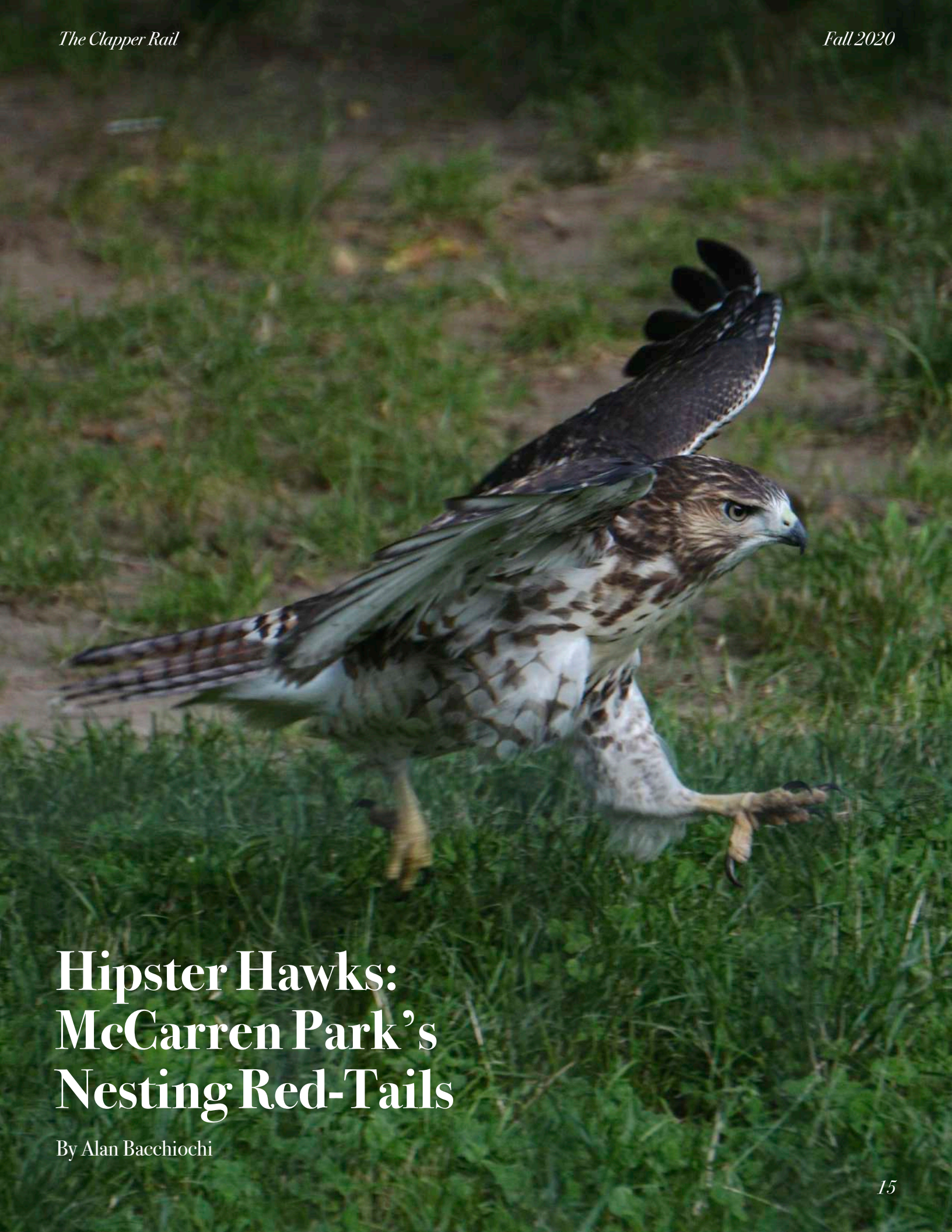
Thank you all for your continued support of the Brooklyn Bird Club. I know it has given me the energy to navigate these uncertain waters and keep the club vital at this challenging time. For that I shall remain eternally grateful.

American Coot. John J. Audubon, Birds of America, 1835.

Photo Gallery: Ronnie Almonte

Above: Prairie Warbler, Calvert Vaux Park. Below: Nashville Warbler, Prospect Park.

Above: Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Calvert Vaux Park. Below: Lesser Yellowlegs, Jamaica Bay.



Hipster Hawks: McCarren Park's Nesting Red-Tails

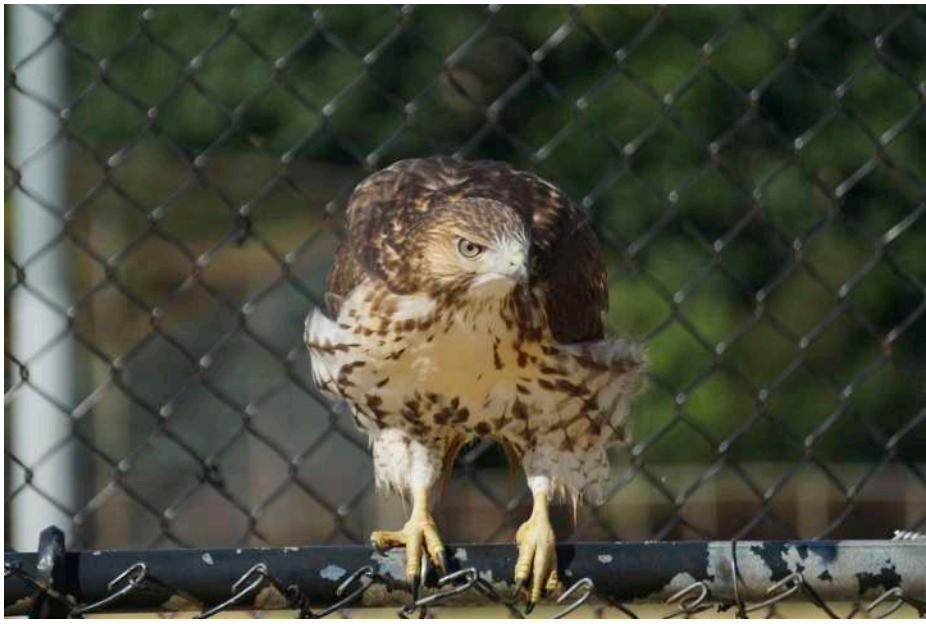
By Alan Bacchiochi

I had been birding for under a year when I received the email on January 24, 2018. The New York Parks Department's Wildlife Unit was reaching out through the Brooklyn Bird Club for volunteers to monitor raptor nests in the city. I knew there was a Red-tailed Hawk in my nearby park. I did not know that nearly three years on I would still be keeping an eye on hawk activity in McCarren Park.

McCarren Park, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, covers 35 acres. It is four blocks wide: tennis courts and asphalt ballfields to the west, a central section of three more baseball fields and a lawn, and then a soccer and track complex with a huge Robert Moses-built municipal pool across the street. Importantly, the track and the central baseball field are surrounded by 60-foot light towers. Red-tailed Hawks have been breeding in the park since 2007 and using the light towers' maintenance platforms as the foundations for their nests. It's easy to understand why.

The platforms are an ideal spot for them to throw down their nest. The McCarren pair was a bit lazy; they piled up their nest rather than build a fine aerie. I was expecting to see some craftsmanship similar to the nest near the Dog Beach in Prospect Park. Nope. For a few weeks they'd try out different locations, partially building ceremonial nests, as they're known. The male would carry branches to one platform or another. If the Blue Jays were around they might mob him as he broke a branch off. Finally, all attention would focus on one of those ceremonial sites.

