Summer 2022

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL

Inside This Issue

Cover: Willet at Shirley Chisholm State Park. Photo by Carol Page.
Next Page: Barn Swallow at Fort Tilden. Photo by Michelle Talich.

Editor's Note

Though this issue might look like the same old Clapper Rail, there is a less obvious change to it, and that is on the masthead: Dan Smith has joined as our deputy editor, the position Janet Schumacher held until she sadly passed away last February. Dan has been writing for the Clapper Rail for several years, and you could say this role will be like a busman's holiday for him, since his day job is at the Wall Street Journal. We're happy to welcome him to a team that at heart works to share the creative talents and stories of the Brooklyn birding community.

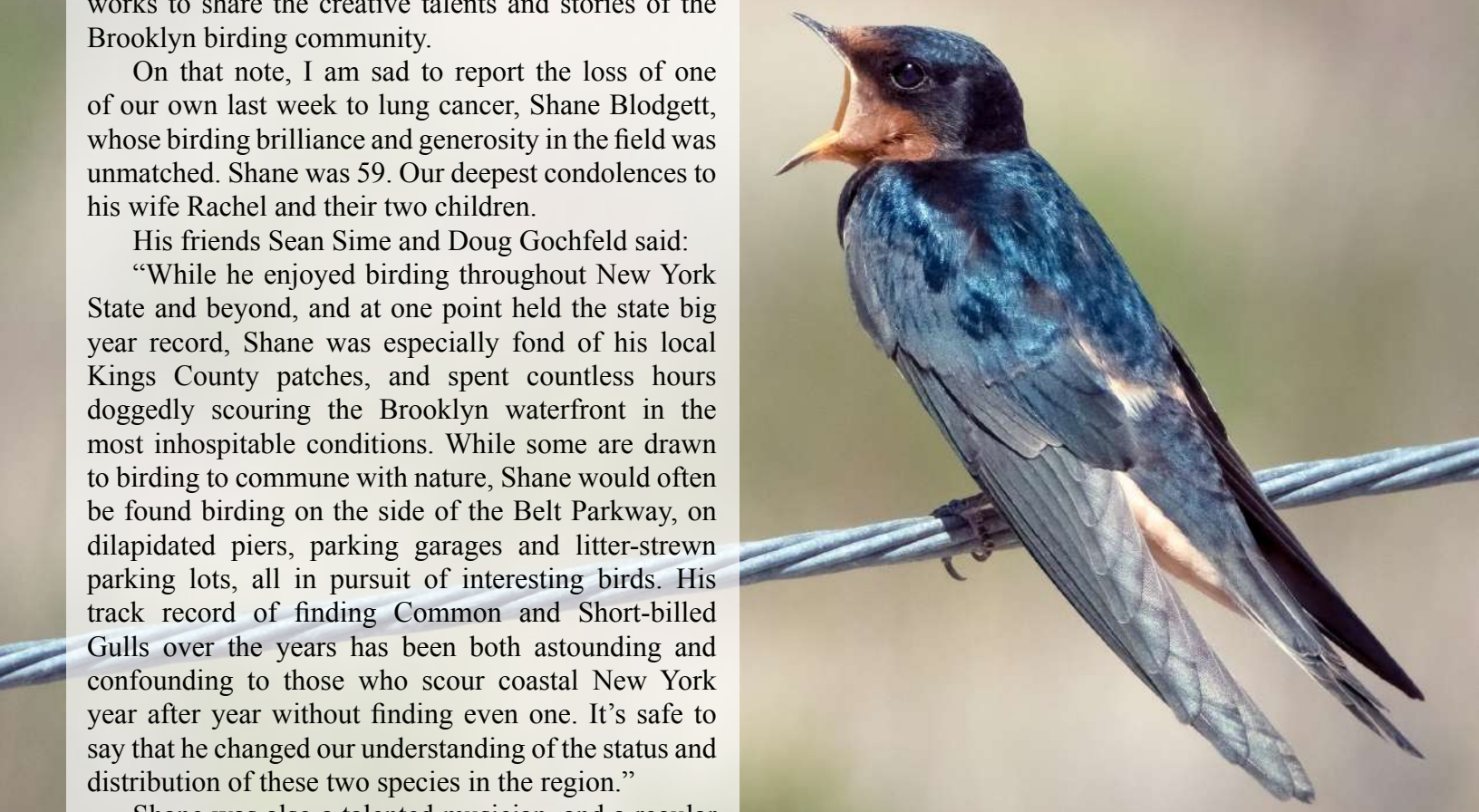
On that note, I am sad to report the loss of one of our own last week to lung cancer, Shane Blodgett, whose birding brilliance and generosity in the field was unmatched. Shane was 59. Our deepest condolences to his wife Rachel and their two children.

His friends Sean Sime and Doug Gochfeld said:

"While he enjoyed birding throughout New York State and beyond, and at one point held the state big year record, Shane was especially fond of his local Kings County patches, and spent countless hours doggedly scouring the Brooklyn waterfront in the most inhospitable conditions. While some are drawn to birding to commune with nature, Shane would often be found birding on the side of the Belt Parkway, on dilapidated piers, parking garages and litter-strewn parking lots, all in pursuit of interesting birds. His track record of finding Common and Short-billed Gulls over the years has been both astounding and confounding to those who scour coastal New York year after year without finding even one. It's safe to say that he changed our understanding of the status and distribution of these two species in the region."

Shane was also a talented musician, and a regular in the city's bluegrass scene, playing Sunday jams at Sunny's in Red Hook, which he referred to as his church. He will be deeply missed.

- Ryan Goldberg



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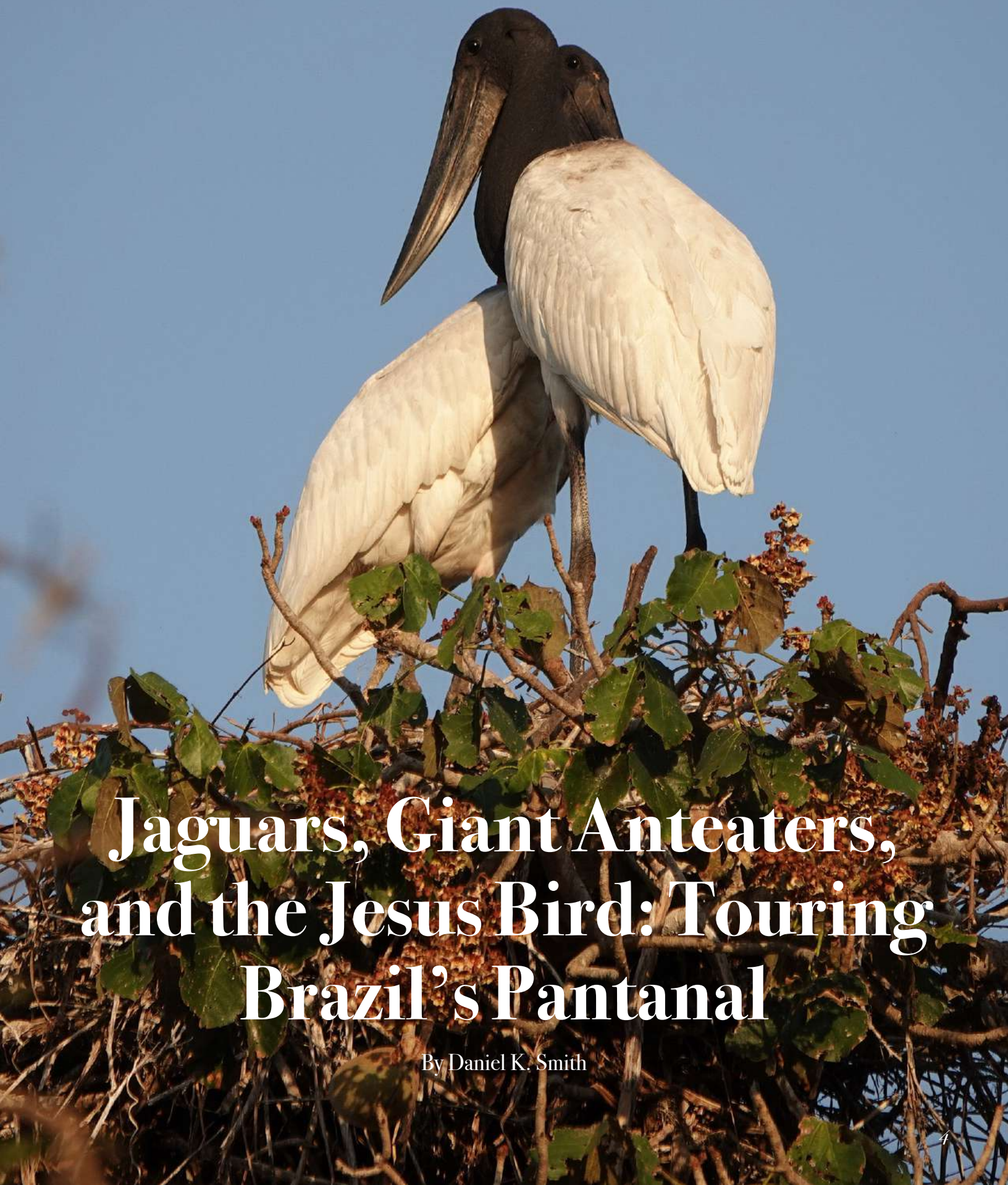


