The summer months tend to be the quietest on the birder’s calendar, but the opposite is true for birds—building nests, incubating, feeding and raising the young, preparing for a southern migration. Here in New York, raptors give us the best opportunity to watch these feats, and in this issue there are stories of a red-tailed hawk family in Green-Wood Cemetery and a kestrel family in Sunset Park. Plus, with shorebird migration in full swing, we have a guide to the Belt Parkway’s Plumb Beach.

There is no shortage of adventurers in the BBC, and I’m excited that several have shared their birding travels with us: from Ohio, Colombia, and Newfoundland. But most of all, I’m overjoyed that this issue showcases the passion of many young Brooklyn birders—their poetry, essays, photography, and artwork.

As always, don’t forget to visit the BBC’s website for information on field trips and events, and contact us at newsletter@brooklynbirdclub.org if you would like to contribute to the Clapper Rail.

– Ryan Goldberg
Right place, right time: Plumb Beach

By Mike Yuan

Plumb Beach (sometimes spelled “Plum”), a one-mile-long strip of beach situated along the inlet to Jamaica Bay, offers a prime coastal habitat for the Brooklyn birder. The salt marsh and tidal flats make it Kings County’s premier shorebird hotspot and host to many a county and even ABA area rarity. For most of the year, spring through autumn, it’s the right place to be for choice coastal birds, but being there at the right time is just as important. Its ephemeral, fleeting moments make it special.

History of Plumb “island”

Originally known as Plum Island, named for the beach plums growing on it, a narrow waterway called Hog Creek separated it from the neighborhood of Sheepshead Bay and the Brooklyn mainland. Plum Island has always attracted hardy and irreverent types since the federal government acquired it in the 1890s. A former judge leased the land from the government, and ruled the island like his personal fiefdom, hosting a carnival featuring boxing matches, illegal just across the water in New York State. Later, it served as a poor man’s summer resort for 1,500 residents in the 1920s. The great hurricane of 1938, the “Long Island Express,” ended residential activity on the island. The storm brought serious damage to the resident structures on the island, and the filling in of Hog Creek and the construction of the Shore Parkway two years later dissolved the community.

In 1972, the federal government took over management of it again, and it became part of the Gateway National Recreation Area, who began calling it “Plumb Beach.” Like most waterfront areas in the polluted New York City waterways, it collects junk
and garbage, but southerly sea breezes and its peaceful position make it attractive for kiteboarders and dog walkers, as well as birders.

How to get there
A car will get you there most easily. Take the east bound Belt Parkway and pull off into the marked rest area parking lot one mile past the Exit 9 Knapp Street exit. This parking lot sits roughly at the center of Plumb Beach, where it’s a half-mile walk to the eastern end.

Public transportation takes you to the far western end. Take the B or Q train to Sheepshead Bay, then the B4 bus from outside the station. After 1.5 miles, the bus drops you off at Knapp Street and the Shore Parkway service drive, where it’s a one-block walk to the western beach access at Emmons Avenue.

By car, some birders prefer to park in the parking lot near the former Lighthouse Inn Motel on the beach’s western end, which gives you a vantage of Sheepshead Bay and an opportunity to walk the least-birded western stretch of Plumb Beach.

Visiting Plumb
Just inland from Breezy Point and the Atlantic Ocean, Plumb sits along the relatively sheltered inlet to Jamaica Bay. To bird the marsh and tidal flats, it’s best to consult a tide chart before visiting. Websites like www.saltwatertides.com give detailed low and high tide times. Use Plumb Beach Channel as the tide marker.

If entering from the western fisherman’s lot by the motel, cross through the field to access the beach, where you might hear a willow flycatcher in late spring and summer. In winter, loons and grebes can be seen in the inlet by Manhattan Beach. Recently constructed groins to prevent beach erosion provide ample resting spots for migrating shorebirds and gulls, and shorebirds like sanderlings, least and semipalmated sandpipers, and semipalmated plovers will frequent the beach.

From the main parking lot, check the trees for migrating passerines, then walk past the boarded-up rest room building, once faded red, now dark blue, to get to the beach. Walk down to the first jetty on your left to start your walk out to the east end. From mid-May to June, mating horseshoe crabs climb the beach to mate and lay eggs along the beach, and migrating red knots and summering laughing gulls feast on the bounty. Once past the jetty, a few entrance points through the dunes give you the choice to bird the marsh habitat or the beach.

Marsh
Plumb Beach offers a unique salt marsh habitat for Brooklyn, where instead of just looking out to the marsh, you can find yourself in the marsh. Dunes separate the beach from the marsh, and a worn path follows the entire south edge of the marsh. Following the length of the marsh will give you different viewpoints of the channel that bisects the marsh. Heron and egrets feed in the marsh, and the occasional gull-billed tern can be seen patrolling above, swooping down to pick up fiddler crabs. Toward the eastern end of the marsh, the path curves north and opens to a sandy area, where annually returning tagged American oystercatchers nest.

From here, you’ll see the mouth of the channel into the marsh. Low tide offers you the opportunity to walk through the channel. Rubber boots offer the most assurance, but it’s possible to maneuver through
with hiking boots. Don’t step on the mussel beds and be careful around the soft muddy spots. If you haven’t explored it before, you can carefully learn your way and footing at low tide.

In summer, you’ll hear the mechanical gibberish of a boat-tailed grackle, and the kek of a calling clapper rail. With luck, you might see the fuzzy black juveniles scuttling around with their parents. Short-billed dowitchers, greater and lesser yellowlegs, and peeps take shelter around the grasses, and a rare ruff made a brief appearance here a few years ago. In September 2008, the first documented observation of a yellow wagtail in the eastern U.S. occurred on the edges on the marsh, and a LeConte’s sparrow appeared a month later.

Around the dunes that surround the marsh, you may find Savannah sparrows, including the beach-prefering Ipswich subspecies. Peak migration of Ammodramus sparrows is in October, where you can find candidates to puzzle over the overlapping characteristics of Nelson’s versus saltmarsh sparrows. A rare northern wheatear spent a few days on the outskirts of the marsh in October 2014, making a washed-up boat its favorite perch. If at low tide, you can cross over the inlet to explore the north side of the marsh, where it is drier. American bittern has been spotted here on past Christmas Bird Counts. Otherwise, you can turn around to bird the flats.

Flats

The transitional nature of the tides offers the potential for pleasant surprises and discoveries at Plumb, but you’ll need patience and stamina to allow the birds to come to you. You can visit on either a rising or falling tide. On a rising tide, birds forced to leave submerged points around Jamaica Bay may find a spot on the remaining sandbars at Plumb. You might get looks at individuals or a flock, at least until that sandbar disappears. Peak high tide reduces the amount of viable land for birds to use, and may be the least productive time at Plumb, but it can push out sparrows and rails to the perimeters of the marsh and present better viewing opportunities.

