

Summer 2019

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL



Inside This Issue



4

Escape in the City

7

The Other LBJs

11

Photo Gallery:
Joshua Malbin



13

A Big Obsession:
The History of Big Year
Books

16

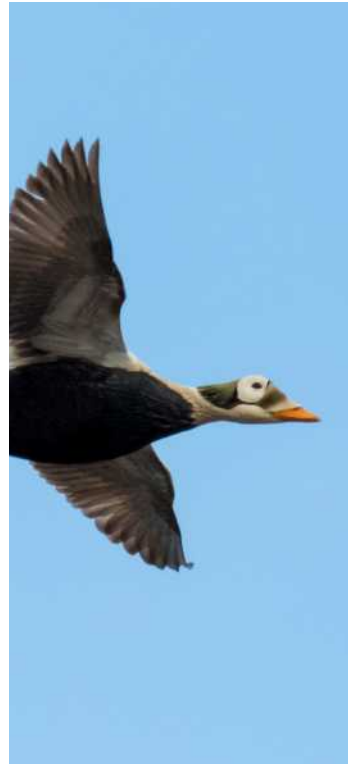
Cheese Curds and Birds

22

Sparks!

24

A Visit to Glacier
National Park



28

Photo Gallery:
Janet Zinn

30

Song Dynasty Bird
Paintings

33

Northern Exposure:
Birding in Utqiagvik



37

Photo Gallery:
Jennifer Kepler

39

The Rangers Are
Coming! Prospect Park
Happenings

40

2019 Birdathon Update

41

Photo Gallery:
Steve Nanz

43

Upcoming BBC
Programs

Cover: Juvenile Piping Plover at Plumb Beach. Photograph by Janet Zinn.

Next page: Eastern Meadowlark at Goose Pond Prairie. Photograph by Ryan Mandelbaum.

Editor's Note

Judging by our new issue, members of the Brooklyn Bird Club haven't been sitting still this summer. They've gone to the marshes of Wisconsin, the glacial lakes of Montana, and the northernmost town in the U.S., formerly Barrow, Alaska, in search of adventure and radiant birds in their breeding territories. The travel accounts of Ryan Mandelbaum, Sheila Friedman, and August Davidson-Onsgard are bound to make you look at your calendars for 2020.

But even if you sweated your way through New York's summer, there was still a lot to see: from staying indoors and looking at ancient Chinese bird art, like Ben Garron-Caine did for this issue, or studying other flying creatures as Matthew Wills describes, or even birding from the subway on your morning commute. As Linda Ewing writes, putting your faith in public transit to reach your birding destination is rarely dull. And when you're underground, you can reach for a book or plan your next out-of-town trip. For some advice, Dan Smith has you covered with his spin through the genre of "Big Year" books.

We hope you enjoy all that and much more. As always, we welcome your contributions to the Clapper Rail at newsletter@brooklynbirdclub.org.

– Ryan Goldberg

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Escape in the City

Birding by Public Transportation



By Linda Ewing

For many Brooklyn birders, public transportation is a means to get to birding hotspots—but it's also more than that. Buses, trains, and ferries offer their own unique vantage points and the possibility of surprise sightings. Consider the long stretch of the A train between Howard Beach and Beach 67th Street, when the tracks cross high over Jamaica Bay's North Channel, parallel the length of the East Pond, and then provide a close-up view of otherwise inaccessible "Subway Island"—all prime habitat for waterfowl, gulls, and waders. Or the S79 SBS bus as it makes its way between Bay Ridge and Staten Island, its high seats giving expansive views

from the Verrazzano Bridge. Or the NYC Ferry, where \$2.75 buys a 40-minute birding cruise between the Brooklyn Army Terminal and Rockaway Peninsula.

Kellye Rosenheim, New York City's Audubon director of development and co-author of the book "Birdwatching in New York City and on Long Island," recently updated Audubon's "Birding by Subway" brochure and interactive map, [available here](#). Her advice to birders thinking about broadening their geographic horizons is to pick a new destination, sign up for one of NYC Audubon's free, guided bird walks, head out with Metrocard in hand—and enjoy the trip.

Rosenheim takes her own advice to heart, not

only using the subway to get to her favorite birding destinations, but birding along the way as well. She's especially fond of the trip on the A train to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, the only National Park Service-administered wildlife refuge that's reachable by subway. "You cross over all that water, and you just get so excited, anticipating the birds you're going to see," she says. "By the time you get out at Broad Channel, you're totally pumped." Her top birding-by-subway goal, as yet unachieved? To see a Peregrine Falcon from the F train where it rises over the Gowanus Canal. Given the fondness of Gotham's resident Peregrines for city bridges, Rosenheim is confident it's only a matter of time.

Even Rosenheim acknowledges that birding by subway is not without challenges. The subway system was built to carry commuters to Manhattan—not to the beaches, salt marshes, and tidal creeks of the borough's southeast coast, or from Brooklyn to Queens or the Bronx (and let's not even talk about Staten Island). Destinations that are close as the crow—or vagrant Swallow-tailed Kite—flies can be frustratingly difficult and time-consuming to reach via public transit. Just try getting from Park Slope to Ridgewood Reservoir or Canarsie Pier (pro-tip: for Canarsie, use the G to the A to the L to the B42 bus, the only in-station bus transfer in the NYCT system). It doesn't help that some of the city's birdiest spots are in transit deserts. Brooklyn birder Ryan Mandelbaum, who uses public transit to travel to destinations as far-flung as Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx and Fort Tilden in Queens, finds Brooklyn's Plumb Beach to be particularly challenging, and sometimes turns to Uber to cover the final few miles from the subway.

There's also the challenge of carrying a scope and tripod on a crowded train or bus; the occasional odd looks from non-birders; dirty windows that make it hard to distinguish a Northern Gannet from a Herring Gull from a streak of slush; and the fact that much

of the city's transit system is underground. The odd Feral Pigeon and House Sparrow notwithstanding, subway tunnels and underground platforms are not very birdy. Studying field guides and listening to song recordings can be a productive use of subterranean commuting time, although the latter calls for caution—as Mandelbaum, who once startled other passengers by accidentally broadcasting the raucous cackle of a Red-headed Woodpecker, can attest.

These challenges notwithstanding, buses and trains open a world of possibilities both inside and outside the city. Jonathan Andrew Perez lives in downtown Brooklyn, but birds all five borough, as well as neighboring counties, via public transit. One of his favorite destinations is Croton Point Park in



Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Mixed-media art by Charles Tang.

Westchester County, a 30-40 minute trip on Metro-North's Hudson Line. From the Croton-Harmon train platform, it's a 10-minute walk to grasslands that are home to Bobolinks and Grasshopper Sparrows. Another Perez favorite is the "Stairway to Heaven" section of the Appalachian Trail on the New York-New Jersey border, reachable via New Jersey Transit bus to Warwick, followed by a \$9 Uber ride to

the trailhead. Like Croton Point, Stairway to Heaven includes the kind of grassland habitat that's scarce inside the city. In the summer, Prairie and Blue-winged Warblers breed in its thickets and woodland edges.

Ask local birders for their most memorable public transportation sightings, and the answers are impressively varied. For Ryan Candee, it was watching from the JFK AirTrain as a pair of Red-tailed Hawks tried to steal an Osprey's catch. Perez recounts taking the A train to JFK, looking down at the marshy patch after the Aqueduct stop, and being astonished to see an American Bittern. Jen Kepler loves watching terns from the Governor's Island ferry.

The transit sighting that stands out for Mandelbaum was a Pileated Woodpecker, spotted from an Amtrak Northeast Regional train on the way to Washington,

D.C. As a relatively new birder, they credit birding from public transit with sharpening their birding skills more generally. (Mandelbaum prefers they/them pronouns.) Birding from a moving train or bus means quick sightings, typically unaided by binoculars, with no opportunity to stop or turn around for a better look. That's taught Mandelbaum to pay attention to size, shape, flight patterns, and one or two key field marks, like the white underwings of that Pileated Woodpecker, or the distinctive profile of a Canvasback seen from a passing A train.

On a personal note, I moved to Brooklyn from car-centric Detroit almost seven years ago. I've been carless for the last five, roughly coinciding with my re-immersion in the birding world. Birding by and from public transportation hasn't just given me great sightings, like Turkey Vultures from the elevated section of the F train, or a Whimbrel at Plumb Beach; it's also introduced me to parts of the city I wouldn't otherwise know. There's nothing like a slow ride on the B3 bus to familiarize yourself with the Chinese bakeries, Kosher delis, Italian pork stores and Russian,

Azeri, Georgian and Uzbek restaurants that dot Avenue U between the F train and the Salt Marsh Nature Center.

While writing this article, I took a break to clear my head by going to one of my favorite places, Plumb Beach. For me, that means taking the R to Atlantic Avenue/Barclays Center, changing to the B to Sheepshead Bay, catching the B4 bus, and then walking the last few blocks to the beginning of the bike path. Cedar Waxwings greeted me as I cut through the scrubby strip between the path and the beach, where I saw Common Terns alternately dive bombing the channel and feeding their begging fledglings, Least Terns scattered like small, feathered handkerchiefs on the flats, and a handful of impossibly cute Piping Plovers. I was in the city, but not in the city.

A recurring theme in my conversations with other transit-using birders was the sense of wonder that comes from getting on a train in neighborhood of horns and sirens and idling trucks and general urban din, and ending, a little over an hour later, in a place that's so wild.

Even more wondrous: all it costs is a \$2.75 fare. 🐦





The Other LBJs

By Matthew Wills

It's hot. The doldrums of summer birding are upon us. It's too soon for migration, most of the breeding is done except for...wait, is that a third brood of robins?

Yet there are other flying creatures out and about this time of year. Spot-winged and Wandering Gliders, for instance, crisscrossing the meadow with tireless persistence. Three-inch-long Common Green Darners zigzagging back and forth along 6th Avenue at fourth floor height, right outside our windows. Blue Dashers everywhere, returning to the same perch over and over again. Yes, the dragonflies are hunting, right into the twilight.

