Summer 2020

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL

Inside This Issue

Cover: Blackburnian Warbler at Prospect Park. Photo by Ryan Mandelbaum.
Next Page: Tree Swallow at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Michael Elfassy.

Editor's Note

Here at last is our new issue of the Clapper Rail. It combines spring and summer, as the coronavirus pandemic that seized New York this spring scattered members of the club and dramatically altered how we interact with the city and birding within it. Those were terrifying days. I know some, like myself, found peace in places like Green-Wood Cemetery, while others departed or remained homebound, and thus experienced spring migration in new or reduced ways. I missed the club's walks and field trips and the camaraderie of seeing birding compatriots in the field. I hope that all of you have been able to weather these trying times.

In these pages, you'll see how some members coped with life in the early months of covid-19. It's no surprise that birds and nature kept us connected to the outside world, forcing us to slow down and observe birds and their behavior from our homes or backyards or local patches. Wherever I turned, there were articles in the mainstream press about the joys of birds and birding, as people woke up to birdsong in a quiet metropolis and finally noticed the colorful sights of spring migration. My hope is that this appreciation continues long into the future.

– Ryan Goldberg

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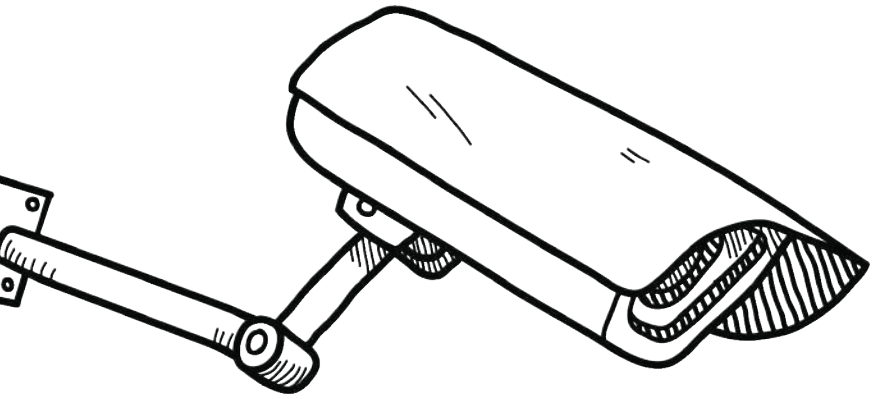


A Room With a View: From Brooklyn to Panama

By Linda Ewing

At the end of March, with New York City locked down, my world—like everyone's—shrank. I'd flown home early from a long-planned trip to Mexico. My tradition of spending part of spring migration birding the woods, wetlands and meadows of my Ohio childhood was looking increasingly doubtful. And while I could still walk to Prospect Park and Green-Wood Cemetery—masked, keeping a wary distance from others, struggling to see through the condensation on my glasses—many of my favorite South Brooklyn spots might as well have been on the moon. Mostly I sat in the apartment, checked news sites and Twitter every ten minutes, and felt sorry for myself. Knowing I was lucky to be healthy and well-housed and well-fed and economically secure didn't make me feel any less caged. It just made me feel caged and filled with self-loathing for being a frivolous, self-absorbed twit.

Which is to say, I was pretty depressed at the end of March.

That's when I discovered feeder cams. More specifically, that's when I discovered the fruit feeders at Canopy Lodge in Valle de Anton, Panama. It's one of several live feeds of feeders and nest sites that can be accessed through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website. Virtual birding had never appealed to me in the past, but that was when the real world was big. As the world shrank, the ability to look at a computer screen and see something happening right this second, out there in the somewhere else that still exists in all its breadth and variety and beauty, was irresistible. More than that: it was magic.

The immediate inspiration came by happenstance, via Bird Twitter.

A guy from South America who lives in England tweeted about wood-rails at the Panama fruit feeder. Here in Brooklyn, scrolling through my updates, I saw his tweet, looked at the attached photo, and felt my simmering anxiety transform into burning wood-rail lust.

A few clicks, and there I was, looking through a window at a rustic platform feeder stocked with halved plantains and oranges. My first Panamanian birds were Clay-colored Thrushes and Black-chested Jays. The

former was a species I knew from my travels, albeit vaguely, but the latter required some looking into. Was it a jay or a magpie? Unsure, I jotted down field marks on a piece of scratch paper—black head and chest, lemon yellow underparts, solid blue-gray back—and googled "Panama jay or magpie" to find a match. Going from complete cluelessness to a solid ID was satisfying. Addictive, even.

As more birds turned up at the feeder, I found that with a bit of internet sleuthing, paired with my Mexico, Trinidad and Ecuador field guides (I've not yet acquired a guide to the birds of Panama), I was able to identify most of them. The Dusky-faced and Crimson-backed Tanagers stoked my birding ego—wasn't I smart, first to recognize them as tanagers, and then to pick them out from the extensive "Panama tanager" lineup? It was fun, too, to realize that those birds that looked so much like Tennessee Warblers were, in fact, Tennessee Warblers in their winter home. The Thick-billed Euphonias reminded me of the Elegant Euphonias I'd seen in Mexico City's Bosque de Tlalpan just a few weeks—that is to say, a lifetime—earlier. The Buff-throated Saltator was an identification challenge (what's a saltator?), but I eventually got it. Hummingbirds, as always, flummoxed me, their plumage changing color with the light—but yes, that one with the distinctly rufous tail was in fact a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird.

"Amidst isolation and uncertainty, I valued these fleeting glimpses of daily life in another part of the world even more than I valued the birds.

No wood-rails, though.

Birding via a feeder live cam is similar to birding in real life, in that flurries of avian activity alternate with long stretches in which not much is going on. Insects buzz. Leaves sway in the breeze. Unseen birds whistle and chirp and twitter. In real life, this would frustrate me as I try to get eyes on the bird I'm hearing. On the screen, it soothes me. Limited to the camera's view, unable to look up or down or through or around, I have no choice but to relax and wait for the birds to show themselves.

I feel lucky each time my session in front of the screen coincides with the feeder's restocking. The human presence is jarring, but welcome. Usually the worker's back is to the viewer as he (so far it's always been a "he") spreads fruit and rice-gruel on the platform or hangs a fresh bunch of bananas from their dangling support. Once, though, the man stocking the feeder turned directly to the camera to smile and wave. I waved back, momentarily forgetting he couldn't see me.

At the height of the pandemic here in Brooklyn, whenever I saw the feeder looking sad and depleted, I worried. Had Canopy Lodge been closed and abandoned? And the man who waved, was he okay? A few hours or a day later, when I checked back, I'd see that the feeder had been restocked and I'd feel reassured. Amidst isolation and uncertainty, I valued these fleeting glimpses of daily life in another part of the world even more than I valued the birds.