Having a nice two-by-12-foot spot as a convenient base lets the hawks just go through the motions: stack things up pretty well and then hope for the best. However, the platforms do allow plenty of room for the eyases (the name for hawks before they fledge) to exercise. (Do birds in more cramped conditions fledge earlier? Or do birds that have the extra room end up being able to exercise more and develop strength for flight faster?) Sixty feet up in the air, the likelihood of being disturbed is remote. My ongoing fear was that the hawks would suffer drone harassment. I have not yet seen that happen. They are more



This page and cover: Nesting Red-tailed Hawks in McCarren Park. All photos by Alan Bacchiochi.

likely to be the subject of mockingbird strafing runs when those birds have their young.

McCarren is a busy park, very loud and very congested at times. The hawks never seemed bothered. They are often perched aloof atop one of the towers, and most people take no notice of them. The first year they nested on the south center of the track. That year the track was ripped up and wholly replaced: two fledglings. Year two saw them nest next on third base in the center of the park, essentially ground zero for noise and activity: a qualified three fledglings. On the third year they nested on the quieter left field tower: one fledgling. And even more impressive, to me, is that when the park starts to really ramp up its activities in early summer is when the eyases fledge and learn to hunt. These hawks tended to eat birds more than anything else – robins, doves and pigeons – before settling for squirrels.

In the park I met and spoke with a lot of people over the last three years. Most of the conversations can be condensed into this exchange:

"What are you a birdwatcher?"

"Yes, I am looking at the hawk up there."

"Yeah, there are hawks in the park, I saw a cardinal, too. Do you think they'll eat my dog?"

"The hawks or the cardinal?"

Every now and then somebody takes a real interest. Once it was an old guy in sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt smoking a Pall Mall and giving me the details of all the rare birds he's seen over the decades. Then there was the woman with the Neopolitan Mastiff that asked every morning she saw me how the birds were doing. She was delighted when I let her look through my scope to get a look at the juvenile hawk in the nest. Two weeks later she asked if the baby was near the hawk in the nest but out of sight. She was staggered when I told her that that hawk was the baby. They grow up fast. The majority of people were happy to have the hawks in the park, although they were often surprised by their existence there. People tend to interpret their presence as a sign of the urban and natural worlds co-existing. To see the hawks hunting, especially the often inept performances of the fledglings, impressed people, took them off guard, made them pause for a second and just appreciate what was before them… and then they reached for their cell phone to snap a picture.

Just after noon on March 10, 2018 – my first

year tracking the hawks, the female was perched on a light tower to the north of the track. She let out a long screech call. About 10 minutes passed by, a man and woman had joined me to watch her as the male flew up. The hawks started a round of raptor copulation, which is basically her balancing forward and perching while he tries to hover and make contact. It is brief and awkward. (And they repeat this action a lot. I'm not sure what the fertility success rate is, but the hawks err on the side of abundance.) After a round of two attempts a third hawk flew in, settled on the next tower over and offered a faint screech. "Too late, buddy," said the woman next to me. The mated pair took off and began slow and wide gyres; the interloper, meanwhile, went to a nearby high-rise HVAC unit, offered a few plaintive screeches along the way, then left the park. Nine days later the female began nesting.

It's hard to know exactly when the eggs hatch. You calculate a date based on when nesting started. You wait. There isn't much to see. I wondered how the female was doing when storms blew in. I was a little taken aback one cold morning when she was just gone. Leaving the nest untended, she flew out for a morning constitutional. The male would take a turn sitting in the afternoons. Incubation lasts up to 35 days, then the eyases spends another 40-plus days in the nest before it fledges. However, given my sight lines to the nest, it's hard to know exactly when they hatch. In 2018, I predicted a hatching around April 28. In early May I could see the female looking into the nest, shifting things about with her beak, paying attention to something in the nest. But the height of the nest and my angle prevented a firm call. On May 15, I saw a living ball of pale down, and then another. They grew and started looking more and more like alien "Grays," and then they began growing their flight feathers, and started looking like scruffy hawks. By the middle of June, they had each fledged.

During the second year I noticed an interesting activity. Every now and then the male or female would bring a fresh, green, thin branch into the nest. The young ones would work on the branch, and I can only assume this is some sort of "beaking" behavior. The dynamic in the nest was also a little different that year. There were three birds. The first two eyases stayed near each other, until they fledged. Then they ranged around the park becoming more and more independent. By mid-July one had departed and within the week so had the

The park's track and baseball field are surrounded by 60-foot light towers. Red-tailed Hawks have been using the light towers' maintenance platforms as foundations for their nests since 2007.

other. Two birds were always together. The other was a little smaller, and often on its own in a corner of the nest. This third bird was the last to fledge. It also turned out to be sick.

One gray, late morning, I came to the park to count five hawks spread out across three of the baseball field's light towers. I was happy; they had all started flying. Again, the setup of the light towers was beneficial for the fledglings. They took their first short flights on a horizontal plane, and they didn't have to navigate to the ground and back up. They could develop their strength and agility on these frequent short flights. Within a week or so they would be going to the ground, using the backstop fencing or low branches for perches. They also had to learn what branches they could use as a perch. Once I watched one young hawk try to land on a branch that was too thin. The branch bent steeply, but the hawk wouldn't let go, and it wound up dangling upside down completely unsure of what to do next. One of those life lesson moments. The hawk did let go, executed a clumsy mid-air turnover, and then alit on a very thick branch. You would also frequently hear the hawks calling out for food.

The third hawk was calling out far more often than the other two. It was also lagging far behind in its ability to fly. Where the others needed some room to gain altitude, this one just didn't seem to have the capability to get up in the air. I talked to one of the parks' enforcement people about its condition. He thought the hawk had a problem with its foot. (I'm not sure how that would affect flight performance.) Bobby Horvath of Wildlife in Need of Rescue and Rehabilitation (WINORR) was called on July 7 to take care of the bird once it became clear that something was very wrong. The hawk had frounce, a digestive tract infection caused by the protozoa trichomonas. It is contracted by eating diseased pigeons, and frounce will spread to the eyes, throat, and brain. It is fatal unless treated. The spring had been a wet one, and those conditions were conducive to a frounce outbreak. However, after a little over five weeks in treatment, the hawk recovered. It was brought back to the park and released.

The third year brought tragedy to the adult pair. I received an email from the Wildlife Unit this past July that an adult hawk had been found poisoned in the park. It was the male, and he was sent to the Wild Bird Fund. He died the next day, the cause eating a poisoned rat. I wrote to the Parks Department about it and was told that they don't use poison in areas where raptors nest. But of course the hawks don't stop hunting at park boundaries.

The female remains in McCarren Park. At the end of October I watched her share a light tower with another adult hawk. Since then I've seen them making wide spirals in the air, exploring the East River waterfront area. Time will tell how the relationship grows, but he seems to be settling in. And, where have the six fledglings gone? I wonder about that a lot, and I wonder how they've fared. Red-tailed Hawk mortality is between 50 to 80 percent in the first year. They can expect to live at least another 10 years, though, if they make it through that first one. I hope for the best, but I'm realistic about their chances. I've also learned these last three years that birdwatching is not just about catching the rare bird. I need to appreciate the slow narrative of life growing up right down the street.

Sparks!