And then there are the other LBJs, the Little Blue Jobs. And I do mean little. Bluets, the genus *Enallagma* damselflies, don't get much beyond an inch and a quarter in length. The forktail damselflies (genus *Ischnura*) are even shorter and slenderer.

Look closer. Damselflies are subtle, hovering close to water and foliage. They're flying jewels in electric blue, surprising orange, and neon green. The dragonflies are bolder and more noticeable, often at eye-level.

You may know them as food for American Kestrels and Green Herons, or as voracious predators of smaller insects like mosquitos. They're the Odonata, the order of insects that encompasses both dragonflies and damselflies. There are some 307 dragonfly species and 150 damselfly species found north of Mexico. New York City has a rather smaller list, with some obvious borough differences (Staten Island is rich, Manhattan is poor). A summer day with fresh water and meadow near can offer up dozen species with a little luck. Fresh water is key: most Odonate species don't like brackish water. We happen to have two who do, the Seaside Dragonlet and the Big Bluet, found at our salty edges.

I've become somewhat obsessed by the Odes. They are handsomely colored and patterned, have a fascinating two-medium life cycle, and present many a taxonomic puzzle to the observer who never uses a net. With my aging eyes, I find I need some magnification

to enjoy them. I usually Odonate—on the to bird model—by camera, which allows me to check on identification later. Where possible: some bluets need to be in hand for ID. Sexual and age polymorphism add to the challenge. There are five forms of the Blue Fronted Dancer, all of which can be spotted in August in the woods above the Bronx River at the NYBG.

Ed Lam's "Damselflies of the Northeast" is indispensable for identification. No print field guide



Above: Familiar Bluets mating. Cover: Amberwing and Orange Bluet.
All photographs by Matthew Wills.

I've seen is as good. Dennis Paulson's "Dragonflies and Damselflies of the East" is thorough, but needs bigger pictures. Both iNaturalist and bugguide.net are hit and miss for help with identification, not least because it's hard to get a ID-worthy photograph. Juveniles in particular are hard to parse.

Typically, males patrol water bodies and females hunt further away, only coming to the water to mate. Reproduction is acrobatic. The male clasps the female



Female Great Blue Skimmer.

behind her head with the end of his abdomen. She swings her abdomen forward towards the front of his abdomen, where his genitalia are. They may perch in this heart-shaped “wheel” or even fly in tandem while maintaining it. Depending on the species, he may continue holding her as she drops her eggs or he may fly near her as she does so. Eggs are laid in the water or near the water. Once in the Vale of Cashmere I watched a Swamp Darner, our biggest local dragonfly species, stick her eggs into very wet, very rotten wood. (Afterwards, she was devoured by a Gray Catbird....)

Odonata larvae are called nymphs or naiads and live under water, where they devour whatever they’re big enough to eat—including fish and tadpoles for some species. They molt through a series of instars, growing larger, usually over a course of the summer and fall. Some may emerge the same year they’re born, others overwinter to emerge in the following spring/summer. A few may be underwater for a couple of years.

Their final molt is known as emergence. This is one of those mammal-mind-blowing transformations

of the insect world. From aquatic to airborne creature. The nymphs crawl out of the water, get a good grip on something, and split down the back. The adults squeeze out from the old exoskeleton, unfurl their wings, harden off, and start to fly. They’re often uncooked and pallid in this vulnerable state, and hide out as their new exoskeleton hardens. Look closely on reeds, sedges, branches, and rocks for their light grey exuvia, or husks of their spent exoskeletons. If you’re lucky you may see a pale green emergent, half out of the husk.

Closely related, dragonflies and damselflies are told apart in a couple of ways. Dragonflies are usually bigger than damselflies. They perch with their four wings spread open. Damselflies are smaller, thinner, and rest with their wings folded along their abdomen. There are always exceptions: the spreadwing damselflies don’t fold their wings while perched (I’ve yet to see a spreadwing in Brooklyn but have spotted them in the Bronx and Staten Island). And our smallest dragonfly, the Eastern Amberwing, a common sight around Prospect Park’s lake, is shorter than a number

of damselflies.

Like most of our insects, Odes are summer animals, but they do get into the autumn. Mild days into October may reward you with red *Sympetrum* genus meadowhawks. Half a dozen other species of dragonfly are migratory, notably the big Common Green Darner. Not unlike birds, they follow the Rockaway Peninsula westward, so the beaches there can be spectacular with passing dragons in the early fall.

I hope this whets your appetite for tuning into the Odonate frequencies. 🐉



Above: Dragonfly Exuviae. Below: Male Eastern Forktail.



Photo Gallery: Joshua Malbin



Top and bottom right: Clapper Rail, Plumb Beach. Bottom left: Common Tern, Jamaica Bay. *11*



Top: Forster's Tern, Jamaica Bay. Below: Lesser Black-backed Gull, Coney Island Beach. 12

A Big Obsession: The History of Big Year Books

By Dan Smith

As my obsessions go, book collecting and birding are in a neck-and-neck race. I know, because I've succumbed to each in turn. Fortunately the two have found a comfortable co-existence with Big Year books.

When I started birding, I read all that I could find on the subject, and came across a sub-category: big year bird books. These are books written by people who have attempted to see more birds in the American Birding Association's North America area than anyone else in a calendar year. I was intrigued that there were so many different voices telling the same story.

It dawned on me that books about big years could be a basis for a collection and I began one. The accounts provide a vicarious pleasure in finding rare birds and hearing about locations that many of us will never visit. The stories also give us a unique portrait of America. But most importantly, it gives me another reason to poke around old bookshops.

Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher's "Wild America" is the keystone of the collection. The book chronicles their 30,000-mile 1953 journey in a new Ford station wagon that began in St. John's Newfoundland. They travel the East Coast to Florida, west to Texas, Arizona, California and up to the Pribilof Islands of Alaska. Some call it the Bible of birding, but to me it's more like Jack Kerouac's "On The Road."

The narrative is divided between Peterson, who provides background and context, and Fisher, who supplies his reactions and emotions to his first visit

to the States. First and foremost, they're interested in the birds and other American wildlife, but Fisher's descriptions of the cities and other attractions are a celebration of America. He marvels at roadside motels and diners and is unprepared for the oppressive heat of the south. But his enthusiasm never wanes. Fisher is dismissive of bird listing, and it's clear that he's most interested in the scientific aspects of birdwatching. The Brit Fisher had run out of new birds in Europe and notes each lifer with a joyous shout of "Tally ho," much to Peterson's amusement.

Peterson refers to Guy Emerson's 1939 record of 497 birds seen in one year north of the Mexican border and thinks he and Fisher have a shot at breaking it.

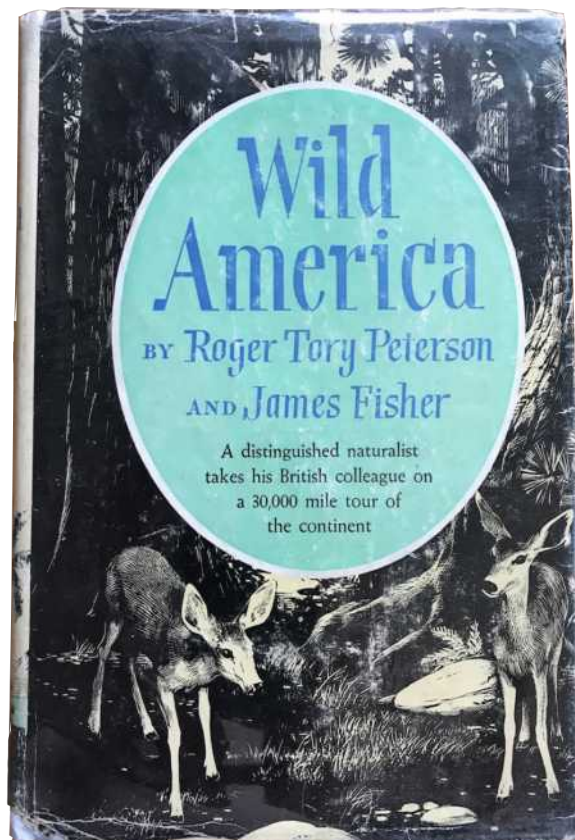
Fortunately for the reader, Peterson lets the narrative flow unencumbered by where they stand numerically.

The illustration on the dust jacket of the first edition shows two white tail deer inviting us into their forest home, reminiscent of the movie "Bambi" released more than a decade earlier. This America isn't the ferocious land of the frontier, but a more innocent and gentle environment. Later editions show a bear set against a bright red sun and an owl overhead. Maybe the publishers felt the original art was too pastoral.

It's a pleasure to read the first edition with its quality paper and fine printing, which add a deep luster to Peterson's black and white illustrations.

The first edition is inexpensive and not hard to find.

Inspired by "Wild America," a young Kenn Kaufman hitchhiked his way to break the record of Ted Parker's 626 sightings in 1972. His book "Kingbird Highway," published 25 years later, takes us from the "birdwatching" years into the modern day "birding." I own an advance reader's edition from wildlife writer Peter Matthiessen's library and he seems to have one quibble with Kaufman. Kaufman writes: "Birding for the 1990s—indeed, birding for the twenty-first century—was born in the brief period from 1970 to 1975," and there's a question mark written in pen next



to it. There's no argument, however, with Kaufman's commitment: the sheer audacity of leaving high school to hitchhike around the country to see as many birds as possible would give any parent great consternation.

