

Fall 2021

*Brooklyn Bird Club's*

# CLAPPER RAIL



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Kathy Willens with New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone during pregame ceremony, Yankee Stadium, June 2021. Photo courtesy of Kathy Willens.

# A Life Outside (of Birding): Kathy Willens

By Janet Schumacher

**R**etiring after 45 years as an Associated Press photographer, Brooklyn birder Kathy Willens was recently honored at Yankee Stadium. Kathy was one of the first women photographers for the Associated Press who covered major sporting events, and the Yankees were on her regular beat. In addition to sports, including six Olympics, Kathy photographed royalty, presidents, the pope, politicians, prisoners, local riots, global conflict, and the Covid-19 crisis. She has received numerous awards for her

photojournalism, including most recently the 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York Press Photographers Association.

Kathy is a fixture of the Brooklyn birding scene – a regular on Dennis Hrehowsik’s Saturday migration walks and on annual Birdathons and Christmas Bird Counts – but her extraordinary life outside birding was not something she usually spoke about on bird walks, and I wanted to hear more. I met Kathy in Prospect Park in August a few weeks after she had retired from the Associated Press.

Growing up in Detroit, Kathy gravitated to drawing and painting, and she learned darkroom techniques from her father, an amateur photographer. After college, she was hired as a photo lab technician at the now-defunct Miami News, and before long, she was promoted to staff photographer after stories she pursued on her free time made the front page.

In 1976, at 26, the Associated Press offered her a job. She loved the Miami News, but her editor encouraged her to take the opportunity at the AP. In the 1970s and '80s, Miami was an incredible news town, she explained. "There were frequent hijackings of planes to Cuba, refugees arriving by boat from Haiti and Cuba,

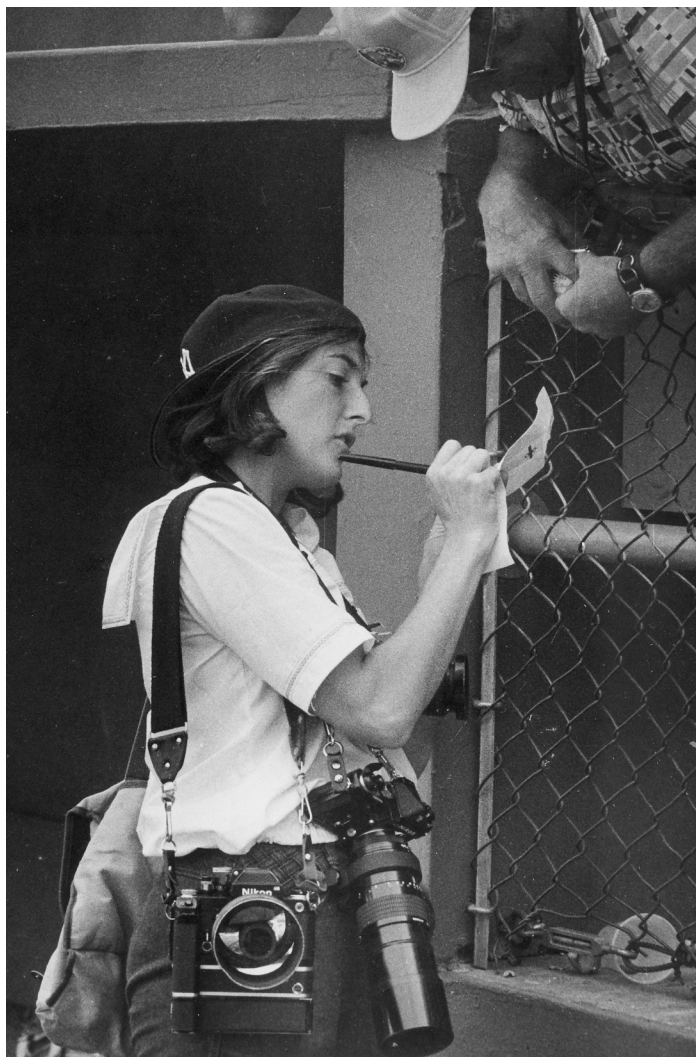
the cocaine and drug trade, and organized crime. It was also great for sports: the University of Florida's football team, the Miami Dolphins, the Yankees in spring training." She was particularly drawn to the plight of the Haitian refugees in Florida.

With so much time spent on the beat, I wondered how birds entered

the frame.

"On reflection, my interest in birding stemmed from photography," she told me. To relax, "I would take my manual focus lens into the Everglades and shoot photos of birds. Nothing special. I enjoyed being outdoors and not working."

Eventually she bought an inexpensive pair of binoculars and left the camera home, drawn to Roseate Spoonbills and Anhingas. Her interest grew. "When a Painted Bunting landed at a feeder outside my window in Miami, I hung up on my best friend who had called to tell me she had won a Pulitzer! I interrupted her



and said, 'I'm sorry, but I'll have to call you back. This amazing Crayola-colored bird is outside my window.'"

Kathy moved to New York in 1993 and joined the AP's international traveling pool. She asked to cover the famine in Africa and was dispatched to Somalia. "But the story had morphed into something quite different by the time I arrived," she said. Somalia had erupted

in civil war, and there was increased hostility toward foreigners. On the last day of her assignment, she was robbed at knifepoint, her two cameras and lenses stolen. Three weeks later, four members of a news crew, including the AP photographer who replaced her in the country, were killed in an



ambush. “I did not want to put my life in jeopardy,” Kathy said.