Jaguars, Giant Anteaters, and the Jesus Bird: Touring Brazil's Pantanal

By Daniel K. Smith

The afternoon was waning when the radio came on. Through the static we heard the word gato. Allan, our guide, turned to look at us and said they'd spotted a cat. We fell back into our seats as the boat accelerated. Our 9-year-old grandson Chace raised his arms and shouted "Woo-hoo!"

We were on a small motorboat in Brazil's Pantanal looking for jaguars. The summer rains were over and this marshland the size of France was draining. For half the year the cats can roam, but as the water recedes, they're forced to hunt along the river's edge. Their prey are the birds, capybara, and caiman that seek the water's protection and concentrated food supply.

After about 20 minutes driving upriver, we spotted a group of four or five boats. Our driver, Beto, throttled down and we quietly joined them. Not more than 30 or 40 feet in front of us was a jaguar. She was hunting and oblivious to us.

This journey started months earlier when we received a "Save the Date" card from my son and his fiancée. The wedding would be in Rio de Janeiro but my wife Ginny and I wanted to explore more of the country and do some birding. The Pantanal is one of the world's premier birding spots and hosts about 450 species. Starting in the fall, the birds are attracted to the fish in the shrinking pools of water. Chace jumped at the opportunity to join us. His favorite animal is the jaguar.

Allan Franco, a tall man with dark hair and a ready smile, is a guide that works for the tour company we hired for this trip, Pantanal Jaguar Safaris. He's a biologist by training and an enthusiastic birder. His hometown of Barra do Bugres, in the state of Mato Grosso, is in the nexus of three biomes where it's possible to see 300 species in a day. We would be spending the next five days with him and he made a good first impression.

The first day was spent in Allan's Toyota Land Cruiser on the 90-mile dirt road called the Transpantaneira. Officially known as highway MT-060, the Transpantaneira is the result of the Brazilian government's attempt to create a route to Porto Jofre in the 1960s. When the futility of maintaining a thoroughfare that would be underwater half the year

Previous page: Jaribu.
Above: Jaguar. All photos by Daniel K. Smith.

became apparent, the project was abandoned. What's left is a wide dirt road that crosses 122 single-lane wooden bridges. Our hotel, Hotel Pantanal Norte, was located at the end of this road.

It was just about noon when we made our first stop beside a sprawling pasture. Ranching is the area's main industry and the cattle shared the grassland with Greater Rhea, Southern Lapwing, and Cattle Tyrants.

We made many stops along this dusty road, turning a three-hour drive into six hours. When the road climbed to one of the many bridge crossings, we got the opportunity to look out over the marshlands. Caimans and capybaras shared the water with egrets, herons, kingfishers, kites, and ibises. Savannah and Roadside Hawks perched on the poles that carried electrical service to Porto Jofre many miles away. Tucked into the roadside brush were beautiful gems like the Orange-backed Troupial, Blue-crowned Trogon, and White-headed Marsh Tyrant. It was a birding Disneyland.

For most of the drive we rolled down the windows until the dust got to be too much. At one point, Chace asked, "Do you have American Kestrels here?"
"Yes," Allan replied.
"I just saw one," Chace said.

Allan knew Chace wasn't going to be a passive participant on our jaguar safari. We were so proud.

We were staying at Hotel Pantanal Norte for three nights. The facility was really a compound with guest cottages, a building where meals were served buffet style, and a small marina where several tour companies

Top and bottom: Plumbeous Ibis and Transpantaneira, a 90-mile dirt road.

dock their boats.

An eight-foot model of a Hyacinth Macaw faced the main building. This bird is celebrated as one of the Pantanal's conservation success stories. Captured and sold as caged birds, their numbers declined to about 1,500 by the 1980s. Hyacinth Macaw Project, started in the nineties, has helped the population recover to over 5,000. At the hotel the birds made their presence known by their squawks high in the canopy.

The hotel sat on a bluff overlooking the marina along a wide section of the Cuiaba River. We were in the boat early in the morning. It was cool with overcast skies and we bundled up against the mist and spray. We were on our way to Meeting of the Waters State Park, also known as Jaguar Land.

There were birds everywhere – wading birds, vultures, caracara, hawks, toucans, and passerines. The motorboats that ran up and down the river seemed to have little effect on them. They cast a wary eye towards us and resumed hunting and feeding. Wattled Jacana, which locals call the Jesus bird because it seems to walk on water, are abundant.

Herons have the greatest variety of species here. Black-crowned Night Herons were the most

Top and bottom: Hyacinth Macaw and Great Black Hawk.

numerous. Alongside them were Whistling, Boat-billed, Rufescent Tiger, Agami, Capped, Cocoi, and Striated. The migratory Maguari Storks had arrived and were feeding with the Wood Storks.

The most dramatic of the wading birds is the Jabiru, a huge bird with a black head and red ring around the neck. The Pantanal is considered the world center for this species. We saw them nesting in several spots, including on top of a Monk Parakeet colony.

Our routine was the same everyday: out on the river early looking for wildlife, back for lunch, return to the river for the afternoon and back by sunset for dinner. For me, it was all about birding but during our time on the river, we also saw caiman, capybara, seven or eight jaguars, three species of monkeys, and giant river otters, the Pantanal's second largest predator after the jaguar.

We left Porto Jofre after lunch on our third day. The next two nights were spent at Pousada Piuval, back up the Transpantaneira closer to Cuiaba airport.

Over the years, ranches along the road opened pousdas, or inns, targeting the eco-tourism business. They're islands in the vast wetland. Focusing on international travelers, they provide WiFi, swimming pools, horseback riding, and locally sourced meals. The business model has been such a success that the

Top and bottom: Rufescent Tiger Heron and Jaribu.

