

Spring 2022

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL



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Editor's Note

In times like these, my fellow birders give me hope.

As I write this at the end of spring, our bird club is about to donate \$20,000 to Green-Wood Cemetery for a new native meadow near the Valley Water, the Birdathon cause which was chosen to memorialize Janet Schumacher. Green-Wood, a place Janet loved, is seeking to mow less and make its nearly 500 acres as bird-friendly as possible, and it sees us as allies in that.

Meanwhile, the Prospect Park Alliance, following months of outreach, just released its restoration plans for the Vale of Cashmere. The verdict is in: people want its natural features safeguarded and enhanced. Local birders were outspoken in their criticism of the Alliance's original plans, which called for a sizable building in the Rose Garden area, and our message, it seems, got through: they've scaled that back significantly. The Alliance's report includes the results of an online survey in which 275 people named birdwatching as the activity they would enjoy most in the new Vale, twice that of the next highest answer: informal gatherings.

Our community, strengthened by hundreds of new members, is principled, vocal, and dedicated. Out at the beaches, volunteers from the NYC Plover Project are putting in the hours to protect Piping Plovers and educate the public about these and other imperiled beach-nesting birds; this past week, New York birder Andrew Baksh was clearing trails for birders at the East Pond at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. The National Park Service is currently developing a management plan for the refuge, and it's up to us to comment on its importance for birds and wildlife viewing.

When birds benefit, we do too. It's a fact we're showing to all New Yorkers.

The Brooklyn Bird Club

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<http://www.brooklynbirdclub.org>

The Clapper Rail

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Left: Dennis Hrehowsik, BBC president, and Bobbi Manian, Birdathon coordinator, hand a \$20,000 check to Green-Wood president Richard J. Moylan. Also pictured: Sara Evans and Joe Charap, Green-Wood's horticulturists. Right: The corner of Magnolia Avenue that will be planted as a bird-friendly native meadow. Photos by Ryan Goldberg.

A Banner Birdathon

By Ryan Goldberg

I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

This year's Birdathon, timed with International Migratory Bird Day on May 14, raised a club-record \$20,000 for the planting of a native meadow at Green-Wood Cemetery. The fundraiser was a first between the club and Green-Wood. Over the last four years, the cemetery's horticulture team, led by Joe Charap and Sara Evans, and supported by turfgrass expert Dr. Frank Rossi of Cornell University, have embraced low-mowing and re-wilding efforts on its nearly 500-acre glacier-carved landscape. They currently manage 43 acres as perpetual meadows – the largest section is the Hill of Graves, at roughly 12 acres – and this figure will continue to grow thanks to the support of Brooklyn birders. As a result of these decisions, Green-Wood has reduced its carbon emissions by almost a quarter since 2018 and created a healthier ecosystem for birds and wildlife.

Later this year, the new meadow will be planted beside Magnolia Avenue, on the north side of the Valley Water, and extend

a corridor of native grasses that begins on the slope next to the cemetery's chapel. The Brooklyn Bird Club's support for this project was inspired by Janet Schumacher, a long-time club member, Clapper Rail editor, and lover of Green-Wood who died in February of pancreatic cancer.

On Birdathon day, 15 teams spread out across the borough, from Prospect Park to Plumb Beach, and all told counted 133 species on what was a rain-shortened day; those teams raised close to \$18,000 for Green-Wood's project, while the BBC's council voted to contribute a few thousand more to contribute a total of \$20,000. The winning team on the day was Heydi Lopes and Josh Malbin's "A Solitary Beer, Yo!" with 111 species. Other noteworthy performances included