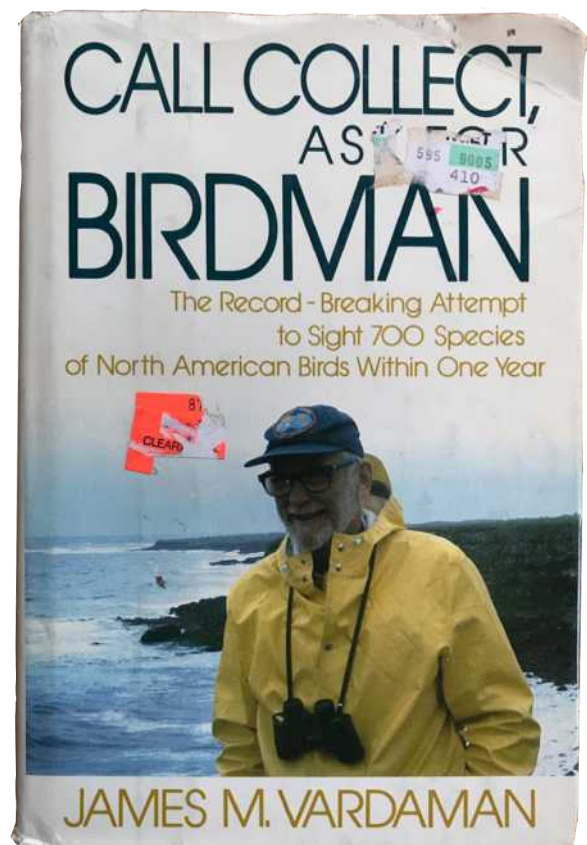
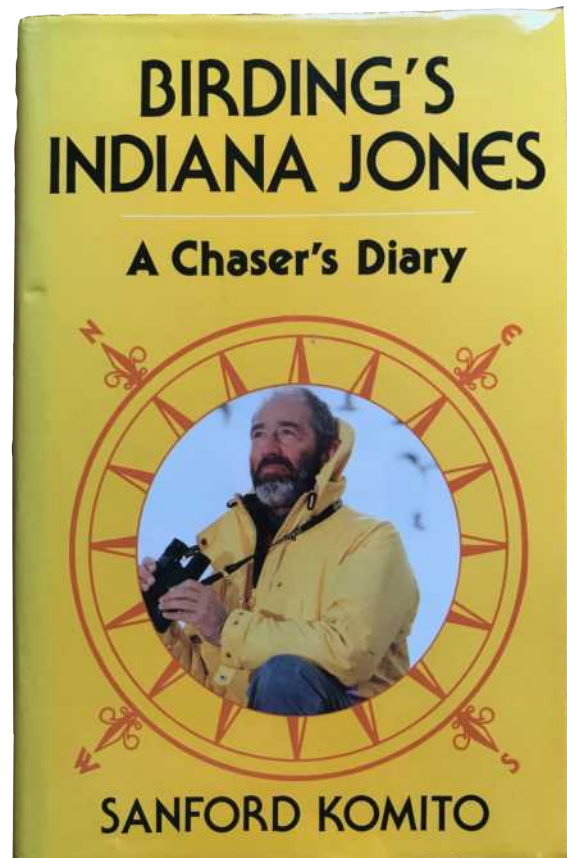
In this canon the only impartial narrator we have is Mark Obmascik in 2004's "The Big Year," a book which was later turned into the 2011 movie by the same name starring Steve Martin, Owen Wilson, and Jack Black. It's about three birders, Al Levantin, Sandy Komito, and Greg Miller, competing for the record in 1998. Obmascik gives each character a super power: Miller has a great ear for identifying birds by songs, Levantin has stamina, an eye for detail and no sense of smell after working for years with chemical solvents (this comes in handy at a Texas garbage dump), while Komito is strategic, fiercely competitive, and experienced. This is his second big year attempt.

Komito describes his 1987 big year in his self-published "Birding's Indiana Jones, A Chaser's Diary," from 1990. Komito (he's the Owen Wilson character in the movie) is known for loud banter and louder pants. This might be a harder book to find. I saw one dealer was asking \$135 but I found a copy for around \$30.

In 1979, James M. Vardaman attempted to be the first birder to see 700 species. A decorated World War II veteran and successful businessman, he planned his big year methodically. He convened a panel of birding experts and travel professionals to map out his campaign. By this time, the success of a big year was dependent on accumulating rarities, so he created a birding hotline where anyone that had information about a rare bird could leave a message, hence the title of his book: "Call Collect, Ask for Birdman."

Despite Vardaman's preparations, innovations, and resources (his big year cost \$35,000), he fell short by one bird, ending 1979 with 699. The first (and probably only edition) has a blurb by Peterson on the dust jacket praising Vardaman's attempt and his contributions to the sport.

The ambitions of Komito and Vardaman are different from Peterson's, Fisher's, and Kaufman's. We don't need to look beyond the titles to see we've moved from exploration and discovery to familiar and self-referential, from Daniel Boone to Seinfeld. Their America is a very different country as well. The roadside diners have been replaced by Denny's, air travel is taken for granted, and communication is instantaneous. It's a country of assumptions not curiosity, it's the sport that takes precedence, not the discovery.



The maps on the endpapers of “Wild America” show the route the authors took in 1953 and this route becomes the template for other big year attempts. If all the maps of the various big years were superimposed, the dotted lines marking the various routes would be solid black in some areas. These are the spots that every big year birder will have to visit to find certain birds. The Dry Tortugas at the very end of the Florida Keys is where you can expect to see Noddies, Sooty Terns, and Masked Boobies. The dotted lines make their way around the Gulf of Mexico and head to

South Texas to converge along the Rio Grande at Bentsen State Park and the Brownsville Municipal Landfill to find a Tamaulipas Crow. In Arizona they come together at the South Fork of Cave Creek in the Chiricahua Mountains for Flammulated Owls. The routes then spread out as they head towards the Great Plains for Prairie Chickens and then bounce along the California coast up to Seattle. The curvy lines stop and become the straight lines of air travel in Anchorage and point towards Nome or Attu at the end of the Aleutian Islands (so west it’s actually east) or the Pribilof Islands for Bar-tailed Godwit, Yellow Wagtail, and Asian strays.

Birders have always been eager to use new technology. In 1956, Stuart Keith had the new Pettingill Guides that provided exact locations for his record year. (“Kingbird Highway,” page 18.) Kaufman also possesses new bird guides and the assistance of the American Birding Association. Vardaman created a precursor to the birding hotline by including a phone number in his “Gold Sheet” newsletter where you could leave a message regarding a rare bird sighting. He also relied on data from Christmas Bird Counts in planning his attempt to see 700 species. Starting in 1985, Komito used the North American Rare Bird Alert to chase rarities.

Pete Dunne’s “The Feather Quest, A North American Birder’s Year” is the anti-big year book. He and his wife, Linda, spend a year traveling to the most well-known birding spots in the U.S. without keeping a tally of species seen. He laces together the excitement and enthusiasm of birding with honesty, knowledge, and skilled writing. This brings my collection back to “Wild America.” Peterson would be very comfortable in the back seat of Dunne’s car.

Here’s my initial list of big year books, the ones I’ve enjoyed or found unique enough to deserve a spot on my bookshelf. It’s not complete but it gives a range of voices and time periods. Part of the joy of collecting books is searching and coming across new items.

Wild America, Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher’s travels in 1953, published in 1955. This book triggered the whole canon and is still in print.

Kingbird Highway: The Biggest Year in the Life of an Extreme Birder, Kenn Kaufman, 1997. Big year attempt in 1972. Kaufmann redeems a parent’s nightmare by becoming a renowned birder, naturalist, and author. His latest book is “A Season on The Wind,” a narrative account of migration in northwest Ohio, where he now lives.

Call Collect, Ask for Birdman, James M. Vardaman, attempt to see 700 birds in 1979, published by St Martin’s Press in 1980. Nothing much happens and it happens a lot.

The Feather Quest, A North American Birder’s Year, Pete Dunne, published in 1992. Foreword by Roger Tory Peterson.

The Big Year, Mark Obmascik, 2004. This book has a great history of big years and could be the only book you need to read about big years. He has a new book about the WWII battle on Attu.

Boobies, Peckers, and Tits: One Man’s Naked Perspective, Olaf Danielson, self published in 2014. He birds while naked, it sounds impractical but he sees 614 birds from August 2012 to August 2013. I don’t recommend it.

Lost Among the Birds: Accidentally Finding Myself in One Very Big Year, Neil Hayward, 2016. Big year attempt in 2013. Will he get the record or the girl?

Birding’s Indiana Jones: A Chaser’s Diary, Sanford Komito, self published in 1990 based on his attempt in 1987. He has a great story but needs a good editor to get it out. Tough to read. He has another book, “I Came, I Saw, I Counted,” but I haven’t found a copy yet.

Extreme Birder: One Woman’s Big Year, by Lynn E. Barber. Big year attempt in 2008. I’m looking forward to reading it.

Cheese Curd and Birds

A Wisconsin travel diary

By Ryan Mandelbaum



I hated my 20-minute commute from the outskirts of Madison to Verona, Wisconsin when I lived there for my first two years after college. Though the strip malls gave way to woods, ponds, rolling hills, and prairies, I only ever noticed the life-draining traffic to a job I didn't like. But when I visited again last month, the same commute gave me a birding experience I won't forget.

Birds weren't the sole goal of our trip. My fiancé Brittany and I were visiting for a wedding, and had added a few days to see friends and eat as much cheese as we could stomach. But we had a rental car, and I

overlooking Lake Winnebago, and then head right to Horicon Marsh, the country's largest cattail marsh and a birding gem home to tons of species that rarely, if ever, pass through Brooklyn.

The farmers' market haul was the same selection I'd brought to countless picnics and hiking trips when I used to live in Madison: a carton of fresh grape tomatoes, a bag of cheese curds so fresh that others could hear them squeak as you chewed them, and a hot and spicy cheese bread, which is just a round challah topped with red pepper flakes and stuffed with hot, gooey cheese. The wedding food would all be vegan,

so we had to take our daily cheese dose early.

We netted an impressive car list on the way up. Red-winged Blackbirds seemed to call from atop every sign, and occasionally we'd notice the double white flash from a meadowlark's tail. Though some Westerns can be found among the Eastern Meadowlarks in Wisconsin, I didn't dare try to separate them at 70 miles an hour. Several flocks of American White Pelicans sailed over the car. Brittany, who was born and raised in northern Minnesota, used a sixth sense

to spot a Common Loon in breeding plumage on a roadside lake. We sped by a pair of Sandhill Cranes pecking at roadkill. When we pulled over to identify a wire bird (a Yellow Warbler), a Bald Eagle flew over. As we pulled into the state park, we passed dozens of Purple Martins flitting around their nests.