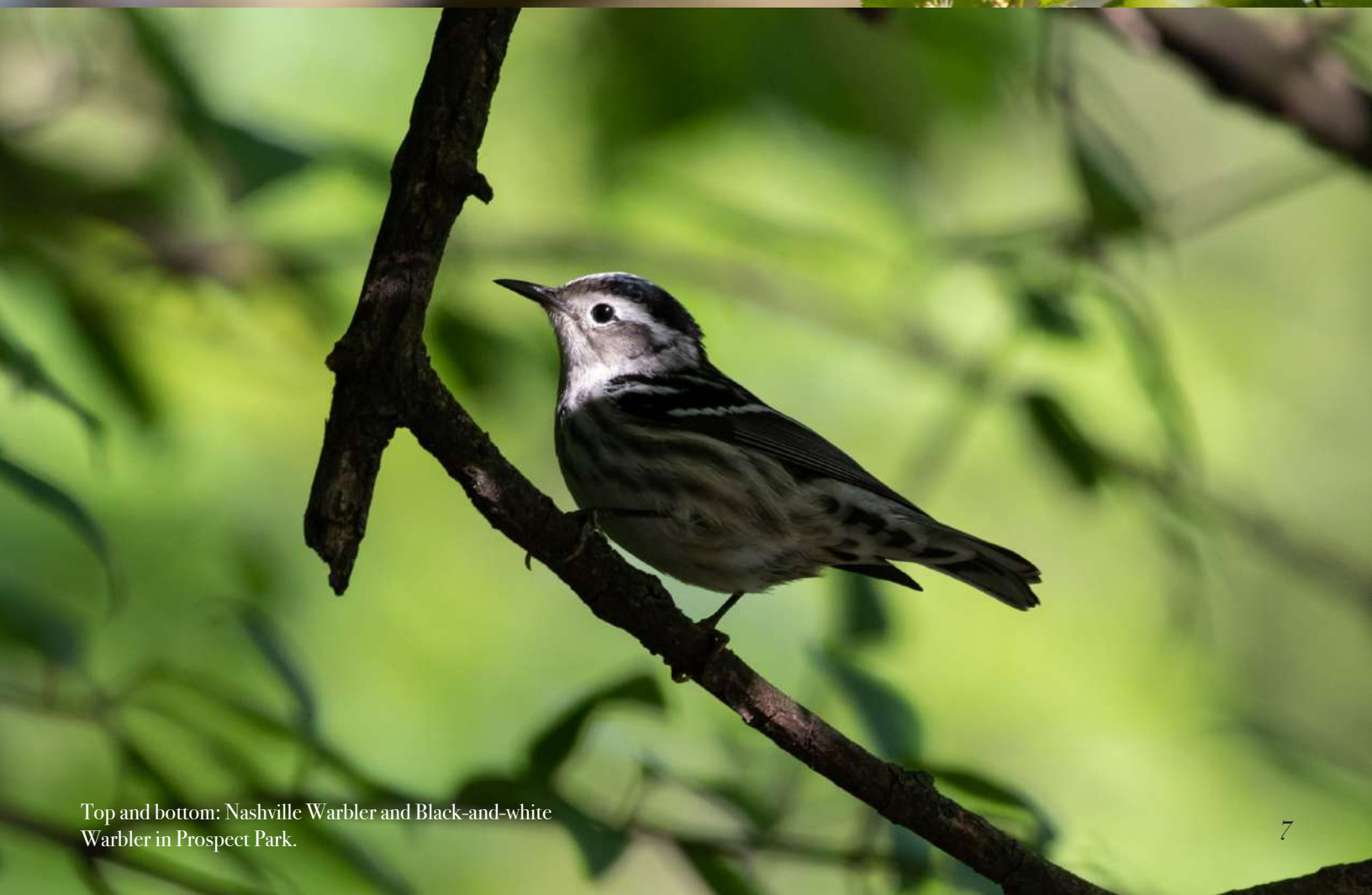
It took a few days of intermittent watching, but I did eventually see my target Gray-cowled Wood-Rails. A pair of them, in fact. They're handsome birds—dove-gray heads, big eyes, cinnamon chests and long red legs—but they wear their good looks lightly. Unlike some birds I can think of (Crimson-backed Tanagers, I'm looking at you), they're not flashy or aggressive. The overall impression they exude is of gentleness…and, when they flick those little black tails, playfulness. I've seen them at the feeder many times now, and they're never less than a delight.

Someday, when the pandemic ebbs, I hope to catch a Copa Airlines flight to Panama City and make my way to Canopy Lodge for real. I'll check in, throw my suitcase in a corner of my airy, comfortable room (needless to say, I've already scoped out the accommodations), and park myself by the window. There, I'll greet the wood-rails and other birds that comforted and distracted me during that bad time when our city was shut down, people were dying, and we relied on distant cameras to remind us that the world was still wide and beautiful and birdy.

(You can visit the Canopy Lodge fruit feeder here.)

Photo Gallery:
Ryan Mandelbaum

Great Egret in Green-Wood Cemetery.



Top and bottom: Nashville Warbler and Black-and-white Warbler in Prospect Park.

Least Tern at Plumb Beach.

Clockwise from top: Dunlin at Plumb Beach; Scarlet Tanager and Hermit Thrush, Prospect Park.

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

By Bets Radley

Here I am "away" in Roanoke, Virginia. A fairly large city of 100,000 resting between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains. As a migrant from Brooklyn, I was happy to find a place with the great outdoors on my doorstep. I could go hiking and, with spring migration less than a month away, visions of warblers danced in my head. And as the self-appointed family historian/genealogist, I wanted to visit some places where my ancestors lived and worked. It's my form of a spiritual pilgrimage.

I left Brooklyn on March 11, while we were still in open times. Once I reached New Bern, North Carolina, I spent two days in their genealogy room before the town shut down. My research showed that my 7x great-grandparents were buried in the local church in the center of the old village. When I went to pay my respects, I found not a soul in sight—it felt like I had entered the Twilight Zone. It was then I realized that I needed to find a place where I could be safe and find peace but still continue my research. Roanoke turned out to be the perfect setting.

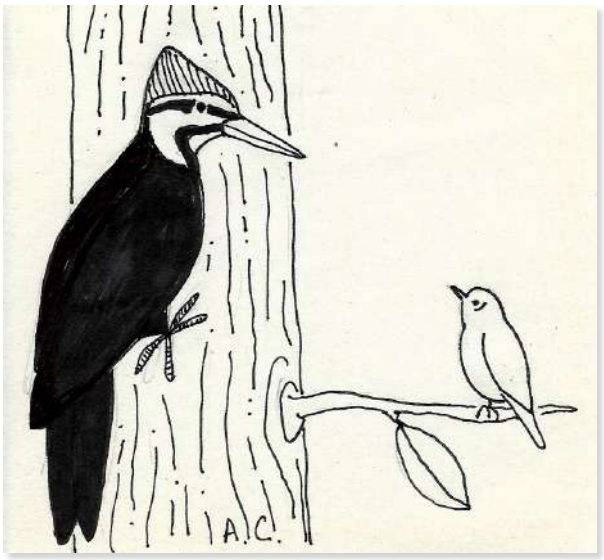
While my ancestors never lived in Roanoke, in 1778 they passed through when they traveled by Conestoga Wagon from Philadelphia to Lexington, North Carolina, on the Great Wagon Road. I found a wonderful place to stay where I could learn more about their travels, but still be close to birding and hiking. My cottage is next to the owner's, and she welcomes my help in her gardens that are planted for birds and other wildlife. She's been a great support to me. In the tradition of the South, she's also an incredible storyteller and captivates me with stories of her family, community, and travels. She's a rare gem and I'm very lucky indeed.