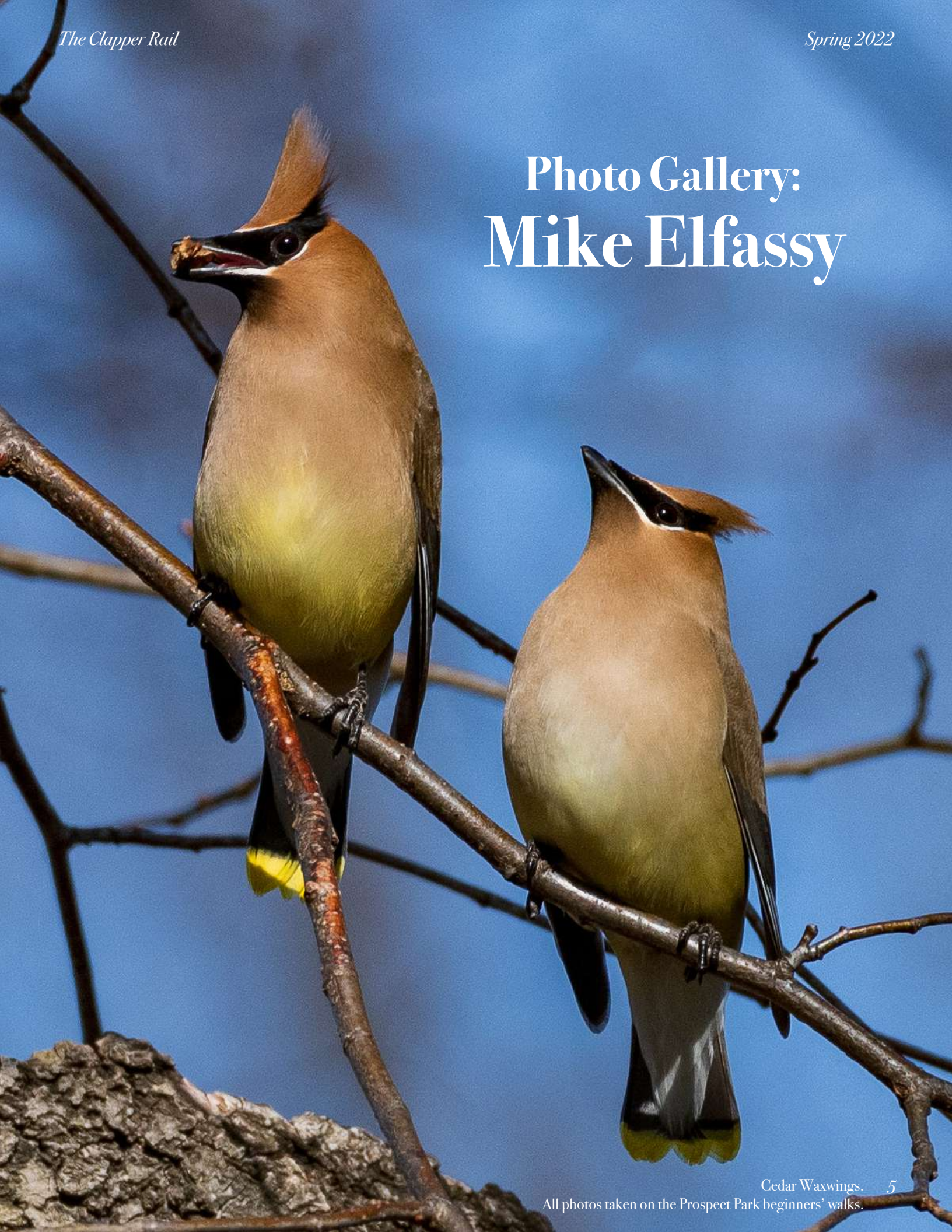
the team of young birders – Ben Abramowitz, Luca Inamoto-Martinez, and Elias Markee-Ratner, accompanied by fathers Matt Abramowitz and Patrick Markee, acting strictly as list-keepers – that tallied an impressive 82 species in Prospect Park on a day other park-based teams struggled to reach 70. 🐦



Birdathon team "Hairy Woodpecker and the Ghastly Swallows" in Prospect Park.

From left to right: Luca Inamoto-Martinez, Elias Markee-Ratner, Ben Abramowitz. Photo by Patrick Markee.

Photo Gallery: Mike Elfassy





Top and bottom: Palm Warbler and Green Heron.

Field Sketches: Nicole Peyrafitte





Eastern Towhee at Owl's Head Park.



Sanderling at Plumb Beach.



Photo Gallery: Marisa Hernandez



Top: Yellow-throated Warbler and Eastern Phoebe at Prospect Park.
Bottom: Ospreys on their nest at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.



