

Summer 2021

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL



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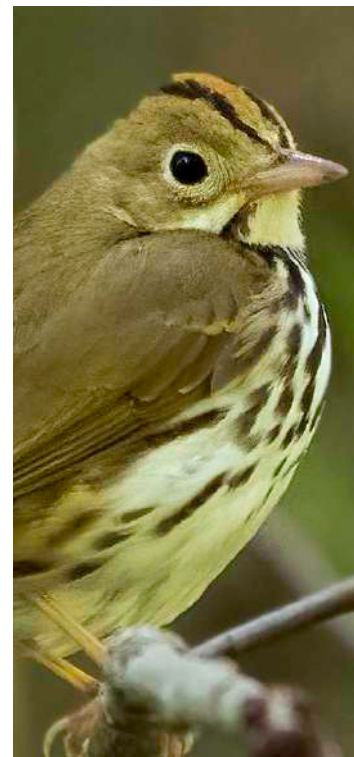
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McCown's Longspur from the series *Dishonorifics*. Ink on paper by Teresa Dendy. Read more about [her series here](#).

Bird Names for Birds

By Daniel K. Smith

Readers of the comic strip *Doonesbury* will remember the character Dick Davenport and his quest to add a Bachman's Warbler to his life list. He needed one more bird to bring his life list to 700. The joke was he wanted to get the warbler before he and the warbler were extinct. The warbler is now considered extinct and if the birding community has its way the name Bachman's Warbler will be gone as well.

The bird's namesake, Reverend John Bachman, was a 19th century Lutheran pastor in Charleston, South Carolina. He collected some birds near his home and sent them to John James Audubon. Audubon recognized them as a new species and in 1833

named the bird in honor of Bachman. But Reverend Bachman also enslaved people and compared them to domesticated animals in some of his writings.

Last year a movement was started by a group of birders to remove the honorifics from North American English common bird names. It's called [Bird Names for Birds](#) (BN4B) and it sits at the nexus of social justice and ornithological tradition. Like the names Trump and Sackler have been dropped from prominent buildings, Bachman, Swainson, Cook and others will be removed from their respective warblers, hawks and petrels.

Bachman's case is a typical example of how an honorific name appears. The naming rights for a new species goes to the first person to recognize the fauna as a distinct species. For English common bird names, this happened during a time of great oppression, racism and sexism. A little research into these names quickly reveal advocates of slavery, eugenics, and the plundering of indigenous people and cultures. The honorifics are a painful and unnecessary reminder of this past. Some find it distasteful to use a female first name as an honorific such as Lucy's Warbler, Anna's Hummingbird or Grace's Warbler. When a man has his name used, it's the surname.

The founders of BN4B and 182 co-signers sent a letter in the summer of 2020 to the American Ornithological Society (AOS) and the North American Classification Committee (NACC) asking that they publicly address the issue of derogatory and oppressive eponymic bird names which create barriers to the enjoyment of birding. The idea of an open discussion was suggested by Dr. Drew Lanham, author of "The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair With Nature."

The AOS was receptive to the idea and this April, AOS's Diversity and Inclusion Committee hosted a virtual panel of birding experts to discuss dropping eponymic bird names. Called Community Congress on English Bird Names, the panel of 15 included field guide authors Kenn Kaufman and David Sibley, Marshall Iliff of Cornell's Lab of Ornithology and eBird, Danny Bystrak of the Bird Banding Laboratory. Jordan Rutter of BN4B also spoke. The moderator was José González, M.S. of the Avarna Group. The Congress was viewed by many members of AOS and NACC to hear the viewpoints of the various stakeholders. The presentation can be found [here](#).

One of AOS's mandates is to maintain order within the ornithological world. Name changes have global consequences affecting bird conservation,

bird-banding databases and historical collections. Several years ago the AOS was asked to remove the name McCown's Longspur because John Porter McCown served in the Confederacy as a general. They refused, saying McCown had a legitimate interest in ornithology and his involvement in the Civil War happened years after the naming of the bird. Recently, the AOS reversed their decision after an op-ed by the founders of BN4Bs appeared in the Washington Post. AOS dropped McCown and the bird is now called Thick-billed Longspur.

After a year of national discussion on the systemic racism that exists in the United States, as well as Christian Cooper's Central Park incident, members of the Congress felt that there were no insurmountable problems in removing the honorifics. All agreed that the benefits of creating a more inclusive birding environment outweigh the challenges.

Some panelists hoped the process would be methodical and taken as a case-by-case basis. But Kenn Kaufman pointed out that there's a problem with selecting which names are good or bad. "If we try to parse all these historical figures saying, 'OK, well, Cassin was good, but Townsend was bad, etc., that

could go on forever...I think rather than nibbling away at the problem, I'd like to see a talented and diverse committee that would tackle all of these eponyms at once."

It seems that's exactly what's going to happen. The president of AOS, Mike Webster, told Birdwatching magazine in May that they support the BN4B movement. "We are in favor of taking any actions that would make ornithology and birding more diverse and inclusive." The next step is to form a committee to sort out "eponymous or otherwise harmful common bird names" and make recommendations on how to proceed. He hopes to have the recommendations by year's end.

Another benefit in renaming will be the opportunity to create new names that would include the bird's habitat, physical appearance, or behavior. These would be more informative, especially to new birders. For instance, one suggestion is changing Kirtland's Warbler to Jack Pine Warbler. As Jordan Rutter of BN4B put it: "The traits of birds deserve to be celebrated...and the (new names) should be of, by and for the community."



Photo Gallery: Michelle Talich



Top and bottom: Mourning Warbler and Prothonotary Warbler in Prospect Park.



Top and bottom: Worm-eating Warbler and American Woodcock at Green-Wood Cemetery.



Gizmo, a Senegal Parrot, at the Kepler home.

Birders Who Live with Birds

By Linda Ewing

Gizmo, Jennifer Kepler's Senegal Parrot, was a vocal presence during last year's Kings County Christmas Bird Count compilation, his screeches and squawks resonating over Zoom as teams called out their tallies of Brant, Snow Geese, Canada Geese and, yes, Monk Parakeets.

Kepler is one of several Brooklyn birders who don't just observe birds outdoors; they live with them. Kepler adopted Gizmo from Sean Casey Animal Rescue in 2012. Steve Nanz and Heidi Steiner rescued two budgerigars and eventually adopted a third. Sisters Karen and Mimi Hue also tried to rescue a budgie, and when it died, adopted another. Tristan Higginbotham, who rehabilitates wildlife at the Wild Bird Fund, has

taken in a pigeon and two doves that were not suitable for release.

All agree that birds can be fascinating, if challenging, pets. They agree even more strongly that the pet trade is a scourge: cruel to individual birds and devastating to wild populations of heavily-trafficked species. "Adopt, don't shop," is their mantra.

The fraught ethics of removing birds from the wild may explain why none of these birders set out to keep birds as pets. Instead, they stumbled into bird ownership. Gizmo was, in Kepler's words, an "oopsie." She and her husband already shared their home with a cat and an assortment of reptiles. On one of her regular food-buying trips to Sean Casey, Kepler happened to meet

a small parrot of indeterminate age that had somehow – its history was unclear – ended up at the shelter. She played with him, went back to see him a few more times, brought her husband to visit... and took Gizmo home the day after Christmas.