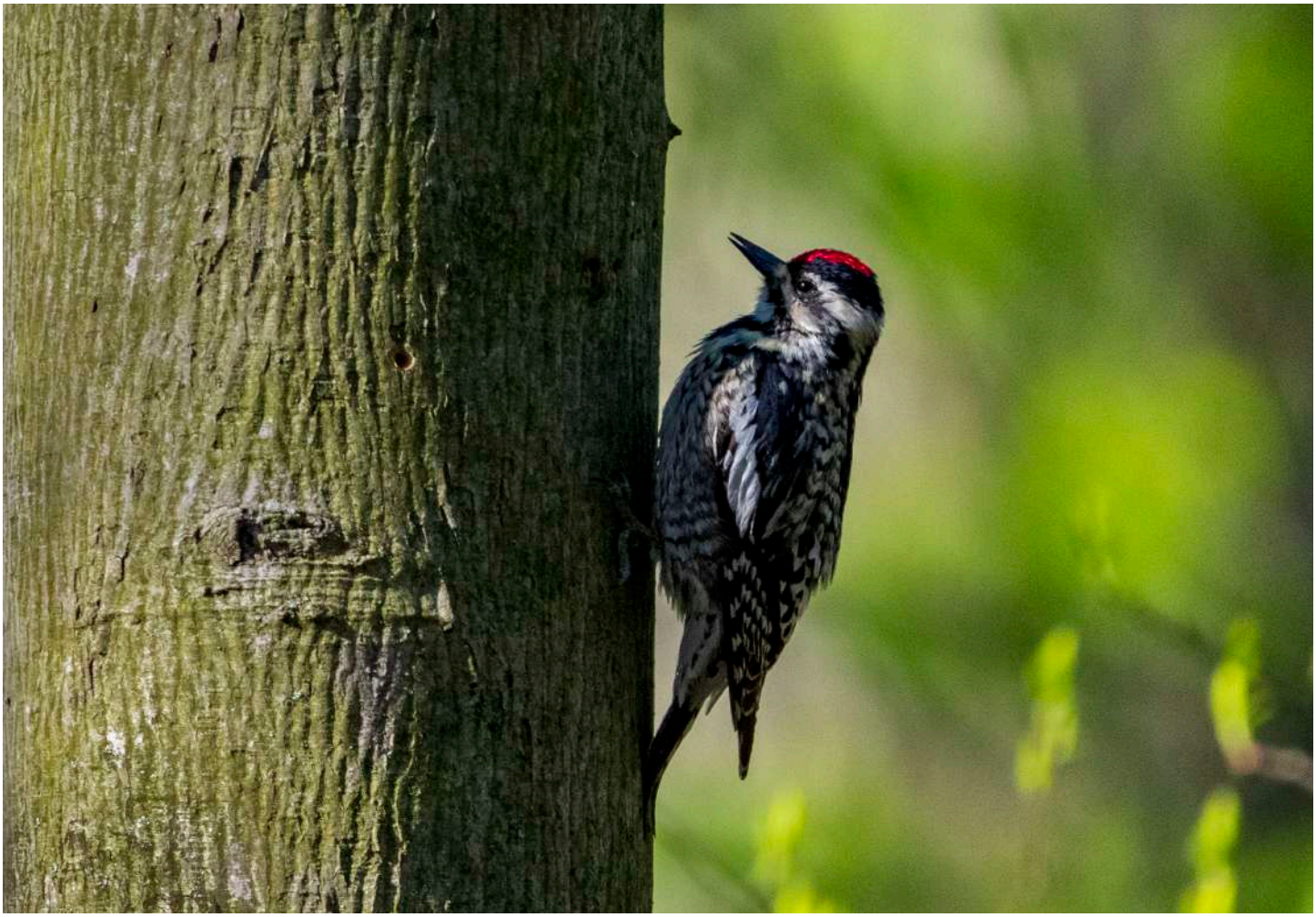
By Mike Elfassy

For a Queens native accustomed to pigeons, sparrows, and starlings, this bird was in another class, a centurion with its imperial red crest. Blow after blow, it made short work of a coniferous tree, tearing away bark with tremendous power and precision.

Three years ago, I found myself visiting friends in the Idaho panhandle. This was most unusual since I didn't know much about the state and never expected to visit. It was really just a place on the map I would mistakenly call Iowa every now and again. With my New York bias rendering expectations low, I was up for anything: check out the "downtown?" Sure. Stop by a drive-through liquor store? Absolutely. Drive out for a short hike? Why not. Turns out, northern Idaho is beautiful and Sandpoint, a small skiing town on the extensive Lake Pend Oreille, is a charming place. The main street is mostly single-story brick buildings with an après-anything vibe; the lakeside park has a miniature Statue of Liberty, a kitschy reminder of home. And it was in that park, along a half-wooded, half-sandy trail, where I heard and then saw this Pileated Woodpecker waging its personal war on a Western White Pine.

That memory lingered in the backwaters of my mind, and one year later, in October 2018, it resurfaced when I got an email advertising a NYC Audubon bird walk in Central Park. Apart from the Pileated in Sandpoint, I hadn't thought much about birds, before or since. On the other hand, my wife Katie Cox had always been curious. Her mother is an avid birder and some of that curiosity had rubbed off on her. Partly wanting to relive that moment from Idaho – I knew I wouldn't be seeing a Pileated in Central Park but could there be other birds like it? – and partly because it seemed like a pleasant outdoor activity, I signed us up.

We met that October morning at the 77th Street entrance to Central Park, across from the Museum of Natural History – places I'd visited many times as a kid and a world away from the American West that Idaho



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Prospect Park. All photos by Mike Elfassy.

Left to right: Black-throated Blue Warbler and Scarlet Tanager in Prospect Park.

represented to me. But as people gathered, it happened again. Another birding surprise: three Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers tapped away on a tree just inside the park, and as I watched, two simultaneous thoughts surfaced in my mind: Is birding always like this? What is this natural world that exists right under my nose?

This walk led to more – many more. The following spring, I made my first contribution by calling out a male Black-throated Blue Warbler. Too inexperienced to know what I was looking at, the guide, Gabriel Willow, called attention to its pocket square and with that field mark, it locked in my memory. Later, we came across a Scarlet Tanager but, frustratingly, all I could make out with my good-for-nothing 8x21 camo-print binoculars was a bright red dot in the canopy. Reflecting on that moment, it's all a blur of color and emotion. It would be another year before I got a good look at a Scarlet Tanager, and my relationship with that bird is the story of the interim, a flash of excitement and a long wait to see it again.

"Is birding always like this? What is this natural world that exists right under my nose?"

Birding regularly through that summer of 2019, I grew in confidence identifying the common birds in our city parks. Eager to see warblers again, Katie and I looked forward to fall migration and for the first time we began to understand the seasons in the context of birds and the broader ecosystem, instead of the calendar months they had always been.

As the birds and parks – their all-too-brief homes – became more familiar, so too did the birders whose own excitement mirrored ours. I crossed paths with Cyrus Baty's beginners' walk brigade and quickly realized what I had been missing – not only in the birds Cyrus pointed out for his group but in their combined enthusiasm. By the winter Katie and I had ourselves become regulars and the friends we made on Brooklyn Bird Club walks brought an unexpected dimension to this fast-growing passion of ours: a new community as diverse and wonderful as the birds themselves. This prepared us for the big one: the 120th Christmas Bird Count. In Prospect Park, accompanied by more seasoned birders, we were happy to go along for the ride. It wasn't until that night's compilation dinner that we learned Katie had spotted all three Hairy Woodpeckers in Kings County. Another woodpecker, another memory. It was edifying to know that even as novices we could contribute in a small way to this age-old tradition.

If I could point to one moment on this transformation into full-fledged birders, it would be the first time Katie and I sought out a rare bird: a Snowy Owl reported at Nickerson Beach, in Long Island. Motivated by a similar sense of narrative fantasy and wonder that I ascribed to the Pileated Woodpecker, I imagined the owl as a sentinel visiting from the frozen tundra. We searched the beach for several hours, finding only our luck to be running out, when we met a few other birders

who pointed us in the right direction. There, we found the snowy perched above a handball court in a beach-club playground, an unexpected yet quintessential New York setting. White with heavy barring, she had golden-yellow eyes that seemed to grow larger the longer you stared at them. We watched her for about an hour; she was stoic, eyeing a pair of gutsy squirrels.