A Bittern Surprise

By Sean Sime

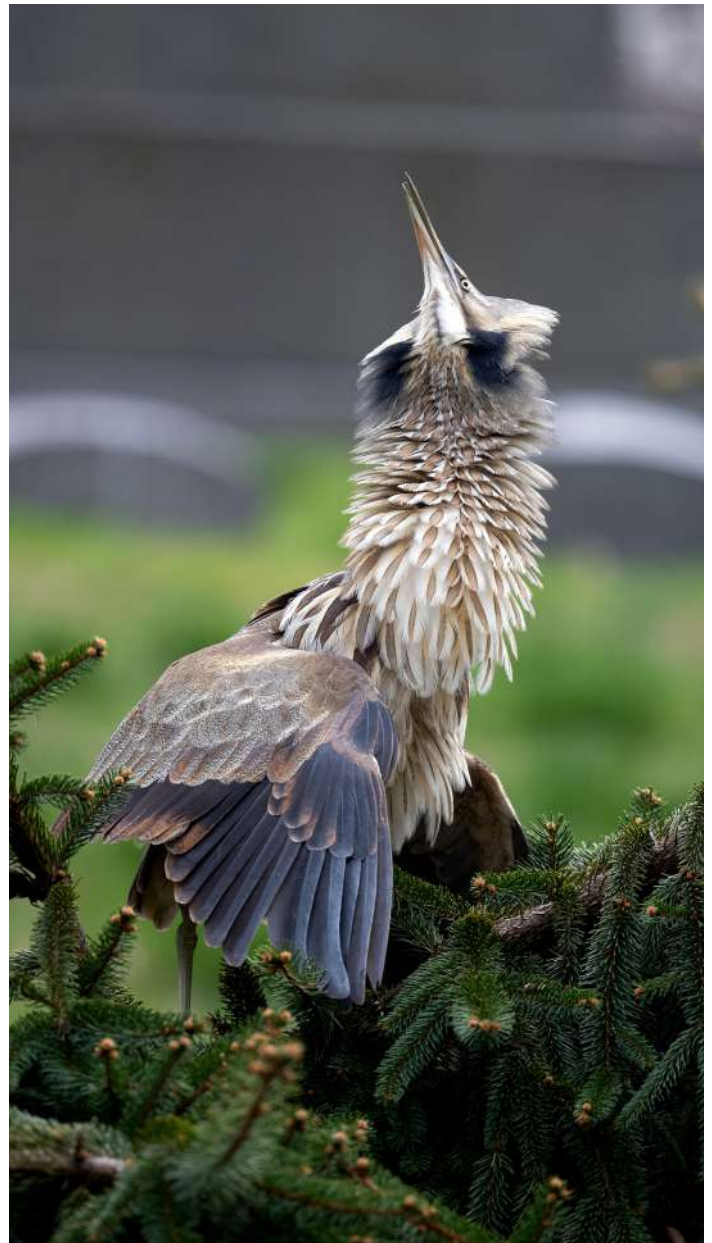


On April 5, I was in Green-Wood Cemetery for my occasional “alternate side parking” birding at the Crescent Water. The weeping cherry was about to pop and I had been testing new camera gear (read: torturing myself trying to get flight shots of Eastern Phoebe). A few minutes before noon, I saw Rob Jett coming over the hill to the north. We greeted each other as we always have: Rob, “Papi,” me, “Chulo!”

I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Rob since the pandemic began so it was nice to catch up. As we were talking something high above the treetops caught our eyes. Looking up I had a hard time reconciling what was happening. Two large silhouetted birds, wings tucked, one pursuing the other, both dropping like stones out of the sky. I lifted my camera towards one which immediately peeled off at treetop

height, revealing itself to be an adult Red-tailed Hawk. The second bird’s final descent was mostly obscured behind trees. It looked like it wasn’t a second Red-tailed Hawk, but some kind of heron.

Needless to say, there was considerable shock and awe when the bird that stuck its landing 30 feet from us was an American Bittern! The bittern immediately began defensive posturing and even growled as the hawk made a second pass, though it seemed immediately clear that this bird was not going to be anyone’s meal. It seems reasonable to consider the interaction was of a territorial nature with a Red-tailed Hawk nest nearby, but the only thing I can say for certain is that the American Bittern flew off unharmed after the hawk’s third pass, leaving behind some very happy birders. 🐦



American Bittern in its defensive posture at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Photo Gallery: Sean Sime Out At Sea





Top and bottom: Sooty Shearwater and Cory's Shearwater.



Top and bottom: Wilson's Storm Petrel and Black-capped Petrel.

A Northern Parula bird is captured in mid-flight, upside down, with its wings spread and tail feathers visible. The bird has a greyish-blue back, a yellow throat, and a dark breast band. It is positioned in the lower half of the frame. The background is a soft-focus green with white flowers and green leaves, likely from a cherry tree, visible in the upper half of the frame.