The story of Nanz and Steiner's first budgie is more dramatic. They found her in their Windsor Terrace backyard, in the middle of a snowstorm, bearing injuries from an unknown predator's attack. She was also missing a toe, possibly from frostbite. Thinking the bird was unlikely to survive, but incapable of leaving her to perish in the cold, Nanz and Steiner captured her, took her in, and nursed her back to health. Their daughter named her "Sarah Fluffy."

The large number of birds abandoned in parks or surrendered to shelters, rehabilitators and sanctuaries speaks to the challenges of keeping them as pets. For Steiner and Nanz, as well as the Hues, finding reliable information on feeding and caring for the birds they had rescued was surprisingly difficult. According to Nanz, the commercial food sold in pet stores is the equivalent of an all-junk food diet, leading to vitamin deficiencies. Karen Hue blames her lack of dietary knowledge for the demise of her first budgie, Georgie. (The bird the Hues subsequently adopted, also named Georgie, is doing fine.)

Kepler's experience as a zookeeper had prepared her well for Gizmo – she was already aware that parrots could be loud and destructive. She also knew



Top to bottom: Budgies Sarah Fluffy and Petie Black Stripe at the Nanz and Steiner home; Budgie Georgie at the Hues' home.

that many species of parrots bond tightly with their mates and can respond aggressively to interlopers. To the extent Kepler was Gizmo's "mate," where would that leave her husband? To avoid problems, Kepler intentionally divided the time she and her husband, Tim, spent interacting with Gizmo so that he would bond with them both.

Budgies, in contrast, are highly social birds – something Nanz and Steiner learned by chance, when they found another budgie in Prospect Park a few years after their rescue of Sarah Fluffy. Nanz threw his jacket over it, and they took it home, where their daughter – the unofficial bird-namer of the family – dubbed it "Petie Black Stripe." Petie Black Stripe and Sarah Fluffy would talk all day,

according to Steiner, initially from adjacent cages, and eventually from a larger, shared cage. "We had no idea how social they were until we put them together," she says. "They need companionship." With that, Steiner and Nanz climbed onto a budgie treadmill. When Sarah Fluffy died, it seemed unkind to keep Petie Black Stripe by himself, and so they adopted their third budgie, Marty.

They drew the line after that, and are now budgie-less.

Compared to parrots or budgies, Higginbotham considers her pigeon and doves to be low-maintenance. Even so, her list of basic requirements is daunting: mail-order seed, supplements to replace the calcium female birds lose through egg-laying, an air filter for the dust they generate, finding the balance between the number of birds you can reasonably care for



and the birds' social needs, keeping them from escaping through an open door or window ("Don't trust a bird!" she warns). And, of course, cleaning. "Some days I come home from work, which is mostly cleaning up after birds, and there I am with...more birds."

Adding to the challenge of living with birds is the fact that many of the birds traditionally kept as pets

30 years in captivity. Pigeons and doves are shorter-lived, but still a long-term commitment. The story of Higginbotham's pigeon, Buddy, is a case in point. He was delivered to the Wild Bird Fund by a family member after the elderly woman who owned him passed away.

In other words, these are not pets to be acquired on a whim.

And yet, for all the challenges of living with birds, they still enchant. Kepler fondly describes Gizmo's favorite foods (pine nuts rank high); his interest in their baby, Kestrel; and the way he responds to bird videos and recordings, his excited squawks making it difficult for her to study bird calls. Hue talks of taking Georgie on birding trips – budgies, Nanz and Steiner concur, are excellent travelers.

Higginbotham laughingly recounts how her increased presence in the apartment during the pandemic seemed to inspire nesting behavior in Buddy – her dresser drawer was a favored spot – culminating in incontrovertible proof that he was, in fact, female. Despite Buddy's egg-laying, Higginbotham continues to use male pronouns when referring to him.

Smart and playful and generally enchanting as they are, there's also something sad about pet birds – especially for those accustomed to observing birds in the wild. Again and again, these birders who live with birds returned to the theme of flight. Gizmo's wings had been badly clipped by a previous owner; as Kepler puts it, "he sucks at flying." Sarah Fluffy's ability to fly was hampered by the injuries she sustained before she was rescued. Higginbotham's Mourning Dove, Islane, has issues with her feathers and bones because of the inappropriate care she received from a would-be rescuer.

Kepler, who loves her adopted parrot that sucks at flying, responds emotionally to the sight of wild parrots in flight. That's the life rescued and adopted birds should have had – and is the reason anyone considering bringing a bird into their home should "adopt, not shop." 🐦



Buddy with Tristan Higginbotham.

are long-lived, sometimes astonishingly so. Macaws, for example, can live for 60 years or more, meaning that one purchased by a bird fancier of a certain age may outlive not only its original owner, but its owner's children. Even a small parrot like Gizmo can live for



Mother and Chick. Pen and ink on paper by Martha Walker.

Photo Gallery: Valerie Masten





Clockwise from top: Green Heron at Prospect Park; Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Green-Wood Cemetery; Least Bittern at Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Brooklyn Botanic Garden: My Birding Refuge

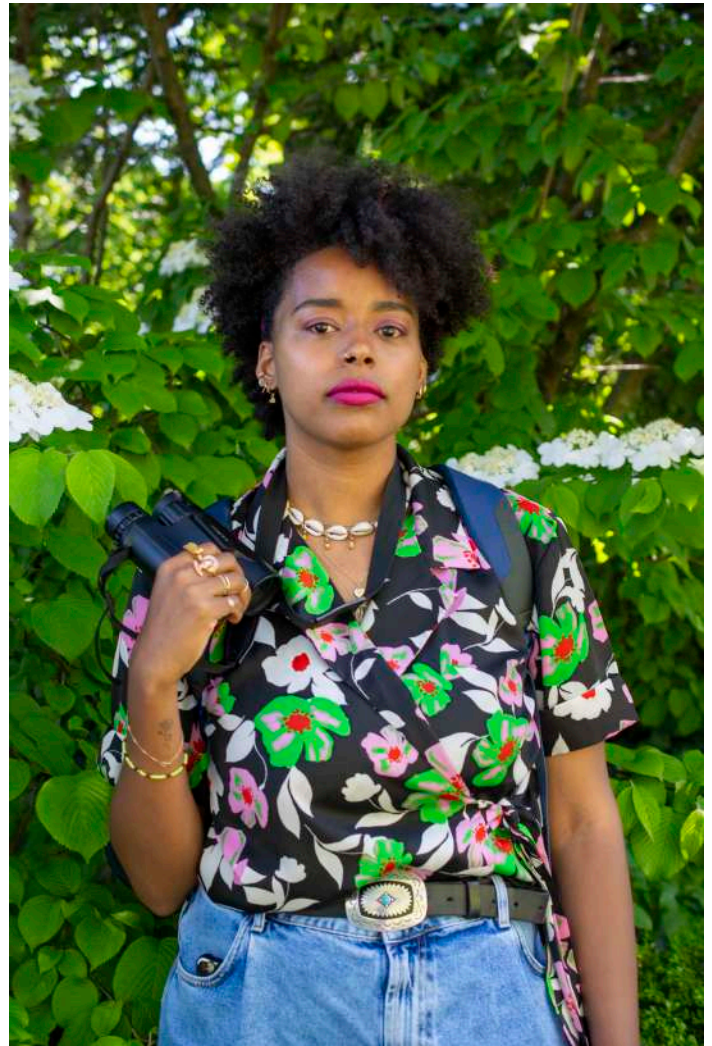
By Indigo Goodson

I don't take for granted feeling safe and free in the outdoors. In New York, the place where that freedom has bloomed, along with my joy for birding and nature, is the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