She returned to cover national events and politics, with an emphasis on sports. “I was always good at photographing sports,” she said. With the adoption of digital cameras in the early ‘90s, photographers no longer had to process their film in a dark room, but quick transmission of their work became important. “There is a lot of stress in processing pictures during a timeout or a field change, and then quickly returning to catch the next play,” she explained. “But I miss the camaraderie of that.”

During her downtime, Kathy pursued her own feature ideas (“I love to meet and talk to people,” she said), including an eight-month project documenting

women raising their babies in Bedford Prison completed in the mid-1990s.

Now that she’s retired, Kathy is considering writing a book, explaining, “I have so many stories. In my job I was rewarded with extraordinary access.”

But first she decided to purchase a camera. She had returned all her equipment to the AP upon retirement, and the AP owns all her photos, too. (Almost 90,000 of them are archived at [www.apimages.com](http://www.apimages.com).) She settled on a Sony @9ii camera and three lenses, including a 200-600mm zoom for birding. “It’s heavy,” she said, “and photographing birds is much more challenging than athletes. Birds can dodge behind leaves.”

But she’s up for the challenge. 🐦



Willens (bottom left) with a group of photographers at the New York Yankees training camp, c. 2011. Photo courtesy of Kathy Willens.

# Brooklyn Birders in Action

By Linda Ewing

Most of us can name our “spark” bird – that one memorable sighting that led us to start noticing other birds, and then others, until eventually, we were heading outside at an ungodly hour, binoculars and camera in tow, obsessed.

But that’s not the end of the process. For many, birding itself has proved to be a spark for activism. From watching birds to protecting them; from spending time in a favorite patch to cleaning it up; from birding as a personal avocation to a passion for making birding accessible to all: these are just some of the ways their love of birds has moved some Brooklyn birders to action.

## The NYC Plover Project

Chris Allieri has loved Piping Plovers since his New Jersey childhood. Last March, as the birds began

returning to area beaches from their wintering grounds, Allieri journeyed to Fort Tilden to look for the new arrivals. After spotting a tiny plover plucking an even tinier worm from the sand, Allieri was basking in his love for the birds and the beauty of the beach.

Then he saw a dog tearing through the fenced-off dunes, chasing two very distressed plovers. After a civil but unproductive exchange with the dog’s owners, Allieri went home and set up an account for the “NYC Plover Project.” By the next day, he had a friend working on a logo and a call in to the National Park Service.

Allieri could have taken a year to plan and lay the groundwork before launching the project – it’s what veterans of similar initiatives would no doubt have counseled – but his encounter on the beach had filled him with a sense of urgency. The birds were arriving, and he wanted a solid group of volunteers to be there



Sam Centore and Ana Zapata working the NYC Plover Project booth at Jacob Riis Park. Photo courtesy of Chris Allieri.

for them.

At the time, Allieri was thinking in terms of a half dozen people. By the first volunteer training, just before Memorial Day, it was clear that goal would be met and exceeded. Eventually, more than 50 volunteers had been trained and taken part in activities that ranged from outreach to beachgoers; staffing an educational booth at the Riis Park bath house; monitoring nests and chicks; and intervening to curb threats to the birds and disturbances to their habitat.

Forging partnerships was critical to the effort's success. From that initial phone call through the entirety of the breeding season to the birds' eventual departure, the National Park Service (NPS) was the NYC Plover Project's first and most important partner. NPS rangers trained volunteers in de-escalation techniques and effective conversations, as well as plover behavior and biology. Additional help and support, in the form of sample materials and shared experiences, came from groups doing similar plover protection work elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada.

Other partnerships grew over time, with outreach to the communities of the Rockaway peninsula producing new allies. "You can't talk about wildlife without people," Allieri says. "We can't have more



Piping Plover chicks at Fort Tilden.  
Photo by Michelle Talich.

successful outcomes without connecting with people in new, different and better ways."

As the summer advanced, the NYC Plover Project tapped the skills and ingenuity of its burgeoning corps of volunteers. While many had no previous experience with conservation efforts, they brought energy, tech and social media savvy, and a wealth of creativity. Volunteers created a sign-up schedule and feedback form; the group's Slack channel provided real-time updates while fostering community; and enchanted beachgoers with detailed replicas of a plover's nest and eggs.

"What was most exciting to me," Allieri says, "was to see the excitement of the volunteers the first time they saw a Piping Plover, the first time they saw a chick, the pride we all took in those two Fort Tilden chicks."

The ultimate measure of the project's impact, of course, is the plovers' breeding success. That's why the volunteers followed chicks and fledglings so closely, and why the two successful fledglings on the busy Fort Tilden beach - where nesting birds have not fared well in the recent past - were such a source of pride.

For Allieri, a key lesson of the project's first year was the importance of meeting people where they are. "In the past," he explains, "I thought everyone doing something wrong was doing it intentionally, to injure the bird. But our project was the first time anyone had ever talked with them about a bird. As the Park Service people say, 'Don't lead with the rule, lead with the resource.' You have to listen, answer questions, help people learn more on their own. It's about being the best possible ambassador for the species."

And yes, there will be a second year - plans are already underway, with an orientation session slated



Chris Allieri and National Parks Service rangers Devin Digiacopo and Patricia Rafferty at Fort Tilden. Photo courtesy of Chris Allieri.

for November. After favorable press in various outlets, including the New York Times, the NYC Plover Project has already doubled its roster of potential volunteers. Allieri is mulling ways to tackle the issue of predation (trail cams, perhaps?) and hopes to hire paid interns from the Rockaway community next summer.

While Allieri brought a history of activism on behalf of wildlife to the NYC Plover Project – he worked as an environmental justice organizer in college, is deeply committed to animal rights, and serves on the boards of Farm Sanctuary and the Wild Bird Fund – he had never undertaken a project this ambitious. “If I can pull this together,” he says, “anyone can.”