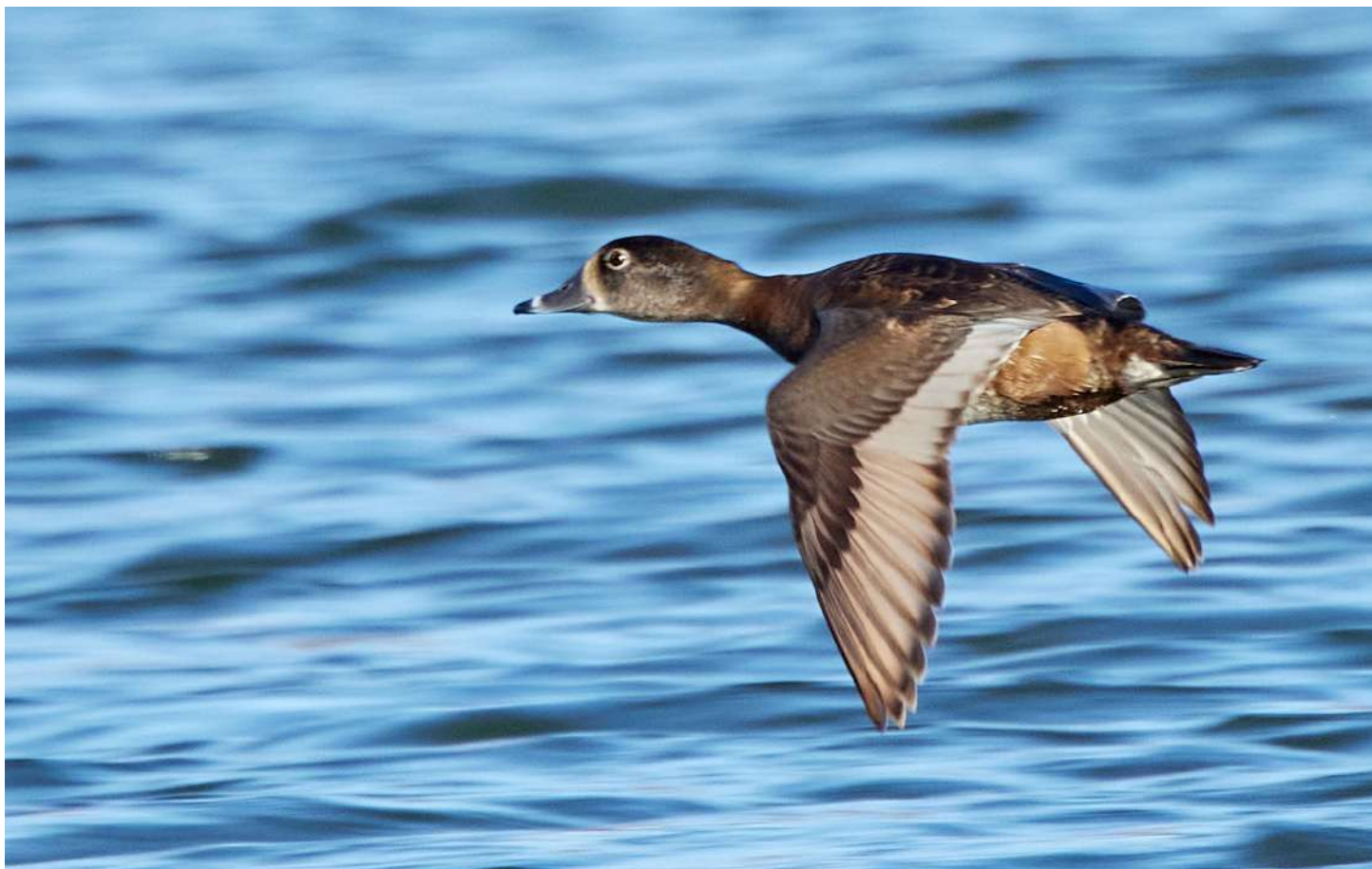
Photo Gallery: Ryan Mandelbaum

Northern Parula at Prospect Park.



Top: Kentucky Warbler at Brooklyn Bridge Park.
Bottom: American Woodcock at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Photo Gallery: Terry Von Ploennies



Top and bottom: Purple Martin and Ring-necked Duck at Prospect Park.