Top and bottom: Kisskadee and Maguari Stork.

pousada can be more profitable than the ranch.

We arrived at ours after dark. In the fields on either side of the long driveway to the guest cottages were termite mounds. We were warned that a jaguar had been spotted around the property and advised not to go out on the grounds alone. Since there were a lot of capybaras around, they attracted the cats at night.

We were up early the next morning and hopped aboard an open truck for more wildlife viewing. This region was dry and hot, very different from Porto Jofre and Jaguar Land. There were several small pools of water, but the odd boat stranded in the parched landscape was the only reminder that this area was submerged half the year.

We spent time looking for monkeys (saw cappuccino, howler, and marmosets), birds, and the giant anteater, up to eight feet long from snout to tail, which favors the huge grey termite mounds. Sadly, this was the only one of our target animals that we didn't get to see. But that wasn't for lack of trying! An afternoon drive turned into a nighttime safari complete with a spotlight to track the giant anteater, but as disappointed as we were, Chace hopped down from the truck and said, "Oh well, good job everybody!" And it was time

for another delicious dinner.

On our last day, we had some time to ourselves before we headed to the airport for our evening flight. I strolled the grounds while Ginny and Chace swam in the pool and played foosball. This gave me a chance to sort out everything I had experienced in the past few days, like gazing upon a jaguar that made me feel invisible, catching a piranha like it was a sunfish, watching vultures feed on a bloated cow drowned in the river.

On the drive to the airport, Allan and I spoke about the future of the Pantanal. His sister, a biologist who works for the Brazilian government, has told him it's just a matter of time before the Pantanal is drained by the deforestation surrounding the region. The forests act like a conveyor belt bringing moisture from the ocean until it hits the Andes. The buildup results in the summer's rainy season. His view is that Brazil is controlled by the corporate interests of Cargill and other large agricultural companies.

I found this prospect disheartening and seemed to counter everything we had just experienced. We saw success in bringing back much of the Pantanal's wildlife, like the Hyacinth Macaw, and the eco-tourism industry appeared to be thriving.

I hope the Pantanal can remain unchanged but few things in this world stay the same. We should experience it while we can.

Rufous-tailed Jacamar.

Art and Photo Gallery: Carol Page

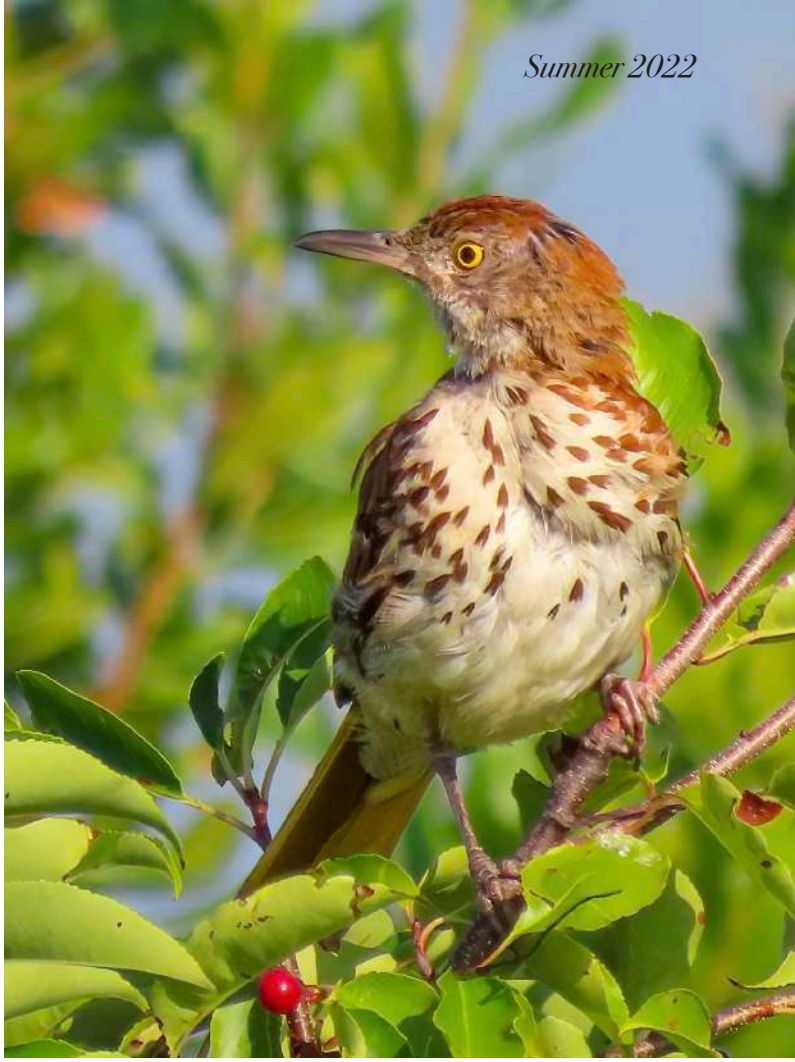
American Goldfinch. Watercolor on paper.

Black-crowned Night Heron. Watercolor on paper.

American Avocets. Watercolor on paper.

American Oystercatcher at Fort Tilden.

Clockwise from top: House Finch at Brooklyn Botanic Garden; Common Tern family and Piping Plover at Nickerson Beach.



Clockwise from top: Black Skimmer at Nickerson Beach; Brown Thrasher at Jamaica Bay; Black-crowned Night Heron at Fort Tilden; Eastern Kingbird at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Sparks!

By Kathy Willens

Painted Finch. Detail of print by John J. Audubon.

As a kid growing up in Detroit, I always wanted to be a bird. Chased down alleyways behind my house by a class bully who delighted in terrorizing young girls, my desire came from the avian ability to take flight on a moment's notice. I was fascinated by Peter Pan, in particular the actress Mary Martin's portrayal of the legendary character in the Tony-award Broadway production. Suspended by wires around her torso, Martin could "fly" on stage to Neverland, an alternate reality where all one's wishes and fantasies were granted. Hard as I wished, though, I remained earthbound and wing-less, my bicycle the only way of escaping bullies.

It was decades later that I would find the next best thing to being a bird: watching them. It was April, 1980, and I was living in Coral Gables, Florida. That day, Madeleine Blais, my best friend and a Miami Herald writer, called to share the incredible news that she'd been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for her feature writing in "Tropic," the Herald's Sunday magazine. She'd won the award for "Zepp's Last Stand," her story of a World War I veteran dishonorably discharged on Nov. 9, 1919, and a profile of playwright/author Tennessee Williams. For a young journalist early in her career, this was an amazing accomplishment. But in the middle of her account, a bird that looked like it was designed by a Fauvist painter flew to my neighbor's feeder. Transfixed by the bird's Crayola-like colors, I completely lost track of what Maddy was saying.

"Maddy," I interrupted, "I have to call you back! There's an amazing bird outside my window."

Without giving her a chance to respond, I hung up and grabbed my 7x20 Nikon binoculars. Only slightly better than opera glasses, they allowed me to gaze at this spectacular visitor. It was, of course, a Painted Bunting, I learned from my paperback Peterson guide.