## Bird Collective

(Disclosure: Angie Co and Tina Alleva are responsible for the Clapper Rail’s art and design; Co’s husband, Ryan Goldberg, is the editor. Featuring them in this story was solely my idea.)

When Angie Co began making bird patches to sell over the internet, it was as a creative outlet and fun side project. An architect by training, with a keen sense of design, Co’s patches were inspired by vintage shirts handed down from her husband’s grandfather. “Prospect Patches” languished until Co’s friend, Clapper Rail colleague and frequent birding partner, Tina Alleva, encouraged her to amp up both her social media presence and her ambitions. Drawing on her 20 years of experience in the fashion industry, Alleva proposed an online store for birdwatchers that would offer clothing and accessories as well as patches.

Soon, the two women were partners, and after six months of groundwork, Bird Collective launched in December 2019.

From the start, Alleva and Co saw Bird Collective as a force for change as well as a business. A portion of sales go to non-profit partners involved in conservation and habitat protection, as well as efforts to make birding safer and more accessible for the broadest possible audience. Through their online platform, Alleva and Co strive to tell compelling stories to raise

awareness of the threats and barriers facing both birds and birders. They want their store to be a gateway to involvement.

For both women, birding served as a catalyst for their own environmental activism. Alleva joined a beginners’ bird walk at the urging of her husband, Chaz Faxton, about seven years ago. She was skeptical at first – “What are we going to look at, pigeons?” she asked him – until she saw a Red-bellied Woodpecker and was smitten. As she spent more time in nature, she found herself increasingly concerned about environmental issues.

“I think birding is something that made me learn a lot about the environment and all the issues birds are facing,” she says, “and made me want to get more involved and do something about it.”

Co’s work as an architect and professor of architecture meant she was already immersed in urban issues, including environmental justice and adapting to climate change – but going on bird walks in Prospect Park was still revelatory.

“After all these years studying New York City,” she says, “I had no idea how much wildlife was in the city. Birding totally transformed my relationship to nature in cities.” Learning about birds’ life cycles and migration patterns

dramatized how connected the city is to other places.

That focus on connectedness permeates Alleva and Co’s work with Bird Collective. Their first partnership was with the Grassland Bird Trust, a small, New York-based organization dedicated to the acquisition and protection of the grassland habitats that are vital to the survival of so many rapidly-declining species, from Sedge Wrens to Short-eared Owls. Since then, they’ve partnered with the American Bird Conservancy’s Great Lakes Initiatives, with a special focus on Kirtland’s and Golden-winged Warblers; with Alabama Audubon, to develop ecotourism in the state’s Black Belt, an astonishingly biodiverse region that was also a cradle of the Civil Rights movement; with BlackAFinSTEM, in support of Black Birders Week; with the Finch Research Network, to broaden



understanding of these birds and their movements; and with Birdability, to make birding more accessible to people with disabilities. They are currently working with the Yurok Tribe, a people with a long tradition of environmental stewardship, in a campaign to restore California Condors to their ancestral land. The effort is about species conservation, of course, but also about the profound cultural meaning of the birds to the Yurok.

Integrating these partnerships into its day-to-day operation is an important part of Bird Collective's ethos. While Alleva does most of Bird Collective's design, she and Co make a point of collaborating with artists and vendors from regions and communities they've partnered with.

Looking back on their first two years in business, Co and Alleva take pride in Bird Collective's success, and in what they've learned along the way. "Me and Angie make an awesome team," says Alleva. But they're even prouder of their work with Bird Collective's outside partners – not just the \$47,000 (and counting) in financial support, but the relationships they've established.

"It's amazing the communities we've gotten to know and become a part of," Co says. "Seeing all different kinds of people from all different kinds of places really excited about our initiatives and our gear is mind-blowing to me."

## The Wobbling Vireos

Before they became the Wobbling Vireos (more on the name later), Ann Murray, Radka Osickova and Michelle Talich were friends who birded together. They'd met through various Brooklyn Bird Club activities in the first half of 2019 – a spring migration walk, a volunteer project – and realized they all lived within a short distance of one another in Kensington. Soon they were an informal birding trio, sharing excitement over Bobolinks and hard-to-identify raptors.

Then came the pandemic. In the spring and summer of 2020, with the city locked down, Brooklynites flocked to Prospect Park. The resources to clean and maintain it lagged the increased use, and it showed.

A Brooklyn Bird Club-sponsored clean-up inspired the three to continue on their own. Armed with their BBC grabbers and outfitted with gloves that Murray purchased, they adopted the south edge of the lake

as their turf. Not only was this where they ordinarily entered the park and started their birding route, it was also one of the sections most heavily used for picnics, cookouts and other gatherings that generated large amounts of trash. Fishing line and hooks left behind by the many people who fished in the lake posed a particular threat to wildlife, and became a particular focus of the group's clean-ups.

"We just wanted to make the park clean ... er," Osickova says with a sigh. Though it often seemed like a Sisyphean task – areas they'd cleaned on Sunday would be trashed again by Monday morning – their efforts drew thanks from parkgoers and, even better, led others to follow their example.

While the Wobbling Vireos weren't the only birders to head to the park with grabbers and trash bags, the must-have Brooklyn Bird Club accessories of Summer 2020, they were the most organized and consistent, returning to their turf on a weekly basis. They were also, arguably, the most relentless. No one cleaned quite like Talich – if she wasn't on her belly trying to fish trash out of the lake, she was doing her



best to extricate bits of glittery confetti from the grass. Other items the group encountered included three odd shoes; forgotten children's toys; discarded grills and coolers; and, memorably, a pile of seven very dirty diapers.