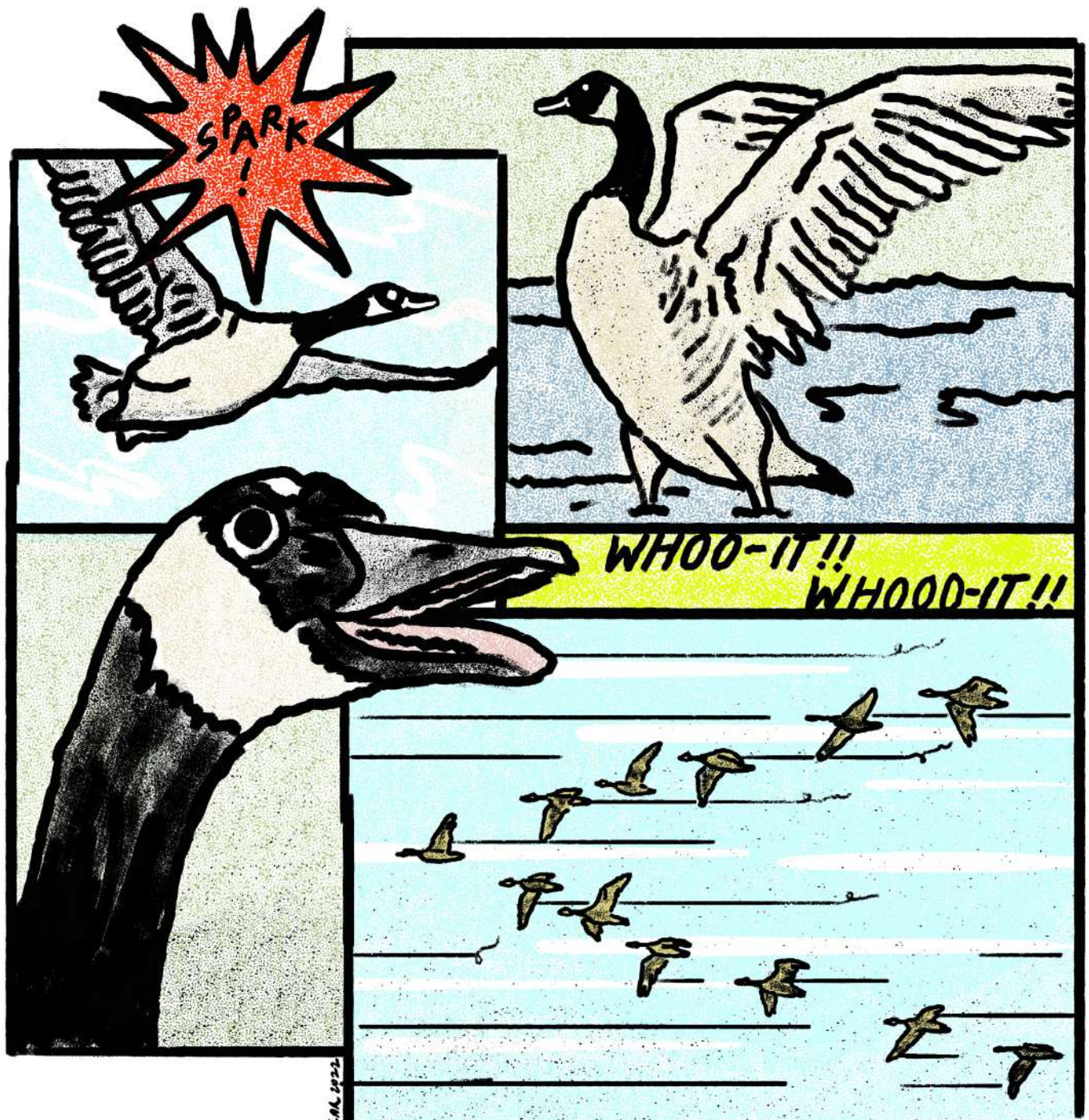


Illustration by Ed Ryan.

Sparks!

By Marcela Mulholland

“My brain is melting,” I groaned for the thousandth time after a day full of Zoom meetings capped off by an evening with the *Real Housewives of New Jersey*. Tired of hearing me complain, Jenna, my childhood best friend, suggested I start going for walks after work to take a break from all the screen time. “I literally walked 10 miles the other day,” she said, inciting a bit of competitiveness and

setting me in motion on the path toward my spark bird.