I don't have a backyard, but after a few visits to the BBG, I realized it was far more economical to become a member and treat the garden as if it were one – instead of searching for a new apartment. It became an extension of my home, my office, my happy place. I fell in love with the intersection of landscaped lawns, cafes, benches, and diverse plant life. I found the curation of flora breathtaking and I noticed the animals too. I still take videos and pictures of the squirrels, cats, bunnies, and birds that inhabit the garden. I've always appreciated and felt drawn to the natural world, but when I became a birder last November, the BBG – a place I'd already spent hours walking through in previous seasons – became more precious and more enchanting.

Now I didn't notice the colorful flowers alone, but the equally beautiful birds feeding on or around them. I began to see everything. I'd stare at an evergreen and find a Red-breasted Nuthatch searching for cones, or marvel at the red and green winter holly as an American Robin picked its berries. Birding at the BBG was an experience I quickly learned couldn't be duplicated elsewhere for me.

As a Black woman, birding is a vulnerable activity due to misogyny and anti-Black racism, especially when you're birding alone. When birding you forgo your peripheral vision, tune your hearing to birdsound, focus on some speck in the distance. Ideally, you block out everything that isn't bird-related. BBG is one of the only spaces I've felt comfortable letting my guard



Indigo Goodson. Photo by Michael Stewart, courtesy of BBG.

down, enough to center my attention on all the details of birds. I can stare overhead to watch Red-tailed Hawks soar, both hands on my binoculars because I left my walking sticks at home – sticks my dad carved for me so I'd feel safer in other places. At the garden I don't have to constantly check for off-leash dogs, I don't have to stay cognizant of any men heading towards me, and I don't have to be as concerned that someone will view my activity as suspicious or threatening.

I'm allowed to be in the moment, allowed to bird, just bird.

I often hear other birders dismiss the BBG with some version of, "There aren't a lot of birds there." Yes, there are typically fewer species on a given day there than at Prospect Park or Green-wood Cemetery, but I can't afford to choose where I go birding based solely on the species count. I go birding at Prospect Park often, but with friends who are aware of my dog phobia and will do their best to protect me. Nevertheless, I still feel like I'm constantly assessing

my surroundings, which pulls away from the attention I'd like to focus squarely on birding. I've always had to deal with others discounting or misunderstanding my fear of dogs, and I'm the only person who knows what I need to feel safe.

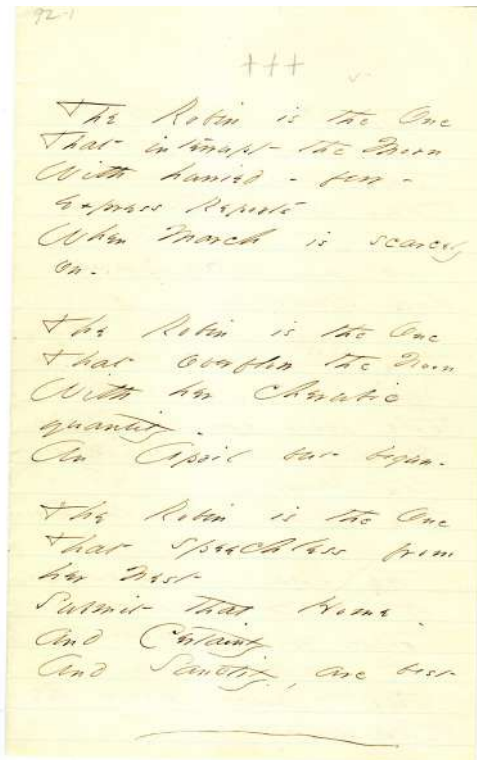
Birding with others is invaluable to me. It allows me to spend more time in areas of a park or other natural spaces that I otherwise wouldn't feel comfortable visiting alone. But birding in groups also gives rise to compromises; I'm still partly reliant on others to evaluate the situation and I'm venturing through spaces based on group consensus. In moments like this I often feel stuck – too afraid to keep birding, but also too afraid to leave by myself, and thus dependent on the mercy of the group's itinerary. In groups, I still wonder how others will react to my fears. Will they dismiss them? Will they gaslight me? And yet, in birding, my desire for new experiences at times feels stronger than

the memories of negative ones.

Birding has brought so much happiness and beauty into my life. I've cried tears of joy in moments where I was overwhelmed by a sighting or simply in awe of my contentment while watching birds. I was in the Native Flora section of the BBG when I first spotted a Northern Flicker. As it took flight and the sun hit its bright yellow underwing, tears filled my eyes. It was then I realized the extent to which I truly loved birding. The BBG gives me the chance to hone my identification skills unlike any other place. And when I want to take a break from birding, I read a book, drink coffee, lay in the grass, or dance with my headphones on – all while enjoying the plants! It's a feeling I wasn't sure I'd ever find until I began birding there about seven months ago; a feeling of safety and peace, in which I grip my binoculars with both hands, open my senses to birdsong, and gaze into the distance. 🐦



American Robin in Prospect Park. Photo by Tom Stephenson.



The Robin is the One

The Robin is the One
That interrupt the Morn
With hurried – few – express Reports
When March is scarcely on –

The Robin is the One
That overflow the Noon
With her cherubic quantity –
An April but begun –

The Robin is the One
That speechless from her Nest
Submit that Home – and Certainty
And Sanctity, are best

– Emily Dickinson



Temporary Ticos: An Unforeseen Choice in an Unprecedented Year

By Sean Sime



Northern Jacana. All photos by Sean Sime.

I can remember the instant I knew we had to leave Brooklyn. Stories about the virus from Washington State were arriving in waves as a groundswell of uncertainty was building in New York, even as national and local administrations were actively downplaying the threat. Masks and social distancing were recommended, but not mandatory yet.

We went to Prospect Park on Sunday, March 14, to toss the ball around with my two kids. The park was insane. There were people everywhere. The unmasked to masked ratio seemed like it was 1000:1. I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in years, someone in a high-risk age group, and he walked up to me with a huge smile on his unmasked face, grabbed my hand and shook it excitedly as he peppered me with questions about life.

I realized we were in trouble. Every interaction with friends, family, coworkers, every single one was going to be a challenge. It was as if being human itself was our biggest weakness. The next day, my wife, children and I left Brooklyn.

Within a week schools were closed; three months of future photography work was cancelled, and we were holed up 90 minutes away in the woods of western New Jersey. We went from 27,000 people per square mile to four. Removing ourselves from the transmission equation in Brooklyn was a benefit to all, but that was an afterthought. We were scared it was going to get really bad. The idea of living mask-free in the woods for a month or two felt like winning the

lotto.