About that name: the "Wobbling Vireo" moniker was born when Osickova used voice-to-text to record a sighting with slightly off-kilter results. When the trio shifted from park cleanups to birdathons, they had their team name ready. 🐦

# Photo Gallery: Michelle Talich



Top and bottom: Bonaparte's Gull and American Oystercatchers at Breezy Point.



# Notes from the End of the Earth

## First Stop: New Zealand

By Alan Bacchiochi

*Ed. Note: Clapper Rail contributor Alan Bacchiochi is working at McMurdo Station in Antarctica until the end of February 2022. This photo series from his pre-Antarctica stop in New Zealand is the first of several dispatches.*

“It’s the price of admission,” said one of our cohort leads. Quarantine. One does not simply fly to Antarctica. We had passed through a four-day isolated quarantine in San Francisco and then a two-week isolated quarantine at a hotel in Christchurch International Airport. My group’s flight south had been due to leave the day after our quarantine ended, but the weather did not allow us to fly. So, we all moved to a less restricted quarantine in a hotel in the city center. After another week of mechanical and weather delays we did fly. And we flew to within an hour of the base before being turned around by a sudden storm. Such flights are called “Boomerangs”. As exciting as it was to fly in the cavernous belly of a C-17, it was still eight hours in the air just to re-land at Christchurch. But the next day we had a field trip to the beach arranged for us. That afternoon trip was much appreciated.



Waikuku Beach, 30 minutes drive north of Christchurch, New Zealand. All photos by Alan Bacchiochi.

Waikuku Beach is a 30-minute drive north of the city. The peaks of the Southern Alps create a startling contrast to its pine forest, narrow stretch of sand, and the salt marshes of the Ashley River's estuary. It was rejuvenating to be outdoors, and it was equally invigorating but tantalizing to see the bird life along the coast. "Was that a New Zealand Fantail? It certainly flashed a white and fanned tail." The estuary, as you would expect, teemed with diversity. Three South Island Oystercatchers dug clams amongst the avian legion. There were hundreds of gulls (Kelp, Silver and Black-billed) and scores of White-fronted Terns. A Sacred Kingfisher hunted from gnarled bushes, Mallards paddled about, and quite few others escaped identification.

Many birds presented themselves boldly and well. Silvereye flocks kept to the edges of the bushes. A White-faced Heron gawkily alit atop a pine tree's peak. European Coots fed along the reeds of a stream below a colony of Pied Cormorants, a street sign indicated that Swampheens might be crossing, and a European Goldfinch showed signs of conjunctivitis. A Swamp Harrier cruised low heading inland hunting the stream as well. Our hotel in the city center offered a small but very active glimpse of New Zealand bird life; mostly Kelp Gulls, Silver Gulls, Welcome Swallows, and Paradise Shelducks, but the trip to Waikuku Beach gave me a broader indication of the richness to be found. Maybe on the trip back north and home there will be some time to explore the South Island. 🐦



Clockwise from top: Sacred Kingfisher, Silver Gulls, Pied Cormorant, Silvereye, and a Swampheena crossing sign at Waikuku Beach.



Rafael Campos-Ramirez at Villas Zurqui in San Jose, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo by Janet Schumacher.

# A Costa Rican in Brooklyn

By Janet Schumacher

**R**afael Campos-Ramirez's mantra, "Brooklyn is great birding!", is high praise from someone who grew up in bird-rich Costa Rica. Rafael is one of the Brooklyn Bird Club's trip leaders and frequents Prospect Park and Green-Wood Cemetery. A keen observer, he enjoys helping others get on birds, too, and he can be spotted recording his sightings in his small notebooks, which he then logs on eBird. The site has him up to 3,969 species observed worldwide.

Rafael and I talked one sweltering day in early August, just after New York City lifted its outdoor mask mandate. Both of us were fully vaccinated, but each of us wore a mask. "Jane makes me wear it," Rafael said, referring to his wife, Jane Zucker, an epidemiologist. It felt semitropical, sitting on picnic benches shaded by tall trees outside the Brooklyn Museum.

Rafael was born in 1951 in Grecia, a small town in Costa Rica's Central Valley. The town was surrounded by cane and coffee farms. His father kept a small farm, mostly coffee, and Rafael helped him with the harvest.

He grew up around endemic birds like the Clay-colored Thrush, Costa Rica's national bird, the Blue-gray Tanager, and what Rafael dubs the "poor man's quetzal" – the Lesson's Motmot, nonetheless a striking bird. But the Baltimore Oriole is the one that caught his attention, seasonally arriving in a flash of orange.

Rafael graduated with a B.S. in biology from the University of Costa Rica in San Jose. While there, he studied and subsequently worked with several prominent American biologists working in the country, like Alexander Skutch and Gary Stiles. Skutch, a botany professor from Johns Hopkins University, founded the biology department in the 1960s but had already retired when Rafael enrolled. Stiles, a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, was scheduled to teach Rafael's ecology course but was on sabbatical. Skutch agreed to fill in for Stiles, and the students jumped at the opportunity to study with him,

driving two hours to his home.

As a doctoral student, Skutch had studied the banana plant in Jamaica and Panama, where he became



From right to left: Campos-Ramirez, Alexander Skutch, Pamela Lankester, Rocio Lopez in Dominical, Costa Rica, 1979. Photo courtesy of Rafael Campos-Ramirez.

increasingly interested in birds and the tropics. The United Fruit Company hired him to research diseases of the plant in Honduras and Guatemala. Wanting to live in Central America, he chose to build his home in Costa Rica because of the stability of its government. He continued to collect plants for museums to support himself, but he began studying birds in earnest. He would write more than 40 books and hundreds of articles on ornithology, detailing his observations on bird behavior, rather than statistics. Some of his earliest studies focused on cooperative breeding habits of some bird families. A vegetarian since 16, Skutch chose not to band birds, concerned about any potential harm to a bird entangled in the net. He admired all birds, including the nest-robbing toucans, recognizing their important role in the dispersal of fruit seeds. He named his home Los Cusingos, the local name for the Fiery-billed Aracari.