Although March was still too early, eBird helped me find the local birding spots, and I headed out several times a week to hike and see what birds were around. March 27 brought me cardinals, a White-breasted Nuthatch, a Hermit Thrush, more Song Sparrows than you get shake a stick at, a Cooper's Hawk and a family of six crows. But truthfully, these were in the backyard before I even left the cottage. Eventually, things picked up and the juncos, thrashers, and an abundance of bluebirds showed up. On April 22 I saw my first Black-and-white Warbler.

Roanoke is on the far west fringe of the Atlantic Flyway, and although warblers are seen here, I couldn't find them. Fewer birds pass through to their northern breeding grounds, and the green areas are so vast. One thing I've learned about birding in the forest is that you can hear them, but it's very hard to see them. Finally, through a chance encounter, I learned that the same warblers found in New York are a 45-minute drive north in a place called Warbler Road. Unfortunately, I never did get to Warbler Road by the end of May. However, there was one local place I hadn't explored; it required a pass, but that was only a phone call away. It wasn't a bad first experience; a couple Killdeer, Spotted Sandpipers, a Willow Flycatcher, and a Common Gallinule, a rarity in this area. The downside? It's the local sewage treatment plant.

I miss the ol' tried and true birding spots I could reach by subway—Green-Wood Cemetery, Prospect and Central Parks, Jamaica Bay and Heather Wolf's patch, Brooklyn Bridge Park. I guess everyone misses the bird walks, but in New York City there is also a community of birders you might run into and who are regularly on Twitter. No such thing here. There is a bird club, but I've only seen one couple with binoculars. A few people report on eBird, but there's a delay of at least a day with the Roanoke City eBird alerts. By the time you learn of a rarity like that Common Gallinule, you might be out of luck.

Although I continue to be astounded by all the Eastern Bluebirds here, the Pileated Woodpeckers that wander the neighborhood and the ease of hiking, there's really no place like home.



I haven't seen them either, but I hear they're hanging out on Warbler Road.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & New York City Audubon: An Interview with Kellie Quiñones

By Tracy Meade

This interview with Kellie Quiñones, NYC Audubon's vice president, board of directors, took place on June 18, 2020.

Kellie Quiñones, please tell Clapper Rail readers a little about yourself.

I am an Afro-Boricua, born and raised in Bed-Stuy (do or die), Brooklyn, but I now live in Queens.

Growing up, I loved animals. At different times of my life, we had dogs, cats, a hamster, and a turtle. I watched every nature program and remember always looking for birds and other wildlife whenever we went for trips to the lakes with my grandmother. I never paid attention to where we were going, so this is probably why I have no sense of direction!

Unfortunately, when you're a kid growing up in Bed-Stuy, a career in nature was not even considered an option, as those with careers in nature were white and men. I loved watching the nature programs but there was never anyone on those programs that looked like me.

I work as an administrative assistant at a bank, but my love for animals never waned, and in May of 1995 I

Kellie co-leading a bird walk at Crotona Park in the Bronx, with Outdoor Afro NYC, in April 2019. Photo by Molly Adams.

became a Central Park Zoo docent, a position I held for 22 years. That same year, I discovered birds and joined NYC Audubon.

When and in what capacity did you become involved with NYC Audubon?

I don't remember the year, but it was in the late 90s/early 2000s that I started as a volunteer on the Field Trip Committee, and in 2003 I learned about "Project Safe Flight," which was started by Rebekah Creshkoff in 1997. Its mission is to rescue migratory birds that collide with reflective glass and bring this issue to the attention of NYC's government officials. Through the continued work and data gathered in a database created by NYC Audubon called d-bird, and in partnership with American Bird Conservancy and several other organizations, the NYC council passed Initiative 1482B.**

Today I am a vice president on the board of directors and chair of the EDI committee. I also lead bird walks and evening bat walks. I am a HUGE bat enthusiast!

When did it become clear to you that NYC Audubon needed to undertake the justice and organizational work of addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion? How did it come to pass that an EDI committee was formed with you as the chair?

When I was approached to join the board, one of the things NYC Audubon emphasized to me was their desire to bring more diversity into the organization so they could better reflect the communities in all five boroughs. I, along with Chris Cooper, were voted onto the board in 2016, and I then joined the Education and Nominating Committees. The Education Committee because it was very important to me that we introduce young people of color (POC) in urban areas to nature and wildlife; and the Nominating Committee because we would work to bring in candidates from diverse backgrounds to better reflect and understand the needs of the communities we serve.

So, NYC Audubon was already working on diversity and inclusion when in either late 2016 or early 2017, I was approached by the then chair of the Education Committee, Rich Fried. He had been in discussions with Rob Bate about forming an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Committee because they recognized that we needed to better reflect the diversity of NYC and that changing the culture required a committee

Kellie at the Austin Bat Refuge holding Midnight, a rescued Evening Bat, in August 2016. Photo by Lee MacKenzie.

dedicated to bringing EDI to every facet of the organization.

Rich asked me to join the committee, and then pulled the rabbit out of the hat and asked if I'd chair the EDI Committee, as he and Rob felt it was important to have someone who brought a different perspective and life experience that was very different from the other board members. Admittedly, I was terrified, but knew that for this organization to remain relevant, equity, diversity, and inclusion would play a crucial role. So, I got out of my comfort zone and said yes.

What was the result of the committee's efforts and are you involved in the implementation of the committee's recommendations?

I have to give huge props to our committee for all their hard work and dedication in putting together a five-year EDI strategy that would incorporate EDI into everything we do, and we would work with NYC Audubon's staff and committees to help guide the plan's implementation.

We've had fits and starts, and we have a long road ahead of us, but NYC Audubon recognizes that implicit bias exists within our organization, and recognizes that changing the culture and our behavior requires reflection, communication, and hard work. Then, and only then, will we dismantle our prejudices and welcome people of all ages, colors, sexual orientation, etc.

Our Executive Director, Kathryn Heintz, has hired several POC and LGBTQ into full and part-time positions, and she always keeps EDI at the forefront when vetting candidates.

And because of our focus on EDI, chair of the Nominating Committee, Sandy Ewing, always kept EDI at the forefront when vetting candidates. We now have the most diverse board—with a mix of African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Latinx, and LGBTQ people—in the history of NYC Audubon.

In addition, we put together an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement and a non-discrimination statement, which the board approved.

What advice would you give to other conservation organizations about EDI and racial justice?

Systemic racism is embedded in the fabric of our society, and unfortunately, many environmental organizations have perpetuated this racism.

Change is not going to come overnight. It requires recognizing implicit bias and building awareness by looking deep within. Once you're aware of the bias, you can work towards changing your behavior by continually self-evaluating. And speak up! If you see or hear racism or people behaving in a manner that is not inclusive, call it out. Call it out. Do not remain silent. To be silent is to be complicit and allows the status quo to remain.

I would suggest that organizations:

Develop partnerships with other local organizations and nurture the ones you have. It is important to reach out to other organizations to work on common goals and incorporate the communities you serve. I'm very proud to have led several bird walks in partnership with Outdoor Afro-NYC, Latino Outdoors, and the Feminist Bird Club. Working together will only make you stronger.