Our time there reawakened something in all of us. Whether it was the kids' in-person science classes with dad or simply being outdoors each day, witnessing the slow creep of spring, our family flourished in the daily reassurance of nature.

As our time there came to an end, thoughts of summer and fall in our Brooklyn apartment began to dawn on us. It was going to be tough.

We managed to muddle through, but our return made two things very clear: my work wasn't returning anytime soon and day-to-day life with four people in a cramped apartment quickly began to wear thin. One night, after the kids went to bed, my wife Sarah asked, "Do we have to be here?"

Dreams of a quiet escape were euphoric. The idea we could go somewhere else felt amazing, but where could we go?

For a family whose temporary relocation to New Jersey proved stressful, you could imagine our bewilderment when we decided, in very atypical fashion, that the answer was Costa Rica. We believed that the pandemic was going to get worse before it got better. Knowing we could create a once-in-a-lifetime experience for our family was enough to push us beyond our fears.

We moved forward with purpose. On the morning of October 17, 2020, we boarded a plane for San Jose with a three-week rental booked in the mountains outside the city. The rest we'd figure out.

Flying in from the Gulf of Mexico over dense jungle and carpeted mountains felt like a scene out of Jurassic Park. From the airport, the drive to our house in the town of Atenas was reminiscent of so much of the developing world, beautiful scenery set against a foreground of villages of corrugated metal beside gated communities. The ying and yang of poverty and excess. Every bend in the road opened a new vista and every bird that flew by was an endorphin rush. Aside from the migratory birds that bred in North America but spent the other half of the year here, they were all new to me.

Our temporary home was on top of a ridge overlooking a forested valley. A covered porch ran the entire length of the home and was outfitted with rocking chairs and coffee tables. Heaven.

While getting us unpacked and finding a grocery store were top of the list, one thought continually bubbled to the surface. It was as if I was starting birding all over again, but with 20 years of training.

The reality that this wasn't going to be a cakewalk became apparent as the sun set the first night. Under dense vegetation below the deck, I heard what sounded reminiscent of a Clapper Rail kek-ing. Any bird calling

at night is sure to be a good one and this sounded close. I inhaled three face-fulls of spider webs during an exhaustive and empty-handed check by flashlight. Scouring recordings of wood-rails and other species I thought could make that sound also proved fruitless. I collapsed into a rocking chair, defeated. You could imagine my dismay as I watched a house gecko crawl up the wall beside me and loudly kek-kek-kek-kek. Costa Rica 1, Sean 0.

The following dawn returned hope and no shortage of magic. As the mist drifted through the valley below, Masked Tityras, Tropical Kingbirds, Lessons Motmot, and Montezuma Oropendola burst through the trees around the porch. This was my yard! Flocks of parrots swirled in the distance while Plain-capped Starthroat and Rufous-tailed and Blue-vented Hummingbirds duked it out in the garden. When I thought it couldn't get any better, a pair of Keel-billed Toucans joined the fray.

It felt like a dream then, and eight months later it still does, as we prepare to return to Brooklyn.

These are but a few of the moments I'll hold onto forever:



October 22, 2020 Dawn in Atenas

You learn quickly that both air and birds move in an orderly chaos here; clouds overhead, mist rising as the air warms, fog pouring down shaded slopes. Trogons and Becards moving along ridges at altitude, Toucans bombing downslope in a stoop to slowly work their way back up, swifts predicting rain better than Doppler radar, layers upon vertical layers of vultures as far up as the eye can see, down to the Rufous-tailed Hummingbird that staked its claim to a Brazilian red-cloak bush in the yard and won't budge... the landscape is alive. Whether sky, water or birds, there is always something in motion here.

January 30, 2021, Scarlet Macaw

Since Costa Rica disbanded its military in 1948, “Ticos” (Costa Ricans) have affectionately referred to macaws as their Air Force. A long history of deforestation and poaching for the pet trade threatened this majestic species. Locals say a Scarlet Macaw chick would have fetched over a thousand dollars on the black market, but strict penalties and decades of reforestation funded by the government and various NGOs has stabilized the population on the Pacific Coast. As birds, they’re all the things cranked up to 11. The biggest, loudest, most colorful, but also nimble, playful, affectionate with each other. I often find them hanging upside down while feeding on sea almonds. No matter which aspect of their personalities you like the most, they’re all-around show-stoppers.



December 5, 2020, Black-headed Trogon

What you gain in sheer numbers of species in the tropics you often lose in lighting. On the rare instance you find yourself looking at a fruiting vine on the forest edge with a bit of sky above, best to hang around and see what stops by. This trogon was making multiple sallies along with Streaked Flycatchers and even the occasional Yellow-throated Toucan. And if you’re a gear hound, I’d take a shorter, faster lens any day under the canopy. A camera body that handles high ISO well isn’t necessary for ID shots, but it’s worth considering if you want them hanging on the wall.



**February 17, 2021,
Green Hermit**

For the parents out there trying to hook their kids on birding (I know, good luck) please take note. There are many places in Costa Rica that have long-established feeder setups attached to restaurants. Whether it's the deck of the Arenal Bird Observatory and Lodge's dining room, or the Soda Cinchona on Route 126 in Alejuela, these are amazing places to watch dozens of species at point-blank all while enjoying a meal or cool beverage. The wow factor is there. No panic-juggle praying a bird won't move as you get the kids lined up behind a scope. The action is up close and often. My kids still talk about how the hummingbirds sounded like light sabers whizzing by. This Green Hermit was often no more than an arm's length from my face.

**April 2, 2021,
Wedge-tailed Shearwater**

My first Pacific Ocean pelagic was much like my earliest Atlantic trips as a passenger on a fishing boat. Even without the buckets of chum and 50 sets of eyes our NYC pelagics offer, this didn't disappoint. The continental shelf begins to drop a mere 30 miles from land off the central Pacific coast, which makes getting to nutrient-rich deep water about as long as it typically takes to crawl a few exits on the Belt Parkway. The most common species out in the deep was Wedge-tailed Shearwater. There are light and dark morphs, and their long, tapered tails had my synapses false-firing all day, dreaming of similarly-shaped gadfly petrels. Three shearwaters, two storm-petrels, two boobies and two jaegers later I had nothing to complain about. The ocean never disappoints.





April 10, 2021, Tennessee Warbler

Gotta forgive this Tennessee Warbler for its lack of intestinal fortitude. I can't imagine what would go through my mind after migrating all night and expecting sunrise to illuminate some lush habitat below, only to realize I'm over the Pacific Ocean 30 miles from the nearest point of land.