I'd purchased that book after I met Roger Tory Peterson himself during a 1972 sailing trip I made through the Intracoastal waterway. At one point, a young man docked beside our boat told me that Peterson was coming to visit him. Peterson, who died in 1996, was an artist, naturalist and author, teacher and global explorer, and his introductory book, "A Field Guide to the Birds: Eastern Land and Water Birds," we had tucked on board our sailboat. We occasionally used it to identify species spotted along the trip. As a shy college student, and not-yet-serious birder, my conversation with Peterson was limited, but I remember him as a gentle and cordial man, not the pioneering giant he is regarded as now. In 1934, Peterson's guide, featuring his own artwork, was the first used to compare and simply identify bird species. At least four publishers rejected it before Houghton-Mifflin took a chance and printed just 2,000 copies. The book sold out in several weeks.

Peterson later said, "It seems like an obvious thing to do now, but nobody had ever done that before."

That Painted Bunting was the first of only two I've seen. The second was 35 years later, and now I was living in Brooklyn. Stalked and viewed by birders and pursued by local and national reporters and videographers, this bird spent two months foraging in the grasses at Prospect Park's Lefrak Center, and quickly became a celebrity.

After my first sighting, in 1980, I often went birdwatching while hauling a 400mm f/3.5 Nikon manual-focus lens. As an Associated Press staff photographer, I used this lens for presidential visits and sporting events like baseball and football. Roaming South Florida's Everglades National Park with a fellow photographer, I learned it was also great for bird photography. For me birding is always about color, and the birds I remember easily are the most colorful species I encountered in my early years of birding.

In the Everglades, Roseate Spoonbills were the most memorable, best spotted from a canoe or kayak where one can get much closer without spooking or distracting them. I recall their deep rose-pink color and flat bills, giving them the appearance of wearing a set of flattened cooking spoons attached to their jaws. Their feeding behavior is also notable. They forage for food in the tannic brown waters south of Miami, swinging their heads from side-to-side filtering the water for insects or small fish.

On a recent Brooklyn Bird Club walk, one person in the group was focused on a Red-winged Blackbird while the rest of us gazed at migrating songbirds that were visible at eye level. Granted the blackbird was gorgeous, with its bright yellow and red epaulets, but it was impossible for me, and I suspect others, to take our eyes off the Yellow-throated Vireo we had in view for a sight of this far more common bird.

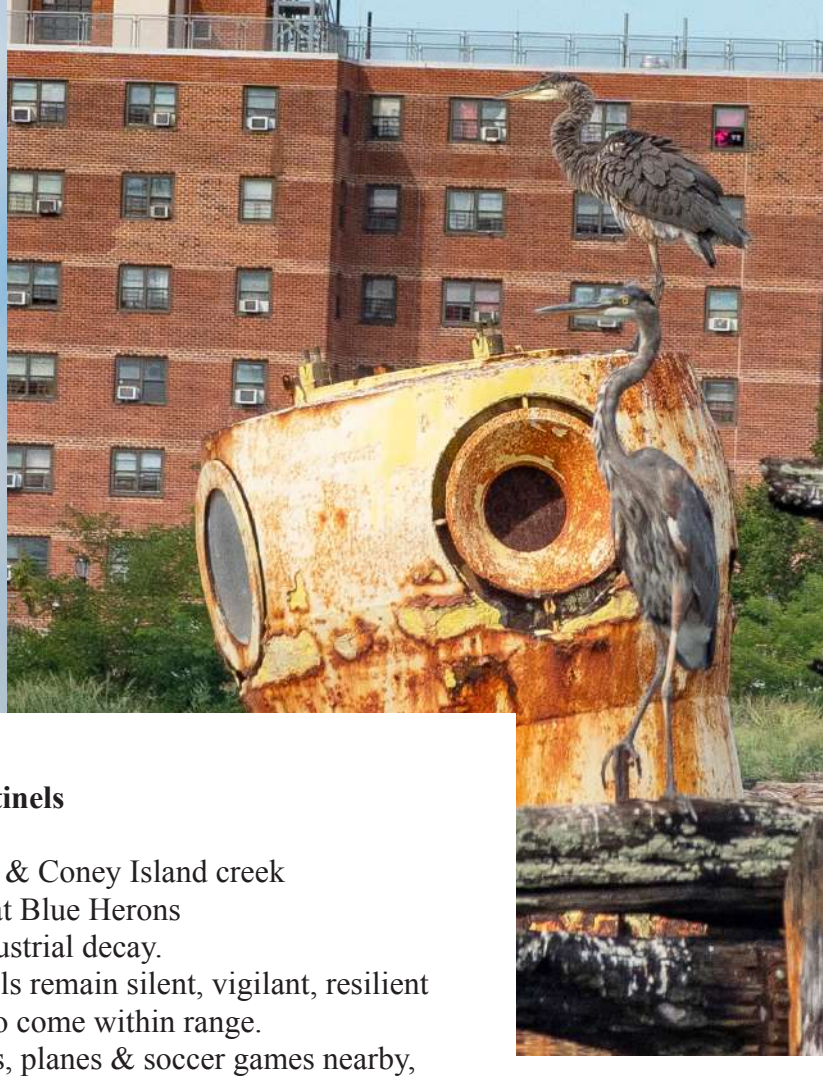
The first time I laid eyes on a Scarlet Tanager, one crisp spring day about 20 years ago, I was hiking through Massachusetts and Vermont. Just after a surprising "Welcome to Vermont!" sign, I looked up and was frozen in my tracks by a fire-engine red bird with black wings. I have many birding friends for whom the scarlet is a spark bird. Had I never seen that Painted Bunting outside my Florida apartment, this might well have been mine too. Even so, the sight of that bird against an azure blue Vermont sky sticks in my memory today, as fresh as ever.

Painted Finch. Detail of print by John J. Audubon.

Photo Gallery: Kathy Willens

Piping Plover chick at Breezy Point.

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



***Ardea herodias*: Coney Island Sentinels**

High tide day between Calvert Vaux & Coney Island creek
I paddle among five impassible Great Blue Herons
perched on shipwrecks & rusted industrial decay.
These majestic Coney Island sentinels remain silent, vigilant, resilient
& will wait patiently for their prey to come within range.
Neither the muffled brouhaha of cars, planes & soccer games nearby,
nor the gouged out eye of the almost fully-submerged yellow submarine
seem to be of concern.
My presence is noticed but not significant.
One takes off.
Its majestic flight leaves me elated/deflated.
The gracious landing on the gnarled dead tree is sympoietic
& the message is potent & clear:
find peace & time for yourself.

- Nicole Peyrafitte

Great Blue Herons at Coney Island Creek. Photos by Nicole Peyrafitte.

Sky Island Dreams

By Ryan Goldberg

The Santa Cruz River. Photo by Ryan Goldberg.

The Santa Catalina Mountains, one of southern Arizona's Sky Islands. Photo by Ryan Goldberg.

In late April, on our final morning in Madera Canyon, I woke before sunrise with a startlingly clear vision of how the day would go. We had to check out of our lodge by 11, but either side of that we were going to spend as much time as was necessary to find an Elegant Trogon. For reasons I can't explain, I felt certain that a trogon would be waiting for us at our first stop, a small footbridge a quarter mile up the creek that runs behind the lodge. It was one of the few places we hadn't tried after three days of marching up and down the canyon, missing it at every turn.

Of course, no trip is about one bird, I told myself. Since my first year of birding, after I struck out on a bitterly cold winter day in Staten Island (female Painted Bunting, Barrow's Goldeneye hen, Cackling Goose), I've largely resisted the urge to chase. I became a "habitat birder," to quote Peter, one of my three birding friends, along with Marc and Chris, on the trip. And in this regard, Madera Canyon, which sweeps up the northwest face of the Santa Rita Mountains in southern Arizona, was spectacular.