I remember thinking how comfortable she must have felt in comparison to me. It was December and I was freezing, in a situation that little more than a year earlier I'd never imagined I'd find myself; she was content, probably enjoying the warmer climate than her typical Arctic home. The juxtaposition in setting was not lost on me either. What was this ethereal beauty doing in a concrete and chain-link playground? Meeting me half-way, I supposed.

My spark bird? Pileated Woodpecker, for sure. It's certainly the succinct answer I think people are looking for. The truth, though, is that the journey is the spark, an unpredictable, surprising and ongoing collection of birds, people, knowledge, photography, and moments with my wife. In the 2012 film, Birders: The Central Park Effect, author and birder Jonathan Franzen described it perfectly, in what is now a quote that plays over and over in my mind: "[It's] one of the rare times in an adult's life when the world suddenly seems more magical rather than less." Every lifer, every chase, every rediscovery or deeper understanding, are the sparks that keep this journey going.

Above: Hairy Woodpecker in Fort Tryon Park.
Below: Snowy Owl in Nickerson Beach.

A Banner Day at Cape May

By Janet Zinn

On a day with a good wind, the Hawkwatch platform at Cape May Point State Park in New Jersey is the place to be for raptor lovers. My husband and I were lucky to be there this past September, where a brisk west wind at the end of the month was guiding southbound migrating hawks well inland over the park. (West or even better, northwest winds, are what avid hawk watchers pray for every fall.) This day, a steady stream of falcons were the star players – American Kestrels and Merlins never seemed to stop coming through, with the occasional Peregrine. Other raptors flying that day included Osprey, Bald Eagle, Broad-winged Hawk, and Red-shouldered Hawk. And it wasn't all raptors – we witnessed amazing flights of over 300 Blue Jays, hundreds of Tree Swallows, as well as the odd passerine.

Our heads were spinning as we literally whirled around trying to catch photos of the birds flying overhead. The final tally of falcons this day, according to the official list, were 619 Kestrels, 134 Merlin, and 10 Peregrine. The official list is kept by New Jersey Audubon, where you can also find additional information on visiting the Hawkwatch. An official counter from the Cape May Bird Observatory is on duty from September 1 through November 30. With the season almost over, you can start planning your trip for next year to witness this annual spectacle!

Cover: Peregrine Falcon. This page: American Kestrel in flight.
All photos by Janet Zinn.

Top and bottom: Broad-winged Hawk and Belted Kingfisher.

Jen and baby Kestrel. All photos by Jen Kepler.

Birding With Kestrel

By Jen Kepler

I can't say I ever envisioned myself as a mother; having a kid was never at the top of my list, but here I am. I always envisioned myself as being free to explore the natural world, nothing to hold me back. The world at large has always called to me and kids just seemed like something that could just bring all those dreams and visions to a halt.

I discussed this feeling with my partner, and we agreed, we would allow ourselves to maintain our interests and keep up with what we love, supporting each other through it all. He could keep running, I could keep birding, we created our vision as parents to be one where we continue to do the things that we love with minor adjustments to accommodate or include a kid in that picture.

Our baby girl Kestrel arrived on May 5, 2020. A couple days before she was born, I spent the whole morning and early afternoon birding Green-Wood Cemetery, catching a healthy dose of spring warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Scarlet Tanagers and many others. I'd like to think the birding helped the whole process – perhaps she knew what she was in for.

Baby's first outing was at our local park: the Marine Park Salt Marsh Nature Center. We carried our little peanut close to us, utilizing one of those confusing cross body-tie baby wraps. It worked well and kept our hands free to utilize binoculars. Some of her first birds included Yellow-crowned Night Herons, a Glossy Ibis, and several warblers.

In her first weeks of life, Kestrel visited a number

Common Loons in the Adirondacks.

of Brooklyn locations with me – and beyond. We went to the Shawangunk grasslands, where she got to experience her first Grasshopper Sparrow, she's seen mother and chick Common Loons in the Adirondacks, and even a pair of Sandhill Cranes at Wallkill River NWR. Her birding experiences might make even the seasoned birder a touch jealous.

In this adventure-in-progress, we've learned a few helpful strategies. First and foremost is a solid stroller, with age-appropriate seating options. The bassinet attachment or car seat attachment is key to safely strolling around. Our stroller fares quite well on grass, gravel, and natural paths, with somewhat wider wheels. Kestrel also seems to enjoy the bumps, which often lull her to sleep.

Another thing to take into account has been accessibility. Birding is not always accessible to strollers or wheelchairs or other devices that aid people with mobility needs. This made birding in the Adirondacks a bit more challenging and we reverted to carrier options for our hikes in search of wildlife. I will often do research or ask others about the terrain and accessibility of places I haven't been, so I can plan accordingly.

Birding with a baby has also taught me the value of a skill that I already felt I needed to work on – birding by ear. I've adjusted my birding to her pace – the girl likes to move – so if I stay in one place for too long she lets me know. Knowing bird songs and calls is essential to getting a fuller experience while we're out on a walk.

My favorite part about birding with Kestrel is watching her: she's a sponge for the world presented to her. She's now at a point, developmentally, where she can focus, take things in, and, if you hand her something, manipulate and explore it. She's starting to stay awake on our walks, and I can see her interested, listening and looking. On one of our recent walks, I caught a little De Kay's snake and she was delighted when I showed it to her. I'm now looking forward to her taking the lead on some outings, allowing her interest to guide us, discovering nature through her curious eyes.

So here I am, a mom. I'm still birding, still hacking away at a year list I'm proud of despite the huge change in my life and routines. I never imagined I'd have a birding sidekick like Kestrel. I try to avert my eyes from rare bird alerts and remember to be grateful to be outside, with my daughter and the birds, where we can explore together and relish what happens spontaneously. I hope that as a kid growing up in Brooklyn, she can embrace the nature around us, appreciate and respect the wildlife here, and maybe, just maybe, make birding a serious part of her life.

Kestrel sees her first De Kay's snake.

Photo Gallery:

Irruption 2020

By Ryan Mandebaum

Top and cover page: Red Crossbills at Floyd Bennett Field. Below: Evening Grosbeak at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Top and bottom: Purple Finches in Green-Wood Cemetery.

Top to bottom: Pine Siskins and a Red-breasted Nuthatch in Green-Wood Cemetery.

The Morning News
By Alberto Ríos

Seasons will not be still,
Filled with the migrations of birds

Making their black script on the open sky,
Those hasty notes of centuries-old goodbye.

The clouds and the heavens make a memo book,
A diary of it all, if only for a day.

The birds write much, but then rewrite all the time,
News continuous, these small pencil tips in flight.

They are not alone in the day's story.
Jets, too, make their writing on the blue paper—

Jets, and at night, satellites and space stations,
Like it or not, we are all subscribers to the world's newspaper

Written big in the frame of the window in front of us.
Today, we wave to neighborhood riders on horses.

We hear the woodpecker at work on the chimney.
There is news everywhere.

All this small courage,
So that we might turn the page.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker. John J. Audubon, Birds of America, 1837.

Mike Yuan in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Diversity in Birding: An Interview with Michael Yuan

By Tracy Meade

As part of our continuing series on diversity in birding, in October I emailed with Michael Yuan, a member of the Brooklyn Bird Club council and the New York City Audubon board of directors, about his background in birding, his work in both organizations, and efforts to make the birding community in New York City more inclusive.

Mike, can you tell Clapper Rail readers a little about yourself?