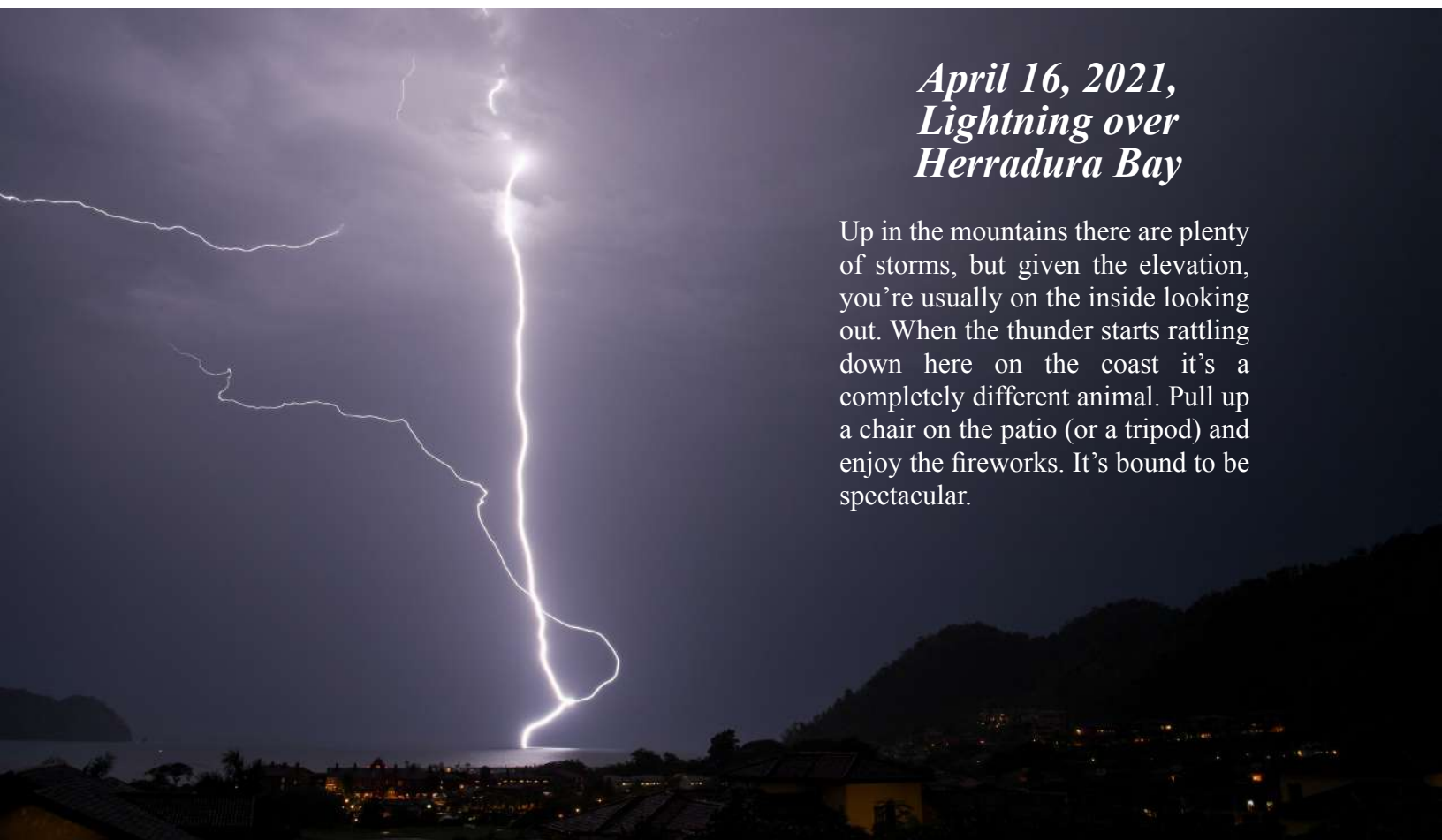
The bird landed on our boat and we were able to catch it. Within seconds it was sleeping in my hand. I was concerned it was going to expire from exhaustion. We placed it in a bucket in a dark room, with a towel at the bottom and a bottle cap filled with water. An hour later it had consumed all the water and was still slipping in and out of sleep. We added a small plate with a layer of water. On the next check it was drinking and bathing. A very good sign.

It sailed with us for a total of seven hours, each check more alert and active than the last. I had a much harder time getting it out of the bucket and it thanked me with a fair amount of pecking. No worries though. Back at the marina it shot out of my hand like a bullet into the nearest trees. Farewell my feisty friend.

April 30, 2021, White-collared Swift

In the places we've stayed, when a group of swifts appears it's either raining, about to rain, or has just stopped raining. The 10 species one needs to weed through can be tricky since they're often high and backlit, tending to come lower in the worst of the weather. The one that always stands out is the White-collared Swift. Not only is it the largest of the swifts here, with a 20-inch wingspan, but its bright white collar is often a beacon of hope for birders suffering through dark, wet conditions. To have this one cruise by low and in good light was an unexpected treat.





April 16, 2021, Lightning over Herradura Bay

Up in the mountains there are plenty of storms, but given the elevation, you're usually on the inside looking out. When the thunder starts rattling down here on the coast it's a completely different animal. Pull up a chair on the patio (or a tripod) and enjoy the fireworks. It's bound to be spectacular.

Feb 20, 2021, Violet Sabrewing

Attack! Clocking in at 30 mph in direct flight and 60 mph in a dive, hummingbirds are the closest thing to a bullet the avian world has to offer. This, coupled with the fact they're one of the most territorial families of birds on the planet, means any experience with multiple birds will get punchy. In the Eastern U.S. we have the Ruby-throated Hummingbird to contend with. In Costa Rica there are nearly 50 species. Photographing near a feeding station with just eight of them had me formulating a photography versus self-preservation calculus. Sabrewings clipped both my daughter and I; we weren't their intended target, they just take corners like Formula One drivers.





April 22, 2021, Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth

Even before we left Brooklyn, one staple of our research were advertisements for Sloth tours. I'm not sure why this was the hill I chose to die on, but I made it known to my family (in Seinfeldesque fashion) that I was NOT going to pay someone to find me a sloth. I would find my own sloth, thank you very much.

Our first two months here...no sloths. No problem. Just need to get into some bigger swaths of habitat. Trips to Carara National Park and Arenal in December and February and, you guessed it, no sloths. The comments from Sarah and the kids started to drop. "Why don't we just take a sloth tour?"

I was willing to depart these lands sloth-less, but for the children. In New York, birders say March is often the month of hope denied. It is in Costa Rica as well, but for slothly different reasons. On a dreary, rainy day in April, I found myself staring at an empty coffee pot. I glumly set off down the hill for a cup. I was so laser-focused on my need for caffeine that I almost didn't stop when I noticed a dark clump in the

top of a sea almond tree. But I did, and there she was!

So many miles travelled, so much time looking, and all the while one was minutes from the house.

February 15, 2021, Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo

When a bird shows up in Costa Rica and multiple people in the U.S. start calling you it's worth paying attention. The Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo holds a near-mythical status worldwide. It hunts army ant swarms like a running Velociraptor, catching insects and lizards fleeing the ants as they pour over the forest floor. And much like the ant swarms, their sightings are ephemeral and rare. When I searched eBird for this report it was the only record in all of Central America for the year. Unfortunately, it wasn't within reach.

Two weeks later, we were heading to Arenal when another sighting of an entire family of RVGCs was reported at Bosque Eterno de Los Niños, 40 minutes from our hotel. Knowing my car couldn't handle the "road" to the forest I started looking for local guides. I was quickly faced with the misery the pandemic had

wrought on the eco-tourism industry here. The first few guides I spoke with had either sold their cars, their scopes, or taken factory jobs. I was humbled by how kind each one was given the circumstances. Our conversations never ended without a new lead to contact. I had all but given up after speaking to perhaps a dozen guides when I finally reached Jehudy Carballo. He said he could get me there four days later.