In the days that followed, I began walking the Prospect Park loop. Looking down at my sneakers hitting the pavement and then looking up at the trees, I’d find myself taking what felt like my first deep breath of the day. I loved seeing what my neighbors were up to and feeling myself immersed in green. In a world of Instagram, Zoom and pandemic-lockdowns,

walking this loop felt like an escape. On some days I would walk it back-to-back, Taylor Swift's Folklore on repeat, racking up miles I would later brag about to Jenna. "We're literally urban hikers," we'd say.

The walks developed a certain routine, as I made a habit out of stopping on the west side of the lake for a break. This spot would become sacred to me, and my quiet moments there, I began noticing the other regulars in the park, and one caught my eye: the Canada Goose.

I don't remember the first time I really noticed the group of Canada Geese living in the lake. I just know that one day I did, and I've gone back to see them nearly every week since. I didn't know there was a term (birdwatching) for what I was doing — indeed a whole community built around it — and I certainly didn't know what a Spark Bird was. I just knew that I wanted to keep returning to see them again.

My relationship with the Canada Geese was in some ways lighthearted — I would post photos to Instagram of them chasing each other with captions like "me and my crush"; I would take videos of them squawking and write "how i feel when joe manchin speaks" — but from the beginning, I felt they had something more profound to teach me.

Day after day, I would sit and watch them, fascinated by their behavior. I even stopped by to see them on the crisp November morning of Election Day 2020 to cool my nerves. Much of why I cared about politics in the first place was to protect the ecosystems these birds called home. I wondered what would come of these new bird friends as I watched them drifting around the lake. To them there was no pandemic, no election day. There was

just another day on the lake and no matter what the election results said that night, they would still be there tomorrow. I could still come to see them. They would still be worth fighting for.

I've found that when I tell other birders that my spark bird is the Canada Goose, they laugh in a surprised way. I'm still new enough to birding that I can't figure out exactly what is funny about it. I suppose people may find it amusing since the Canada Goose is such a ubiquitous character or odd to be in awe of such a familiar face. The Canada Goose isn't sophisticated or rare, after all — they're everywhere (although that wasn't always the case). But they remind me that nature isn't a foreign place I must wait to have the time and energy to venture off to — it's all around me, all the time, and I just need to pay attention to it. I just have to listen for a bird call.

And so here I am, listening and learning. For a while I called the bird the Canadian Goose until Chris Laskowski from the BBC very kindly informed me that I had been saying it wrong. Embarrassing! The first of many flubs, I'm sure, on my birder journey. As of writing this, I still don't own my own pair of bins (also embarrassing, but I'm proud to know the term bins!), but already birding has changed the way I move through the world. Where once I only heard loud cars and trucks on my street, I now notice birdsong within the din. On walks home where I previously saw trash and dirty sidewalks, I now notice house sparrows picking through the grass. I'm discovering a whole new world of friends both human and avian out there — and I have the Canada Goose to thank. 🦢