On a falling tide, a sandbar off the far eastern point will emerge, offering a perch for gulls and terns, and newly exposed feeding areas for migrating shorebirds. Temporary pools on the flats attract others. With patience, and perhaps a portable chair, a watch from the eastern end can bring in surprises, but their visits could be brief. Much desired shorebirds for Brooklyn, like marbled and Hudsonian godwits, whimbrel, buff-breasted sandpiper, and stilt sandpiper have made fleeting visits to the flats. In late July, piping plovers and royal terns disperse from their breeding grounds.
and feed and rest on the beach and sandbars. Often, human and canine activity will flush birds, so birding in the early morning is ideal.

At dead low tide, the flats are expansive, and reach far into the inlet, but birds spread out more and can be harder to find. The saying “bad weather brings in good birds” indeed applies to birding at Plumb Beach. Recently, in May, rainy weather drove terns that usually feed off Breezy Point to the low-tide flats, and the flocks included an Arctic tern, a long-distance migrant that travels over open ocean and typically comes to roost further east on Long Island.

The potential of finding something special at Plumb is what draws in birders, but enjoying the cool breeze from the bay, while roaming a marsh with the whirr of Belt Parkway traffic in the background and the solemn Marine Parkway Bridge in the distance, offers a unique Brooklyn experience.
Nests
By Sheila Friedman

It’s mid-July as I write this and spring migration is long over. Birds, whether they stayed here or pushed further north following their internal clocks, got down to the business of nest building and raising the next generation.

Nests are iconic. Nest imagery figures heavily in our idioms:

Nest egg, feather your nest, empty nest, on the nest (In the classic film “It’s a Wonderful Life,” James Stewart’s character George Bailey says to his newly-expecting wife, Donna Reed’s character Mary: “Mary, are you on the nest?”), a nest of vipers, and love nest, to name a few.

In my teaching days, I brought my love of birds to my fifth-grade students. We observed nests I’d found on the ground and brought in. We compared the tiny, fastidious hummingbird’s nest, made of small twigs and spider’s silk, to the robin’s larger, mud-filled and somewhat slapdash nest. Something as obvious to adults as the size of a nest in relation to the bird that built it is a revelation to a 10-year-old.

However, nothing compared to a class visit to Prospect Park, shared binoculars in hand to see the real thing in its rightful place. Once we ran into Peter Dorosh near the Lullwater, and he showed us a tiny blue-gray gnatcatcher sitting in her equally tiny nest. “Oh, look!” whispered my normally raucous students.

Nesting season for red-tailed hawks coincided with the Department of Education’s test prep and testing calendar that New York City students must endure. As a relaxing (yet informative) break, I would turn on Cornell’s red-tailed hawk cam in my classroom. My students and I would gather our chairs around the computer screen and watch the hawks—then Big Red and the late Ezra—build a nest and later incubate and care for their young chicks. Their nest was at the top of a tall light post surrounding one of Cornell’s athletic fields. In Ithaca it can be really cold in April and we saw the adult birds sometimes covered with ice and snow. We worried about them and cheered when the first eggs started to hatch and grew to be the fuzzy...
white chicks that my students then named.

They had questions too. Why did the parents put leaves and branches in the nest? We speculated—to eat? No, we could see that what they brought to the nest was far bloodier than leaves. Cornell answered our questions: Sometimes leaves provide pest control in the nest. As we learned our compassion grew, and I hoped that experiences like this were the beginning of a lifelong connection to the animals that share our world.

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As a retired teacher now, I responded (as did several other BBC members) to an email from club president Dennis Hrehowsik with a request from the Wildlife Unit of the NYC Parks Department. They needed volunteers for their raptor nest-monitoring project, which began in February with online training and then scouting of possible nest sites in all five boroughs.

Although I witnessed hawks performing their courtship flights over the lake in Prospect Park, I couldn’t locate a nest. But when, in late March, Katie Leung, the field technician of the Wildlife Unit, told me of a possible location in Green-Wood Cemetery, I was hopeful. (I later learned that some birders were familiar with this site as a previous nest or nesting attempt.) When I traveled to the cemetery to see for myself, it was cold and rainy. As I walked through rows of Victorian gravestones I had my eye on a tall Eastern white pine. I thought I could see a dark spot about 12 feet below the top, which affirmed what I had read beforehand that red-tailed hawks “typically put their nests in the crowns of tall trees where they have a commanding view of the landscape.” Workers were sawing trees nearby, noise which I assumed would surely scare off a nest-building bird. Later, Katie told me that the mere fact that hawks nest in our urban environment signals that noise may not affect them.

Being unsure that I’d located the nest, I returned the next day. As the book of prophecy and wisdom, the I Ching, says, “Perseverance furthers.” This time I saw a hawk’s head peeking out above the nest. Red-tailed hawks are a common sight in Brooklyn, so it surprised me how elated I felt to see that, yes, this was the nest!

That was at the end of March. For the next two and a half months I made weekly visits (and sometimes
more often when things turned interesting) to the nest site as did my co-monitor, Josh Malbin. We took turns entering our data on the NestWatch website. (You can see some of Josh’s videos here.) We observed the parents probably incubating the eggs, three new chicks peeking out, the parents bringing them food and feeding them, the chicks “branching” as if they were ornaments on a Christmas tree, and then of course, fledging. April, May and a bit of June— that’s how long it takes to raise a raptor.

There were also upsetting moments. For example, checking on the chicks (they are called eyases) after a particularly powerful storm and not seeing any sign of them was cause for worry. “You are there to observe,” Katie Leung advised. “The views of the nests in trees, as opposed to nests on platforms or buildings, may become obscured by leaves. Don’t worry if you lose sight of them.” The next day, they were there looking just fine.

Even though I knew I had nothing to do with their progress or success, it was inevitable that a little part of my maternal (or grand-maternal) heart was touched by these impressive creatures. I rooted for them and was thrilled on the day that I saw one of them fly to a nearby tree. Each time I visited, I gave them names gathered from the headstones nearby. Sometimes I visited Abigail, Henry, Arabella, or Hiram. Other times I greeted Constance, William and Eliza.

I visited the young hawks a few more times after they had fledged. I learned that after about 42-46 days in the nest, they’ll hang around the area for another several weeks learning and practicing the skills that they need to survive. About two and a half weeks after fledging they’ll be able to take longer flights. Then, when they’re able to fly farther and hunt successfully, they leave their parents’ territory. They may join up with other young birds in a “juvenile staging area” before finally moving on. Kind of like college.

NestWatch, which is run by Cornell’s Lab of Ornithology, is a citizen science project and open to anyone nationwide. You can monitor backyard birds and migrating birds. Cornell will use the collected data to study the effects of the changing climate on their habitat, populations, and invasive species. Locally,
Katie Leung told me that their data will help the Parks Department understand raptors’ adaptability, territory size, and habitat preference, and ensure their health and reproductive success. For example, the use of rodenticide is suspended between March and August to limit the instances of poisoning in breeding raptors. The use of dry ice to control rat populations has been piloted in some places.

I asked Katie why this project was important to her.