The Santa Ritas are one of the sky islands of the Southwest and northwest Mexico – isolated ecosystems of high-altitude pine-oak woodlands that rise out of the lower elevation Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts. The plant biomes change with every thousand feet, from scrub to Canadian-style forest, saguaro to Douglas-firs. The biodiversity is tremendous. The birds, of course, change as well, from roadrunners to Red-faced Warblers. Our lodge, which sat about halfway up the Santa Rita's 9,500-foot mass, was surrounded by live oaks, alligator junipers, and Arizona sycamores, a tree whose bone-white arms reached out like scarecrows bent by the wind.

Elegant Trogons nest in sycamore cavities, so throughout our stay I had my eye on them. The bird itself, I knew, would be unmistakable. The males, like most songbirds, are the showier of the pair, with clean

lines and solid colors: metallic-green head, thin white chest band, sparkling red body, steel-gray wings. Their eye is bold, encircled in red, and their long tail (for males and females) is a real showstopper: a flute of iridescent copper-green on the back and delicate black striping on white underneath. The females, a lovely silver-gray, have a white teardrop behind the eye. Before the trip, I had memorized their song, a hollow and repetitive croaking, almost like a bark, that seemed a poor match for their brilliance.

The reports we got in the field suggested there was a pair, possibly two, scouting nest sites. We pieced together the times and locations of these eyewitness accounts and strategized. On our second day, acting on one, we hiked up the canyon until the trail disappeared, then kept going, until we reached an enchanting but trogon-free spring that trickled over dark rocks. On our climb down, we heard a pair calling back and forth where we first received the intelligence. The wind was strong, though, and they were not showing.

There are only 50 pairs in all of Arizona – the one state where they can be reliably found – and only in four mountain ranges. Elegant Trogons were first found in the Huachuca Mountains in 1885, and in 1939, a nest was discovered in Madera Canyon. Birders like us have been flocking here ever since. Kenn Kaufman, one of the most famous, wrote that, "The observer who finds one may get to watch it at leisure: rather sluggish, the trogon may sit upright on one perch for several minutes."

I would be happy with several seconds.

Still, part of my confidence that final morning had to do with everything else we'd seen so far. For a week, we'd been birding like lunatics in a kind of delirious wonder. We had begun in Patagonia, an old trading post south of the Santa Ritas and a famous destination for the birds that are rare for the U.S. and found above the border there. Driving from Phoenix airport, we pulled into the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a Tucson Audubon sanctuary, with 10 minutes of daylight left. Decades of stored-up lifer-hungry excitement careened out of our rented minivan, much to the bemusement of Louie Dombroski, the center's mild-mannered birder-in-residence. Four hummingbird species – Violet-crowned, Broad-billed, Anna's, and Black-chinned – grabbed one last sip of nectar from the feeders. A Gambel's Quail scurried across the yard. And a trio of Cassin's Kingbirds burst into the trees around the old house, coming in for their nightly roost. Their noisy chatter (a signature of the species laid down in their scientific name, vociferans) made a lasting impression on me.

Broad-billed Hummingbird at Madera Canyon. Photo by Marc Brawer.

The next morning, Louie was going to take us birding around Patagonia. I woke at four in the morning, barely able to sleep. I walked onto the front porch of our house, down the road from the center, and the kingbirds were already calling somewhere out there in the darkness. Peter was also on the porch. It was an hour before sunrise, and looking southeast, the planets sat low in the sky, below the waning moon. He pointed them out from left to right, lowest to highest: Jupiter, Venus, Mars, and Saturn. Venus was so bright that I first mistook it for the blinking lights of an airplane. City habits die hard.

A couple hours later, we were on our way to Patagonia Lake State Park. If you want to find a lot of birds in the desert, look for water. The lake, tucked inside dry, rolling hills of blooming ocotillo and mesquite, was created by damming Sonoita Creek in the late 1960s. There were birds everywhere – a few in the migration departure lounge, some recently arrived, and still others, like Lucy's Warblers and Bell's Vireos, already sitting on nests.

Teals – Cinnamon, Green-winged, Blue-winged – foraged in the shallow edges of the lake, while a Wilson's Snipe, Sora, and American Coots stuck to the reeds. A trail followed Sonoita Creek, where cottonwoods and willow thickets were chock-full of tanagers, orioles, vireos, warblers, goldfinches, buntings, vireos. The Summer Tanager's wooden pit-a-tuck became part of the background. Five kinds of doves – Inca, Common Ground, the rare Ruddy Ground, White-winged, Mourning – tested our flight identifications. With flycatchers, we were spoiled for choice. There was the Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a tiny thing with bedhead, up to the crested gang – Dusky-capped, Brown-crested, Ash-throated – and kingbirds, plenty of Cassin's and an early Thick-billed. The Thick-billed could just as well be named the Thick-necked, I thought. It landed high overhead, called three times – a loud, springy boi-ink – and then took off.

The next day, on Louie's advice, we hiked Miller Canyon, in the Huachucas east of Patagonia, hard against the border. Birders typically go to Madera Canyon to find Western warblers, he told us, including the local breeding specials like Red-faced, Grace's, and Painted Redstarts, mountain-forest birds that hopscotch from peak to peak, never straying below the higher elevations. But Miller was just as reliable, he said, with a fraction of the people. He was right. We

Clockwise from top: Bullock's Oriole at Ash Canyon; Western Kingbird at the Santa Cruz River; Lucy's Warbler at Patagonia Lake. Photos by Marc Brawer.

were the only birders on the mountain. The sky was azure and cloudless, the crisp air laced with pine.

When we set out, the trail bending through sunbaked chapparal, several waves of migrant warblers were moving quickly toward the shaded canyon, with its promise of water and conifer shelter: MacGillivray's, Hermit, Townsend's, Black-throated Gray, Nashville, Virginia's. We followed them. Soon we crossed a narrow streambed and passed an old steel pipe that once, I read later, carried water downslope to the boomtown of Tombstone. Our O.K. Corral was a tamer faceoff: coming onto another flock, we spotted a pair of Red-faced Warblers in the shadows of the forest floor, most likely a mated pair scouting territory, and we rushed up the dusty trail to stay within sight of them. Every few seconds, this brilliant match of fire-engine red and gray would reappear. The other red warbler – Painted Redstarts – vied for our attention, flipping their tails, flashing their wings, sallying out for unbelievably close looks.

We were lucky. Louie was the first of several birders we met who wanted nothing more than to share spectacular birds and places with us. That afternoon, sitting at a former lodge-turned-sanctuary in the Huachuca foothills, called Ash Canyon, I met

Top and bottom: Lazuli Bunting at Ash Canyon and Red-faced Warbler at Mount Lemmon. Photos by Marc Brawer.

an older couple who lived in Utah but spent much of the year searching out the best birding in their RV. We sat in chairs strategically placed around hummingbird feeders, and every few minutes, somebody would call out a bird and the feeder it was on, such as "Lucifer on three." A male Lucifer Hummingbird, primarily a Mexican species, hovered 10 feet in front of us. Catching the sunlight, fuchsia streamed down its throat like a lava flow erupting under its long, curved bill.

I wondered aloud how it could get any better than this.

"Well, how would you like to see a Western Screech-Owl?" the husband, whose name I've forgotten, asked me.

I said I would like that very much.

He gave me directions to a clump of three Arizona sycamores beside a wash off the highway on our drive back to Patagonia. It would be the largest tree on the right, and the second cavity from the top. It took a few minutes to find a place to pull off, but sure enough, perfectly camouflaged against the gray bark of the sycamore, was the owl, almost three-quarters of its body out of the hole.