I've been birding for over 11 years, and feel I came of birding age when being a part of the birding community meant seeing people in person, out in the field, as opposed to now, where many interactions take place on social media. I enjoy both, as the wide reach of social media quickly introduces new people to birding, but seeing a familiar face in the field always warms me up.

My day job brings together data and public policy, where I manage technology-based advocacy platforms and databases to help promote political participation among employees at a Fortune 100 company.

In 2019, I took one of the reins of coordinating and compiling the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) for the Brooklyn circle, with Chris Laskowski and Bobbi Manian. Managing the amazing proprietary database that my predecessor, Rick Cech, created and managed for over 30 years has allowed me to apply my data organizing and analysis skills to birding. It's a natural fit.

Most weekends, you'll see me birding somewhere in Brooklyn, and this year, as we cope with Covid-19, I've been fortunate to be able to visit Brooklyn Bridge Park nearly every day, and I've adopted it as my "pandemic patch." Keeping a finger on the pulse of bird activity in the park, observing the change of seasons, and meeting eager new birders has brought some light to this difficult year.

I enjoyed rereading your Sparks! column in the Winter 2018 Clapper Rail. In it, you give your grandmother, your friend Jeff, and your cat Bobby a shout out for turning your attention to birds in and around Baltimore, Maryland. You've clearly learned a lot about birds since your Common Grackle ("mini-crows") spark bird. As an experienced birder, can you recall a more recent birding encounter that sparked curiosity or joy?

A series of encounters with parkgoers on a recent weekend in Canarsie Beach Park brought me joy.

My birding companion and I saw an adult Bald Eagle gliding by, and pointed it out to nearby group of people. It turns out we chose the right ones, as the response of a woman in the group was more than you could ever hope for – "Oh my god! A Bald Eagle! It's my first eagle! My husband is going to be so jealous!" She told us that she and her husband had recently gotten into birding and rattled off a list of birds she had seen in the park, and asked me if I could share the photos I just took of the eagle. I emailed her the photos that evening, and told her about some birding resources to keep her going.

Shortly after, we met a father and his three young daughters, each wielding tiny binoculars, some pink, some yellow, and some with butterfly wings on top. We told the father it was great to see young ones interested in nature, and he asked us questions about the birds one could see in the park, seemingly surprised at the bounty that one could find. We tried to get the girls on some quick-flitting Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the tree next to us, but that was perhaps asking for too much. They zeroed in on a squirrel, and that was just right.

The following day, in the midst of the Brooklyn Birdathon, I passed a pre-teen boy who was doing some boxing training with his dad. The boy stopped punching the pads, walked over to me, and asked "Are you a birdwatcher?" When I said yes, he asked "How do you get into birds?" I had to plug New York City Audubon and the Brooklyn Bird Club, but I also thought back to how I figured out my bird, and recommended he check out allaboutbirds.org, just like I did many years ago. I told him as boxer and a birder, he'd be a great one-two punch!

It was a delight to talk about birds with such a rapt audience. Birding is truly a wonderful pursuit. How often can you have a stranger can come up to you, and through their excitement, say, "I share the same interests as you, tell me more?"

You're on the BBC council and the New York City Audubon (NYCA) board of directors, so you're on decision-making bodies that engage in discussions and influence actions as pertains to organizational responsibility on issues of diversity and inclusion. How is this work going and where would you like to see greater focus in the months and years ahead?

I'm honored and grateful to serve two leading New York City birding organizations. Shortly after I joined NYCA in 2019, I was asked to join the nomination committee, which researches and recommends candidates for the board of directors and board officers. I wondered if I could be effective in this capacity, having just joined as a new member. I soon learned that it was simply a matter of keeping one's eyes and ears open to the NYC birding community, speaking to them about my passion for helping the birds, and encouraging them to understand for themselves how they could help. The nominating committee is motivated to execute NYCA's strategic goal to bring diversity to its governance and represent supporters of birds among all New Yorkers, in every borough. Fully supporting this approach, I'm confident my background and perspective can help achieve the objective.

I also serve on the conservation committee, a large group that researches issues and develops strategy for protecting habitat and safe passage of birds in our urban environment – the heart of what the organization aims to achieve. I take a special interest in Project Safe Flight, a dedicated corps of volunteers who monitor buildings for bird collisions, and am particularly pleased with this prime example of community science. Our volunteers' findings in the field have supported NYCA's efforts to push for bird-safe glass for buildings and helped make the city safer for migrating birds. Dealing with the unpleasant side of birds' lives in urban settings isn't for everyone, but promoting the project's goal to a more diverse community will raise awareness of the issue and reinforce everyone's stake in helping the

environment.

With the BBC, I'm pleased that the council is supportive of my efforts to promote the club's fundraising and outreach initiatives, and mainly have fun doing it. While we could not hold our typical team May Birdathon, we shifted it to a celebration of all birds in Brooklyn, and encouraged all on social media to talk about their local birding patches and revel in the amazing birds that pass through and reside in the borough. As Covid-19 seemingly brought out many new birders, it's important for us to warmly welcome them and show them the joys and birding and being a part of the birding community.

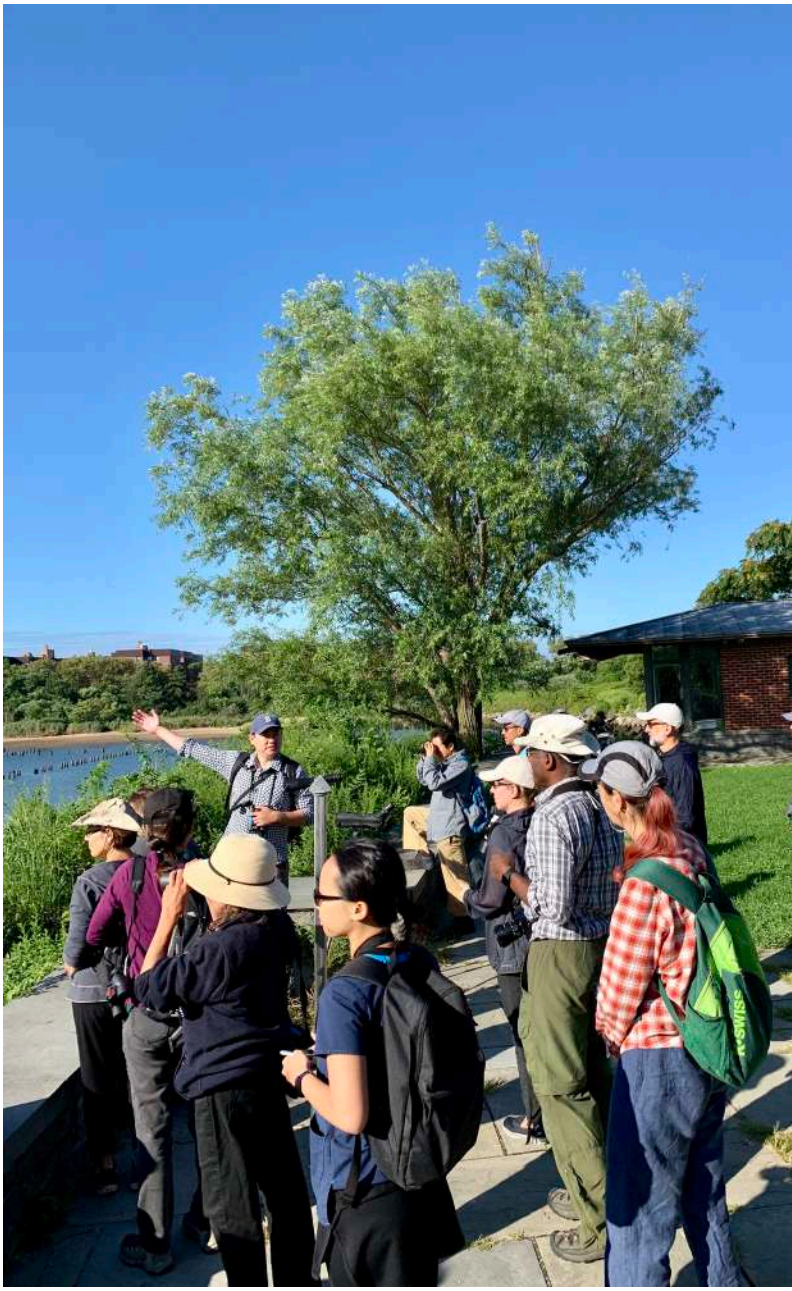
Is there prejudice and discrimination towards Asian-Americans in the conservation community and the birding community? If so, how does it manifest and what barriers need busting to enable change?