After Rafael received his degree, few jobs were available for a graduate in biology. The national parks were poorly managed and

underfunded. But Rafael had the opportunity to remain employed as a teaching assistant and aide to Stiles in the biology department. Stiles was then in the early stages of fieldwork for “A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica,” which would be published in 1989.

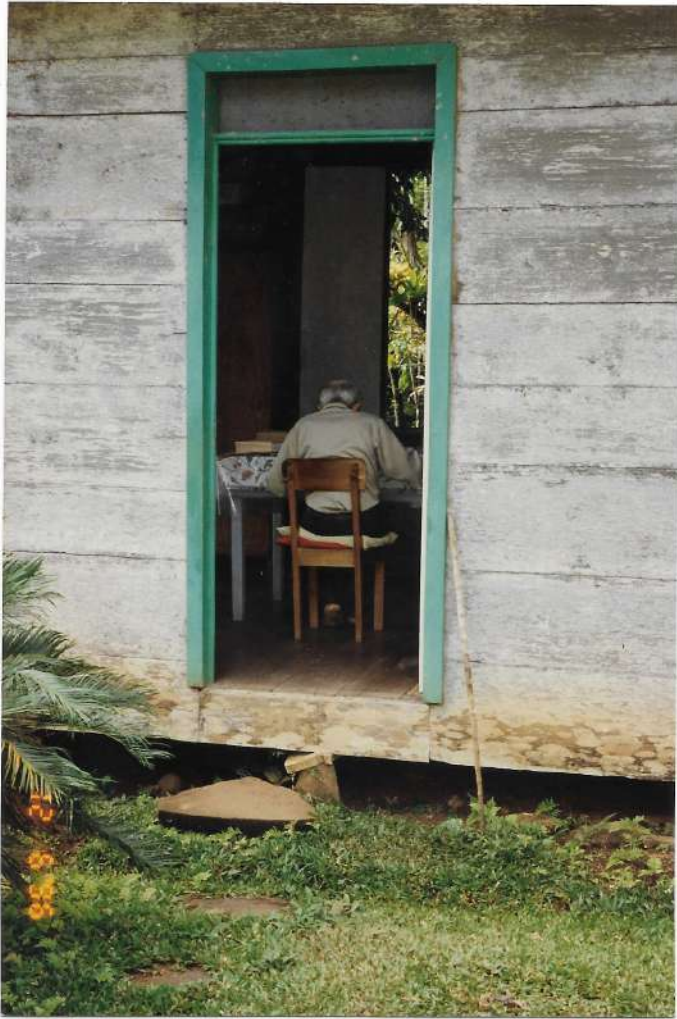
Rafael collected specimens for the zoology museum at the University of Costa Rica, which Dana Gardner, the guide’s illustrator, used, and he lugged equipment into the field to record birdsong. Some of these collected specimens are currently in field museums in Costa Rica and the United States. Rafael remained in regular contact with Skutch, who was overseeing the guide with Stiles, interchanging manuscript pages and illustrations among the three contributors.

In Stiles’ guide, Rafael is credited with providing information on local bird names. There is no standardization of bird names in Spanish, he told me, and attempts to unify the nomenclature have failed, with disparities in the language remaining from Mexico down to Argentina. Latin names are the standard. English names are commonly used on birding tours now.

Skutch dedicated his book “Orioles, Blackbirds and Their Kin” to Rafael, “my former student and continuing friend.” In 2004, Rafael planned to join fellow students, colleagues, and friends at Los Cusingos to celebrate Skutch’s 100th birthday, but



Alexander Skutch and Rocio Lopez during a field trip to Division, Costa Rica, 1979. Photo courtesy of Rafael Campos-Ramirez.



Alexander Skutch in his studio, 1979. Photo courtesy of Rafael Campos-Ramirez.

Skutch died eight days before the milestone.

In 1979, Rafael led his first international field trip, to the highlands of Central America, for the Florida Audubon Society, stepping in when Stiles was unavailable. Subsequently, he led tours during his university's December-February break, a popular travel time for North American birders eager to escape the snow and cold. How did Rafael learn English? "By listening to rock music – the Rolling Stones, the Beatles," he said with a laugh.

Rafael went on to guide for a number of international tourism companies, most notably Caligo Adventures, specializing in Belize and Trinidad and Tobago, but also Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, Venezuela, and Costa Rica. Guyana remains one of his favorite countries, "like the good old days as a birding guide," he says, "roads bad, but birding so good." He noted that development in Costa Rica has diminished the diversity of birds, but the species list for the country sits around 930. Rafael says his personal list in his native country is 760,



Campos-Ramirez in Lomas de Barbudal Biological Reserve, Costa Rica, 1989. Photo courtesy of Rafael Campos-Ramirez.

occasionally increasing with "couch" birds: official splits of species he has already seen.

I first met Rafael in 2002 when I travelled to Costa Rica with the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology. Rafael was our Costa Rican guide, and it was my first international birding trip. A few days in, Rafael surprised me when he said that we were practically neighbors...in Brooklyn. He noticed from the trip roster that we lived only a few blocks apart; he had moved two years earlier there to live with his wife Jane, a physician and epidemiologist who is currently the Assistant Commissioner of New York's Department of Health and Mental Health, in charge of immunizations. Jane, who has worked internationally on polio eradication and malaria research, met Rafael in Costa Rica and they were married at the Villa Lapas Lodge, which also happened to be the first stop on my trip.