Provide the tools by offering implicit bias and diversity and inclusion training.

Look at the organizational structure of your organization and review the processes that may exclude others and develop processes that are more inclusive.

Seek out candidates from diverse backgrounds and once they're there, make them feel welcome and take the time to get to know them and create opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds to come together.

Listen. Communicate. Create an environment that allows everyone to speak up and contribute to the dialog, so that you can have the difficult and uncomfortable conversations. Only then, will you see change.

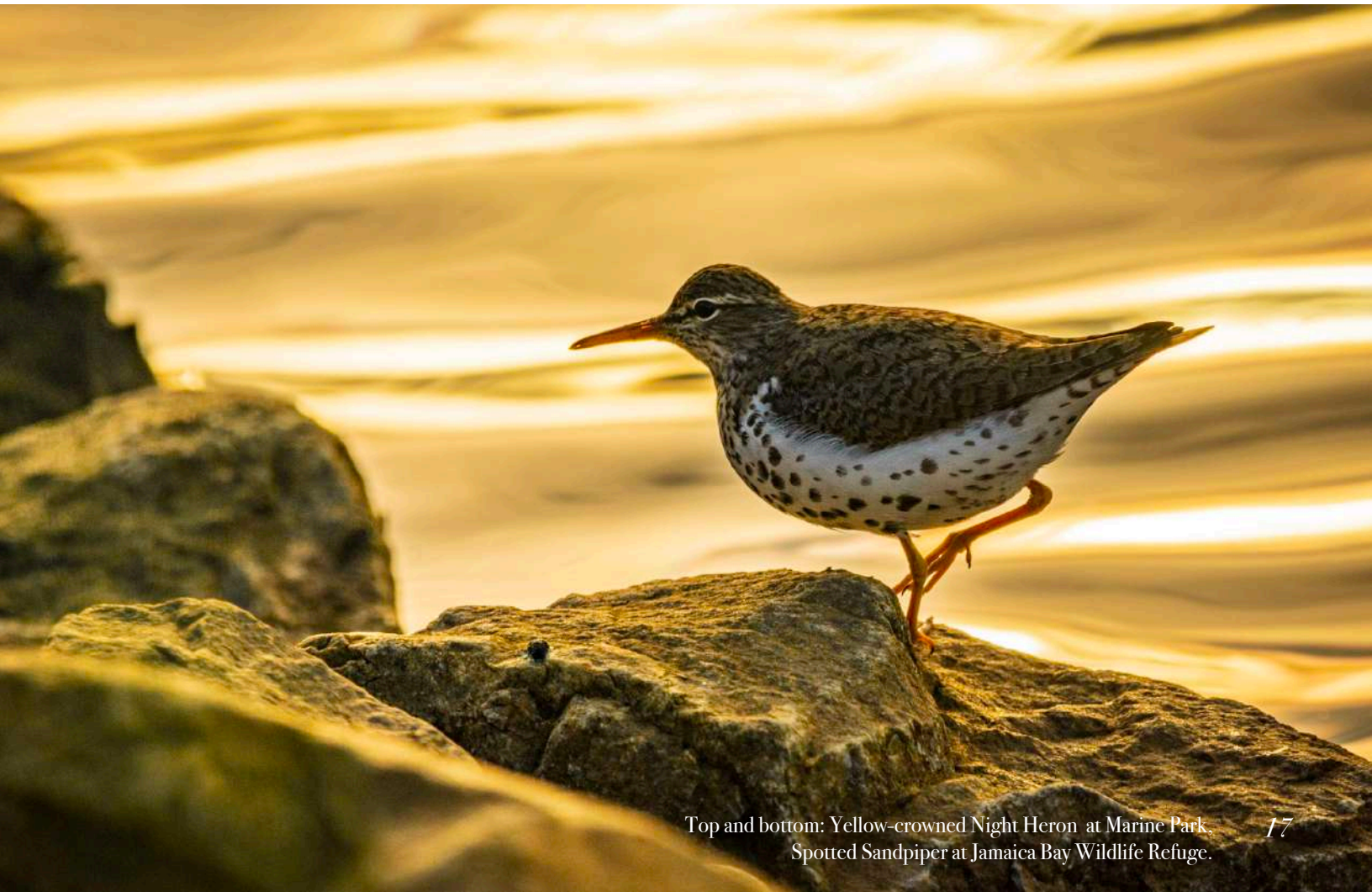
***Initiative 1482B is the city's new bird-friendly materials policy, which goes into effect January 10, 2021.*

Photo Gallery:
Michael Elfassy

Barn Swallow at Prospect Park.

Top and bottom: Common Tern at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge,
Laughing Gull at Prospect Park.

Scarlet Tanager at Prospect Park.



Top and bottom: Yellow-crowned Night Heron at Marine Park, Spotted Sandpiper at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.

CHIMNEY SWIFT

What matters to the black chatter
of chimney swifts
as they cut patterns across last light

are tiny bits of life
too small (or select) for human eyes.
All I can see

is the fact that they feed.
No. The fact that they fly
in dips and cuts.

I toss a copper penny up
—up into the smoke of emerging stars—
and one swerves by just long enough

to recognize the joke.

—Daniel Wolff

"American Swift," from "Birds of North America" (1827-1838), by John James Audubon.

Sparks!

By Ryan Mandelbaum

Great Blue Heron in Prospect Park. All photos by Ryan Mandelbaum.

Forget for a moment all of the facts, field marks, and positive or negative associations you have as a birder, and imagine seeing a Great Blue Heron in a New York City park for the first time. Imagine spending most of your life only noticing (and hating) pigeons, geese, and "seagulls," and then encountering this child-sized, spindly creature emerging from a giant nest in a city you never previously thought of as wildlife habitat. It would probably change your perspective completely—at least, that's what happened to me.

I'm from a New York City suburb on the east end of Jamaica Bay, bounded on two sides by saltmarsh habitat. I know today that this area is plenty birdy; Yellow-crowned Night Herons perch on roofs, gulls litter parking lots with dropped shells, and neotropical migrants fill the trees when the winds are right. But I never noticed any of that as a kid growing up. I was a computer geek who preferred the city to the suburbs and my family wasn't especially interested in wildlife. Most of my early childhood memories relating to birds are bad, like getting pooped on by a gull after feeding it a potato chip or seeing an entire nest's worth of dead hatchlings on the sidewalk. I decided early on that I was a "bird-hater."

I didn't really hate birds. I recently found a diary where I devoted half of a written page to the excitement of seeing California Condors at the Grand Canyon, and I always hoped to one day see the Eastern Bluebird, the New York State bird not commonly found in the city or its immediate vicinity. But once I decided that I hated birds it became part of my identity, and any positive avian experiences were simply exceptions to the rule.

Bird-hating grew incompatible with the rest of my identity as I matured, though. I started liking the outdoors, and led four-day canoe trips down the Delaware River for incoming first-years in college. I moved to Wisconsin, where hiking and nature are built into the fabric of the state's culture. I came back to New York to attend a graduate program in science journalism in 2015, and most of my peers were interested in wildlife in some way—not to mention that several former Audubon Magazine editors were part of the program's faculty. I stopped telling people that I hated birds and started saying that I feared birds, which was still true. I started to accept the possibility that I could be okay with birds.