“Hawks and other raptors are an integral part of New York City’s urban ecosystem,” she told me. “I aim to promote peaceful coexistence between New Yorkers and the urban wildlife. My colleagues and I wanted to involve birdwatchers by being our many eyes in the sky. I’ve found that the most incredible thing was how much time and effort each person invested toward the nests and resident raptors. Every week I’ve looked forward to the stories, photos, and videos that the birdwatchers shared with me, and there was no shortage of awe and respect for the birds.”

Note from Katie Leung:

Our Urban Park Rangers regularly lead birding events throughout the five boroughs. You can find all upcoming events on our calendar. We also have an interactive map that shows the best times and places to spot various birds and wildlife throughout the city.

In 2016, the City launched a campaign called “WildlifeNYC” with the goal of increasing public awareness about wildlife in the city and discouraging feeding. You may have seen the ads on buses or on the subway. The campaign specifically focuses on red-tailed hawks, piping plovers, mallards, deer, raccoons and coyotes.
Red-tailed hawk in Prospect Park. Photograph by Charles Tang.
By Linda Ewing

It was Peter Dorosh who first brought up Magee Marsh: “You’re from Toledo? I guess you must have been to Magee Marsh a lot, huh?”

I pretended to know what he was talking about, but the embarrassing fact is, I wasn’t entirely sure where Magee Marsh was, or if I had ever been there.

When I was growing up in Toledo, there was no Magee Marsh. Or more precisely: there was an expanse of marshland and scrubby woodlands along Lake Erie, and that expanse was once owned by the Magee family, but I don’t recall anyone referring to it as Magee Marsh. Parts of it were inaccessible and intimidating, the domain of men with shotguns and wading boots. Parts of it were the dauntingly vast Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. And a very small part of it was Crane Creek State Park—“crane” being the local folk name for any long-legged wading bird, “creek” being pronounced “crick”—which is where I used to go with my parents and sister to see birds. I remember brown winter fields whitened by swans and snow geese. I remember counting each elegant great egret until I lost track of the total. I remember telling my grandparents to stop calling egrets and herons “cranes,” because they are completely different birds, and because I was insufferable.

What I don’t remember are warblers—probably because we had plenty of those in the wooded ravine behind our house.

And so, when Peter—and then Karen, and then Ryan—waxed euphoric about spring passerine migration in northwest Ohio, I smiled and shrugged. How much better could this renamed Magee Marsh be, really, than my parents’ backyard?

But they kept talking about it, and I was sufficiently intrigued to do a bit of research. That’s how I discovered that Magee Marsh was in fact the Crane Creek of my childhood, made bigger and better, and that my annual birthday/Mother’s Day trip home had, since 2009, overlapped with the “Biggest Week in American Birding” without my even knowing it. Gripped by a potent mix of nostalgia and birdlust, I added a few extra days to this year’s visit and began following the Black Swamp Bird Observatory on Twitter. My excitement mounted as I booked a flight, a rental car, and after some hesitation, a hotel room.

For past May visits, I’d always stayed at my parents’ home. Although the old house sold last winter, staying in a hotel chosen for its proximity to Magee Marsh, rather than to my recently-widowed mother’s apartment, felt at once sad and liberating, adventurous and disloyal: in a word, complicated. I justified the first night as a birthday present to myself. When my mother called to let me know that, despite what she’d told me initially, the guest unit in her senior complex wasn’t available on Thursday after all, I urged her not to worry—and as soon as I hung up the phone, gleefully added a second night to my reservation at the Comfort Inn East in Oregon, Ohio.

I still felt a bit of guilt as I pointed my rental car toward I-280 instead of continuing south on I-75, but the “Welcome, Birders!” signs on Navarre Avenue soothed it. After I spotted a black-necked stilt in the waning light of that first day, only a trace remained. And by the next morning, when I entered the hotel’s breakfast room in the pre-dawn murk and found it crowded with excited, shining-eyed birders, it was gone entirely.

The young woman at the coffee place across from the hotel expressed astonishment that people traveled to her small town from so far away—she’d met a couple from Alaska, even!—and I shared her wonder. It’s a powerful thing, to see the childhood passion that marked you as an oddball overtake the terrain of your awkward, oddball childhood. When and how did birding become such a significant economic force in northwest Ohio?

I had no idea, but it was an interesting question to consider as I filled my thermos and headed east on Route 2 toward Magee Marsh.

Before the trip, I’d spent hours going through Crane Creek Park. Photograph by Donald James Ewing Jr.
old photographs that my father had painstakingly converted from slides to digital format for my sister and me. So when the access road into the park approached the Sportsmen’s Migratory Bird Center, I immediately recognized the old Crane Creek nature center, and stopped to walk around it (netting indigo buntings and white-crowned sparrows for my day list). I had forgotten all about the adjacent observation platform, but seeing it again gave me an almost physical jolt. As much as I wanted to race to the top one more time, it was closed—because of bees, a sign said. I could only linger at its base.

But I didn’t linger long: there were birds to see. Although it was a weekday, the parking lot by the boardwalk was already filling up with cars and people. I parked at the far end, and immediately swiveled my binoculars up, down and around. Before I reached the golden-winged warbler stakeout at the boardwalk’s west entrance, I’d already seen multiple bald eagles, several scarlet tanagers, too many Baltimore orioles to count, and half a dozen warbler species. Cape Mays, which I’d worked so hard for in Prospect Park, were in every tree, or so it seemed.

I didn’t see any rarities that morning—an errant black-throated gray warbler showed up a couple of days later, and I’d have had a better shot at a Kirtland’s in Manhattan, as it turned out—but I didn’t care. I reveled in the sheer quantity and variety of eye-level birds, and in the excitement and earnest helpfulness of the hundreds of birders around me. My most vivid memory from those hours on the boardwalk is of a warbler tornado: a tight, swirling funnel of birds (Blackburnian, bay-breasted, black-throated green and more, perhaps a dozen in all) most likely provoked, I was told, by a nearby owl.

Over the next four days, I continued to add to my storehouse of memories. I watched diving terns at Metzger Marsh, where my grandfather used to fish for lake perch. I drove through the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in the rain, just as we had in my parents’ forest green Impala, thinking with mild embarrassment how I had never liked it as much as Crane Creek—probably because there was no observation platform to race up. When I stopped to look at a pair of roosting pelicans, I could hear trumpeter swans bugle and an unseen sora whinny. Sitting there, rain coating the windshield and blowing through my cracked window, I decided that I might just possibly love the refuge’s expansive wetlands more than the celebrated Magee Marsh boardwalk.

Even after I relocated from the Comfort Inn to my mother’s building for the weekend, I kept on birding, kept on adding new memories to old places. Oak Openings Metro Park, the site of all those Electrical Engineering department picnics I was dragged to as a kid, is a great place to see meadowlarks and lark grasshopper sparrows. On my last day, when I took my mother out to lunch at one of the cheese-intensive Mexican restaurants in Toledo that defined that cuisine for me into young adulthood, a broad-winged hawk flew out of the parking lot just as we pulled in.