The Villa Lapas was a comfortable, rustic lodge with Bare-throated Tiger Herons nesting on its roof,

trogons nesting in a dead tree in a dry riverbed, and several pairs of the Golden-hooded Tanager nesting outside my cabin. It was a thrilling introduction to neotropical birding, exceeded only by the sight of Resplendent Quetzals feeding in a wild avocado tree a few feet off the Pan American Highway near Savegre Mountain Lodge. Quetzals openly perched on telephone wires at the lodge, guarding a nest cavity.

Rafael impressed our group with his skilled use of a compact mirror, capturing the sun to pinpoint a skulking bird. Although he currently owns a laser pen, he still carries the mirror. "I'm still in the primitive age," he laughs. He began birding with his father's heavy field glasses, and later Caligo Adventures provided him with Bushnell binoculars and finally an upgrade to Swarovski binoculars and scope. A perk for senior guides is that leading binocular companies may provide optics for free or at reduced cost as part of their marketing strategy.

Being an international bird guide seems like a dream job, but I have seen some questionable behavior on trips. I wondered what it was like from the leader's perspective. Yes, Rafael agreed, there is a lot of pressure to please all the participants and to find target birds, regardless of their scarceness or the weather conditions. But he continues to enjoy introducing birders to new birds, as well as seeking out surprises of his own – he recently had to postpone a much-anticipated trip with Jane to Antarctica.

Given the ecotourism slowdown that has forced many guides out of work, has he retired? "No, but I no longer have ties with an organized birding company," Rafael told me.

"I'm always waiting for another chance to go birding, though," he said, adding, "As a neotropical birder, Brooklyn is a jewel too." 🐦



*Fruit and Baltimore Oriole*, Oil on canvas signed by Wagguno (American artist), c. 1858.  
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

### **To a Mourning Dove**

Omitted from the aviary of odes,  
Nightingale, skylark, autumn swallows,  
It, nevertheless, deserves our regard.  
Its song a solitary note:  
“Coo...coo... coo...coo... coo....”  
A voice as plaintive as the nightingale’s,  
As haunting as the owl’s.

– *Eric Mathern*



*Mourning Dove.* Pencil on paper by Eric Mathern.



# Photo Gallery: August Davidson-Onsgard



# Brooklyn's first Painted Redstart

By Richard Payne

When I woke up on the morning of Sunday, October 18, 2020, the last thing I expected of the day was that I was going to find a mega-rare warbler that had never before been seen in Brooklyn. For one thing, I was not even in Brooklyn. I had gone hiking upstate the day before with my friends Christopher Kaiser and Griffin O., and spent that night at Chris' apartment in the Bronx. As Chris and I ate breakfast Sunday morning, Tripper Paul posted a message to the Kings and Queens bird alert WhatsApp group that drew my attention to Floyd Bennett Field, where he reported an American Golden Plover – a county bird for me at the time. I was determined to try for it, though considering that Chris's Bronx apartment is literally as far away from Floyd as you can possibly be and still be within New York City, I knew my chances were low.

Chris kindly drove me home and I got to my Brooklyn apartment a half hour before noon. Not owning a car myself, I still had a 45-minute bike ride down to Floyd, and for a second I thought twice about going. We had done a strenuous hike up a small mountain the day before, and the truth is I was tired. Nevertheless I decided to push through, got to Floyd around 1, and prowled the runways in search of plovers. There were none, though I happened across a Vesper Sparrow, and then another, and I posted those to the WhatsApp group and kept moving.

From the runways I had a very clear mental picture of where I wanted to go next, and I marched there as directly as I could: the part of the perimeter path around Ecology Village that meets the grassland, where there is a short white rope fence marking the edge of the path. When I got there I received a text message from Mike Yuan, who was also at Floyd and asking for more details about the vespers. I texted him

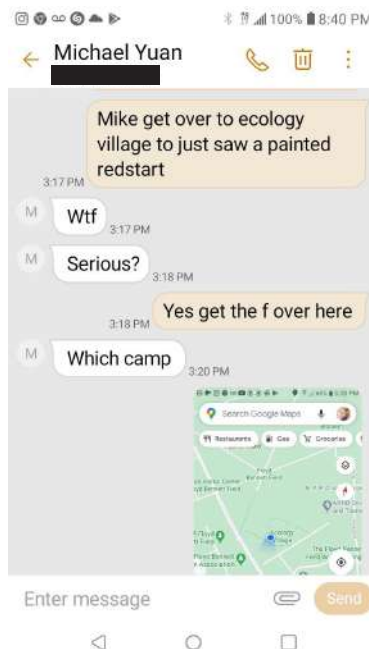
some directions to the sparrows, concluding with, "Let me know if you find that damn plover," then walked down the perimeter path a bit and turned left into Camp Pheasant, a campground of large pine trees. It was by now about 3:15 in the afternoon.

I took two steps in, looked up, and saw one of the most unbelievable things I've ever seen in my life: about 20 feet above me, framed against the trunk of a pine, was a Painted Redstart, unmistakable in its red, white, and black plumage. The bird sallied out to catch an insect, called once, and flew over my head and out of sight. Within a couple of seconds of spotting it, the bird was gone. I didn't have time to even touch my camera.