While fortunate to not have experienced overt racism while birding, despite the possibility always around, I feel that the greatest issue facing Asian-Americans is being unseen and unheard, living in the shadow of being perceived as a perpetual foreigner or outsider to this country, while allowing assumed traits of the model minority myth to suppress them from leadership roles in conservation. East Asians, South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders are sometimes lumped as one monolithic "Asian-American" minority, seen as having polite, unobtrusive personalities, and ill-fitting social capabilities or interests, but they are diverse. Personally, I hope that Asian-Americans can ensure we're partnering with and working to understand how we can best support Black and brown communities and other people of color. We're in it together.

As organizations like NYCA and the BBC continue their outreach, and as more people become interested in birding and conservation issues, it's worthwhile for everyone to consider the impact of implicit and explicit bias in all of us. It's natural to rely on the crutch of learned judgements about others in making decisions, and that often leads us to making biased decisions. Hearing the perspective of others, and welcoming diverse voices to the conversation, will help show that people are individuals, rather than broad stereotypes, and the conversation becomes richer.

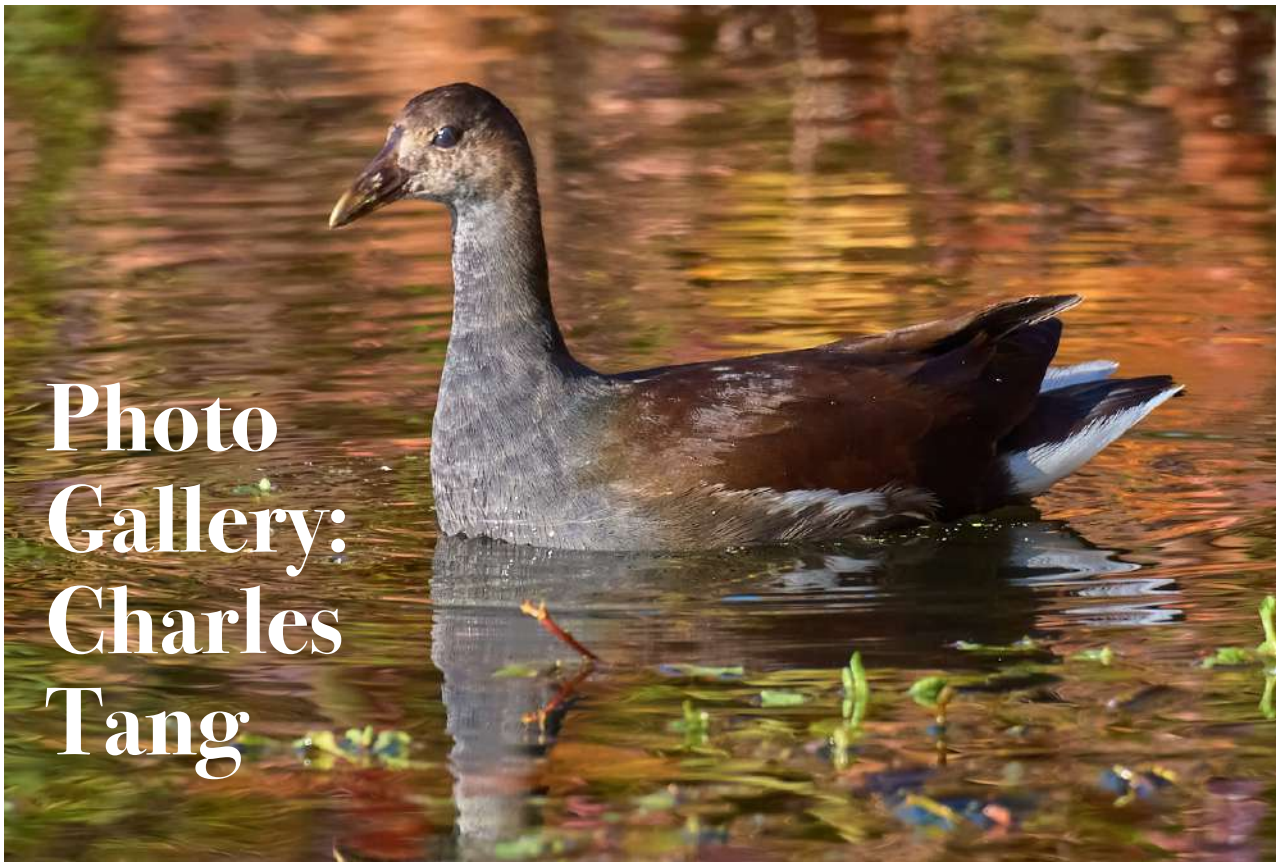
Can you take a look into a more hopeful future, a post-Covid 2025, and tell us what is substantially better because of the diversity and inclusion work we committed ourselves to now?

Like everyone, I hope we are able to return to a state of normalcy well before 2025, especially as it pertains to resuming outdoor adventures with NYCA and BBC. I hope we have a glut of new birders who have been dying to go on birding walks and trips with the wonderful guides in both organizations. It's not hard to make everyone feel a sense of belonging and feel welcome on a bird walk, but to develop a new generation of conservation leaders, we'll have to extend that welcome to the voices of all New Yorkers, and start listening to them now.