The ceremony was a small affair in a picnic pavillion and was about as relaxed and fun as a wedding could be—though I must admit, the sounds of crows, blue jays, and wood-pewees kept my mind occupied on which birds we might see at Horicon. We changed and left for the marsh as soon as the clock struck two, and by then, Brittany was as eager to bird as I was.



Cover: Yellow-headed Blackbird, County V Pond Wetlands. Above: Sandhill Cranes, Horicon Marsh. All photographs by Ryan Mandelbaum.

was determined to make up for the time I'd wasted in the Badger state without binoculars.

Our flight landed during the night, so we headed straight to the Echo Tap, a dive where I used to eat fried cheese curds and sip on local craft beer weekly. I'm sure that fights over who has the best fried cheese curds have ended friendships, but the Echo Tap's stringy, breaded morsels were always my favorite. They were as good as I had remembered. We arrived late at our friend Kristin's house where we'd stay for the three-day trip and posted up on an inflatable mattress.

We planned a packed first day. We were to start at the capitol-circling Dane County Farmers' Market, drive up to the wedding in High Cliff State Park

Horicon is a vast plain of tall marshgrasses, lakes, and mudflats first formed as a result of glaciers retreating at the end of the last ice age. It was hidden from the adjacent farmland by a line of trees, and appeared from nowhere. We stopped briefly at a locally-run visitor center to use the bathroom, where we were met with more Purple Martins, Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds, and Blue-winged Teals.

The wildlife-watching autotrail was closed this summer for maintenance, so we followed an itinerary that the Brooklyn Bird Club's Janet Schumacher helped us put together. We drove along a highway which cut across the northern stretch of the marsh, and pulled over every few hundred feet to scan (and to avoid the speeding semis that were tailing us). I spotted a Black-necked Stilt in the distance and got so excited that I flagged down another car birder to show them. They rolled their eyes at me, because though field guides say that these birds' ranges stop several hundred miles south, I later learned that stilts have bred in the marsh annually for two decades. We continued our start-and-stop journey, taking in the views while Sandhill Cranes flew overhead and rafts of Redheads and Blue-winged Teals floated by in the dozens. When the road temporarily left the marsh and turned to grasslands, we got out of the car to listen for a dreambird of mine, the Henslow's Sparrow, with no luck. But that stop treated us to the sight of a feisty male Bobolink chasing a female through the tall grass.

We finally arrived at a boardwalk where we could walk through the marsh, the highlight of our Horicon experience. Red-winged Blackbirds clanked, Common Yellowthroats warbled, and Sedge Wrens chattered from all directions, occasionally interrupted by a

Sora's descending whinny. I listened intently, as the latter two were life birds for me. A robin had nested on the viewing platform, and was feeding his babies just a few feet from where we sat. A Trumpeter Swan floated in the distance while Eastern Kingbirds sallied from low perches...and then the main event started. A trio of Black Terns made their entrance, flitting and swooping above the still water, often flying closeby. I took a few photos, but mainly watched as these creatures



Black Tern, Horicon Marsh.

produced barely a vibration on the water's surface while dipping to catch insects, unlike the beachside terns' dive-plunges I'm used to.

Once I had my Black Tern fill, I returned to Brittany who was staring into the grass at the start of the boardwalk. I hadn't actually seen any Sedge Wrens yet, but Brittany had been watching a gutsy male who had emerged just feet from the path before flying

away. We waited another 15 minutes, the birds singing farther off and deep in the sedge, until another male decided it was his time to show off. He hopped and hid, approaching closer until I, too, stood face to face with a shouting Sedge Wren grasping on a bending stalk of grass and contorting itself, at points nearly touching its head with its tail.

We returned to the car and drove back across the marsh beneath a flock of Redheads that stretched across the sky. We pulled over where a man was looking at a bird—a White-faced Ibis, he said, which would have

marsh: Yellow-headed Blackbird, Henslow's and Clay-colored Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, and of course, Whooping Crane. I'd also hoped to get better looks at species we'd only spotted from a distance or overhead like the meadowlarks, Bobolinks, and American White Pelicans.

Our friend and host Kristin had birding planned for our second day too, since she had already volunteered to count Eastern Bluebird and Tree Swallow chicks for Madison Audubon on a small tallgrass prairie preserve atop a hill. Prairies have always wowed me as a

habitat I'd rarely experienced growing up, and this tract was especially beautiful, overlooking the familiar Wisconsin hills and unplanted farmland. Monarchs fluttered around small starbursts of flowering golden alexanders which seemed as numerous as grass stalks, Tree Swallows fluttered all over, and we had to tread carefully to avoid leopard frogs. Most of the nest boxes didn't have eggs yet, but the furthest housed a pair of newly-hatched swallows.

As we walked back, I started noticing sparrows too far away to identify, and wrongly assumed they were Song Sparrows. But as they neared, they revealed pink bills, brown facial markings and clean chests—we'd stumbled upon at least a dozen Clay-colored Sparrows. An especially bold one landed in a shrub nearby and posed for its close-up. That would have been enough excitement for a

Sedge Wren, Horicon Marsh.

been a lifer for me. He drove away and I took a look; unfortunately this bird had a dark, rather than fleshy-pink face, indicating that it was actually a Glossy Ibis. Glossy Ibises are still a relative rarity for Wisconsin, and I enjoyed filling out the trip's only rare species comment on eBird for a bird that I was so familiar with from birding New York City.

Though the second two days weren't the same epic excursions as Horicon, there were still a handful of species I was eager to see that we'd missed in the

morning, but then a Bald Eagle flew over, mobbed by a small flock of Red-winged Blackbirds.

We returned for brunch with Brittany's Madison friends, then had an entire afternoon to kill before a dinner reservation with my Madison friends. I decided I'd show Brittany where I used to work, an ostentatious corporate campus loaded with meaningless art, its buildings constructed to themes like Harry Potter, the Wild West, and New York City. We didn't make it.





American White Pelicans, Fitchburg, WI.

“Are those swans?” I asked, looking over my shoulder before returning my eyes to the road. At least a hundred giant white birds were sitting around a large downed tree in a pond I’d driven by nearly every day for two years and had never noticed anything interesting about. “They’re PELICANS!” Brittany shouted. “We gotta pull over! Turn off here!” Britt scanned the map for a vantage point. We pulled off at the next exit on the highway and took a “short hike” along a rail trail for an impromptu birdwatching and photo session before resuming our previous plans.

The short hike was actually a 30-minute trot each way, but the spectacle was worth it. Pelicans were swimming, napping, cuddling, and fishing. Pelicans were turning their bills inside out over their necks. Pelicans were fighting and smacking bills, getting caught up inside one another’s mouths. Pelicans were slowly circling on thermals above us. We counted 120 in total, which seemed like too many for this small lake. I wondered how I could have possibly missed spectacles like this when I lived in Madison (I’ve since been reassured that the bird’s Midwestern population has recently increased and it might have been easier to miss five years ago). We took in as much pelican as we

could handle (not to mention a Bald Eagle, Osprey, and flock of Great Blue Herons flying over), then jogged back to the car. The commute that had given me so much grief had provided one of my favorite birding experiences of the year.

Our final morning couldn’t match the drama of the prior afternoon, but Britt promised I could fit one more birding stop around our plans, and there were still plenty of birds I’d hoped to see. We didn’t have time to head up to the park where the Whooping Cranes breed, nor to the more reliable spots for Upland Sandpipers, so I had to choose between a nearby marsh for Yellow-headed Blackbirds or a nearby prairie for Henslow’s Sparrows.

I’m a light sleeper, so I picked both—I woke up early, grabbed coffee with another Madison friend, and sped up to a small wildlife refuge next to a farm. A Turkey Vulture feasting on roadkill blocked the only place to park the car, so I pulled over right on the highway. As I was rattled by more semis and fighting unusually gusty winds, a male Yellow-headed Blackbird flashed his white wing patches and flew up over the marsh before landing on a cattail. He, too, fought a wind that threatened to blow him from his weak perch.

I watched for a few minutes, then terrified that I might be run over, returned back to wake up Brittany.

Our final stop was a prairie preserve just south of Madison where Henslows had been previously reported. This prairie dwarfed the prairie we'd visited the day before, and the flatter land meant that we were nearly swallowed by the grass—the "trail," if you could call it that, was an indentation where a four-wheeler might have driven a year ago. For a half-hour or more, the loud wind created waves over the field, punctuated only by the occasional call of an Eastern Meadowlark. We'd walked far into the prairie, but it seemed that the birds were simply too far from the trail for us to notice their insect-like call.

Then, as we were about to head back to the parking lot, a tiny bird peeped and zipped like a wren down the path. But we hadn't heard any wrens. I pushed through the grass towards the small shrub where the bird had landed. Of course, a Song Sparrow sat there calling—no, not you! But I heard the song again, too quiet for a bird, it seemed, like an eight-bit video game glitching. It kept singing, and soon, I noticed the peeping all over the field. Something, our presence perhaps, had roused the Henslow's Sparrows. A tiny, finely-streaked bird with a greenish head emerged from the leaves. I lifted my camera, and...

Of course, my camera died. I'd forgotten my charger in New York and thought that maybe strategic use would let it last for the long weekend, but it gave out on me. I eked out a few blurry shots of the sparrow amid the leaves, but nothing that I'd be able to remember it by. I turned, looked up, and noticed a male Bobolink had landed mere feet from where I was standing, looking directly at me. I laughed—if I couldn't get any good pictures, at least my Henslow's chase was memorable.

We returned to Madison, bought some fancy cheddar, went to Culver's (a jewel of Midwestern fast food) and eventually returned to the airport. I'm leaving out plenty of fun non-bird activities we crammed into the three days, but I was plenty satisfied with the weekend. Seventy bird species in mid-June, plus a handful of lifers. It wasn't a trip to a tropical destination and most of the birds were ones you could spot in New York State. But seeing my old home through birding binoculars gave me an appreciation for the state that I certainly didn't have when I lived there. And maybe I was a little disappointed that we didn't see any Whooping Cranes during the weekend—but that gives us an excellent excuse to return. 🐦



Ryan walking through a prairie in Southern Wisconsin looking for Henslow's Sparrows.



Sparks!

By Eric Mathern

Warbler. Mixed-media illustration by Sam Dean Lynn.