Birding Magee Marsh and northwest Ohio during spring migration is special wherever you grew up, as thousands of visitors from around the country and the globe can attest. But when your earliest birding memories are from Toledo and the surrounding area, it’s even more special. Next year will be the 10th anniversary of the Biggest Week in American Birding, and I wouldn’t miss it for the world: my hometown and I still have some catching up to do.
Right after sunrise on June 19, the local pair of American kestrels went berserk. The male and female birds were hovering over the roofs behind the nest site on the corner. They were calling, over and over again. The sound was similar to the cyclical alarm call they gave when fish crows were in the area, only this time the falcons kept it up for a much longer period. Something was happening up there.

Kestrels are known for hovering, but we hadn’t seen all that much of it in six months of observing this pair from our apartment windows in Sunset Park. Except when a red-tailed hawk or fish crow was on the scene.

After weeks of watching the male bring kill after kill to perches near the nest and the female emerge from the nest to be handed food bill-to-bill, it was about time for fledglings. Were they, in fact, hovering over one of their fledglings on the roof?

I’d actually caught a glimpse of a nestling two days earlier. This was my first sign of generation 2018. The nest, above the corner bodega, was inside the right bracket of the cornice. The opening was rectangular. It had previously been a starling nest. (In fact, back in February, when I first saw the male kestrel enter this cornice, there was a noisy contretemps with the local starlings.) Some ribbony-stringy leftovers from the former occupants were stuck to the entrance. The young falcon inside was clawing at a piece of ribbon attached to the metal. Its foot stuck out into the sunlight grasping the string, pulling it in. American kestrel babies have pale feet. And, like other babies we know, they’re grabby!

For two months, we could only guess about what was going on inside this nest. Now we knew there was definitely something!

In the literature, male American kestrels have been recorded brooding from 0-60 percent of the time. This is an enormous range. The local male was on the low end. I’m not sure he did any incubating at all. The female was only seen away from the nest briefly.

But if the male wasn’t doing incubation duty, he
sure was hunting. Once I saw a small rodent in his talons, but otherwise it was sparrows, warblers, and at least one vireo, often several times a day. Most of the corpses couldn’t be identified; some were obvious nestlings, though.

His usual strategy was to pluck the prey, eat the head, and then give the rest to the female. Sometimes when he had food, he made a distinctive clicking purr, never heard otherwise. I had first heard this noise on our fire escape. My presence inside obviously spooked him, and he flew off, leaving a headless songbird in the corner. It was there for at least fifteen minutes before he retrieved it.

Most remarkable was seeing both the male and female swallowing down their preys’ feet whole.

Like the female did during courtship, the male cached food. There was a knothole on top of a big branch in the London Plane tree across the street. It had tiny little bird feet sticking out of it on at least three occasions. This cache, however, was busted by a fish crow. One or two of these corvids harried the falcons day after day in June before the fledglings emerged, making repeated passes around the block as the falcons screamed, chased the crows, were chased by the crows, and hovered overhead. Crows stole kestrel food, kestrels robbed nests—it was quite the education in wildlife.

Amongst all the birds in the world, cavity nesters are in the distinct minority. The American kestrel is the only cavity-nesting raptor in North America. So how many eggs were in that cavity? We’ll never know. Three to five is the range in the literature.

In other American kestrels news, at least one male nestling fledged at a nest I know about on 5th Avenue in Park Slope. There had been two nestlings peaking out of the wooden cornice hole here, but I couldn’t be there every day to see what developed. A friend checking in on a nest in Manhattan’s Chinatown saw two successful fledglings, a male and a female. The Wild Bird Fund posted a picture on Twitter in late June of eight baby falcons they were caring for. It was evidently raining American kestrels around the city.

Meanwhile, here in Sunset Park on June 20, we suddenly had one male and two female fledglings perched inside the big ailanthus in the backyard behind the nest. The male fledgling had downy fluff on his head for days. His father was identifiable because of a gaping patch in his chest feathers and a broken tail feather (parenthood is hard!). The females were much more heavily streaked than their mother. All three youngsters were quiet, even when a parent was nearby with food, so unlike songbird chicks.

Kestrels: The Next Generation played out on rooftops over the next two weeks. They bathed in rooftop puddles, something I’ve always suspected urban raptors do. They tussled with each other, nipping at each other’s feathers, snagging each other’s tails with their claws. At least twice I caught the male fledgling sitting down, something I’ve never seen a raptor do before. One day, a female on her own was eating a big June beetle.

And yes, they made noise. But their calls were remarkably subdued compared to their parents.
returned to perching on the tall car service antenna on 5th Avenue where he had spent a lot of time during the winter before courting began.

On July 7 at Bush Terminal Park we came upon quite a scene. A male and two female American kestrels were stalking killdeer. The falcons were in turn being harried by a couple of Northern mockingbirds. The killdeer, protecting at least one hatchling, were loud as all get-out. Was this the young falcon trio from six blocks uphill or was it another family entirely?

By the time this is published, all these kestrels should have spread out into their own new territories. But because these birds aren’t banded or tagged with transmitters, though, we can’t say much more than this. Might they do some short-distance migration? If they have survived, that is—a big if, since survival rates for the first year are pretty grim. One statistic I’ve come across for raptors is that only one in three will make it to their first birthday.

After six months of reliable neighborhood kestrels, half a year of colorful little falcons right across the street, my partner and I still jump to the window when we hear them, even though this happens rarely now.

Maybe the young will be seen in your neighborhood? It looks like the male parent is sticking around locally. Will the female return next season? That cornice on the corner looks like a great place to raise a family…

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I will never climb Mt. Everest. I’m not the type. I’m too acutely aware of the perils that await human beings at high altitude. At best, it seems very cold. I’m not even an enthusiastic traveler. When the opportunity arose in college to study abroad, and my peers hurried off to Rome, or Copenhagen, or someplace further flung, I signed up for a semester at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, located right here in New York City.
The students enrolled in this program (me and another guy) were housed on Roosevelt Island. From there, I was maybe 90 minutes from my home in New Jersey by public transit. A stone’s throw. This was considered “abroad” only by administrative fiat, as any official academic endeavor that happened off campus was run through the school’s study abroad program.

Roosevelt Island, if you haven’t been, is a strange place. It’s a long, thin island in the East River, equidistant from Manhattan and Queens. It’s about 40 blocks long, and narrow enough that it only has one street. It’s called Main Street, which, to me, has always seemed a little folksy for New York City. The subway station (which was more convenient for my commute than the famous tram) is located across from 62nd Street, and my building was at about 80th, which is to say the walk to and from the train was substantial.

Walking along Main St. has a certain charm. You get the impression that you are looking at an urban planner’s vision of the future, circa 1975. After making that same walk for a couple months, however, the charm had worn thin. The island only has one road, but there are also footpaths that run along the water. They are less direct, but by April I was ready for a longer route, so long as it was a novel one.