The peaks and valleys of emotions began in earnest I followed the reports each day. The ant swarm disappeared further from the trail, and sightings dropped from four birds to two. The morning before our trip, Jehudy told me we should cancel our trip if no birds were seen that day. Once they're gone, they're gone, he said. Later that afternoon, one bird was seen. We were going!

By seven the next morning, we had bee-lined to the last-known location. It was unnervingly quiet. There were no ants to be seen, and after an hour of very little activity or song, our hopes sagging, a coatimundi sauntered through the understory, brightening the moment. "This is a good sign," Jehudy said. "The juvenile was following coatimundi yesterday."

Looking into dense tropical forest isn't easy, but I was taught early on to let my optics work for me. Down on one knee, I scanned the ground as far as I could see in all directions. The view through glass was far brighter and more detailed and farther reaching than the naked eye. Almost instantly, the bird appeared silhouetted deep off the trail on the forest floor.

It was like seeing a ghost. It vanished as quickly as it appeared. Some time later it made a close pass in front of me as if to say, "Yes, Sean, it was real."

In those quiet hours beforehand, I found myself thinking about all the guides I'd spoken with, how the pandemic had damaged their livelihoods. At the same time, I thought about my own fortune, how my dream of coming to Costa Rica only happened because my own business was shuttered. As is often the case when travelling, it's these connections with people and cultures that stay with you, the moments that move quickly past your gaze but resonate deeply, long after the birds have stopped singing. 🐦

You can see more of Sean's [Costa Rican adventures here](#) and find his work [here](#).



Photo Gallery: Janet Zinn



Top and bottom: Blue-headed Vireo and Red-headed Woodpecker at Prospect Park.



Top and bottom: Summer Tanager and Hooded Warbler at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Ruffed Rebuff

By Alan Bacchiochi

I only managed a quick check of the field guide. Pheasant shaped head and beak, none of the pheasant's psychedelic camouflaged splendor, more of a rusty Forest Chicken.

Amy's Park, halfway up the west side of Lake George, is a nature preserve established in 2012. It features hiking trails across steep watershed terrain around a large marshy area flooded by beaver dams. The forests beyond are threaded with old logging roads. This land is at the edge of Adirondack State Park, all six million acres. It wasn't Prospect Park (526 acres). It was the end of April, and spring color had not yet arrived. There were the barren colors of late winter: browns, reds, silvers, grays, and contrasting evergreen. Underneath some of the low pine boughs you could still find snow. The water was still, black and reflective. Early migrants had arrived. Chipping Sparrows called out from the marsh brush. Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds joined the marsh chorus as well. The grackles preferred the bare dead trees. The blackbirds favored the reeds. They claimed adjacent territories and made a lot of noise. One finely-striped female blackbird took it all in one hundred feet up in a pine's top, the rising sun flashing her rusty face marking. Later in the morning, Tree and Northern Rough-winged Swallows jockeyed for aerial position.

There were scant eBird reports for Amy's Park. From the last report, 10 days earlier, one sighting leapt out: Ruffed Grouse. I'd never seen one before. Might still be there, might not. Even if I didn't see one, I figured it would be fun to check out a new location outside the city in the big woods. I told myself it might be a tough find. Brown, subtly patterned, skulky, and favoring leaves. Kind of like looking for a woodcock.

The trails were a variety of boggy, steep, rocky or pleasant. Not treacherous, but you needed to pay attention, and keep an eye on the trail markers. I heard somebody really far off trying to start a small motor. A quiet, deep and low-pitched thump, thump, thump.



Chipping Sparrow at Amy's Park. All photos by Alan Bacchiochi.

The noises continued and grew faster but the engine never turned over. Somebody off on one of the logging trails was probably tending to a small weekend project. Maybe five minutes later I heard it again. Maybe it wasn't a motor. It didn't sound quite mechanical. Maybe it was a deer? Didn't bucks make a sort of drumming sound when they were rutting? I couldn't be sure. Or the Lake George Vortex? Elephants use infrasounds to communicate over several kilometers. Most of my attention went to not taking a header in the mud. One log softly crumbled beneath my feet dropping me to a knee.

What about turkeys? Probably bucks going into a rut. File it away and check up on it later. I did not have much time to scan for Forest Chickens blending into the underbrush.

I did spend a lot more time listening to the sounds of the woods. That thumping happened about 10 times in all. And I never saw a turkey, deer, elephant, or a small two-stroke motor. I did hear gangs of chortling Black-capped Chickadees in the treetops. Hermit Thrushes boldly responded to pishing, while Red-breasted Nuthatches honked all around. Sapsuckers kept finding the loudest hollow trees to drum on, while Ruby-crowned Kinglets were hissing about. Near my hike's end, a Winter Wren launched into its complex song from the depths of a thick hemlock.

The next morning I visited some logging trails just south of the lake, and I heard that same thumping again. I also startled up a small group of deer. Beyond that were many of the same species from the day before, making themselves heard far and wide. I didn't see any turkeys. Maybe after all it was a deer making that thumping, somehow?

I finally had a moment to check out that thumping. Helpful YouTube videos had turkeys spitting, gobbling, and supposedly drumming. No dice. Deer grunt, snort, or bleat. Not thump. Then I typed "thumping call bird" into my search. Guess what the first result was. Go

ahead. You probably already know the answer by this point.

Ruffed Grouse.

To quote from the website All About Birds, "The male Ruffed Grouse's unique drumming display takes place from atop a low log, stump, or rock." Color me stupid.

In his "Essential Field Guide Companion," Pete Dunne writes: "The most commonly heard sound is



Canada Geese atop a beaver lodge in Amy's Park.

an accelerating, percussive thumping..." He adds that you can mimic it with an open hand against the chest.

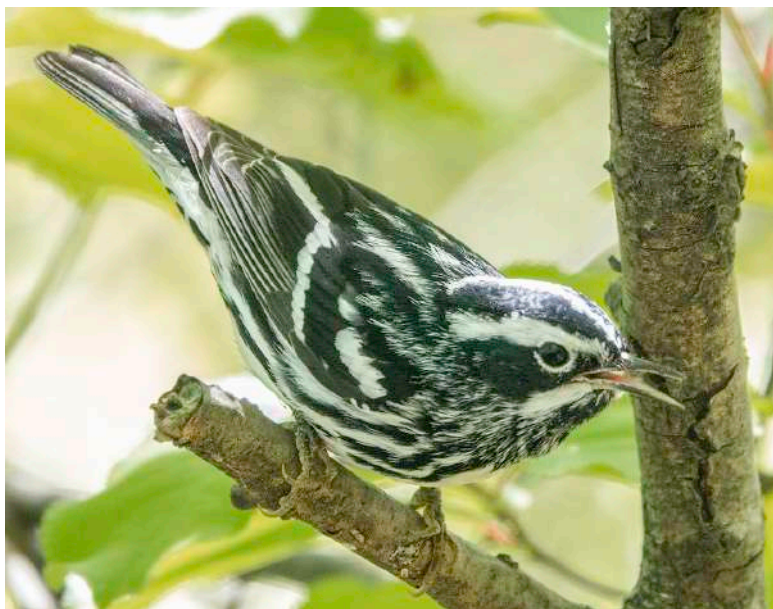
Most damningly, from the Sibley field guide app, which I negligently inspected before I set out to get a visual clue of the bird, "Voice: Male display is non-vocal, a series of accelerating, muffled thumps..."