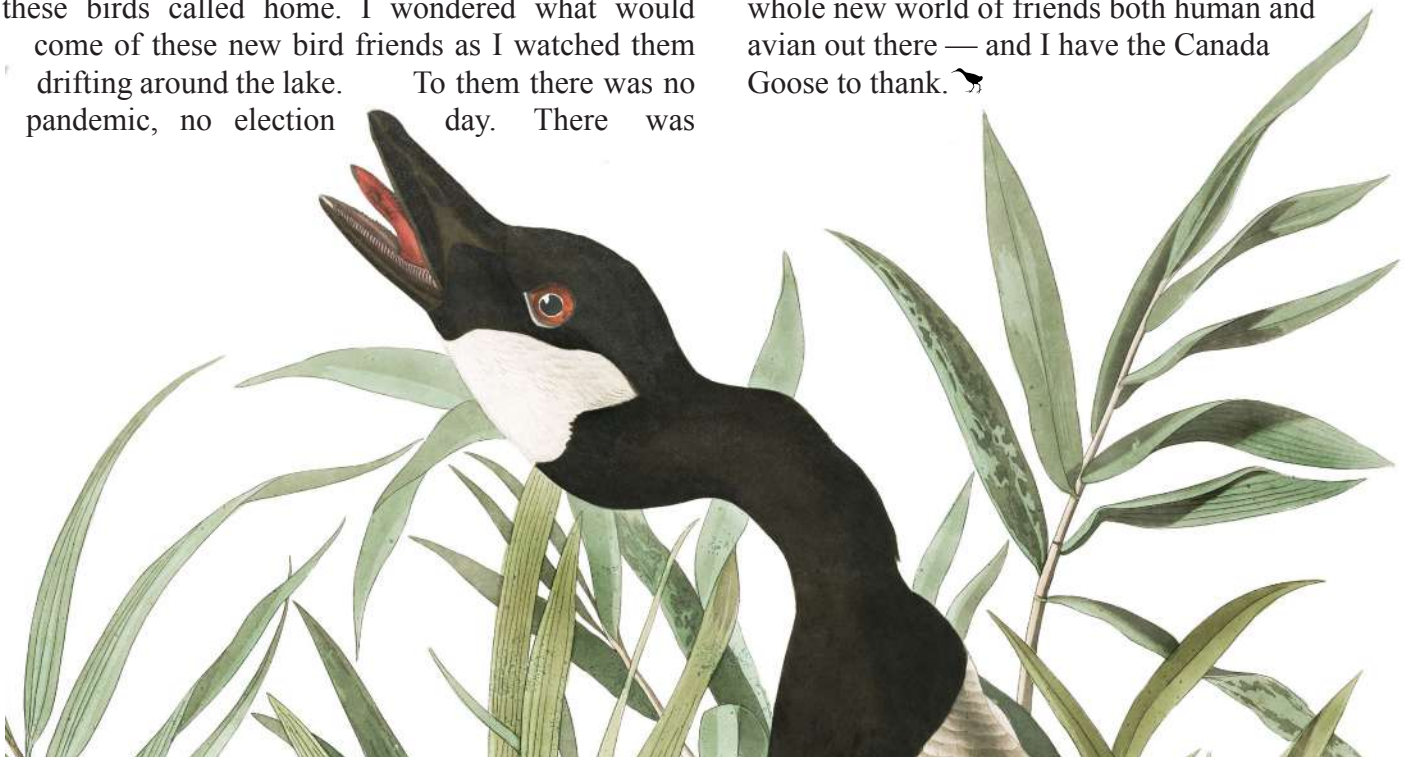


Photo Gallery: Radka Osickova



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher at Prospect Park.



Top: Canada Warbler at Prospect Park.
Bottom: American Oystercatcher and chick at Nickerson Beach.

Photo Gallery: Charles Tang



Seaside Sparrow at Governor's Island.



Red-tailed Hawk cyasses.

Kenya: A Birder's Delight

By Nicole Veno

For most tourists, a trip to Kenya is an opportunity to see and photograph wild animals such as giraffes, lions, cheetahs, hippos, zebras, and elephants. But for a birder, an African safari is an opportunity to see all those animals while spotting countless exotic birds in the national parks and beyond, which I did last February.

Upon arrival in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, I immediately noticed the diversity of birds perched on telephone wires and chirping in backyards. That very afternoon, I was greeted by a Silvery-cheeked Hornbill in a residential backyard. Its large white casque made it look like a prehistoric toucan – a truly unusual sight to behold.

The following day, I took a small plane to the Maasai Mara, the famous national preserve of savannah wilderness on the Kenya-Tanzania border. I was struck by the presence of giraffes and zebras against the green savanna on the descent to the small dirt airstrip. I stayed at the Karen Blixen camp in a large tent on the bank of the Mara River. In one tree, the branches were adorned with the woven cylindrical nests of the Village



Top: Silvery-cheeked Hornbill. All photos by Nicole Veno.
Bottom: Pied Kingfisher.

Weaver. These yellow birds seemed to have learned the art of Kenyan basket weaving, and it was a thrill to see them fly to their nests with a long piece of green grass to continue their craft.

But this was just the beginning. While out on game drives with our guide Derrick, a member of the Maasai tribe and an expert birder, we saw nearly 80 species over two and a half days. Having grown up in the park, he had the spotting skills of a hawk and could identify most birds by their call. One of my favorites was the beautiful Lilac-breasted Roller, Kenya's national bird and an icon of the park. Derrick showed us the nest of the Hamerkop, a medium-sized brown wading bird whose nests are among the largest in the world. While watching two of them perched on a branch, one climbed on the other's back and stretched its wings in a mating display.