I should add at this point that the Painted Redstart was not the first very rare bird that I discovered in Brooklyn that year. In May of 2020 I found and photographed a female Red-necked Phalarope at Plumb Beach, the first record in eBird of that species for Brooklyn since 2011. Now, when I saw the phalarope

I had a visceral physiological reaction that I think most birders will recognize: my heart was pounding, and my rate of breathing increased just as my motor coordination skills momentarily decreased. But when I found the redstart I had (almost) none of those physical reactions, because my initial reaction was nothing beyond utter disbelief. Was this a dream? Had Chris Kaiser slipped me a tab of acid over breakfast? It was as if I had stepped through a gateway in the fabric of space-time and been transported back to where I saw my first Painted Redstart, in the foothills of Arizona's Coronado National Forest.

But this was indeed Brooklyn, and I knew that without further documentation the redstart didn't happen. The first thing I did was text Mike Yuan, since I knew he was already in the park. "Mike get over to ecology village to [sic] just saw a painted redstart," to which he replied, "Wtf // Serious?" I texted back that he should get over here fast – this wasn't the time for epistemological doubts. I posted the sighting to the WhatsApp group, and walked around the perimeter path, anxiously trying to find the bird again. Mike arrived with his friend Jer Thorp, and to my great relief we soon found the redstart in the middle of Camp Pheasant. Other birders began to arrive, and at least 30 people eventually saw the bird as he or she



was hyperactively flycatching in the pines of Ecology Village, constantly calling and fanning its tail. A real performer, the bird put on a good show for us. It was the second New York state record, and a first for New York City.

It was an exciting, surreal event, all the more so for the setting in which this discovery happened. As I was first texting Mike after finding the bird, an older Asian couple, dressed semi-formally and appearing to speak Japanese, entered Camp Pheasant from the other side. The woman had her hair done up in Princess Leia buns on the sides of her head. They went up to one of the wood platforms ordinarily used for tents, placed a small speaker on the railing above the platform, took off their jackets, and, as I was frantically looking around for the bird, began to waltz to music playing from the speaker. They continued waltzing as more and more birders arrived, dancing throughout the commotion as a small crowd grew in the middle of the woods. The juxtaposition of a bird that belonged in the mountains of the Southwest with a pair of dancers who could have easily been attending a fancy indoor ball only heightened the dream-like quality of the whole experience.

And then the next day the Painted Redstart was gone. A bird not known for sticking around very long

outside of its normal range, the Floyd Painted Redstart disappeared extra fast. A Painted Redstart, possibly the same bird, had been in the Outer Banks of North Carolina on the fifth and sixth of October, a few weeks before the Brooklyn bird. Then on October 21 another Painted Redstart that could have been from anywhere was seen in the middle of St. Paul, Minnesota, also for less than 48 hours. Whether there were one, two, or three (or more) Painted Redstarts east of the Mississippi that October we will never know.

But one thing is certain, which is that if I or someone else had not wandered into Ecology Village that Sunday, the redstart – presumably the first ever to appear in New York City – would have gone completely undetected and unrecorded. All of which raises the larger question: How many other extremely rare birds go undiscovered in a given location every year, or even every month? In a 2012 [blog post](#), David Sibley asked this very question, pointing to examples of rare birds that had probably gone unseen for two to four or more weeks in various spots around the U.S. before being found. He speculated that birders probably find well under 10 percent of all the rare birds that are out there, concluding that the next very rare one is probably out there right now. That bird is waiting for you too. 🐦



Painted Redstart at Floyd Bennett Field. Photo by Richard Payne.



Inflatable kayak at Red Hook. All photos by Jay Ackley.

# Birding By Sea: A Kayaker's Guide to Birding Brooklyn's Waterways

By Jay Ackley

One of my favorite things about summer has always been spending time on the water. On 80 degree days with a cooling breeze coming off the water, splashing across a lake or bay has always filled my heart with nostalgia for childhood and brought my body and mind into a peaceful balance.

My appreciation for casual boating only increased when I discovered the wonders of birdwatching from the water. Something about the smooth motion of a kayak or canoe slipping through water seems to allay the “fight or flight” instinct often exhibited by birds

when approached on foot, and the pictures and looks I've gotten from herons, egrets, shorebirds, and raptors have far surpassed anything I've managed to get from land.

Most folks would assume that you need to take a train out of the city to get many opportunities to splash around in water, but in 2018 and 2019 I spent many summer weekends on the Prospect Park lake, either via kayaks rented from the LeFrak Center or rowboats borrowed from the Village Community Boathouse that ran a free program near the Wellhouse. I can still

remember the thrill that shot through my body when I turned a corner around the Peninsula in my kayak and saw my first Green Heron waiting on a fallen log for small fish to come within range.

But as for so many things in life, 2020 was different.

Like many city dwellers, the spring and summer of that year were filled with claustrophobic fear. I found what respite and sanity I could in jogging, biking, and birdwatching in Prospect Park. The ambulances rushing down Flatbush Avenue day and night were a constant reminder of the enormous and unprecedented loss of life that we were experiencing as New Yorkers, while the ever-circling helicopters and police brutality unfolding in our streets made it seem like life and society were in a state of collapse.

Compared to the scale of trauma unfolding, the fact that I couldn't take a rented kayak out for a spin on a hot June afternoon was a trivial sacrifice, but we don't get to choose the things that push us over the edge. One afternoon, I found myself unexpectedly crying at my ad-hoc work-from-home setup and my partner asked what was wrong. I started laughing at myself while blubbering, "It'd just be really nice to go out kayaking, but the rentals are shut down for Covid." Her response, despite being obvious and extremely practical, surprised me. "Why don't you buy a kayak then?"