It can be exhilarating to seek out a new species. It's an equally charged letdown when you get in your own way with fanciful answers.

It was a real slap on the forehead moment, funny and humbling. It was about as dumb as not cooking potatoes in salted water before mashing them. The lesson: When you research a new species, read to the bottom of the guide. You know, where they usually describe a bird's vocalizations and unique thumping noises. Well, the next time I'm back up that way in the spring, I know I'll know what I'm hearing. I hope. 🐦

Migration Walks in Prospect Park: Tom Stephenson





Clockwise from top: Prairie Warbler, Northern Parula,
Black-and-white Warbler.

Smuckers and Omar: The Orioles Who Stuck Around

By Ryan Mandelbaum and Paul Sweet



Smuckers the Baltimore Oriole. Photo by Ryan Mandelbaum.

New York City was not kind to warm weather lovers this winter, delivering more snow on some days than in the entire previous winter. And yet, a pair of neotropical migrants—two Baltimore Orioles—managed to survive the entire winter at Brooklyn bird feeders.

This past winter, Baltimore Orioles we eventually named Omar and Smuckers forewent migration and decided to winter at the Brooklyn apartments of Paul Sweet/Liz Frances and Ryan Mandelbaum/Brittany Widseth, respectively. And, despite nearly 40 inches of snow, each of these birds managed to survive the entire winter. Though uncommon, these records represent part of a larger cohort of orioles choosing Northeastern bird feeders over migration that has spanned over a century.

Baltimore Orioles are among Brooklyn's most common summertime birds, recorded breeding in parks across the borough and occasionally stopping by feeders. They typically show up in large numbers

during the last week of April and first week of May. After breeding, they begin migrating southward around late August to September, and from there migrate to Florida, Central America, the Caribbean, and northwestern South America. However, stragglers remain well into the fall. According to *Birds of the World*: "Fairly regularly overwinters north to New England, most at feeders; probably few survive."

Smuckers and Omar set out to prove *Birds of the World* wrong.

An unidentified Baltimore Oriole first arrived at Ryan Mandelbaum and Brittany Widseth's fire-escape suet feeder on November 24, 2020, providing only a glimpse before flying away. Another Oriole—perhaps the same bird—appeared on December 12. This time, Mandelbaum put out a spoonful of Smucker's strawberry preserves on top of the seed feeder, which the bird took to immediately (hence the name). Mandelbaum kept fresh jam available, and Smuckers came back nearly every day until April 27, 2021,

molting from her gray-tinged winter plumage to bright yellow-orange as the spring approached.

Smuckers demonstrated several adaptations that allowed her to survive in her home and diet. Though she'd hang around the fire escape on warm days, she'd return each night to a bush against a building full of house sparrows across the backyard, perhaps how she was able to bear the cold. She mostly didn't have to bear the snow—even on the snowiest days, Mandelbaum worked to keep the feeder snow and ice-free. However, after one snowstorm, she picked up a habit of clinging to the feeder's wire handle, rather than standing directly on top of the snow-covered feeder. She also demonstrated a "gaping" behavior typical of orioles eating their natural food sources of ripe fruit, where she'd stab her bill into the jam and open it to move the large strawberry pieces in favor of the small bits. Though always skittish when her human hosts were in the same room as the window, she defended her jam aggressively against other birds, fluffing up her feathers and opening her beak at juncos who came near while she was on the fire escape.

Meanwhile, Paul Sweet and Liz Frances upped their bird feeder game in their Bedford-Stuyvesant yard during the pandemic. A Duncraft squirrel-proof pole was hung with suet feeder, peanut feeder, nyjer sock, seed feeder and a tray feeder. This array had already been successful in bringing in a good variety of birds, including Pine Siskins and a Carolina Wren, then on November 26, a young male Baltimore Oriole appeared on the peanut feeder. Sweet immediately halved an orange and put it on the tray feeder, and within five minutes the oriole was probing the citrus. He became a regular in their yard, visiting daily, eating oranges, peanuts, suet, and occasional spoonfuls of marmalade. They named him Omar the Oriole, after Omar Little, a character from the Baltimore-based drama, *The Wire*. They hoped that Omar would stick around for the Brooklyn CBC, which he did, and he kept coming through the New Year and into February, weathering some heavy snow storms. Then on February 16, he disappeared. After a few days, Sweet assumed he had finally succumbed to the winter weather. However, to his great surprise, Omar returned to the feeders on March 16. He was a sporadic visitor up to April 6, when he was already molting into summer plumage.

Though traditionally neotropical winterers, records of wintertime orioles at bird feeders date as far back as the 1890s, according to a blog on the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division website by retired wildlife

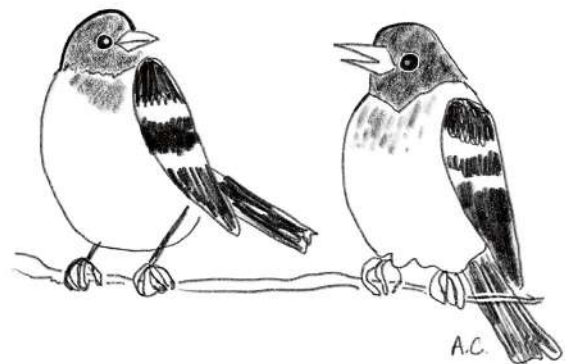
biologist Terry W. Johnson. Ludlow Griscom's 1923 "Birds of the New York City Region" mentions that the bird is of accidental occurrence in winter; it reports that ornithologist Frank M. Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History (and the founder of the Christmas Bird Count) saw "one around the Museum" in January of 1894. Of one 1909 bird first seen in Central Park on November 14, Griscom writes:

"It fed greedily on the suet at the feeding station maintained by Miss Crolius, and seemed perfectly well, barring a frost-bitten foot during a cold wave the end of January. It began to sing the third week in March and departed the night of April 20, 1910. I know of no better illustration in the bird world to show that food is of greater importance than absolute temperature."

By the 1998 "Bull's Birds of New York State," Baltimore Oriole was listed as "unusual among our breeding species in that it is one of the earliest to depart in fall and yet is now recorded annually in winter, when it is usually found at feeders." One East Meadow, New York bird feeder recorded nine orioles in the winter of 1973-1974.

Though we couldn't find any studies specifically focusing on why these orioles overwinter or how these numbers have changed over time, it's clear that our birds are part of a larger, annual pattern of birds finding shelter at feeders throughout the region, including several other overwintering birds in New York City in the past few years. Plenty of other factors may be contributing to these birds' decision to remain, but perhaps most importantly, they find reliable food sources at these urban spots.

For us Brooklynners who sheltered overwintering orioles, we're just happy to have provided a safe haven, and are especially happy to see our birds survive the winter. 🐦



Just like you, man. I got the orange, you got the strawberry preserves. It's all in the game, though, right?