One generally thinks of a spark bird as the one whose sighting is so transformative that the viewer begins his or her conversion from a casual observer of birds into a birder. For me, however, there were a few preliminary sparks before my passion for birding caught fire.

Growing up, there were no bird feeders in the backyard of our New Jersey home, but I remember being attracted to the black, iridescent grackles that strutted across our lawn, the ubiquitous House Sparrows in the neighborhood, and the occasional male cardinal, whose appearance was always cause for excitement. As I grew older these were the birds I knew, and my awareness of birds remained at this level for years.

Strangely, the first time I remember having a keen curiosity about birds was not in the suburbs, and not in the country either, but when I was a student at NYU residing in the East Village. In those days I'd often go for a morning run on a path that bordered the East River; once, I spotted what I thought was a black duck swimming just a few yards from the path. I couldn't recall having ever seen such a creature, and I stopped my run and stood there, transfixed, as it hurled itself beneath the surface and then bobbed up a few yards away. Later on I learned this was a Double-crested Cormorant, and searching for it on my subsequent morning jobs became part of my routine. But I was merely on the threshold of being a birder, and, unlike the cormorant, hadn't yet fully plunged beneath the surface.

That immersion took place many years later, but there were interim stages. In my late twenties I dated a woman who was a full-fledged birder. She encouraged me to purchase my first pair of binoculars and first Peterson's guide. We spent most of our weekends at Jamaica Bay or traveling to a wildlife refuge in New Jersey. One August we rented a cabin in the Adirondacks, where during one hike my girlfriend would call out towhee or junco as I struggled to focus binoculars on the elusive bird flitting before me. In those years I grew more knowledgeable, but with an experienced birder by my side, I too easily settled into the role of neophyte, happy to remain passive and let my companion identify the birds that darted across our hiking paths.

Still, I learned some on my own—mostly ones that were large or easier to identify, like Glossy Ibises or

kingfishers. Our relationship ended, and heartbreak followed, as I lost a friend as well as my birding guide. But I held onto my interest in birds, and I kept riding the A train to Jamaica Bay, looking for shorebirds, finally breaking in my field guide as I flipped through its pages trying to locate the long-legged birds wading before me.

But my interest had other competitors, namely running marathons. I spent almost every day in Central Park, jogging along its loop road, but still catching hints of bird activity: the white flashing tails of the juncos scattering into the brush, or the Red-tailed Hawks floating high above me. They were minor players, however, in the drama that was preparing for the NYC marathon. Still, I noted the Laughing Gull that seemed to be eye-level with me on the Triborough Bridge, or the robins' orchestral song rising from curbside trees as I set off running at five in the morning.

After five marathons, I decided that my time as a distance runner was up. I would still lace up my sneakers and head to the park, but instead of running the loop I would walk the quieter bridle path or the trails leading into the Ramble. Another transformation was complete: I was no longer a runner but a walker.

So it was a perfect coincidence when, walking past the boathouse restaurant one day, I noticed a number

“I now have my spark bird—really, my re-spark bird. And it's changed the course of my life.”

of birders walking quickly into the Ramble. I decided to follow them, and as we reached an area they called the Point, I found even more birders there—and their attention trained completely on a small, egg yolk-colored warbler flitting through the low-hanging branches of a waterside willow. It was a Prothonotary Warbler, and I was entranced. To this day I don't recall if I watched it without binoculars or

if someone let me use theirs, but I clearly remember hunting for my old pair that night. When I returned the next day, the Prothonotary still occupied the same tree, and I watched it happily as this luminous bird hopped from branch to branch.

That was more than a year ago, or three migration seasons. Since then, I've been making near-daily trips to Central Park, as well as venturing outside the city to see Short-eared Owls at Shawangunk or Harlequin Ducks at Jones Beach. And so after decades of on-again, off-again birding, I now have my spark bird—really, my re-spark bird. And it's changed the course of my life. 🐦



Bears, Birds, a Flat Tire and a Man Named Feathers: A visit to Glacier National Park

By Sheila Friedman

Glacier National Park. Photograph by Joe Mabel, via Creative Commons [\[CC BY-SA 2.0\]](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)

Where to celebrate our 50th anniversary? We'd been to several national parks out west, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Yellowstone and Bryce Canyon, all beautiful and awe-inspiring places. But, 50 years called for something very special and so we chose to visit one of the crown jewels of the National Park System: Glacier National Park.

Glacier National Park sits in the northwest corner of Montana and shares a border with Alberta, Canada. The entire park, Canada and the U.S., includes the Continental Divide, the northern Rocky Mountains and totals about one million acres. In the U.S. that's 28,000 square miles of snow-capped mountains, icy, blue-green lakes, fields of sub-alpine wildflowers and iconic wildlife like grizzly bears, moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goats. Everywhere you look could be a photo in a National Geographic calendar.

George Bird Grinnell, an anthropologist and naturalist born in Brooklyn, called Glacier the "Crown of the Continent" in the late 1890s. One of Grinnell's many accomplishments was to organize the first Audubon Society and New York Zoological Society,

but equally important was his trumpeting of support to make Glacier a new national park in this "fledgling" park system.

GNP's tourist season is relatively short, from mid-June to mid-September. The full length of the road that allows visitors to travel east and west across the park, the Going-to-the Sun Road, doesn't open until near the end of June. Much of the road is open before this but the higher elevations are often still snow-filled. The bulk of the crowds arrive in July and August which makes traffic and packed parking lots common sights. We wanted to avoid that so we opted to visit in mid-June. We wanted to hike some of the many trails (56 of them, ranked from less-challenging to very challenging are listed in GNP's official summer 2019 newsletter), take boat rides, see those iconic large mammals and, of course, see birds.

To prepare for birding in GNP I purchased "Glacier is for the Birds," by David Benson, and visited the Flathead Audubon Society's website. Benson's book divides the park into distinct areas with all the trails in that particular area and the birds one is likely to

see in each. Most people come to GNP to see the large animals, not birds. Benson, tongue in cheek, makes a case for the superiority of birds, while pointing out the complicated business of identifying mammals.

Benson runs through the challenges to birding in GNP and I experienced all of them. Bears are common residents. There are signs at the beginning of every trail posting messages of caution and warning hikers about bear awareness and use of bear spray. Hikers are instructed to make noise at regular intervals so as not to surprise a bear. Calls of “Yo, bear!” shouted every few feet, fill the air. People are encouraged to hike in groups, not alone. (We hiked well-traveled trails and Ranger-led outings and joked that the people in front of us would get eaten first!) Birds don’t like noise.

Of course, I found the hardest challenge to be the evasiveness of the birds in GNP! The density of leaves and conifer needles seem to swallow the birds up as they fly across your path. Very frustrating. It’s for this reason that learning their songs and calls becomes so important. Even a bird’s bright colors may not help you find it. Benson explains that through natural selection, colorful birds have developed a behavior of sitting very still to avoid detection by a predator. They can also throw their voices so that you think they are much closer and higher up than they really are. In many places, I kept hearing a thrush singing but couldn’t locate it. Benson’s book listed Swainson’s Thrush in those locations, so I thought that was a possibility. I heard and finally saw one at the Goat Lick Overlook on Route 2 heading from East Glacier to West Glacier. A goat lick is not an ice cream stand but an area of mineral deposits where goats trek to get the minerals they need.

Our trip began in Kalispell, Montana, surrounded by mountains. Red-winged Blackbirds and Purple Finches perched in the small marshy area near our hotel. On our way to Route 2, the road that brings

you around the southern end of the park to the eastern entrance, we passed several small areas with signs announcing a slough. They looked like marshes and in fact, a slough is defined as a place of deep mud, a swamp or a creek in a marsh or tide flat. At Paul’s Slough there was a Bald Eagle stationed high up in a tree overlooking the slough. It was a good sign.

Our first stop off of Route 2 was the Hungry Horse Reservoir and Dam. Approaching the visitor center, hundreds of Cliff Swallows shot into holes in the rocky cliffs alongside the road. Violet-green Swallows swooped up the walls of the dam. Continuing on, passing Lewis and Clark National Forest and several “prairie pothole” lakes, we entered GNP at the East Glacier entrance on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation.

GNP and the surrounding areas were the traditional



Blackfoot Indian Reservation. Photograph courtesy of USDA NRCS.

territories of the Blackfoot, Kootenai, Pend d’Oreille, and Salish Nations. These tribes would hunt, fish, gather plants and hold ceremonial dances in what is now the park. GNP sits alongside the Blackfoot Reservation to the east and the Flathead Reservation to the southwest. Much of

the tribal land was stolen after dishonored treaties—a familiar story. The Kootenai are still negotiating a treaty with Canada and British Columbia for rights to their ancestral homeland and the protection of their water.

At the park’s St. Mary Visitor Center, there’s a moving exhibit to the past and contemporary lives of these three tribes. I learned that the construction of the Going to the Sun Road was a “mixed” blessing to many Native people. They recognized the irony of the creation of the road, considering it a “huge scar on the landscape.” On the other hand, without it there would be fewer visitors to Glacier and less support to keep the park in its untouched state. On a particularly affecting panel was a quote from Blackfoot tribal chairman Earle Old Person: “We only sold them the rocks.”

Outside the same center, I spotted several White-crowned Sparrows foraging in the freshly cut grass. The males learn songs from their parents and stay on the same territories, so their dialects are distinct. Birds living on the edge of two territories, I learned, are bilingual and can sing both dialects.

Onward to the Many Glacier Rd. entrance through the small town of Babb, passing the Cattle Baron Supper Club. This sounds fancy but is a rather dark, wooden two-story building with holes in the siding that turned out to be Northern Flicker homes. Several pick-up trucks were parked outside, including one with about four or five American Crows finding something irresistible in the bed of the truck. In Montana, even the crows drive pick-up trucks.