I came across herons on my own. I learned through research that New York City Audubon had painted lawn flamingos white for a study to attract Great Egrets to Prall's Island on Staten Island's western shore, and decided to write and make a video about the organization's Harbor Herons project for a graduate school assignment. I found myself consuming as much information as I could about the long-legged wading birds (like the fact that egrets are just a kind of heron—this is not trivial information to someone who knows nothing about birds), first out of requirement for the assignment but eventually out of earnest interest. I decided that I really liked Great Blue Herons, not only because of their sheer size, but also because I found it amazing that such a wild-looking bird could call New York City home.

A video about herons and egrets wouldn't be very good without footage of herons and egrets, so I set out to find some. I visited the marshes across the water from Prall's Island on one trip, and didn't find any. I visited "Blue Heron Park" in Staten Island on a second trip, but again, no herons. I finally asked NYC Audubon folks for help, and they introduced me to the staff of the Greenbelt Native Plant Center. The center's seed collector Heather Liljengren knew the location of an active Great Blue Heron nest in another Staten Island park, and took me in her truck to see if we could spot the nest's occupants.

The enormous nest sat high in a tree above the lake, and I could only film it unobstructed if I climbed a tree down the shoreline. I perched awkwardly trying to capture the nest through the branches, the bird's wispy head plume poking above the sticks. I filmed for several minutes, unsatisfied with footage of a bird I could barely see…and then it stood up, outstretched its neck, and gave a quick feather shake. My gasp is audible in the raw footage. After a week of effort, I was overcome with a sense of utter joy, joy I today recognize as the feeling I get when I see a life bird for the first time after a lot of searching or anticipation.

I set the moment to Also sprach Zarathustra, the famous title theme to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in the final video project. This was meant to be funny, but is probably apt given the dramatic fire that this spark bird experience lit.

I still told people I feared birds even after my heron experience, but that wasn't really true anymore—it was just an outdated part of my identity I was hanging onto like an older child holding onto a security blanket. By that point I would always look at my local marshes when I drove by to see if I could spot any herons or egrets, and learned to recognize the slow flapping and extended legs of a heron in flight. I started noticing other birds too, and definitely sent a birder friend a picture of a European Starling asking for ID help. Most importantly, I learned that New York City was an important place for wildlife, embodied by the dinosaur-like bird that didn't look like it belonged here but still managed to survive and breed in the city limits.

Ryan birding at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge shortly after they started birding.

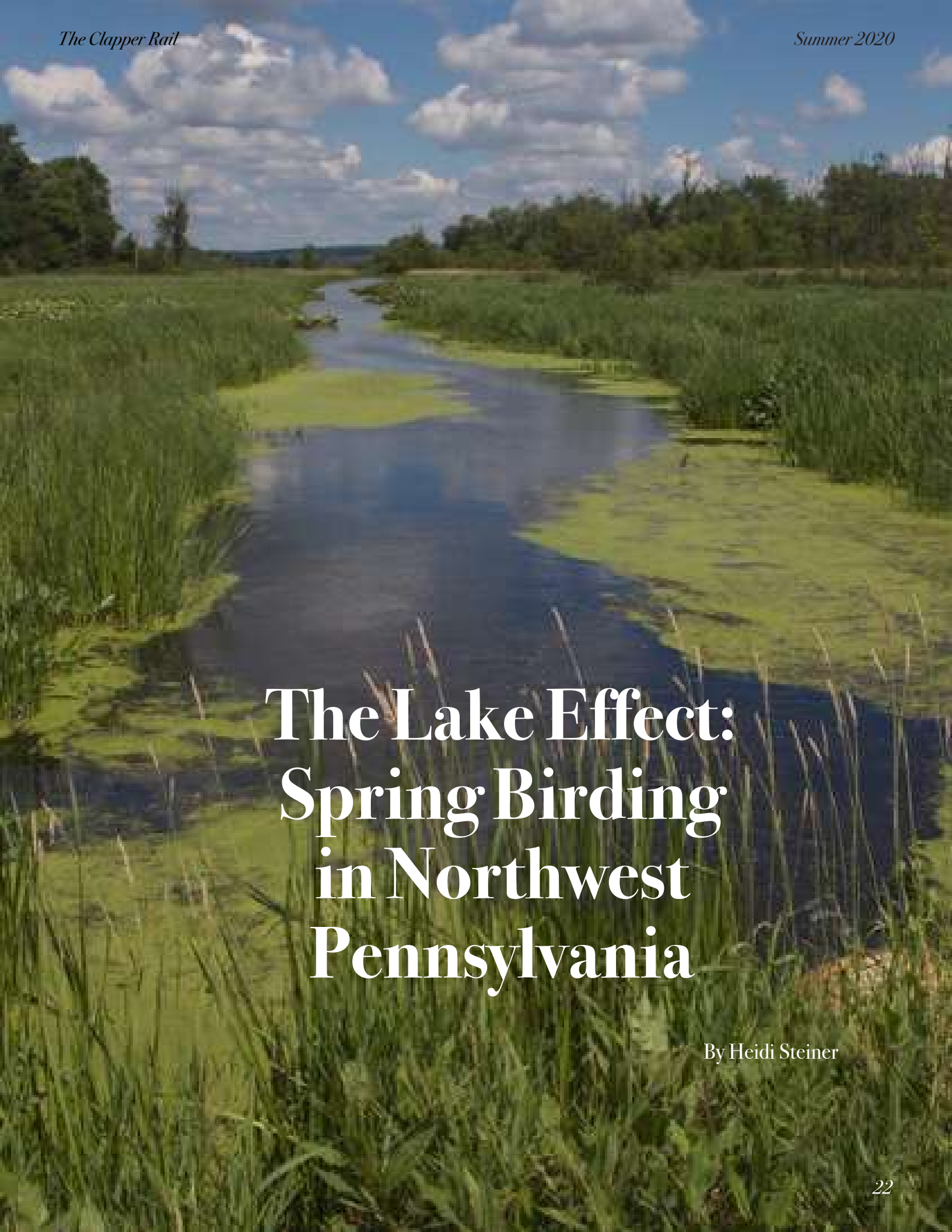
Things went like this for a year or so, as I slowly

started learning more about birds and started writing about birds in my first full-time science writing job. But then, in the summer of 2017, my now-spouse moved to NY and we got to chatting about what our couple's hobbies should be. They were an outdoors-loving Minnesotan whose college friend worked for the National Audubon Society and I was a heron-loving outdoorsperson who told their friends that they were afraid of birds. We decided to get really into birdwatching.

Three years later, we're utterly bird-obsessed. I spend most of my free time birding, reading about birds, and writing about birds. We've filled our home with bird photos and tchotchkes. Every recent vacation we've taken has had a birding component, many of our closest friends are birders or ornithologists, and I started a vertical at the tech news website Gizmodo devoted to stories about birds and bird science. I dream of a future where I can make a living writing about birds and leading bird tours on a boat or in a national park. My biggest regret is that I didn't start liking birds sooner.