Photo Gallery: Charles Tang



Clockwise from top: Evening Grosbeak and Blackburnian Warbler at Green-Wood Cemetery;
Bobolink at Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge.

Diversity in Birding: An Interview with Dennis Hrehowsik

By Tracy Meade

As part of our continuing series on diversity in birding, this spring I emailed with Dennis Hrehowsik, president of the Brooklyn Bird Club, about his background in birding, the club's surge in new members, and efforts to make Brooklyn's birding community more inclusive. The interview has been lightly edited for space and clarity.

I like to start these interviews by giving the Clapper Rail readers a sense of who you are, and in this case, please tell us how you found yourself in the role of president of the Brooklyn Bird Club.

I began birding about a decade ago and was one of those enthusiastic birders who found themselves signing up for pretty much every trip the club offered. After about two years, I was asked by Jerry Layton to help him on the Programs Committee. As Jerry's health failed I became chair of the committee and, after about four years of committee service, I was asked by then-president Rob Bate if I wanted to serve on the council. I accepted the invitation.

During this time, I had led a few trips for the club. Around this time I also began to lead my Saturday migration walks. After two years or so on the council,

Rob expressed his interest in stepping down and asked if I would consider taking over the role as president, since I was one of the most visible members and doing a lot of service. I said I would accept the position if nominated. That was about three years ago so it has been an 11-year journey. It's not something I can say I sought out but I'm in the habit of saying yes to things, and I don't regret the decision since serving the BBC has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

Because this is a series about diversity in birding, can you tell us about the club's engagement with these issues in recent years?

When I took office, I made the decision early on that every person I would ask to do service for the club would be a woman or person of color whenever possible. I think I'm pretty close to 100 percent at this point, which is a record I'm proud of. While I'm a master print maker by trade, I'm part of a nonprofit called Powerhouse Arts which is trying to build an art fabrication community that reflects the racial demographics of New York and provides career opportunities for communities that have been traditionally underserved. I work closely with many community organizations, the Department of Education, as well as social justice and equity consulting firms to do this in a way that is sustainable, emphasizes inclusivity, and rejects tokenism.

I always say that what makes me a master printer (and birder) is that I have made every possible mistake at some point along the way and learned from it. The same is true in my experience creating a workplace that represents New Yorkers in accord with the current racial demographics of our city. I've learned what works and what doesn't first hand. I bring these lessons to my service of Brooklyn Bird Club members and consider them carefully with every decision I make.

Can you tell us about the challenges as well, and how informal organizations like clubs can play a



role and have a voice in making birding welcoming and accessible to communities across Brooklyn?

The biggest challenge is getting people to volunteer for things. I try to make offers people can't refuse (I was called the don of the Brooklyn birding mafia) in terms of getting a feel for new members, what they like and what I think they would have fun doing for the club. Even then it's very difficult and I can understand completely. People have lives, families, careers and



Both photos this page: Scenes from Dennis' Saturday morning walks.

there's only so much time in the day. I think there is a belief that community organizations like ours are full of individuals unwilling to relinquish control of the club to new members. The truth is most of us have these service commitments year after year because nobody else wants to do them.

Please consider saying yes if I or one of the committee chairs approaches you about taking on a service commitment. If we haven't met yet and you'd like to volunteer for the club in any capacity, please consider reaching out to me. We have always selected our council from those members who volunteer for the BBC, and I want everyone to be a part of that. That's what I believe it means to be welcoming. It means being inclusive from the ground up and giving members a stake of ownership in the club through service.

As far as outreach, the club has traditionally relied upon attraction, not community engagement. One area where I think it's critical to change that is reaching out to high school-aged students who've been widely underserved when it comes to education about the nature all around us here in New York. There's an assumption that nature is elsewhere, despite the fact that we live on the Atlantic Flyway and are surrounded by incredible coastal habitat. I'm laying the

groundwork to create a program that will bring birding to black and brown high-school students, presented by someone who shares a common background and will introduce them to birds and a stewardship of nature in which they belong as much as anyone else. This is how we will inspire the next generation of conservationists, scientists and BBC members.

I'm impressed by how the Feminist Bird Club includes specific language on its website about creating "a safe opportunity for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, BIPOC, and women to connect with the natural world." My sense is the Brooklyn Bird Club could be pushed a bit on how its materials and activities address the issue of safe opportunities. What are your thoughts about this?

I think the FBC did a great job of adapting the Contributor Covenant into a statement of intent with language relevant to their mission. As the covenant states, simply adopting this language and pasting in on a website isn't enough. It takes a deep commitment from the leaders of a given community to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all.

This strong leadership is something the FBC and BBC have in common. This statement was released in response to allegations of sexual assault against Jason Ward by Aisha White, a female birder he met while in a leadership role at Georgia Audubon. The BBC released a statement in support of Aisha White, and I personally addressed our members via Zoom in support of her and all victims of violence, and condemned racism, sexism or abuse of any kind. This is my greatest fear realized –



a member of our club harmed by an individual we put in a position of authority.

Bobbi Manian, Tina Allewa, Peter Dorosh, Tom Stephenson and I spend hundreds of hours per year

leading walks for the BBC. We spend this time not just sharing the joy of birding with our members but also getting to know them quite intimately. We use this time as an opportunity to assess who the next leaders of the BBC will be. We discuss who will make a good ambassador for the club, who seems reliable and who understands our mission. Could this person be trusted with the safety of our members? Could they be a sexual predator? Could they be a racist? Would I trust them with the safety of a member of my family? I still think the BBC can do a better job of communicating how carefully we consider each candidate and push other organizations to follow our lead in adopting similarly rigorous vetting.

This may make it appear we are slow to accept new members into leadership roles. To ensure the physical safety and mental wellbeing of our members in this way takes an enormous amount of time and effort, but their safety is our single most important responsibility. As president I consider it my personal responsibility. Several members have written and asked me if I thought the BBC should adopt a statement similar to the FBC's. I told each one I think it's a great idea and

asked if they would consider writing a first draft for the BBC's council to review. So far, no one has taken me up on that offer. Maybe someone reading this will lead the way.

I've heard that membership in the club has expanded significantly this past year. How do you think about sustaining this growth and what do you know about these new members?

Yes, as of this writing we've almost doubled our membership to 400. We had been hovering just under the 200-mark the last few years and this new interest is certainly a result of people looking for outdoor activities during the pandemic. I can only speak to the active members I've met, but the new crop of birders skews much younger (late 20s to early 30s) and female. I find them highly enthusiastic, curious and thrilled by the new world they've found. Time will tell if this new interest is a lasting trend or if membership will wane once life gets back to normal. I truly hope they're here to stay and take an active role in shaping the future of the BBC. 🐦



Cape May Warbler. Photo by Radka Osickova.

HELP NYC AUDUBON MONITOR CHIMNEY SWIFTS

Share nest and roost data

NYC Audubon is seeking volunteers to contribute any amount of data on nesting colonies & roosting sites of Chimney Swifts throughout the 5 boroughs. Critical data include locations of nesting sites (May - Jul) & the number of birds in roosting colonies (Aug - Oct).

Identifying the buildings and chimneys used by Chimney Swifts in NYC will help us understand and protect this declining species.

For more info or to submit data, contact us at:
nycswiftsurvey@gmail.com