As I walked home along the waterfront, appreciating the uninterrupted views of Manhattan, I noticed some birds loitering in the river, just at the water’s edge. I had never paid much attention to birds, but I could recognize the 10 or 15 species that I encountered in my day to day life. I felt this put me ahead of the average person, as far as birds go (the veracity of this claim is questionable), but these new birds were neither mallards, nor Canada geese, and that was enough to render them mysterious to me. I knew some birds were considered rare, and I had certainly never seen these before. Were these birds rare? I had recently acquired an Audubon Field Guide that had been my grandfather’s, and I was intent to consult it when I got home to find out.

The first thing I discovered when I opened the guide is that I wasn’t strictly sure what category of bird these were. They were swimming around in water, and they were generally duck-shaped, but there were so many types of birds that fit that criteria, and I had heard of so few of them! Were these cormorants? Were these mergansers? What even is a merganser? Needless to say, I had not arrived at an ID, but I kept looking. Who knows when or if I would see these birds again, and I wanted to be better prepared next time.

I was driven in part by what I’ll call a sort of good-natured pedantry, a sense that there is some virtue in knowing what’s what. But more potent than that was a growing anxiety. I still didn’t know whether these were rare birds or not. It was a variant of Fear Of Missing Out. Rather than worrying that I was missing out on a more interesting experience happening somewhere else, I was worried that an experience I’d already had might have been interesting, but I would never know for sure.

I was extremely relieved, then, to see that the same birds were there again the next day. I looked at them with a more critical eye, and hurried home to renew my search. I knew the birds were sort of brown, but that also didn’t narrow the list down as much as I had hoped. It was staggering to me how many aspects of shape and size and coloration and behavior and location and time of year were needed to make an ID with any confidence.

The next day, the birds were still there, but I also noticed something else in the water. A little head sticking up and swimming around, that would periodically submerge and reemerge a surprising distance away. This looked a lot like the cormorants in the guide, which meant I could rule out cormorants. The list had gotten smaller, which was a significant development.

After a few more iterations of this process, I finally put a name to my birds. I had initially assumed that the little white smudge on their necks was either a matter of individual variation, or perhaps some East River sludge that stuck to them after their feeding, but it turned out to be the key identifying feature. They were brants. Not rare, as far as I could tell, but a bird I had never heard of.

The part of this search that most surprised me was the magnitude of bird diversity. Flipping through the Audubon guide with an active interest in its contents made me realize, in a way that flipping through it idly had not, that there were a lot of birds, or at least a lot more than I had thought. I had underestimated the number of species that might be encountered in Eastern North America by an order of magnitude. I may have known more about birds than the average person, but I clearly knew far less than the average birdwatcher.

As best as I can figure, this was the moment I became a birder. What mattered to me was no longer where I stood among hypothetical everyday people with general, everyday knowledge, but where I stood against specialists, with specialized knowledge. I had
a lot to learn, and I got started right away by reading what I could about these newly-identified brants. The information I could find suggested that these birds were merely stopping here temporarily. They were refueling for their long flight to their summer nesting grounds, the tundras above the Arctic Circle.

Now, I had always thought of nature as something that happened someplace else. I believed whatever quality had once made this place useful to the natural world had been depleted when the city was built. The plants and animals that lived here, I thought, were limited to pigeons, rats, and other species who had found success interjecting themselves into human settlements. Natural spectacles, like the mass migration of animals, must surely take place off in some national park, or at least in the countryside. Living this close to midtown Manhattan, one of the most urban places in the world, it should not be possible to see that sort of thing without hearing David Attenborough’s voice. Nothing from the tundra belonged here, where I lived.

I’m a believer in systems thinking. In my view, if you look closely at two things that are highly interdependent, the border between them gets blurrier, not sharper. These birds rely on the expansive grazing lands of the tundra to feed their young and fuel their flight south. Their grazing, in turn, limits the types of plants that can survive in the tundra, encouraging the growth of species that can recover well after being chewed on by thousands of hungry birds. Each is fundamentally shaped by the other. Each, if viewed with the right perspective, can be seen in the other.

I had seen birds while looking at Manhattan that were intrinsically connected with a very far flung place. In this instant, the tundra changed in my mind from an abstract concept that I was generally aware of, to a real, actual place. A place that affected the things I saw in my everyday life, despite being thousands of miles away, in one of the most urban places in the world. The Earth came into focus in my mind as a single physical object. It was not a collection of many disparate places, but one big place. And no matter where I went, I would always be there; I would always be a part of it. This is the most valuable thing birdwatching has taught me.

I will never climb Mount Everest. And I may never travel to the tundras above the Arctic Circle. But every year, a stone’s throw from home, I will see them as they fly past me.
Clockwise from top: female wood duck and chicks in Prospect Park, herring gulls at Marine Park, little blue heron at Plumb Beach, whimbrel at Plumb Beach, yellow-crowned night heron at Marine Park. Photographs by Paul Chung.
Travel diaries: Colombia
By Ed Crowne

Over 1900 sp. birds. 70-plus endemics. Variety of habitats: coast, desert, lowland rainforest, paramo, llanos, cloud forest. Only five hours from New York!

Sound good? It is—now.

“Ironically, Colombia, the country that supports more birds than any other in the world, and which has South America’s best field guide, is not a popular birding destination. This is because of the poor infrastructure, which can mean lengthy travel times and, more importantly, the long-standing drug and guerilla wars, which can make traveling very dangerous,” wrote Nigel Wheatley in 1995 in Where to Watch Birds in South America.

Today, it is safe to say that Colombia is much safer. At no time, during three weeks of birding in Colombia last winter did my wife, Robbyn, and I feel insecure, whether in heavily populated urban areas or in isolated rural sites. Yet, as I write, I see and hear reports of instability occasioned by dissatisfaction with the terms of the 2016 political settlement and new pressures exerted by dissolution in Venezuela. And, as the BBC recently reported, “Colombia’s war on drugs is very far from over.”

After reading Steve Hilty’s Birds of Tropical America for the first time I was motivated to bird Colombia. But the turmoil there meant delay. In the meantime there was all the real estate encircling Colombia. Colombia connects by land to Panama and is then bounded advancing clockwise by the Caribbean Sea, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and the Pacific Ocean. For me Brooklyn’s winter weather is an expedient excuse to explore the Neotropics. So after several birding trips to Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador and the resolution of Colombia’s political war, the time for a visit had arrived.

Departing New York at the edge of anticipation with a short time to think about the evolution of bird migration and study the plates (including some by the Brooklyn Bird Club’s past president John Yrizarry) in Hilty’s Birds of Colombia, we arrived five hours later.
Our time in Colombia began in Cartagena, which is perched, like its Old World Spanish counterpart and its more ancient Phoenician namesake, at the edge of a sea, the Caribbean. In February, Cartagena was very warm and sunlit. Magnificent frigatebirds and black vultures swirled in the languid air like black kites in pale skies. Below them street merchants filled carts with a rainbow of tropical fruits. With a population of one million, this vibrant city is dominated by its 16th century Castillo and newer glass towers. Hotels in the Old City or Centro Historico preserve some its architectural heritage and afford visiting tourists interesting and hospitable accommodations.