Great Blue Herons will always hold an important place in my heart, and I don't think I would have become a birder without them. I hope that now I can have a hand in continuing to make New York City a place where these birds thrive so that they can convert other "bird-haters," too.

Above: Screenshot of Ryan's Great Blue Heron footage.
Below: Marshes in Staten Island.



The Lake Effect: Spring Birding in Northwest Pennsylvania

By Heidi Steiner

On March 18, a few days after New York City closed its schools, we decided to quarantine at Pymatuning Lake in northwestern Pennsylvania, where I spent my summers growing up and where my husband Steve and I bought a second home several years ago. Before, our time there had been determined by the school calendar, so visits were confined to July and August, winter and spring breaks. With the exception of one short visit in May 2014, we'd never been there during migration.

Pymatuning was created in the early 1930s by damming the Shenango River to prevent flooding in newer urban centers downstream. Creation of the lake flooded a huge portion of the Pymatuning Swamp, although thousands of acres of the swamp still exist. This, combined with the Hartstown Swamp and the Conneaut Marsh, also called Geneva Marsh (an Audubon IBA), both within 10 miles of Pymatuning, offer amazing ecosystems to kayak and search for birds, insects, unusual plants and abundant other wildlife.

Straddling the Pennsylvania and Ohio border, Pymatuning is a generous-sized lake at roughly seven miles long and over a mile-and-a-half wide, with about 70 miles of shoreline. Very little of the property that abuts the lake is privately-owned, as both states have reserved a margin of land around the perimeter. The lake is also surrounded by two state parks (one in Ohio and the other in Pennsylvania), game lands, wildlife conservation areas, and other land owned and managed by these two states. The huge tracts of uninhabited wetlands, thousands of acres of game lands, and abundant farmland all comprise high-quality bird habitat. The lake also appeals to us because there is no water skiing or jet skis, and the size of all outboard boat motors is limited to 20 horsepower. Most boats on the lake are fishing boats slowly trolling along, sailboats (the lake is surrounded by flat terrain and gets great winds for sailing) or kayaks. The climate prevents boating for a majority of the year. All of these conditions add up to a relatively tranquil retreat and a wonderful place to go birding.

Because the lake is shallow (12-15 feet in most areas), it generally freezes over entirely for several months in the winter, but when we arrived in mid-March it had already thawed. The lake was filled with waterfowl. From our house or at the lake, we observed the following species: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Common Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, American Coot, and Bonaparte's Gull. At the nearby game lands we also saw Gadwall, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, and Green-winged Teal.

On one clear, very windy day, we drove a few miles to the dam at the southern end of the lake and there in a

Above: Pymatuning Swamp.
Previous page: Conneaut Marsh. Photos by Heidi Steiner.

very narrow strip we saw thousands of birds gathering in anticipation of migration. The most abundant were Double-crested Cormorants (2,000+ estimate) but also hundreds of Red-breasted Mergansers, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and ruddies. The next time we passed by that way, perhaps a week later, they were all gone. I would've liked to have been there when they left.

Great Blue Herons, Belted Kingfishers and Ospreys must have arrived shortly before we did. They all return as soon as the ice breaks up. My neighbor told me it had been the mildest winter she can remember—the ice was gone by the end of February. In previous winters we had seen Tundra and Trumpeter Swans and Snow Buntings.

Gray tree frog. Photo by Steve Nanz.

Another sign that spring is imminent is when the silence of cold winter nights is broken by the incredible ruckus coming from the wetlands around our us. There is a vernal pool in our front yard, standing between the house and the lake, and a small seasonal stream (gully might be more appropriate) bordering the property. Frogs and toads love it here. Normally we arrive after the spring peepers have made their voice heard, and by late June we might hear the occasional stringy "plunk" of a green frog or the monkey-like calls of the gray tree frog. But this year we were treated to the full opera of amphibian arias. On many evenings the noise was deafening, but delightful. Gray tree frogs are so camouflaged that they're difficult to locate, and their strange laughing sounds seem to come from every direction. Interestingly, we seem to find them when they're silent and we're not looking for them. We've stumbled into them "perched" high in a tree in an unused woodpecker hole or resting on a windowsill. (As I write this, we haven't yet seen the bull frogs, but their rich baritones typically arrive in early summer.) One morning in early May, I watched an Osprey alight in the pool for a few seconds and then depart with a little snack in its talons. I think I saw two frog-like legs trailing behind.

My brother had been keeping small sunflower and suet feeders on our front porch and they had been popular all winter. In our first couple of weeks here, we saw Mourning Doves, Blue Jays, American Crows (this silly bird likes to hang upside down on the suet feeder), Black-capped Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, Eastern Bluebirds, Gray Catbirds, starlings, Dark-eyed Juncos, cardinals, House Finches and American Goldfinches. And then there were the woodpeckers…

We've always enjoyed seeing the woodpeckers out here, but I don't think we recognized their abundance. A woodpecker couldn't find more suitable habitat. In November 2017 a tornado came within a half-mile of our house, toppling or uprooting at least a hundred trees. Many more were "topped," creating snags that make for perfect nesting cavities. One day in April, we found Red-headed and Red-bellied and Yellow-bellied, Downy and Hairy, flickers and Pileated on an hours-long walk. With the exception of the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, they likely all nest in the immediate area. We constantly hear their tapping and drumming, and the wicking, ticking and quirring sounds these birds make.

This year we observed nesting Downy and Hairy,

and in previous years we've located Red-headed and Red-bellied nests. All seven species have taken to our suet feeder, many of them in pairs. If we're lucky enough to be watching when he arrives, the Pileated climbs (really, sneaks) up our porch post, although he's slowly becoming more daring. Recently he landed squarely on the suet feeder as Steve sat on the porch only eight feet away.

The population of Bald Eagles in the area has increased steadily since I saw my first adult on a nest of three chicks around 1978. Crawford County was one of the few areas with records of nesting birds prior to the 1960s, although no one I knew had ever seen one or expected to. Now they're common and we often see them fly over our yard. The winter before last we watched as at least 15 gathered on the ice around a small area of open water toward the middle of the lake. Multiple nests are usually scattered around the lake, but this spring there was one within a mile of our house, and the last time we stopped by the lone nestling looked ready for flight. Ospreys also nest nearby, and

Top to bottom: Red-headed Woodpecker and Pileated Woodpecker. Photos by Steve Nanz.

although we initially saw two young in their nest, we think only one bird successfully fledged. Steve rode his bike by there the other day and says the parents appear to be working on a second brood.

Other birds of prey we commonly see are Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks (very noisy, not sure what all the yacking is about), kestrels and the occasional accipiter. We see peregrines on occasion. On winter visits, we often see a pair of magnificent Rough-legged Hawks flying over vast farm fields near the game lands. And although we've never seen owls, on clear and quiet summer nights we've heard them in the distance from as far as the other side of the lake—Screech, Great-horned and Barred.

I'm sure you're starting to think that this place sounds like Shangri-la, but it's worth mentioning now that everything here is determined by the weather, which, in turn, is determined in large part by the lake effect produced by Lake Erie, about 35 miles directly north of our house. This is the southern end of the Snow Belt, and historically, areas just north of here average well over 100 inches per year. I like snow, but it's the weather that the lake effect can create when the temperature is warmer, like in March when we arrived this year, that I find much more trying.