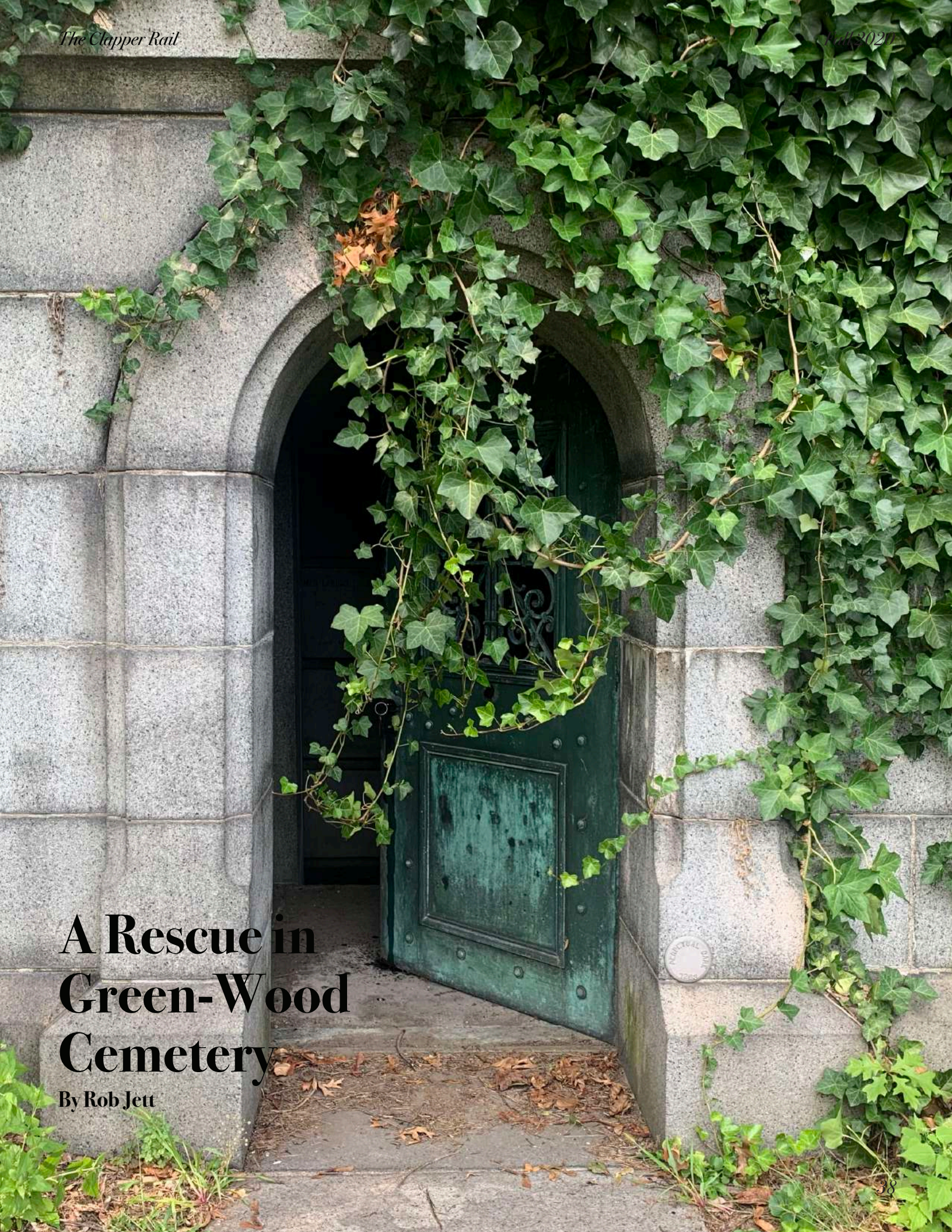
Mike Yuan leading a bird walk in Marine Park.

Photo Gallery: Charles Tang



Above: Common Gallinule, Prospect Park. Below: Western Tanager, Green-Wood Cemetery.

Above: American Golden-Plover at Plumb Beach. Below: Ash-throated Flycatcher in Green-Wood Cemetery.



A Rescue in Green-Wood Cemetery

By Rob Jett

This blog post, published September 16, 2020, is being reprinted with permission of the author.

Yesterday was an amazing day for southbound migrants in Green-Wood Cemetery. My friend Mike and I arrived just as the main entrance was being unlocked. We spent the next 10 hours riveted by the sudden explosion of bird life.

Our first stop was at the ridge above Sylvan Water next to the George Caitlin memorial. There was a nice chill in the air from the overnight cold front. Dozens of songbird "chip" calls were coming from the surrounding trees, as well as from small flocks dropping into the cemetery after a long night of flying.

In recent days much of the bird activity had been centered around the fruiting Kousa Dogwoods and yew trees. Yesterday, however, birds seemed to be feeding just about everywhere: the upper story of mature, towering trees; within dense shrubs; the leaf litter beneath tree stands; unmowed sections of overground grass.

Warblers were ubiquitous with American Redstarts dominating our list with 62 counted. Northern Parulas came in a distant second at 28. By far the most exciting member of this bird family seen yesterday was a Connecticut Warbler. Found around New York City only during the fall leg of this bird's migration, they are notoriously difficult to observe as they spend most of their time quietly foraging on the ground within dense vegetation.

Late in the day we returned to the Dell Water hoping for a better observation of the Connecticut Warbler. That never happened but a nice consolation prize was close looks at the scarce Philadelphia Vireo.

At around noon, Mike and I decided to take a walk along a narrow path at the edge of Ocean Hill. Within the first 50 yards a flash of bright yellow caught our eyes. Unfortunately it was coming from behind the glass window in the wrought iron door of a stone mausoleum set in the hillside.

Somehow a Magnolia Warbler had managed to get trapped inside the stone structure. I climbed up on the hill to examine the section of exposed roof. Nothing. I then noticed farther back on the ridge a brass vent pipe sticking out of the dirt. Our best guess was this little bird was chasing an insect that then dropped into

Above: Magnolia Warbler trapped inside a mausoleum in Green-Wood Cemetery.
Cover: Mausoleum entrance. All photos by Mike Yuan.

the opening. Here he is flying against the inside of the glass:

"Please let me out." We felt completely helpless to free this poor thing.

I called Tommy, who was the security guide on duty. He came right away. After assessing the situation he told us that he couldn't access the keys to the mausoleums, but called someone who might be able to help. Within a few minutes Neela, the Director of Restoration and Preservation, arrived with the key and two of her staff. With the warbler periodically fluttering at face level, she and her workers sprayed the lock with WD40 and tried to work the ancient locking mechanism loose.

The warbler was so stressed that we could hear his alarm chip calls echoing within the stone vault. It took about 10 minutes but eventually they managed to get the door opened. Freedom! The tiny, yellow warbler flew through the doorway and immediately perched on the low railing in front of the Morgan family mausoleum.

We stood motionless and watched as it rested and got its wits back. It then dropped down onto the pathway where it began searching for insects to eat at the edge of Dawn Path.

After about 5 minutes on the ground it flew up into the safety of a dense stand of viburnum.

A huge thanks to Neela Wickremesinghe and her staff for coming through and saving this approximately 10-gram songbird on his way back to his winter home in the tropics of southern Mexico and Central America.

The Magnolia Warbler rests after being freed from an early grave.

Atlas Corner: The Breeding Calendar

By Julie Hart, NY BBA III Project Coordinator

This article was first published in New York Birders, July 2020, by the New York State Ornithological Association, Inc.

Now that the first year of the Atlas is winding down, it's a good time to reflect on the breeding calendar. As we cycle through the seasons each year, so changes the breeding calendar. Some birds nest in the cold, dark winter, while others await the last hot rays of summer. Hopefully your foray into atlasing has helped tune you into the seasonal changes that birds use to tell them when it's time to start nesting. Journey through a year of atlasing.

Great Horned Owls are our earliest reliable nester, starting their courtship duets as early as November and beginning nesting in January. In the first few months of the year, other large raptors like Bald Eagles and Common Ravens initiate nesting, followed by the smaller corvids and owls. Urban birds that can nest near warm heating vents and other artificially warm locales also start nesting while there is still snow on the ground, birds such as House Sparrows, European Starlings, and Rock Pigeons.

Most of our forest residents, like chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and some of the woodpeckers, start nesting in April and can survive early cold snaps by holing up in their cavity nests. At the same time, our forests and fields are enriched by the drumming of Ruffed Grouse, the peenting and twittering aerial displays of American Woodcock, and the whirring of male Spruce Grouse as they perform their flutter-jumps to attract mates.

Things start to heat up in late April and the first part of May, literally. The soil thaws, rivers come to life, and the leaves start unfurling. Some of the larger, hardier waterbirds start nesting as soon as the waters thaw, such as swans, Canada Goose, Mallard, Great Blue Heron, and Sandhill Crane. Coastal areas of Long Island warm up sooner than the rest of the state, and early returning birds take advantage, such as American Oystercatcher and Clapper Rail. Our trusty harbinger of spring, the Red-winged Blackbird, can be heard from every patch of reeds in the state by now.