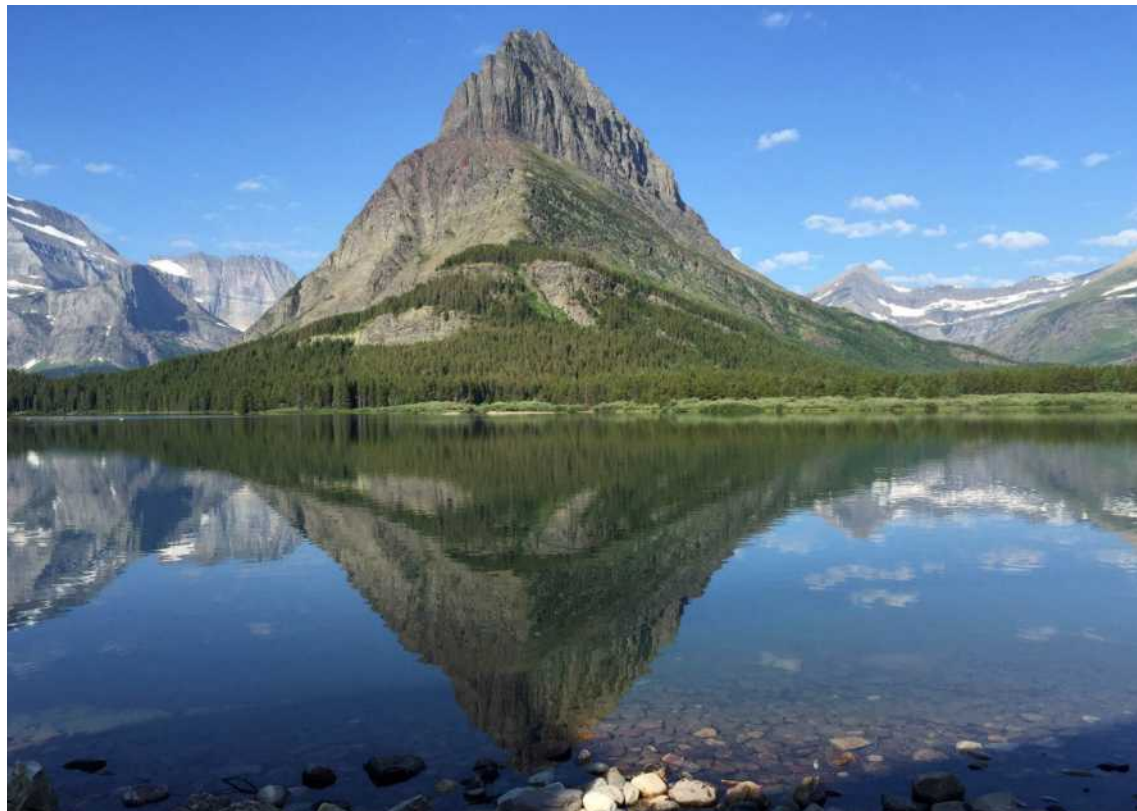
Right past the supper club we came upon a large pond with a central beaver's dam, as described by Benson. I consulted his book constantly. Common Loons, many Red-Winged Blackbirds, swallows, Chipping Sparrows, Cedar Waxwings perched low, and Ring-necked Ducks were enjoying the pond. A later trip on the way out of the park would bring us a very low flyover of a pair of Sandhill Cranes. Ten-million year old fossils found in Nebraska of these cranes (*Antigone canadensis*) revealed that they're the oldest known bird species still in existence. The fossils are structurally identical to present-day cranes.

Further along Many Glacier Rd. is the Sherburne Dam and outfall. This can be a good place to see the bird I had hoped to see, Harlequin Ducks, since they favor turbulent, rushing water. But no luck. As we continued along, we noticed a small crowd of people standing alongside the road next to their cars. When people stop traffic to observe an animal it's likely a bear. And it was.

Two black bears were ambling along, munching vegetation a la "Blueberries for Sal." When people stop like this, it's called a bear jam, definitely not as bad as the bison jams we saw at Yellowstone where

some visitors got dangerously close to the animals. The rangers made sure that people kept their distance. On another day, coming back to the hotel by boat, we noticed a moose in the water wading close to the shore. A crowd had gathered not far from the water's edge. Our boat's captain picked up her megaphone and blared, "Step away from the moose! Move away from the moose!"

The road to the chalet-style Many Glacier Hotel (and we joked, sadly, calling it Not-So-Many Glacier Hotel) is in bad shape, with potholes and bumps galore. Sure enough, when we arrived at the hotel we found



Swiftcurrent Lake from Many Glacier Hotel. Photograph by Pwessel222, via Creative Commons [[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)]

that one of our tires was low. The next day it was flat.

As bad as the road is, the hotel itself is breathtaking. Many Glacier Hotel sits on Swiftcurrent Lake and is surrounded by snow-capped mountains and some glaciers. (Signs in the hotel show the shrinking glaciers.) The lake is ice-blue and dozens of swallows swoop above it. Cliffs nested above the window of our fourth-floor room. With my binoculars I could clearly see their characteristic buff-colored foreheads. Columbian Ground Squirrels were everywhere, behaving like prairie dogs at their burrows. The lake held about a dozen Common Mergansers and a moose with her calf.

After we replaced our tire with the spare donut, we got the name at the front desk of a local mechanic

named Randy Feathers, who could fix it and free us up to continue our journey inside the park. We met him in Babb so he could guide us to his place. There, I saw a couple of Black-billed Magpies, Chipping Sparrows, Audubon's warblers (the western version of our Yellow-rumps), crows, and a fox, along with many cars, old tires, dogs and a few cats. Mr. Feathers inflated the tire and it became clear that it couldn't be fixed. We had to order a new one before we drove 90 miles back to the west side of GNP, where we were going to meet friends.

Several phone calls later and several hours sitting in a parking lot in St. Mary, where we were able to find a cell signal, we ordered a tire to be picked up in a few days 35 miles away in Browning, the governmental seat of the Blackfeet Nation. We set out to enjoy the next two days from our base at Many Glacier Hotel.

One of the great things about national parks is the variety and abundance of walks, hikes, talks, and programs led by rangers. I attended one to learn about the relationship between whitebark pines and Clark's Nutcrackers. Whitebark pine can't survive without the birds because they open the tree's cones, remove seeds, disperse and bury them. The birds are equally dependent on the seeds for food. Both have been declining due to the blister rust fungus, which attacks the trees. The ranger leading the talk told us of efforts to replant the pines lost to the fungus and how the trees they had planted appeared to be thriving. There is hope. (The park's website is filled with information on research, education, and preservation projects you can learn about and contribute to.)

Outside the hotel I saw a Gray Jay, a few Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and a Calliope Hummingbird. I also heard lots of birdsong but their camouflage tricks worked and their identities eluded me.

The tire never came. Avis had to send a driver with

a new car for us so that we could enjoy the rest of our vacation without worry. While waiting for the driver, I saw a perfect rainbow and a Western Tanager. Back in business with four sound tires, we drove to Jackson Pass and Sunrift Gorge, driving right up to the still-closed section of the Going to the Sun Road. Carpets of lupine, beargrass, and rosy pussy-toes were everywhere. On a trail alongside the gorge I saw a male and female Pine Grosbeak eating sand, a MacGillivray's Warbler flitting about in burned-looking trees, and Audubon's warblers.

The opening of the Going to the Sun Road is always big news in the park. Park rangers field questions leading up to that date, and when it finally opens they broadcast it on local radio. We drove back to the west side along Route 2, the road around the southern end of the park, and the next day Going to the Sun Road was open. Unfortunately, it was raining heavily so the drive to Logan Pass, the highest point in the park, wasn't ideal. Stopping at Avalanche Creek, a Harlequin Duck hangout, I checked the rushing water for the ducks. By the end of June, most of the males have made their way to the Pacific Coast, but

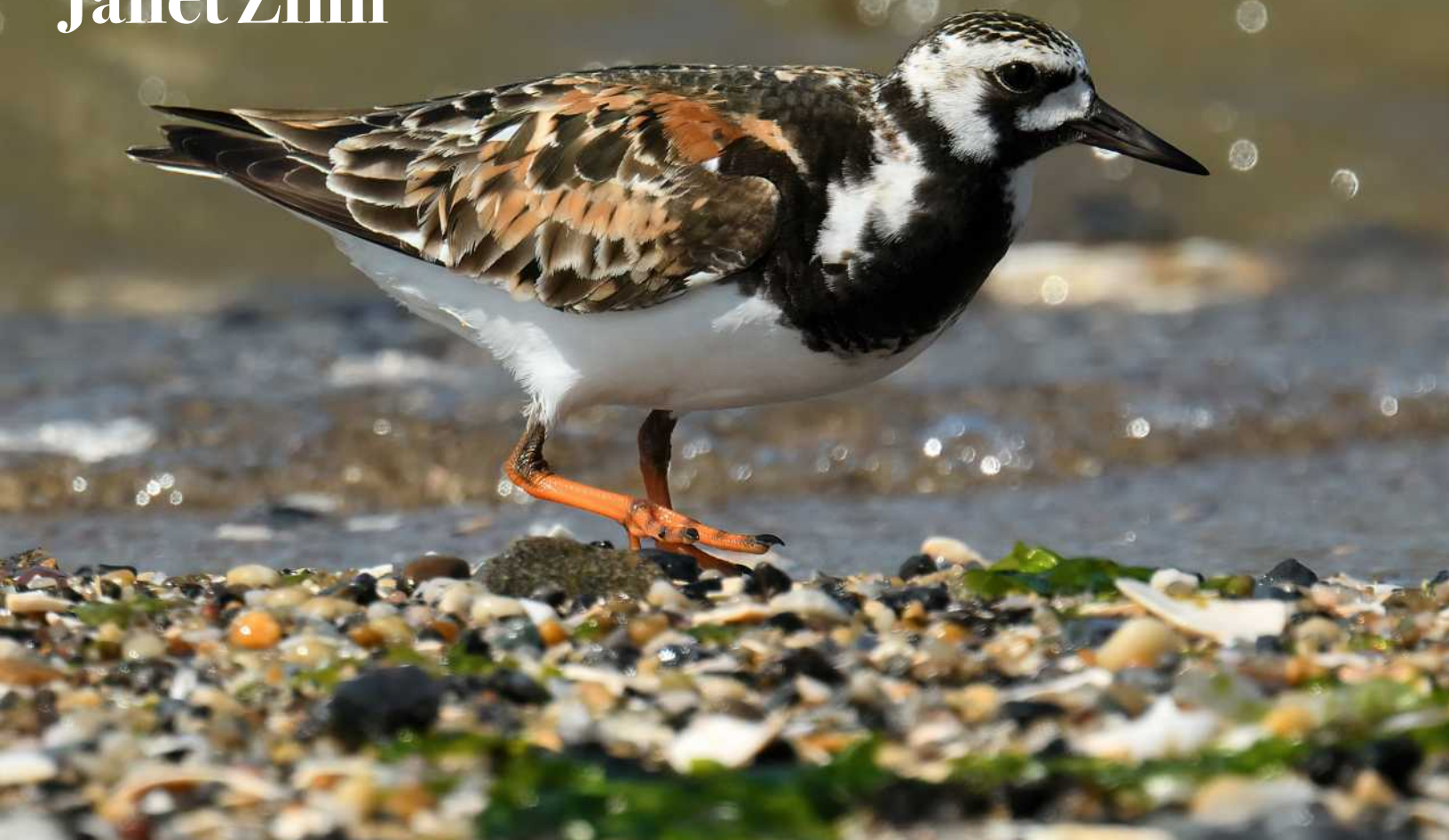


Avalanche Creek. Photograph by Finphish,
via Creative Commons [\[CC BY-SA 3.0\]](#)