And so began a good run of owls.

The next day, on our way to Madera Canyon, we made a short stop at the Santa Cruz River to look for a Green Kingfisher. The river was a jewel, hiding below a dirt parking lot off the ugly highway that connects Nogales to Tucson. The kingfisher was nowhere to be found, but a Pittsburgh transplant named Randy, who moved to the area for the birding, asked us if we'd like to see a Great-horned Owl family. He led us over the river to a tall cottonwood, where the mother, asleep, and her two babies, large, gray, and fluffy, sat in the nest. They snuck looks from behind their mother, their heads moving side to side.

Our luck would go like that for the next two days – except for the trogons. That first night, right before sunset, a female Elf Owl shot her head out of a telephone pole across from the lodge. And the next night, we listened in high-elevation darkness. Several Mexican Whip-poor-wills began calling their name on either side of us, rolling whistles that made the hair stand up on my neck. Beyond them, we heard a faint tooting that sounded like morse code, a sequence of ones and twos. It said to us Whiskered Screech-Owl.

And so, that final morning in Madera Canyon, there was really no way I could ask for more. We would be driving to Tucson next, where we would undoubtedly find great desert birds and great mountain birds. An Elegant Trogon might have to be the one that got away.

It looked that way as we stood on the footbridge

Top and bottom: Harris's Hawk in Tucson and Elf Owl at Madera Canyon. Photos by Marc Brawer.

over the creek, barely running, for 20 or 25 minutes, waiting for something to happen. Mostly we made small talk with a pair of college birding buddies, now in their sixties, one living in California, the other in Wisconsin, who had the same idea as us that morning. Soon they left us for their car, and Chris and Marc, from our group, started to do the same. Peter was talking to me, but as he spoke, I thought I heard, over my shoulder, somewhere up the creek…a barking. I cut him off, saying I think I heard a trogon. Moments later, those two friends sprinted back. They'd heard the same thing.

It was not far off. We scrambled off the bridge and walked down to the creek. A couple hundred yards away, we saw two birders looking up into a sycamore. As I pulled up my binoculars, I immediately recognized the shape, only for the bird to fly away from us. The trogon flew to several perches, and when I finally got a brief look, I could tell from the gray head and chest that it was a female. She had that white teardrop behind the eye.

Most of the group followed her, clawing their way up the creekbank to attempt a better view. I stayed behind with Chris, and we returned to the bridge and began walking up the one road in the canyon that parallels the creek. We excitedly replayed what had just happened. Ten, maybe 15 minutes later, we reached the others, heading down. They had found the female and her mate.

I decided to keep walking up and Peter went with me. In no time I could hear the barking again, down in the creek. I stood at the edge of the road, looking down the steep bank, but could not find the source. I slid down, walked across the creek, and then underneath a large sycamore. It was loud now, as if it was coming from overhead, but I couldn't find the bird. I gestured toward Peter, who had stayed at the edge of the bank, and shrugged. It's here somewhere, I mouthed.

I turned around and sat down on a large stump, looked up, and on the lowest branch of the sycamore, toward the outer edge of the tree, was the male trogon, not more than 20 feet above me. I barely moved as he began calling again. The female, out of sight, called back. This call and response went on for minutes. At one point, the male stuck his head in a trunk cavity and called, a muffled bark now, as if he was saying to his mate, we found our tree. As Peter walked over, I was certain the bird would flush. It didn't.

Raising his binoculars, Peter gasped. "Oh my god," he said. "I can die happy now."

We had to check out of the lodge in two hours. We could stay and watch a little longer.

Elegant Trogon at Madera Canyon. Photo by Marc Brawer.

Raven. Mixed media by Toni Simon.

Your Fall Birding HOROSCOPES

Aries (Mar 21 – Apr 19)

You may be tempted to chase every rarity across the five boroughs, but don't underestimate a quiet, contemplative walk in your local patch. October is a good time to ground yourself in nature. And in the process, you might just turn up your own Code-5 rarity.

Taurus (Apr 20 – May 20)

Get out of your comfort zone and go birding somewhere you've never been this fall. Join a Brooklyn Bird Club or Feminist Bird Club trip. Make plans with friends to get outside the city for a day, or even the state. You'll thank me later.

Gemini (May 21 – Jun 20)

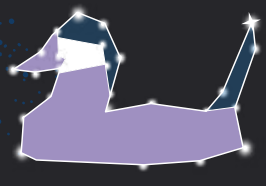
Pay attention to your interactions with fellow birders. You may be tempted to brag about all the birds you've been seeing lately, but don't overdo it. Ask them what they've seen, and you'll be the first person they text when they spot a rare vagrant this fall.

Cancer (Jun 21 – Jul 22)

People flock to you for your wealth of knowledge, and you are happy to share. Patient and kind, you'll go above and beyond to help as usual. Just don't go too far overboard and forget your own needs.

Leo (Jul 23 – Aug 22)

You've recently been thinking about upgrading your gear. Whether it be optics, camera lenses or footwear, don't rush into any major financial purchases. Do your research; test the products in person, ask your fellow birders, read reviews, and, if you can, wait for a good deal around the holidays.



Virgo (Aug 23 – Sept 22)

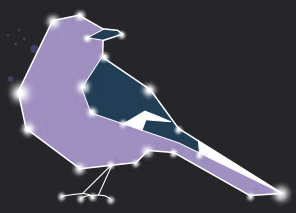
Sometimes others don't understand your love of birds. Be wary of outsiders who question your hobby, and don't worry too much about those who expect you to be low-key. You're allowed to be unapologetically excited about your passion. Soon, they'll be asking to join you on your next outing.

Libra (Sept 23 – Oct 22)

You love company and are often found birding in groups. Try taking a couple of outings on your own this fall. You'll sharpen your spotting and ID skills and will gain new insights and knowledge without the distractions of others.

Scorpio (Oct 23 – Nov 21)

You dipped on that bird by about five seconds, you're stuck at work while everyone is looking at that unexpected rarity, and it downpours on your day off. Birding doesn't always go as planned. Try not to take it too seriously and remember to enjoy the journey. It builds character and patience and will ultimately make you a better birder.



Sagittarius (Oct 23 – Nov 21)

Put together a plan detailing what birds you really want to see this fall and another mapping out the best plan of action. You're usually the one who just goes with the flow, hoping to stumble on your next lifer. Recruit others to join you on these adventures, and everyone will reap the rewards of your diligent planning.

Capricorn (Dec 22 – Jan 19)

Try not to overcommit yourself this season. You sometimes sign up for more than you can handle and end up feeling stressed and tired. You started birding because it was something you enjoyed, but sometimes you treat it like a job. Get back to your roots and remember why you started in the first place.

Aquarius (Jan 20 – Feb 18)

Don't beat yourself up if you mistakenly ID a bird in front of others or on your checklist. Everyone's done it before, but it's how you handle it that will show your true character. Mistaken IDs are usually the best learning opportunities and will ultimately make you a better birder.

Pisces (Feb 19 – Mar 20)

You read lots of birding reports and know the likely spots of your target species. Make a plan of action, but don't forget to follow your intuition once you're in the field. Birds don't stay in the sample place, and you shouldn't ignore your sixth sense. You'll be rewarded for not following the crowd.

Photo Gallery: Marisa Hernandez

Previous page: Common Tern at Nickerson Beach.
Top and bottom: Short-billed Dowitchers at Jamaica Bay and Willets at Shirley Chisholm State Park.