While not a prime birding destination, Cartagena can be birded on foot with casual early morning walks to the sea, small parks, and lagoons. I searched, unsuccessfully, along the mangroves that line the local lagoons for Canario manglero—prothonotary warbler—though the effort did yield some other worthwhile results. The prothonotary warbler, along with over 240 species, is found on eBird lists for the Jardin Botanico, 10 kilometers from Cartagena’s Old City.

From Cartagena we went by minibus along the coast to Santa Marta. As the bus rolled on I caught fleeting glimpses of birds in this Caribbean coastal terrain. At Santa Marta, a coastal city with a population of half a million, we were met by our driver to convey us to our first Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta stop: Casa Viejas. Not a first-order birder’s destination, Casa Viejas nonetheless enables seeing birds not seen at the higher elevations of Santa Marta. A friendly, knowledgeable local guide is available here.

Looking out from our room toward the distant city of Santa Marta, I watched one evening as two king vultures drifted toward us. The next morning, I encountered one of them roosting in a tree.

Rising above the city of Santa Marta, the Sierra incorporates over 17,000 square kilometers and includes the highest elevations (5700m) in Colombia. Almost one-third (20) of Colombia’s endemics reside here. From Casa Viejas at about 1000m we ascended higher to the first of three ProAves reserves we would visit. ProAves’s El Dorado reserve is another 1000m above Casa Viejas. Like many of the ProAves reserves, El Dorado offers lodging and a local guide to their list of over 360 species. While we were there, a Field Guides tour group was there. From the lodge, birders are able to travel an additional 1000m higher in search of range-restricted species.

Almost immediately upon our arrival at El Dorado I saw a blue-naped chlorophonia, a bird as beautiful as its name implies. The next day our guide helped us hear and see the endemic Santa Marta antpitta and the white-lored warbler along with many other birds. Very near the lodge was a nesting pair of the near-endemic white-tipped quetzal.

From El Dorado we moved down slope to Minca. Somewhat like Casa Viejas, Minca is an intermediate step on the way to the higher elevations accessible from ProAves’s El Dorado lodge. The main local business in Minca is conveying tourists by motobike to Pozo Azul, where pools of refreshing rushing water await. During walks upward from Minca, I watched a flock of rose-breasted grosbeaks in a fruiting tree and Baltimore orioles surveying the countryside. On a pre-dawn walk I listened to a black-and-white owl.
From Santa Marta one could travel east about 80 kilometers to Los Flamencos Nature Sanctuary (over 300 species on eBird) and still further to the northern desert of Colombia, the Guajira Peninsula. A perhaps useful alternative to using Cartagena as an entry point is instead to begin in Barranquilla, only 90 minutes from Santa Marta.

Back at Santa Marta, we boarded a commuter jet that descended in Medellin in less than one hour. Using Medellin as a hub, we toured five sites of varying distances and directions from Medellin as well as Medellin itself. Our first stop was Santa Fe de Antioquia, a colonial town less than two hours northwest of Medellin. A short ride in a tuk tuk, a three-wheeled motorized rickshaw, conveyed us to “Colombia’s Brooklyn Bridge” over the Rio Cauca. The bridge’s Colombian engineer had worked on the Brooklyn Bridge and used it as a model for Colombia’s bridge. With only a little imagination I could envision the volumes of water rushing beneath the bridge during the rainy season. Though birding was not the main focus here, there were assorted birds in the rampant bougainvillea and Southern lapwings on dry river flats.

Medellin lies in a valley 1500m above the sea. With 2.5 million residents, it is decidedly urban, featuring a large outdoor collection of Ferdinand Botero sculptures, a very modern urban train and of particular interest to birders, a botanical garden.

Our next ProAves stop was at the Chestnut-capped Piha Reserve (eBird lists over 480 species here), reached by minibus from Medellin, in the northern part of the central Andes. The endemic cotinga after which the reserve is named is restricted to the geography of this reserve. At an elevation of 1800m, Piha is similar in some physical respects to El Dorado. Among the interesting birds we encountered here were blackish rail, white-mantled barbet, red-bellied grackle, pavonine cuckoo and chestnut–capped piha.

After an at times bone-jarring return trip to Medellin, we picked up a rental car en route to our third and final ProAves reserve. The roads in and around Medellin were reputed to be good and in general that is how we found them. Google provides reliable navigating advice.

The birds found at Las Tangaras (260-plus species list, though eBird lists well over 400) belong to the Choco biogeography that extends into Ecuador. Consequently, I was able to see again some of the species I had seen many years earlier in northwest Ecuador and, with the help of our guide, Luis, familiarize myself with others for the first time. One of the prized birds to be seen at Las Tangaras is the gold-ringed tanager, a local endemic that appears on the cover of Birdwatching in Colombia (J. Beckers and P. Florez).

The trails at Las Tangaras were my favorite among the several sites we birded. Toucan barbets vocalized as they perched in the Cecropia trees in which they were feeding while swallow-tailed kites hunted above. Only El Dorado with its lengthy list of endemics and somewhat better facilities provided a perhaps better birding experience. Yet with dining al fresco at Las Tangaras and seeing red-ruffed fruitcrows, club- and golden-winged manakins, black solitaire, the gold-ringed tanager and other memorable birds was a very close second.

During our last hours at Las Tangaras, we watched a violet-tailed sylph vie with other hummingbirds at

Las Tangaras. Photograph by Ed Crowne.
a small assemblage of feeders near the trail. As we left I pointed to a Solanum quitoense growing nearby. Our guide, Luis, collected an armful of its fruits (lulo in Colombia) and deposited them in his four-wheel drive. I had first seen and learned about this plant at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Jardin, a few hours from Las Tangaras, was our southernmost birding locale. Like Santa Fe de Antioquia, birding Jardin is a secondary consideration. But it is where the extremely rare yellow-eared parrot is sometimes seen. Jardin also hosts an Andean cock-of-the-rock lek. More than twenty of this spectacular cotinga were gathered here, vocalizing and displaying in close proximity. Elsewhere in Jardin I walked a trail adjacent to a field of coffee trees and was pleased to encounter several of a more familiar bird, mourning warbler.

The tail end of our trip meant a four-hour drive from Medellin, almost halfway to Bogota, to Canon del Rio Claro, a privately-owned and operated resort whose activities include birding as well as rafting, ziplining, and hiking. For birders, some interesting lists for RN Canon del Rio Claro can be viewed on eBird (almost 500 species). There are trails along the Rio Claro best explored for birds before the river rafting is organized and underway. Among the more intriguing birds to be seen and heard are the oilbirds, cave dwellers that emerge at dusk. With these permanent residents I also saw temporary ones: bay-breasted, cerulean and Tennessee warblers. In the morning outside our room reliably were rufous motmots and common tody-flycatchers.

The weather we experienced in Colombia was almost uniformly agreeable. During one short interval of rain at Las Tangaras, our guide Luis and I employed some ample banana leaves. Over our three weeks, rain was very exceptional. Colombia’s dry season spans January through March but the best time of year for birding depends on the specific region. The terrain we saw in Colombia away from the coasts was rugged, with often steep slopes and deep valleys.