the females can still be on their breeding grounds with ducklings. Scanning the rushing creek in the cold rain, I checked the banks for Harlequins and American Dippers. Dippers also like the bubbling, rolling waters; they're also the only songbird to swim. No ducks, no dippers.

But the rest of our trip still offered a bounty. Outside Whitefish, Montana, sort of like Park Slope with a western motif, we found juncos, coots, Mountain Bluebirds, chickadees, Eastern Kingbirds, kinglets, Killdeer, and more Sandhill Cranes. By the end, we felt certain: Glacier really is for the birds. 🐦

Photo Gallery: Janet Zinn



Clockwise from top: Ruddy Turnstone, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Piping Plover. All photographs taken at Plumb Beach. 28



Song Dynasty Bird Paintings

By Benjamin Garron-Caine

Chinese “Bird and Flower” painting, or Huaniao Hua, dates from at least the early Northern Song Dynasty in the 10th Century. Silk painting of the Song era was markedly different than the landscape painting of the preceding Tang dynasty, in that expansive landscapes were replaced by more simple, object-focused depictions. Historians suggest that the Daoist Tang Dynasty rulers preferred art which depicted large scale, universal themes, while the Song Emperors preferred object-focused art with blank backgrounds as a way of formulating ethical codes at the individual level, from the “ground up.” While its not certain that the Huaniao Hua of the Northern and Southern Song dynasties were created with this aesthetic in mind, they are unique in their field-guide-like display, which in several pieces focuses on the individual object’s detail and leaves empty and void any background.

Here’s a brief survey on some of the better-known paintings and artists of the Song period, and the birds in their paintings.

Huang Quan (903-968). Quan was a court painter who worked in the imperial painting academies of the late Shu and early Song dynasties. Although a prolific producer, he has few paintings which survive. One of the most famous, “Birds, Insects, and Turtles” is a small ink on silk painting held at the Palace Museum in Beijing.



Birds, Insects, and Turtles. Painting by Hwang Quan. National Palace Museum, Beijing.

The painting shows 24 different representations of animals, including nine birds. Clockwise from left, these appear to be the: 1. White-cheeked Starling; 2. White Wagtail; 3. Yellow-bellied Tit; 4. Daurian Redstart; 5. Horned Lark (possibly); 6. Russet Sparrow; 7. Blood or White-eared Pheasant (possibly); 8. Reed Bunting (possibly); 9. Some type of gull.

This painting was said to have been created for Quan’s son to study. The Daurian Redstart, a migratory songbird seen on Hwang’s piece, is seen on other pieces of Song-era art, like the silk album leaf examples here: one from the Song Imperial Court under Emperor Huizong, and another attributed to the early 13th Century Chinese painter Ma Lin, son of the more famous Song era painter Ma Yuan.



Bird on a Flowering Branch. Painting by unidentified Song Dynasty court artist. Cleveland Museum of Art.



Late Snow and Wintry Birds. Painting attributed to Ma Lin. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Although birds like the Redstart and the Tit appear repeatedly in Song dynasty art, they don't appear to be representational objects of larger themes. Other birds, however, did have representational significance in Ancient China—magpies, for example, represent happiness, while Mynas were said to protect society from political corruption.

Cui Bai (1050-1080). Cui was a painter of the Royal court of the Northern Song, famous for his painting “Magpies and Hare” housed in the Palace Museum in Taipei. Here's an example of birds as symbolism: the word Magpie was phonetically identical to “happiness,” and the creation of paintings with two Magpies, or double happiness, were created ceremoniously for weddings.



Magpies and Hare. Painting by Cui Bai. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Another painting, not signed by Cui, but attributed to him, was featured in a Qing Dynasty imperial album, “Third Compilation of Collected Treasures of the Stony Moat.” The silk screen painting features a large peacock silhouetted by an Asian Paradise Flycatcher and a Yellow-bellied Tit. The peacock and flycatcher are seen in other pieces of Song era art, but their significance is unclear. As in many extant second millennium East Asian paintings, the paintings are passed through generations, so often accumulate other dynastic seals well after creation.



Peacocks and a Loquat Tree. Painting attributed to Cui Bai. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Emperor Huizong (1082-1135). Emperor Huizong, born Zhao Ji, the eighth and final emperor of the Northern Song, was a prolific painter and calligrapher, whose court artists were said to have created over 6,000 pieces of art. Nineteen pieces attributed to Zhao Ji or his Court followers remain, including “A Scroll of Precious birds,” which was sold at auction for over \$8 million USD in 2009. The piece has many recognizable birds such as the Hoopoe, top left, and the Azure-winged Magpie.

In addition, the Boston Museum houses a painting on silk attributed to Zhao Ji called “Five-colored Parakeet.” Interestingly, the bird doesn't particularly resemble any Chinese endemic species of parakeet. I suppose the closest would be the Red-breasted or Blossom-headed Parakeet, although both seem to have ranges centered to the west of what would have been



A Scroll of Precious Birds. Painting by Zhao Ji, Northern Song Dynasty. Collection of Liu Yiqian.

the territory of the Northern Song Dynasty. The poem, in calligraphy, is about cultivating virtue amongst the elites, so maybe in fact Emperor Huizong was cultivating a bird in his imagination to accompany a poem with high goals.

Wu Bing (1190-1194). Wu Bing was active in the late Southern Song, and is the only artist I can find who painted a Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, also known as the Korean Flycatcher. Wu was known for his painting of “broken-branch” style bird and flower paintings, but of the limited Wu Bing attributions I’ve located, he seemed to like opulence. Here he’s painted



Seeds Visible in an Open Pomegranate. Painting by Wu Bing, Southern Song Dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Five-colored Parakeet. Painting by Zhao Ji, Northern Song Dynasty. Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

a flycatcher, either a Yellow-rumped or Mugimaki, on an open pomegranate, which to the 12th-century Chinese represented wealth, and the lucky possibility of having multiple male heirs. In “Rice, Plants and Insects,” found in the album “Collected Gems of Famous Paintings,” housed at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Wu Bing exemplifies what appears to be characteristic of many of the bird and flower silk paintings of the Song era: precision in detail but with a plainness or non-existence of the background.



Rice, Plants, and Insects. Painting by Wu Bing, Southern Song Dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE BIRDING IN PITQIAGVIK



By August Davidson-Onsgard

Utqiagvik, formerly known as Barrow, Alaska, is the farthest north town in the United States. It's also a great place to go birding. This June, I travelled there with my family and saw about 40 species, 13 of which were life birds. In this article I will go through some of its best birding hotspots.

Utqiagvik is remote. It's located north of the Arctic Circle, and like many Native Alaskan villages, is so remote that there are no roads connecting it to other areas. None of the roads in town are paved because they wouldn't stand up to the harsh winters. All groceries and supplies are flown in. Large items like motor vehicles and bulk deliveries of gasoline are shipped in by boat once a year during the few weeks the sea is clear of ice hazards. This means that almost everything is extremely expensive. The cost of living is so high in Utqiagvik that its median annual income is \$80,000, or 60 percent higher than the national average. Many of the town's residents are Native Alaskans who harvest wild game. If you walk around town, you will see evidence everywhere of the subsistence harvest. Everything from racks of curing seal meat and polar bear pelts to walrus tusks and bow whale blubber.

When I arrived in town, one of the first things I noticed was its unique airport. There are no conveyor belts for luggage. Instead, a small window opens on the side of the building and a single airport employee tosses each bag out individually. The airport is so small that it can't fit any of the typical TSA scanning equipment, so each checked bag is taken apart by hand. Of note

to birders, unlike other airports the TSA in Utqiagvik will want to hand inspect your camera and lenses. It's common for airplanes to be turned around without landing due to inclement weather, so travelers should prepare for the possibility of being re-routed back to Anchorage or Fairbanks, or remaining in Utqiagvik longer than expected. The flight to Utqiagvik from Anchorage or Fairbanks is short enough, though, that day trips are possible.

Stepping out of the airport, I immediately heard



Cover: Spectacled Eider. Above: King Eider. All photographs by August Davidson-Onsgard.

the songs of Snow Buntings. Buntings, along with Lapland Longspurs and Semipalmated Sandpipers, are as common there as House Sparrows, pigeons and starlings are to us in New York. They raise their young everywhere throughout town. One house has a number of bird feeders in its yard, and the couple that lives there are gracious about allowing birders to hang out



and watch the many Arctic species that visit, including both species. If you haven't rented a vehicle on your own, this is the home of Mike, a local tour guide. Renting a vehicle through your hotel or through the Native corporation is also possible.

Utqiagvik is perhaps best known to birders as one of the few places where you can see all four eider species: Common Eider, King Eider, the rare Stellar's Eider, and the even rarer Spectacled Eider. Most of these are found by driving the roads outside of town. We spotted Spectacled Eiders by scanning the ocean on the edge of town and along the road that goes north to the spit.