Swamp Sparrows add their metallic trill to the avian soundscape in late April to May. Photo by Ian Davies, Macaulay Library.

As spring advances, insects begin to emerge, which means there is more food available to support returning migrants. By mid-May, the migrant hawks, swallows, wrens, sparrows, and flycatchers have returned, and warbler migration hits its peak. By the end of the month, rails, nightjars, and thrushes fill out the avian soundscape. Males arrive first to stake a claim to the best territories so that when females return a week or two later they can quickly scout out a good place

Barn Owls are known to nest in every month of the year. Photo by Ian Davies, Macaulay Library.

to build a nest. They get down to business gathering nesting material right away.

In the first couple weeks of June there is a lot of bird song filling the air, but it slowly diminishes as

they lay eggs and start incubating. This is followed by a lull in the breeding season, kind of a calm before the storm, that breaks in late June and early July. There is a rush of chatter, not of bird song, but of call notes between pairs communicating to each other as they frantically try to find enough food to feed their young. We as atlasers feel this rush, too. It's a glorious time to be out watching bird behaviors. Birds are so busy collecting food to quiet their incessantly begging young, that they pay little notice to us interlopers.

And then it's suddenly done. We are left with a feeling of loss as we watch the birds we've gotten to know so well disperse or congregate in large flocks. At the same time, some birds are just getting started! Just as the warblers waited until there were insects to return north, and just as the hawks timed their nesting to coincide with maximum fledgling songbirds to feed their young, other species were waiting for conditions to be right for raising their young. Cedar Waxwings were waiting for bountiful summer fruits while American Goldfinches were waiting for thistle, aster, and sunflower seeds to be available. Red and White-winged Crossbills, if they have dropped down for a visit from Canada, wait to take advantage of soft, fresh cones on the trees. Birds with second and third broods can also be seen feeding young into late summer.

Fall is pretty quiet for atlasers. Birds migrate south, the leaves change color, and mammals get ready to hibernate. But one bird, the Barn Owl, has been known to nest in every month of the year! Before you know it, the days shorten, the first snow falls, and Great Horned Owls delight us with their evening duets and it starts all over again. Now that you have witnessed a full breeding calendar firsthand, you can enjoy atlasing in 2021 with an even deeper appreciation.

Great-horned Owl. Watercolor pencil on paper, by Beryl Simon.

Represent! #1: It's a Bird

DC Comics
Written by Christian Cooper
Pencils by Alitha Martinez
Inks by Mark Moralez
Colored by Emilio Lopez

Synopsis: Jules, a Black teenager, is given a pair of old binoculars as he heads out for a morning of birdwatching in Central Park. He soon learns the binoculars show him a lot more than birds, and maybe they keep him safe, too.

***

Click on the excerpted images below to read the first issue of Represent!, a new digital comic by DC Comics from underrepresented voices. The first issue, "It's a Bird," was written by longtime NYC birder Christian Cooper. This issue is free but you do have to sign in to view. Enjoy and share!

Upcoming BBC Programs

Please check the BBC website for updates.

Tue 1.19.21 7:00pm

Via Zoom, registration required. Please register here.

The Grassland Bird Trust with Laurie LaFond & Paloma Spina

Grasslands are the fastest disappearing habitat in the U.S. and grassland birds are disappearing right along with their habitats. We have lost 700 million grassland birds in the U.S. and Canada over the last 50 years. Short-eared owls, Northern Harriers, Upland Sandpipers, Eastern Meadowlarks, and other iconic species are vanishing from rural landscapes at an alarming rate. Learn about these amazing grassland birds and find out more about what Grassland Bird Trust (GBT) is doing to reverse that trend.

GBT has conserved or helped conserve over 250 acres of critical habitat in upstate New York. Learn about their work with renewable energy companies on innovative new projects to conserve more land. GBT is also spearheading regional efforts to form a grassland coalition that will greatly increase the scale and pace of grassland bird conservation across the eastern U.S.

Join us and discover how you can be a part of this pivotal conservation movement!

Laurie LaFond is the founder and executive director of GBT (formerly Friends of the IBA). She has led GBT's growth into a respected land trust conserving critical habitat for endangered, threatened, and rapidly declining grassland birds. Laurie initiated and co-leads GBT's efforts to build regional and national coalitions that will vastly increase the pace and scale of grassland bird conservation across the U.S. She is also developing innovative partnerships with renewable energy companies to conserve more land, fund stewardship and minimize impact on grassland birds. LaFond holds a B.S. in Non-profit Administration and an A.A. in Communications. She has extensive experience in organizational development, fundraising, community development, and grassland bird conservation.

Paloma Spina, board member and coalition co-coordinator for GBT, is an environmental engineer currently working for Anchor QEA, a consulting firm specializing in environmental remediation. She started developing a passion for habitat restoration when working on a conservation project in the cloud forest of Honduras. Paloma regularly works on a variety of fundraising and development projects for GBT. She is passionate about the organization's mission and is highly invested in building a grassland coalition with Laurie LaFond and other partners. She holds a B.S. in Environmental Engineering and a B.S. in Earth Science from Cornell University.

Tue 2.16.21 7:00pm

Via Zoom, registration required. Please register here.

Save the Choco with James Muchmore

"Save the Choco" was our beneficiary of our 2019 Birdathon, for which we raised a record amount of

over $12,000. Join us to learn a bit more about "Save the Chocó" and the impact our donations from the 2019 Birdathon have made to protect this important bio-diverse region of South America.

James Muchmore is an artist, birder, designer, and photographer turned conservationist. James has been exploring design's role within conservation for the last 5 years. He has put his years of corporate design and branding knowledge to use by collaborating with local and global organizations to help protect vital areas and species throughout the Chocó region.

Tue 3.23.21 7:00pm

Via Zoom, registration required. Please register here.

Washington Square Park Eco Projects with Georgia Silvera Seamans

Georgia Silvera Seamans is an urban forester and the co-founding director of Washington Square Park Eco Projects. Georgia is also an independent researcher and freelance writer. She has had bylines in Urban Omnibus, Audubon online and Audubon Magazine, and her research has been published in Urban Forestry & Urban Greening and the Journal of Arboriculture. She's an alumna of Wesleyan University, the Yale School of the Environment, and UC-Berkeley.

Georgia will present the changing ecology of 9.75 acres of unceded Lenape land now known as Washington Square Park. She will discuss two current projects in the park: the Observing Wildlife Longitudinally (a.k.a. the bird survey) and the WSP Phenology Project.

Tue 4.6.21 7:00pm

Via Zoom, registration required. Please register here.

Audubon Mural Project: A Virtual Walking Tour with Leigh Hallingby

The Audubon Mural Project is an impressive effort to create murals of over 300 North American birds. Most of the murals are in the Harlem neighborhoods of Hamilton Heights and Washington Heights, where John James Audubon lived the last ten years of his life. Since all of the birds painted are threatened by climate change, the Project is designed, not only to display the birds' beauty, but also to make us aware of the challenges that they face. The artworks range from lovely panels that fill in a former window to spectacular murals covering the entire side of a building. We will see about 40 murals, plus Audubon's grave site, in a 50-minute slide presentation with live commentary. There will be time afterwards for Q&A.

Leigh is a licensed NYC tour guide who specializes in Harlem, Morningside Heights, and the Upper West Side. She is passionate about exploring all five boroughs and beyond on foot, mostly through organized walking tours. Leigh is retired from a 36-year career as a non-profit librarian. She loves doing research about the neighborhoods in which she gives tours and sharing the information about them with attendees. Leigh is a collector, genealogist, and lover of arts, culture, and travel. She lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Gray-cheeked Thrush in Green-Wood Cemetery. Photo by Marc Brawer.