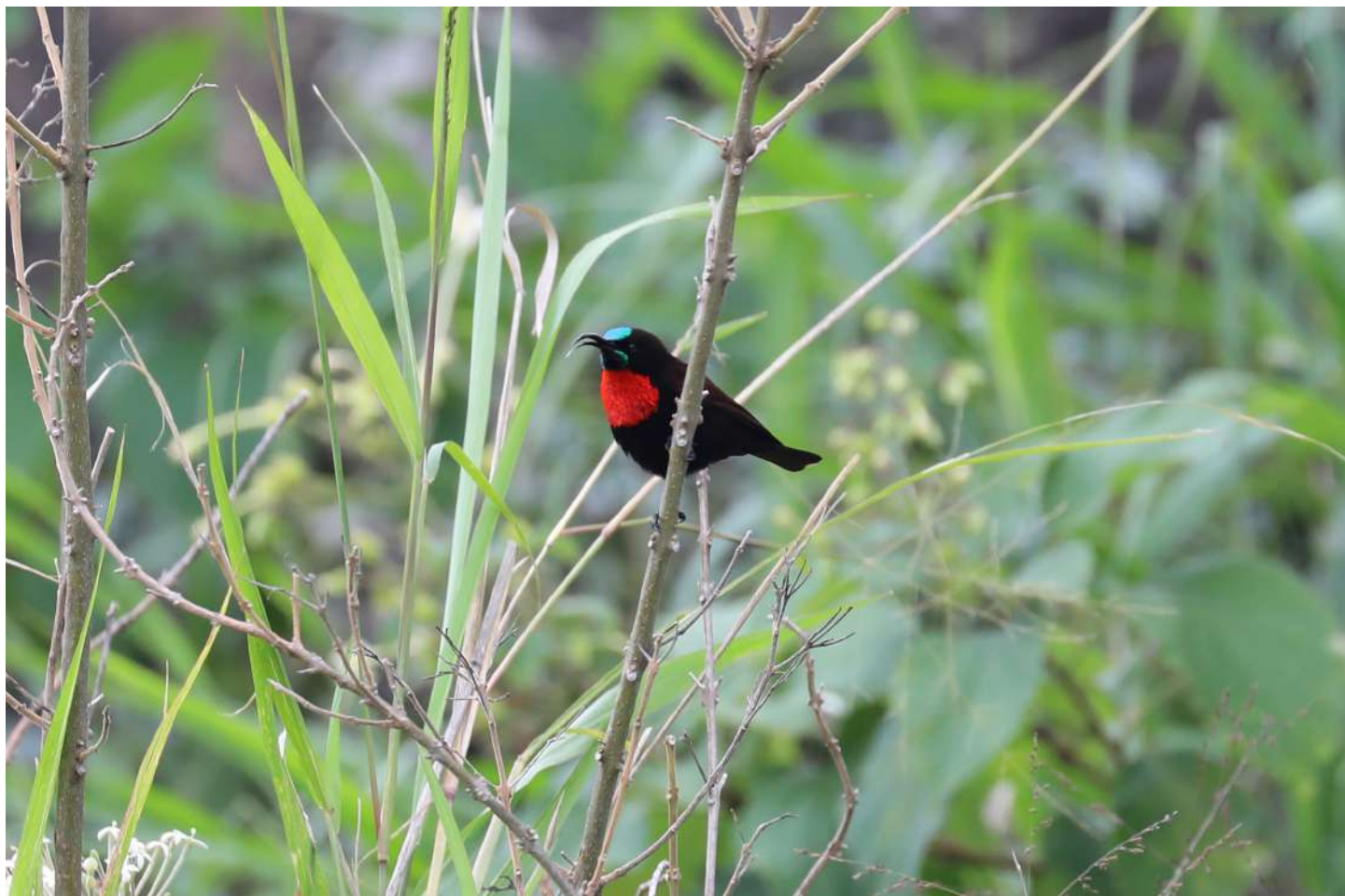
Other memorable sightings included a small blue bird with red cheeks called the Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu, Oxpeckers that feed on the backs of buffalo and giraffes, and a Scarlet-chested Sunbird, a black bird with a red chest and blue and green accents on its face. Sunbirds resemble hummingbirds and have long beaks, but perch to feed instead of hovering.

I left the Maasai Mara having seen four new types of kingfishers, a snake-eating Secretary Bird with long legs and equally long eyelashes, and a Grey-Crowned Crane. At the airstrip, I spotted a Pin-tailed Wydah in the tall grass with its dramatic long black tail. A spectacular grand finale. 🦋



Top: Lilac-crested Roller.
Bottom: Grey-crowned Cranes.





Top: Scarlet-chested Sunbird.
Bottom: Secretary Bird.



**Photo Gallery:
Valerie Masten**

Olive-sided Flycatcher at Prospect Park.



Double-crested Cormorant at Prospect Park.