Near the south salt lagoon at the intersection of Stephenson St. and Cake Eater Rd. is a popular spot for birders. This is one of the best spots to find Red-necked Stint, a regular visitor to Utqiagvik. Little Stint is also a possibility. Many Lapland Longspurs have visible nests in this area as well. If you continue down Cake Eater Rd., past the natural gas plant, it changes names and connects with New Landfill Rd., where there are multiple ponds on both sides of the road. This



Top: Snowy Owl. Bottom: Red Phalarope.

was the best spot I found to locate King Eiders.

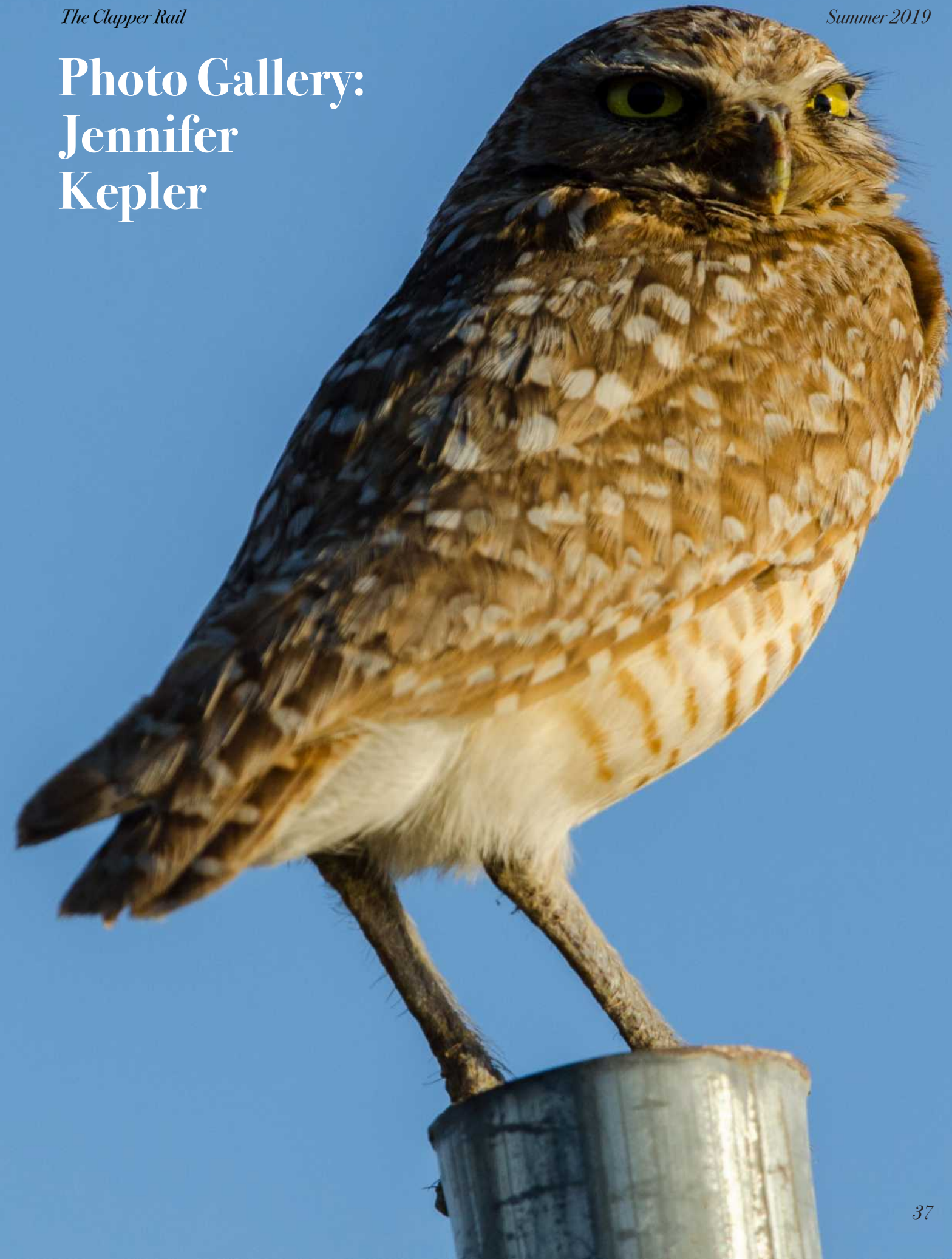
If you leave town in the other direction, Nunavak Rd. is a great spot to look for the Snowy Owls that nest in the area. I also found Nunavak Road to be the best place to find Stellar's Eiders. Additionally, you can also drive down Freshwater Lake Rd. to find nesting Sabine's Gulls and Arctic Terns.

Utqiagvik is such a small town that you can travel each of these roads in a single day. However, if you have multiple days to explore, you'll be able to cover more of the rare Arctic species. Because of its northern location, the summer offers the hardcore birder that rare gift: endless daylight. In other words, you can go birding around the clock.

One tip: if you are considering visiting Utqiagvik, I highly recommend you invest in waders. Though you can get by with just a pair of waterproof boots, if you are planning on leaving the road at all (check with the Native corporation about where this is legal as permits are required to travel on Native land) or laying down to take photos, a pair of waders are incredibly valuable. Your waders will also help you stay warm; summers in Utqiagvik can sometimes mean temperatures as low as the thirties. 🐦



Photo Gallery: Jennifer Kepler





The Rangers Are Coming! Prospect Park Happenings

By Stanley Greenberg

The Prospect Park Community Committee met June 25, 2019. Speaking to the park's capital projects, the Concert Grove Pavilion restoration will begin in August. Groundbreaking for the new entrances to the park on Flatbush Avenue was scheduled for July, but has been delayed. Starting from Grand Army Plaza, the first phase of the Flatbush perimeter restoration is complete, and the remainder should be completed by fall. Protected bikes lanes on Flatbush are also expected to be installed by fall, but that is a separate project managed by DOT.

For the new fiscal year, the Parks Department's budget was increased by \$43 million, largely due to lobbying from New Yorkers for Parks and other advocacy groups. Some of this money will go for more Park Enforcement Patrols (PEP) and a new class of rangers. The Prospect Park Alliance hopes to get several rangers permanently assigned to Prospect Park.

Also, \$2.2 million was designated for a comfort station near Parkside Avenue and \$1 million for the Parkside Avenue perimeter restoration (Borough President Adams allocation); \$600,000 for a horse-riding ring where the compost pile is now (Councilman Lander allocation); and another million for way-finding in the park (Councilwoman Cumbo).

In other news, the Alliance is purchasing a small street sweeper to be used on pedestrian paths. Parks is finally meeting with the NYC Emergency Services to come up with a system for locating sites in the park when you call 311 or 911. We've been asking for this for three years; it appears to be finally in discussion. I asked about the removal of the fencing around the area we planted near the Adventure Playground, and I'm still waiting for a response.

Lastly, the Alliance is planning a large capital campaign to fund improved maintenance and landscaping throughout the park. As part of that effort, we were asked to weigh in on their general ideas for what the park should be. Most of the ideas were in

keeping with what we as a club would like to see; I stressed the aspect of stewardship, and others spoke to the same idea.

The next ComCom meeting will take place in September. 🐦



Brown Creeper. Ink on paper by Toni Simon.

2019 Birdathon Update

As I write this I'm happy to inform you, dear member, that the pledges we raised for Save the Chocó have been safely received, thus drawing our most successful birdathon to a close. I'm immensely proud of the effort put out by the teams, the generous donations pledged by our friends and family, and the hard work Bobbi Manian put in (as she does every year) to make this event a success. The \$14,000 we raised will be matched by the Rainforest Trust and with our combined donation we will help purchase approximately 100 acres to expand the Canandé Preserve in Ecuador. Our wintering migrants give you their sincere thanks for helping to protect their wintering grounds.

I am already in discussion with several organizations to target next year's birdathon. I'm hoping to do something a little closer to home next year (maybe a lot closer!) while working to find a concrete metric like the \$275 per acre that I feel made this year such a success. Stay tuned.

As the summer birding doldrums come to a close we approach my favorite sequence of the year. August shorebirds roll into the neotropical migrants of September. The fall sparrows of October stretch into November, which brings the promise of rarities, and then transitions into December with its gulls neatly attired in their textbook winter plumages just in time for the CBC. We have everything our little slice of birding heaven has to offer to look forward to in the next few weeks. Get out there and enjoy it! 🐦





Photo Gallery: Steve Nanz's Backyard Bugs



Above: Hummingbird Clearwing. Below: Red-banded Leafhopper.

Upcoming BBC Programs

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

All programs begin at 7 p.m. at the Prospect Park Zoo in the Conservation classroom. Please enter through the service gate on Flatbush Avenue. Doors open at 6:45 p.m.

9.17.19

“Bats at Prospect Park Zoo,” presented by the Wildlife Conservation Society Staff and Paul Keim

Come learn about the bats native to our area with a presentation from Wildlife Conservation Society employees who are studying the bat diversity within the grounds of WCS’s institutions. We’ll conclude our evening with a walk, led by naturalist Paul Keim, on zoo grounds looking for bats and other evening fauna that call the natural areas of the zoo home. Please wear comfortable shoes to venture outside with.



10.22.19

“Members Photo and Art Night”

BBC Members are invited to share their photos, media, and NEW bird art! Please register to present by emailing Jen Kepler with digital files of your photos, video, and/or art. We ask for a submission of up to 10 files per presenter to share with the club; please be prepared to share a little about yourself, the stories behind your work, and the equipment/media used.* To register and submit files, please email: Plummer.Jen@gmail.com.

*We ask that photos and videos were captured ethically, according to the ABA code of birding ethics.



11.19.19

“Save the Choco,” presented by James Muchmore

James Muchmore is an artist, birder, designer, and photographer turned conservationist who’s been exploring design’s role within conservation for the last five years. He’s put his years of corporate design and branding knowledge to use by collaborating with local and global organizations to help protect vital habitats and species throughout the Chocó region in Ecuador. Join us to learn a bit more about “Save the Chocó” and the impact of our donations from the 2019 Birdathon to this important cause.