Though I relied on Hilty’s *Birds of Colombia*, the newer, more compact ProAves Field Guide is highly recommended. I also gathered applicable audio recordings from earlier trips to Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama, and added more from xeno-canto. There is a seven-CD set of Colombia bird songs available.

For many, if not most, the organized tours provide the best means to bird Colombia. For those who prefer and are willing and able, birding independently is a good alternative. Negotiating and navigating in Colombia does require a working knowledge of basic Spanish.

We returned our car in Medellin and commuted by jet back to Cartagena. Time for one last walk past the former home of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a sandwich tern or two for lunch and gelato confected with lulo.

In early April we attended a Linnean lecture entitled “Colombia—Birding and Conservation” by Alvaro Jaramillo. For the brief duration of his presentation we were transported back to Colombia. The generally amicable people and birds of Colombia await you.

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Photograph by Tina Alleva.
Travel diaries: Newfoundland
By August Davidson-Onsgard
Newfoundland, the “seabird capital of North America,” is an exceptional place to go birding. In the breeding season, up to 35 million seabirds come to the island, including seven million storm petrels and 500,000 Atlantic puffins. I spent July of 2018 traveling to many hotspots in Newfoundland, and I’ve described them below.

You can either fly to Newfoundland or take a ferry from Nova Scotia—my family opted for the 14-hour ferry to Argentia, which put us very close to Cape St. Mary’s Ecological Reserve when we arrived. Though not the largest Northern Gannet colony in the world, the one at Cape St. Mary’s Ecological Reserve is definitely the most accessible. A one-kilometer walk from the visitors’ center will bring you just feet away from some of the park’s 20,000 gannets. Scanning the cliffs, you can also find nesting kittiwakes, common and thick-billed murres, and razorbills. A few songbird species can be found as well including American pipits and horned larks.

Closer to St. John’s (the biggest city in the province and a popular airport) is the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. This reserve is made up of four islands, all of which are covered in nesting seabirds in the breeding season, among them kittiwakes, murres, razorbills, and puffins. Although they don’t nest in the reserve, great and sooty shearwaters can both be found as well. There are many different boat tours that will take you out to the islands (we took two different ones) and you can see great birds on all of them. I highly recommend taking Captain Wayne’s Marine Excursions for the best birding experiences. His boat tours are popular with birders because he uses a small boat and offers a longer tour. Captain Wayne will get you closer to both the islands and to the birds in the water without scaring them.

After visiting both of these reserves we headed off the Avalon Peninsula inland towards the Bonavista Peninsula. The first place where we stopped was the Skerwink Trail, a five-kilometer, well-maintained hiking trail in Port Rexton. The Skerwink trail is best know for its scenic coastal views, impressive sea stacks, and whale watching, but it’s also a great place to see shearwaters. From the trail, both great and sooty can be seen floating on the water in groups of hundreds. Boreal chickadees are also an easy find on the trail.

Driving to the end of the Bonavista Peninsula, just beyond the town of Elliston is a puffin viewing site that’s very popular. A short walk from the road brings you onto a grassy point close to a small island where they nest. Sometimes the puffins will land only a few feet away from you, but to witness this you’ll need to get there either early in the morning or late in the evening to avoid the crowds that scare them away.

On a tip from a local, I also visited the nearby Bonavista Lighthouse, a 15-minute drive from Elliston. Although you won’t get as close to the nests as you
can at Elliston, it was much less crowded and the puffins flew much closer to me. For these reasons, I found the lighthouse a better spot for photography and enjoyed it more than Elliston.

If you decide to visit Newfoundland it’s a good idea to spend multiple days in the same area, both to make sure you get a day with nice weather and to give yourself the opportunity to visit at different times of the day. The weather was so bad on my first day that I considered bypassing St. Mary’s (a tropical storm hit Newfoundland just hours after we arrived), but the following day it was sunny with clear skies. I also visited a number of places not detailed here—including the two national parks in Newfoundland, Gros Mourne and Terra Nova—but the above were by far the most impressive. In total I saw about 70 species of birds in Newfoundland, including seven lifers.
Naturalist’s column: Poison Ivy

By Nancy Tim

We’ve had a hot, humid and rather wet summer so far this year. Just look at how lush Prospect Park is from all the rainfall. Ditto with some areas in Connecticut where I’ve done some birding. But beware all of this greenery as there’s one plant that’s thriving and not at all friendly towards us humans.

Poison ivy (Toxicodendron radicans) is a member of the sumac family and is native throughout southern Canada and the U.S. except along the West Coast. It can be found growing in disturbed areas, stream banks, edges of woods and swampy areas. In other words, it can be found growing almost anywhere, including Prospect Park.

The plant can be a non-climbing shrub, a vine creeping along the ground or a vine climbing high into trees, fences, or poles. A versatile plant it is. Oh, and did I mention that the leaves may vary in size and texture, too? Usually the leaves are alternate with three leaflets and a bright shiny green, but they can also be quite dull in some cases. The plants produce a cluster of small white berries. (Hence the rhyme: Leaves of three, quickly flee, berries white, poisonous sight.) In autumn, the leaves turn a vivid scarlet, and for those unfamiliar with the plant there is a temptation to pick a colorful bouquet of foliage for a flower arrangement.

About 50-70 percent of people are sensitive to the plant oil found in poison ivy, called urushiol. (Similar oils are also found in cashew shells.) Once a person has been sensitized by contact with these oils, exposure produces a contact dermatitis. The oils are quickly absorbed into the skin but can remain active on clothing, pet fur and even tools. All parts of the plant can cause a skin reaction even when the plant is dormant. Each exposure to poison ivy increases sensitivity in proportion to the degree of skin exposure.

A thorough washing is necessary within minutes otherwise the dermatitis reaction of rash and blisters will take place hours later. Clothing, tools, and pets should also be cleaned. The allergen can also be carried on particles of carbon in smoke if an attempt is made to burn parts of the plant, causing lung damage.

Now for some good news: In spite of poison ivy being a nuisance to man it offers considerable value to birds. In winter, when other foods are scarce, many songbirds will eat the plant’s fruits, such as chickadees, juncos, fox sparrows, finches, cedar waxwings, and red-bellied woodpeckers.

Now, go and enjoy fall migration—but watch where you step!

Poison Ivy. Print by Eduard Winkler, Pharmaceutical Waarenkunde, 1845-52.
INTRODUCTION: THERE WAS ONCE A BIRD

There was once a bird with a throat on fire.
There was once a bird with a knife for a beak.
There was once a bird with clever fast wings dancing through the sky, upside down, backwards and sideways.
There was once the smallest bird in the world eggs smaller than a jellybean.
There was once a bird named the ruby-throated hummingbird.

CHAPTER 1: A BIRD’S HOME [deforestation]

The sun had won the day.
My sharp beak struck into a beautiful flower.
The lake in the sky that blessed us only so often had lost the intense battle against the sun with the gift of six beautiful colors.
Chop!
Chop!
Chop!
Three long wooden bodies came falling down waving their arms for help while screaming.
The wind whispered to me that my short days on earth weren’t going to get happier.
My wings jumped up in the air slicing through the wind two baby birds died that day.