We had three days of nice weather during the third and fourth week of March, and then in the following six to seven weeks we had exactly four partially clear days. The remaining 40 presented snow, rain, or complete cloud cover. This neck of the woods gets only slightly more hours of annual sunshine than Seattle. We're almost halfway between Pittsburgh and Cleveland, which are in the top five for gloomiest cities in the country. Of the 3,111 counties in the U.S. rated for solar radiation (sunlight) by NASA, Crawford County is ranked 3,020. (Kings County is 1,134.) When we bought this place Steve said he thought we should install solar panels. I laughed.

At the same time, I love the rapidly-moving storm fronts, large billowing clouds, layers of air moving in different directions, shifting quickly and forcefully. For many weeks this spring it felt like the air was locked in furious and constant movement. Everything bristled with kinetic energy—the trees, the grass, the whitecaps on the lake. You can feel the forces of nature here. On the weather app for this area you might find icons for clouds, rain, lightning and sunshine—all in the same hour! My neighbor jokes that you can get a whole year's worth of weather in one day. If I return

Surrounding farmland. Photo by Heidi Steiner.

for another extended period, I'd like to understand how this impacts the birds.

As always, though, the birds persisted in returning to the area despite the inclement weather. Some of the first in April were the swallows and swifts. Tree Swallows arrived at the vanguard, followed by barn and rough-winged and bank. We see dozens every day, especially in the evening, hawking over the lake and the vernal pool. The Purple Martins arrive a little later, plus the Chimney Swifts swooping through clouds of insects in graceful banks and figure eights. At a fish hatchery nearby, and in the gatehouse for the dam, we've found large colonies of nesting Cliff Swallows.

Three years ago I bought a Purple Martin house with 12 compartments, and every year since then we've put it up over spring break in April. But no martins. Attracting martins is a much more complicated process than we'd imagined. Even after reading the "The Stokes Purple Martin Book: The Complete Guide to Attracting and Housing Purple Martins," I knew I missed many of the details that later became apparent. We thought this year we would finally succeed.

We were here at the right time, as the birds started arriving in early April. But where were our martins? Finally, on May 10, and then about a week later, two or three martins came in on very strong storms with beating rain and high winds. We noticed one or two of them hunkered down on the birdhouse at night, and just as the light was fading, Steve waded through the storm with a flashlight and carefully lowered the entire house on its telescoping pole. Strangely, the birds didn't budge and just sat there watching him, face to face as they rode the pole down. Steve opened two of the nest holes, which had been blocked to prevent house sparrows from using them, and then hoisted it back up the pole. The martins entered a compartment, stayed through the night, and then teased us through the next morning with their comings and goings, and then departed. House sparrows thus got a good start on a nest before we could get out there to plug the hole back up. We realized that these were second-year martins or sub-adults and were not members of a colony. They might have still been migrating and stopping for a rest, or maybe looking for others to join them in this new colony.

As the days extended and the weather grew slightly warmer, we began to see and hear Golden-crowned Kinglets, robins, towhees, and a host of sparrows—Chipping, Field, Song—and blackbirds, grackles, and cowbirds. At the game lands in mid-April we saw Killdeer, Bobolink, and Eastern Meadowlarks. One of the most unexpected sightings there in early April were Sandhill Cranes, although we have a history with them.

Sandhill Cranes. Photo by Steve Nanz.

The very first time we saw them in the area was close to 20 years ago, at a tract of game land on Bog Road near Linesville. We were scanning the gently rolling terrain when we saw a herd of unidentifiable "animals" levitating just over the ground about a half-mile away. It was summertime and there was a lot of heat distortion rising above the fields. They appeared to be small oval blobs, with eyes. But were those bills? Could they be some sort of chicks? No, definitely not. Finally these shapes started moving toward us, from lowland to higher ground, and we realized that these strange shapes were attached to long, thin necks, and then as they drew even closer we realized these necks were attached to the body and legs of a crane.

As we moved into April, newer arrivals included Carolina Wren (one claimed the motor mount on my brother's boat for building its nest, nice and waterproof under a tarp), Eastern Phoebe, a lone Brown Creeper,

Brown Thrasher, Palm and Pine and Yellow-rumped Warblers, some early Yellow Warblers, White-throated and Savannah Sparrows. During the second week of May, when full migration would have been underway in Brooklyn, we had snow and heavy frosts. It wasn't until the third week of May that a break in the weather brought with it spring's avian bounty. If we blinked we would've missed it. Peak migration lasted about three days but they were sweet ones. Warblers graced us with their presence: Black-and-white, Tennessee, Nashville, Northern Parula, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Black-throated Blue and Blackpoll. Their fellow travelers, like American Redstart, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Green, were likely to stay and nest. Every year in July we regularly see Prothonotary, Common Yellowthroat, Hooded and Yellow Warblers.

Along with the warblers came Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Yellow-throated, Red-eyed, Blue-headed and Warbling Vireo, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Wood Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Scarlet Tanager (we saw three adult males in one tree), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and Baltimore Oriole (nesting in the one tree on our property). With the exception of Ruby-crowned Kinglet, most will breed in the area.

Now it's June and it almost feels like it does when we typically arrive. Now things almost seem normal, although that is of course hardly the case. We've been so fortunate to reconnect with the rhythm of the natural world and gain an appreciation and growing understanding of this place that we were only part-time observers of before. And now it's time to think about the next season: time to go to the mudflats and scan for sandpipers, to check the marshes for rails and gallinules, to search the bays for bitterns, herons and egrets in the overhanging branches. Time to spend lazy days in the kayak and soak up some much-needed sun.

Hooded Warbler. Photo by Steve Nanz.

Photo Gallery: Charles Tang documents Prospect Park's young

Above: Barn Swallows.
Left: Acadian Flycatchers.

Clockwise from top: Cooper's Hawks, Green Heron, Wood Ducks.

iNaturalist

By Matthew Wills

According to iNaturalist, over 4,230 species of plants and animals and fungi have been recorded in Kings County. These represent the observations of 4,536 Brooklynites. These numbers will be higher by the time you read this, because new observations are being added by new observers all the time.

The most common sightings may not be surprising. The ubiquitous Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), the tree of Betty Smith's famous "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," is number one. White snakeroot, common mugwort, American Robin, and Monarch butterfly round out the top five.

You probably know eBird, which was developed by Cornell University. For birders, it's the exemplar of the citizen science observation databases. But there are also specialized ones for insects in general (bugguide.net), butterflies (www.butterfliesandmoths.org), and dragonflies/damselflies (odonatacentral.org). iNaturalist is the "one ring to rule them all," a compendium of all life observations.

This "community for naturalists" was developed in 2008 by UC-Berkeley graduate students. Today the database is sponsored by the California Academy of Sciences and National Geographic.