Clockwise from top : Forster's Tern at Jamaica Bay;
Glossy Ibis at Shirley Chisholm State Park; Mallard duckling at Prospect Park.

An Island Paradise in the Boreal Forest

By Ryan Mandelbaum

Homebase on Bois Blanc Island. All photos by Ryan Mandelbaum.

For the past three summers, I've vacationed with my spouse's family in a house on Michigan's Bois Blanc Island, located in Lake Huron on the Straits of Mackinac. Boblo, as the locals call it, is more than two-thirds the size of Brooklyn, with a permanent population of a few dozen, swelling to maybe a few hundred during the summer months. It has one store, one bar, and only dirt roads. What it lacks in amenities it makes up for in nature – acres upon acres of state-owned land, including northern hardwood forest, mixed forest, and boreal forest. The locals go hunting, fishing, and boating; I go birding and lay in a hammock.

When you've got nothing but free time and a car on a sparsely-populated island with perfect habitat for eastern North America's breeding birds, you're bound to discover something new. In three weeks of birding Boblo, I've documented more than a hundred avian species on the island, most of which presumably breed there, including 15 warbler species. I've spotted plenty more moths, butterflies, dragonflies, plants, and other living things. Each visit has revealed something new – a new patch of unexplored habitat, evidence of breeding for some other species, a cool new rock, or range-restricted plants.

We started going to Boblo as a compromise with my spouse Brittany's parents. They live near Grand Forks, North Dakota, and we try to see them at least annually. But amid the height of COVID in 2020, we realized there would be few opportunities to see one another without flying, so we compromised. We'd pick a vacation destination halfway between us and Britt's family, and we'd all drive there from our respective homes. They found the house on Boblo and we all agreed it seemed to fit our requirements, with all of the outdoor getaway and indoor comfort we were looking for while providing space for us to enjoy each other's company and remain socially distant.

At first, I was mainly eager for the drive; it would pass by Ohio's famous birding destinations along Lake Erie, and then up through Michigan's stunted jack pine forest before hitting the ferry at Cheboygan, 15 miles southeast of Mackinaw City. I wasn't expecting much from the island itself, though, until we got off the ferry and drove to the small, pale-blue house. The very first bird I saw upon our arrival was an immature Cape May Warbler, which could have bred extremely close by.

The house sat right on a beach of both sand and

Canada Tiger Swallowtail.

rubble; the rocks provided infinite potential for entertainment, with fossils, geodes, agates, and other interesting stones to find. I was excited, too, since Killdeers were nesting there and Common Mergansers were passing by in huge flocks. The other side of the house was surrounded by cedars, spruces, firs, pines, and birches, and inhabited by a conspicuous pair of Brown Thrashers, Nashville Warblers singing everywhere, and Yellow-rumped Warblers still showing signs of breeding. I began exploring both the forest immediately around the house and driving further afield to check out what the rest of the island held. On successive visits, I've expanded my exploration to include the insects, mammals, and interesting plants that grow in this unique habitat.

I've now put together a routine as I've gotten to know the island. On most days, I start by driving to one of the large lakes at the island's center. Each one hosts pairs of breeding Common Loons, but I much prefer the western lake complex, Twin Lakes, whose shore features an extensive marsh surrounded by conifer forest. Here, I've spotted Caspian Terns, nesting Alder Flycatchers and Winter Wrens, and many different

Top and bottom: Black-and-white Warbler and Pink-shaded Fern Moth.

dragonflies; last year, the lake hosted at least six Wilson's Snipes piping from perches and performing display flights. On a night drive, I encountered a family of American Woodcocks rocking across the road nearby. I figure that there must be some Virginia Rails or Soras nesting in the marsh, but I haven't detected any yet.

From there, I like to check the island's functioning airport, with a respectable patch of grassland. It's always a bit disappointing, since I've yet to spot any grassland birds there. However, I've found singing Indigo Buntings and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Red-shouldered Hawks, and Sandhill Cranes occasionally stopping by. Plus, there are usually lots of butterflies to photograph. I hope that enough visits will eventually reveal something new.

I'm usually more successful on my long drives down Firetower Road, which cuts through the center of the island with its extensive mixed forest, containing treefalls, thickets, and wetlands that are all worth checking. It's mostly public land, but I rarely stray far from the car, instead pulling over wherever a patch of habitat feels right. Through the endless songs of Red-eyed Vireos, Ovenbirds, and Black-throated Green Warblers, I'll occasionally pick out Black-throated Blue Warblers, Black-billed Cuckoos, Purple Finches, or Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers, all of which probably breed there. Meanwhile, Northern Waterthrushes and

Top and bottom: Wilson's Snipe and Red Squirrel.

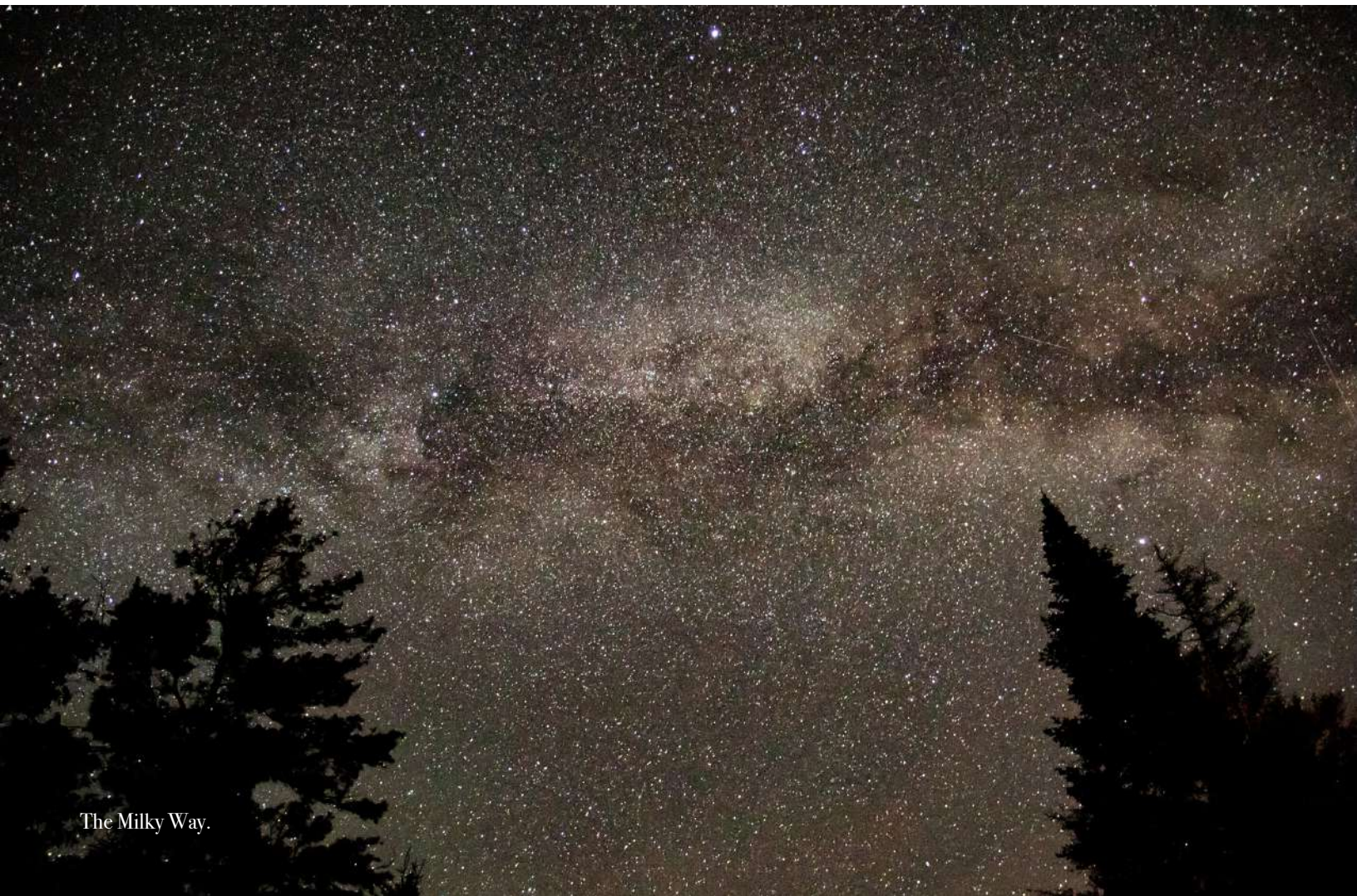
Common Yellowthroats sing where the road passes a flooded patch of forest.