CHAPTER 2: A BROADWAY SINGER

Tchew!
Tchew!
A thin knife appeared out of a flower.
Squeal!
Was that a squirrel?
The knife caught fire at the bottom.
There seemed to be a structure of a small bird with no wings though it was hovering.
Chch ch chi
It was chasing another bird!
ch ch ch!

CHAPTER 3: TWO LOVELY WINGS

Hmmm
Hmmm
Hmmm
What a nice sound coming from a bird.
No not its beak
Two lovely wings are the musicians.
Two lovely wings can fly twenty to two hundred beats in one quick second jumping across the air.
No hawk osprey eagle can outrun the three inch bird.
Even the flowers smile at it.
Mexico and Central America wait patiently for the bird to visit.
CHAPTER 4: A LARGE BEE

The trees waved at me in the lovely spring air
hmmm
hmmm
hmmm.
Bzzz
Is that a bee?
No too large
doesn’t look like a bee.
A thin long dark beak dips into a flower
hmmmmmmmm.
Acts like a beak.
Another one skips in the air like a tiny pebble.
Beak runs on the ground till it hits a delicious meal.
Crunchy insects and juice nectar are on its menu.
And that’s when reality slapped me hard on the face
this was no bee
this was a ruby-throated hummingbird.

CHAPTER 5: A SMALL BIRD

There was once a bird with a throat on fire and a knife for a beak.
Small curved feet smile while twirling around on a bright red flower.
The knife goes in the flower and comes out with orange blood
snatches insects from their days in the sun.
Every night it comes home to a wooden body stretching its arms for a perfect home.
It flew forward so much it zoomed backwards, sideways and even upside down skipping in the air like a fairy.

—Eleanor Lewis, age 8
Heron. Mixed media sculpture by Isabel Tribe, age 13.
My passion for birds

By John Dean, age 9

When I was about two years old, my mom, my dad and I went on a trip to the National Zoo in Washington D.C. I pulled my parents directly through elephants and monkey exhibits, to the back of the zoo where the aviary lay. Inside, they had penguins, potoos, hawks, and hoatzins. The tropical bird enclosure was bursting with parrots, manikins, toucans, and other exotic birds I had never heard of. The brightly colored scarlet macaw caught my eye. They where balancing on ropes, plucking juicy fruits from trees, and best of all, flying. All a sudden, I wanted to be a macaw. I wanted to feel the refreshing fruit juice on my tongue, to swing across the rope, and to soar through the rainforest. From that day on, I was closer to birds than I ever had been before. Although I had loved birds before than, I think it is safe to say that was the day I really understood them.

One of the ways to express my passion for birds I soon discovered was art. Okay, mostly drawing. It was a typical spring day in 2011. I was only three, yet my love for birds was already fired up. That day, I had something in mind. I ran to my room and grabbed my newly inherited box of crayons. For a while, my sheet of paper remained empty. Then I began to sketch three scribbly figures with my electric pink crayon. Flamingoes. (I had recently visited relatives in the Bahamas, where they can be found). I wasn’t satisfied until they had beaks, feet, wings, a lake to stand in, and
the sun was shining. This is only a snapshot of how art and birds connect in my life. Now, my mom still uses that drawing to say, “look how much you’ve improved since then!” and my dad uses it as a constant reminder of what you can do if you try.

Birding has taken me to scattered locations around the continent. I have visited Mexico, the Bahamas, Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Green Key wildlife preserve in the Florida Everglades, and Coronado Island off the coast of San Diego. But the parks of New York City, Brooklyn in particular, hold a special place in my heart. I love to visit Central, Prospect, Pelham Bay, and Inwood Hill parks, and also Green-Wood Cemetery, Jamaica Bay, Governor’s Island, and Hoffman and Swinburne Islands off the coast of NYC. But perhaps my favorite is Fort Greene Park.

Fort Greene Park is no bigger than two football fields as the crow flies, and I have only seen sixty species in the two years I have lived around the corner from it. I used to visit every single day, and I still come often. The dogs in the morning make afternoon an ideal birding time. Fort Greene Park, as suggested by its name, used to have a fort on the summit of its hill. This was used in the Revolutionary war. A Prison Ship Martyrs’ Monument rises over the park. This creates the downside of the remains of glass bottles scattered around the park. But having been there for so long, the park is home to ancient trees, with beautiful gnarled bark. These old trees are from the age of George Washington. These attract woodpeckers, songbirds, hawks, and even nightjars to this historic monument. There also rarities like the Connecticut warbler. These are also perfect conditions for waves of migrating birds in the spring and fall. This park has opened my eyes to the ability birds have to adapt to the habitats we have created.

This previous year, when I was in fourth grade, I became more aware of Earth’s changing climate. One issue I noticed is that our school cafeteria uses plastic utensils and paper plates, which can harm seabirds and other marine wildlife if they enter the ocean. Articles in newspapers and magazines alert me about these affects. I talked to my parents, and when the end of winter break came along, I was ready. I brought a simple fork and spoon, made of metal and 100 percent reusable, to school. My teacher asked me to talk to the class about my decision. I was impressed with my classmates ideas and maturity with the facts. One kid suggested that we weigh one set of utensils to see how much waste we cut down on. I showed them a (rather intense, I must admit) picture of the stomach contents of an albatross that died from eating plastic with its bones scattered around the perimeter. We all agreed to try to bring in reusable utensils as often as we could, and we kept a record of how many people brought them. A few of my classmates and I brought in utensils every day for the rest of the year. We continued to bring up current issues, and later in the year I presented on bird collisions with glass.

My class and I, teachers included, have helped each other become aware of current issues this year. Exploring natural catastrophes, new parks, zoos and my own creativity has pushed me into the deepest pools of birding fun. Birding has changed me, and helped me in everything else I do. I could not ask for a better passion.
Clockwise from top: yellow-rumped, worm-eating, and prothonotary warblers, all in Prospect Park. Photographs by Nikolaj Noel.
Upcoming Brooklyn Bird Club events

September 18, 2018 at 7 PM
Information Commons, Central Library Brooklyn

Working to Prevent Migratory Bird Slaughter in the Mediterranean

Speaker: Jason Gregg

For the past two years, Jason Gregg has travelled with the Committee Against Bird Slaughter to join other activists in the fight against widespread poaching of migratory birds in Cyprus, Italy, and Spain. Each year, 25 million birds are killed by poachers in the Mediterranean area.

Jason J. Gregg is a conservation biologist and activist based in the United States. He has worked with Point Blue Conservation Science, the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, the Peregrine Fund as well as other conservation organizations and universities around the world as an ornithologist and field biologist.

Wanted: field trip registrars

The BBC needs registrars for its field trips. Please contact Peter Dorosh to volunteer. Email: prosbird@aol.com

50 years and counting

Kudos to Helen Hayes, who has been monitoring and maintaining the nesting colonies of common and roseate terns on Great Gull Island since 1969.

http://www.greatgullisland.org

Photographs by Jennifer Kepler.