Most people use iNaturalist via a free phone app. You take a picture and submit it with geo-coded location. (Locations for rare and endangered species can be obscured.) If you don't know what you've photographed, chances are someone else will. There's also a built-in automated species identification tool that gets better the more people submit photographs, like Merlin. An identification that any two people, including yourself, agree on is considered "Research Grade." There are now more than 24.5 million Research Grade observations on the database from all over the planet.

iNaturalist is also the home of many specialized projects. There are dozens for birds, for instance, and at least two for the galls found on plants in our region. The service is also home to global events like City Nature Challenge and the more localized NYC Ecoflora EcoQuest

Previous: Polished lady beetle. All photos by Matthew Wills.
Top to bottom: Black swallowtail, oblique stripetail fly.

survey, which targets a different plant every month. Macaulay Honors College (CUNY) does a bio blitz every fall for its entire sophomore class: last year's was in Green-Wood Cemetery and the Gowanus Canal area. Results are entered and identified on iNaturalist and used in subsequent research by the students during the year.

Personally, I do all my iNaturalist observations on my home computer, after downloading from my camera. A weakness of photo-based apps is the camera-phone: great for something unmoving right next to you, like a flower, but not so great for a distant bird or a fast moving insect.

I signed up to iNaturalist in 2013 but only really started adding entries in 2019. One quirk I discovered is that observations on Brooklyn Bridge Park's piers are catalogued in New York County, because technically Kings County ends at the pier line.

Of course, since anybody can use the system, some observations should be taken with a grain of salt. For instance, last year somebody submitted a picture of a coyote emerging from some conifers and gave the location of…Ocean Avenue. Also, the point of iNaturalist is the documentation of wild lifeforms, but newbies often put up pictures of their house plants.

Anyway, you should consider adding iNaturalist to your battery of natural history observation tools. You can enter observations retrospectively, making it a perfect indoor activity in the covid-19 era. And you can identify birds for other observers. But be warned: birds get identified quickly. It's the lichens and spiders and flies and beetles that are harder to figure out…

Cellophane bee.

Pandemic Diaries

Left: *Pandemic Diary #6: Droplets*. Ink on paper, by Toni Simon.
Right: *Pandemic Diary #15: Lost Horizons*. Goache and ink on paper, by Toni Simon.

Doors and windows of Green-Wood Cemetery. Photos by Janet Schumacher.

Prospect Park Happenings

By Stanley Greenberg

This is a report from the July meeting of Prospect Park's Community Committee (ComCom).

We don't usually have summer meetings, but with the pandemic and its impact on the park, we're continuing without a summer break.

The Parks Enforcement Patrol reported 17 driver violations and 12 OATH (other park rules) violations, including five relating to dogs off leash.

The Alliance is placing several large trash dumpsters in these locations around the park. There will be signage reminding people to carry out their trash. The Greeter Program has started as well, and anyone can volunteer for this. Greeters will roam the park reminding people of the rules (trash, dogs, etc.) and will also hand out masks and garbage bags.

They are also starting volunteer cleanup weekends. Every Saturday and Sunday through August 30, the public can register to check out Green & Go Kits at various locations around the park. These kits include a trash grabber, garbage bags, and gloves; see details and registration here. Sue Donoghue and other Alliance staff were very appreciative of the Brooklyn Bird Club's cleanup efforts. The Curling Club (yes, there is one!) is starting a cleanup effort as well.

The landscape team returned to work on June 29 but they've been mostly dedicated to keeping the park clean. The Tennis Center reopened on June 22, the zoo on July 24, and Lakeside on August 8.

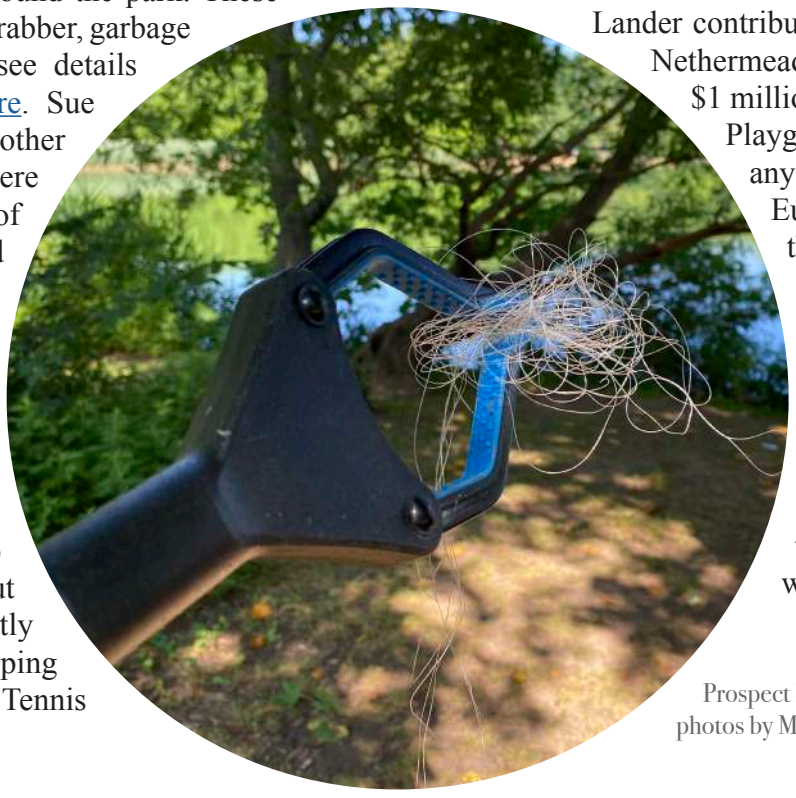
The Alliance received a Payroll Protection Plan loan from the federal government and was able to hire several per diem staff members to help keep the park clean this summer. Citywide, there are 1,700 fewer parks workers this year as compared with this time last year.

The Woodlands Youth Crew, normally funded by the city, was cut from the budget, but NY Presbyterian-Methodist funded the program so that the normal complement plus 25 children of their workers could have jobs for the summer.

The Breaking Ground/NYPD program addressing homelessness in the park was disbanded after budget cuts (no comment), but the Alliance is seeking other partners for this. Call 311 to report issues in the park.

In the new budget, other than cutting the Parks Dept. by 14 percent, there were a couple capital allocations from local councilmembers. Brad Lander contributed $500,000 for paths in the Nethermeade, and Laurie Cumbo gave $1 million to restore the Lincoln Road Playground. There was no word on any contributions from Mathieu Eugene. Any capital projects that were underway before the pandemic are now active again. Other projects not yet started remain on hold.

We all know it's going to be a rough year for parks, with increased usage and decreased budgets. Hopefully the birds will have patience with us.



Prospect Park trash specimens, photos by Michelle Talich.

BROOKLYN BIRD CLUB

TRASH CLEANUP at PROSPECT PARK

BYO MASK!
BBC WILL PROVIDE:
TRASH GRABBERS!
TRASH BAGS!
GLOVES!

STAY TUNED FOR THE NEXT DATE

RESULTS:

JUNE 14
45 VOLUNTEERS
87 HOURS
55 BAGS OF TRASH

JULY 5
33 VOLUNTEERS
66 HOURS
47 BAGS OF TRASH

AUGUST 2
20 VOLUNTEERS
40 HOURS
29 BAGS OF TRASH

THANKS TO ALL OF OUR VOLUNTEERS!

"Before & after" photos by Tina Alleva. BBC flyer by Angie Co.
Tina Alleva, Radka Osickova and Ann Murray picking up trash.