Four years earlier, friends of ours in California had put an inflatable kayak on their wedding registry, and we had jumped at the opportunity to buy them something that they'd be able to throw in their car to take on adventures. It had never crossed my mind that we could do something similar in Brooklyn, but

I dived into online research, and by the end of the day had ordered a new two-person kayak and lifejackets for around \$400. Not cheap, but considering that we had managed to maintain employment stability, and cancelled all our summer travel, it felt like a bargain.

The kayak arrived a week later and immediately my head was spinning with tidal charts and boat launch regulations. I wanted to play it safe for my first excursion, so I popped the 50-pound bag over my shoulders like a backpack and biked over to the Wellhouse in Prospect Park. It took me under 15 minutes to get everything

inflated and ready, and when I paddled out onto the lake I took a deep breath and exhaled out the stress of previous months. I saw a Great Egret, a Great Blue Heron, Green Herons, swallows, swifts, Eastern Kingbirds and others that spend their summers cooling off and snacking near the water. It was magnificent, and this time when I wept it was for relief and joy.

(After that first trip, I discovered that it was technically prohibited to launch your own kayak in the lake "due to insurance reasons" – make of that what you will.)

Having proven the seaworthiness of my new vessel, I decided to try the open water. I had discovered on the New York City Water Trail that there was a public boat launch a 20-minute bike ride away at Red Hook's Valentino Park. I checked the tides and the forecast and everything seemed good for an adventure. When I first pushed off the small sandy launch and pulled down my mask I was awestruck by the new perspective kayaking gave me on the city.

The harbor bells were clanging and the wake from the Staten Island ferry rocked me. I discovered this stretch of water was



Terns at Governor's Island.



Great Egret and Glossy Ibis at Marine Park Salt Marsh.



Ospreys at Marine Park Salt Marsh.

called Buttermilk Channel and I braved the tidal strait to make it over to Governor's Island. Although the kayak launch on the island was disappointingly closed, it felt incredible to circumnavigate the island and see all the cormorants, gulls, and terns that breed in New York waters.

The waves from passing boats were occasionally nerve wracking, and I was grateful to have all my safety gear, but the most harrowing ordeal was when I glided too close to the nesting colony of Common Terns on an abandoned pier at Governor's Island. They made it very clear to me that I was not welcome!

As I paddled back to shore, avoiding empty Cheeto bags and Pepsi cans (and one bloated rat carcass), I laughed; it was much more romantic to think of what would have been litter or refuse on land as being magically transformed, by dint of floating in the harbor, as flotsam and jetsam.

My next trip was to the salt marsh at Marine Park. On previous visits I had noticed a bike and boat rental kiosk there, but each time I was told, "Only bikes today, they're supposedly sending us kayaks from California." That has continued to be an empty promise, but with my own kayak in tow – by now I had purchased a bike trailer – I was free to explore this often-overlooked waterway beside Jamaica Bay on my own. It remains the highlight of my birding life. Circling Mau Mau Island, I encountered a flock of Great Blue Herons jostling in the afternoon sun. I also saw American Oystercatchers, Yellow-crowned Night

Hérons, Black Skimmers, Glossy Ibis, and an Osprey family nesting on a platform near the mile-long loop trail.

I insisted my partner join me on my next kayak outing there, and we had a similarly wonderful time, right up until we were returning to shore and ran over the jagged top of an abandoned and submerged pier. A few seconds lapsed between the impact and the start of the whooshing sound as our kayak began deflating. Fortunately, it was designed as a multi-chambered vessel, so a tear in the bottom didn't affect the air in the sides, and we returned safely (and dryly) to shore.

Over the next few weeks, I tested various patching kits and materials, and was able to effectively repair the kayak. After each of these outings, as I clumsily rinsed off a 12-foot kayak in the small shower of our apartment, I found myself still amazed by all the birds I was able to see from the water thanks to some well-constructed vinyl.

I've since taken my kayak out with friends, and they eventually resumed kayak rentals at the Lefrak Center. Kayaking has become an integral part of my approach to birding and experiencing nature in Brooklyn. For the 2021 season, the Parks Department reinstated the requirement to purchase a launch permit (for \$15) and I was happy to purchase it.

Nearly every time I've gone out, I've been approached by a stranger who's inquired about my kayak and the rules and experience of boating in the city. I'd smile as they walked away with a peculiar look on their face as they thought about whether they might give it a go themselves. I'm hoping this article might persuade some of you in the Brooklyn Bird Club to consider birding from on the water as well as on land. If you do, please be safe, and enjoy! 🦢



Great Blue Herons at Mau Mau Island. 26



## Photo Gallery: Charles Tang





# CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2021

Please contact the Teams Organizer, Bobbi Manian ([roberta.manian@gmail.com](mailto:roberta.manian@gmail.com)), to join a team. Registration ends December 8.

Please check the [BBC website](#) for updates.



The annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is the nation's longest-running community science bird project, where birders across the continent conduct a bird census that helps Audubon and other organizations assess the health of bird populations and guide conservation actions.

Read more about the Audubon Christmas Bird Count at the official website [here](#).

The Brooklyn CBC, made up of 12 different sectors, encompasses parks, cemeteries, and significant coastline on the bay and ocean, and there is a team for all skill and commitment levels. Grab your binoculars and come out and join us.

Compilers:

Chris Laskowski, [celaskowski@yahoo.com](mailto:celaskowski@yahoo.com)

Mike Yuan, [mjyuan@gmail.com](mailto:mjyuan@gmail.com)

A potluck dinner and compilation of the day's sightings will be held for participants at the Prospect Park Boathouse.

Note: Some teams begin at 7:30 AM or earlier. Plan for 4-8 hours of birding. Rain or shine.