My favorite part of the island, though, is the boreal habitat on its east and north coasts. Here, I spend much of my time exploring one of the few hiking trails I've found on public land, the Vosper Nature Preserve. It features a chorus of Hermit Thrushes, and I've documented probable or confirmed breeding behavior for 10 warbler species along the one half-mile trail alone: Ovenbird, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Pine, Magnolia, Black-and-White, Yellow-rumped, Nashville, Northern Parula, and American Redstart. I've also encountered other northern forest birds like Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruffed Grouse, and Red-Breasted Nuthatch. Down the road from Vosper is the Snake Island-Mud Lake State Natural Area, which holds its own bounty; Common Terns and Ring-billed Gulls are a constant sight as they breed on a colony nearby, migrant sandpipers stop by during the right time of year, and there are large patches of wildflowers including pitcher plants and the federally threatened dwarf lake iris.

It was just north of the Vosper Nature Preserve where I spotted my 100th island species this past summer: a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. As my list grows longer, I'm starting to set my sights on what less common birds I might turn up. There's no reason I can't find a Red-headed Woodpecker, Golden-winged Warbler, or Spruce Grouse, all of which breed nearby.

But eventually, it gets hot and the mosquitoes wear on my patience, and I recede to my favorite spot on the island: a hammock strung up in the shade of the cedars outside the house, often with a cup of Moose Tracks ice cream purchased at the island's diner. It was here last year that I scored my most prized Boblo tick: as I was recording a Great-crested Flycatcher, a Red Crossbill, my favorite bird, flew over.

Since then, I count down the days to our next trip to the island. It's not like I expect to turn up life birds, but with every visit I learn about some plant or bug I've never encountered, I study the breeding behavior of birds I usually only see on migration, and I can take genuine pleasure just exploring and relaxing without any pressure to chase other people's findings. Most importantly, I seek to break my own record for how many consecutive hours I can lie in a hammock.



The Milky Way.

Photo Gallery: Michelle Talich

Piping Plover at Fort Tilden.

Top and bottom: Semipalmated Plover and Sanderlings; Piping Plover chasing an American Oystercatcher at Fort Tilden.

Top and bottom: Common Tern at Fort Tilden; Yellow-crowned Night Heron (Black-crowned in background) at Plumb Beach.

On the Road for Rarities

By Matt Beck

In February of this year, there were about 30 of us waiting by a utility pole in Texas. We were not electrical workers. This was at the entrance to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in the Rio Grande Valley. Some had flown in from as far away as California and Michigan. I had tacked on a few extra days after a work trip to Austin. Like everyone else, I had been brought here by rare-bird alerts. I saw it on eBird; others got the news from a WhatsApp group specifically devoted to this bird; a couple from Connecticut used all of these and hired a guide who had recently set the state's Big Year record. This was a code-five alert: a Bat Falcon, widespread in the Neotropics, but never reported before in the United States, had been seen at dusk almost every night resting on the same pole.

As we waited, conversation passed easily within the group, stories shared of other rare birds in the area. This only ceased when somebody called out, "Falcon flying left by the water tower," and we all raised our binoculars. There are a lot of kestrels in Texas this time of year.

I returned to speaking with the Connecticut couple about birding in the tri-state area. Over the next couple days, we would run into each other often. Once, looking for a Golden-crowned Warbler, then again for a Social Flycatcher. These we saw. But as the sun went down and a coyote howled in the distance, the Bat Falcon was a no-show. We in turn drifted away to our hotels and Airbnb rentals.

These days, there seems to be an almost magnetic pull of the various rare-bird alerts, apps, and, when lucky enough to be included, WhatsApp groups for specific areas (or even specific birds). Inevitably, when you show up to a spot of a rare sighting other birders are already camped there. Sometimes they'll point out the bird right as you arrive. When this happens in Brooklyn or another borough, I might get a lifer, and a chance to visit and reconnect with birders I know. Mostly I enjoy this; but some days, I feel like there is something to be said for the solitude of finding birds on your own, even in an urban park. What if it turns out you're the one to find that rarity?

Part of the attraction to birding for me is the anticipation and randomness of what I might see. Social media can be a great tool, and I'm not one to turn my nose up at a lifer. And going out with no agenda or chasing a reported bird can still produce randomness: Sometimes it's a bird I wasn't expecting to see or couldn't identify confidently or a run-in with a familiar face. Technology, it turns out, can change only so much. But sometimes it gets you into the field.

In late February, not long after I returned from Texas, the Steller's Sea Eagle was in the news, and soon a friend and I were driving to Maine. We rented an Airbnb that was close to the bridge where there

Steller's Sea Eagle in Boothbay, Maine. Photos by Daniel K. Smith.

had been consistent sightings. We plugged into a WhatsApp group that gave us hope on the back of a number of recent sightings. The bird, of course, was a long way from its normal home of Russia or Japan, and had made itself famous after making stops in Canada, Texas, and Massachusetts, finally ending up in Maine.

Our first morning on the bridge there were six people. Despite being bundled up in hats and scarves, I recognized a few faces. The couple from Connecticut were there; we were on the same rare-bird circuit now. Talk about random and unanticipated. We updated each other on the rest of our Texas travels and we shared breakfast recommendations for when the cold proved too much on the bridge. It was, though, a lovely vantage point. The sky was a clear blue and the ocean smelled great. Our small, hearty group kept busy by imagining why the eagle had made its way here to begin with. Was it lonely for a mate? Might it breed with a Bald Eagle? Both are in the fish-eagles genus. After two days, the Sea Eagle never appeared, and it was time to go home.

Was I disappointed? Of course, but I reflected on the fact that these rare-bird alerts had led me into some great adventures to interesting places, where conversations sparked over a love of birds and still-good sightings. I'm not sure I'll be going to Russia anytime soon to chase a Steller's, however. Now that fall migration is in full swing, a normal routine has resumed: I'm making my usual walks in Prospect Park, and for a city adventure, I might head to Jamaica Bay to see the shorebirds that are still around there. Alerts have yielded a few lifers recently. And I'm making use of Cornell's BirdCast, its migration forecast, and its Merlin song identifier. In the end, I'm looking forward to my next walk. Who knows what will happen?

Photo Gallery: Terry Von Ploennies

Black Tern at Prospect Park.

Dueling Lesser Yellowlegs at Jamaica Bay.