

Fall 2026

Brooklyn Bird Club's

CLAPPER RAIL



Inside This Issue



3

In Defense of
the Traditional
Pronunciation
of “Parula...”

By Melissa Marturano

6

Photo Gallery:
Eliot Jenkins



9

“A Lady Bird Once
Told Me”

By James Wu

10

From Wasteland to
Grassland: Hope in
Unexpected Places

By Arabella Pajoohi



15

Gallery: Flycatchers
by Marleny Rafferty

18

Photo Gallery:
Hyun Young Kim

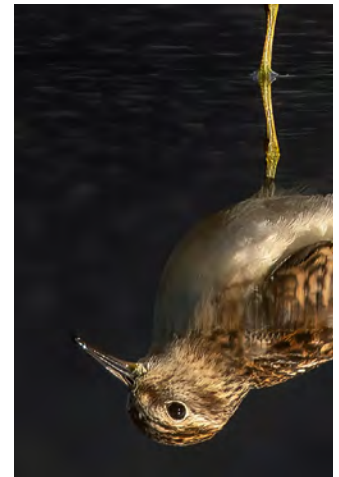
21

The Return of Flaco:
A Review of
“Wild Inside”

By Ryan Goldberg

24

Photo Gallery:
Sean Krepski



27

Photo Gallery:
Sandpipers in
Prospect Park
by Seth Barr

31

Bluebird by
Toni Simon

32

Photo Gallery:
Marc Brawer

The Brooklyn Bird Club

President: Dennis Hrehowsik

www.brooklynbirdclub.org

The Clapper Rail

Editors: Ryan Goldberg, Jamie Magyar

Art & Design: Tina Allewa, Angie Co, Amy Wang

Cover: Least Sandpipers and Semipalmated Sandpiper on the Lefrak Center's
Splash Pad in Prospect Park. Photo by Seth Barr.

In Defense of the Traditional Pronunciation of “Parula...”

By Melissa Marturano

When I entered my first more serious warbler season of birding in the fall of 2023, my friend, my partner, and I came upon a small blue bird ablaze in its chest. With some referencing of our avian guides, we were able to determine it was a Northern Parula, an early lifer for all three of us. I remember we pronounced it *pa-RU-la /pʌˈruːlə/, with the stress on the second syllable. It seemed like a

natural enough pronunciation for the word we read. I did not connect the word to Latin until later, although I am a professor of the immortal language of the Romans, since it is quite rare to refer to birds by an actual Latin word.

Weeks later, after referencing the English and Latin dictionaries looking up the new birds I had seen, I learned the dominant pronunciation was PA-ru-la /ˈpæ.ɹə.lə/ (as pronounced in New York and New Jersey, my native dialect) and changed course, not wanting to embarrass myself beside more experienced birders. To provide some prefatory context for the readers not as linguistically invested as I, word stress in English is marked by increased volume and change in pitch. Stress in English and other Germanic languages is inherent to the word. In Latin, however, word stress instead follows predictable rules based on syllable count and weight, heavy and light.

The word for our bird friend in Latin is *pārula* /ˈpaː.ru.la/ (the diacritical mark called a macron above the *a* indicates the vowel is “long” and thus held more extensively than “short” vowels; this is vocalic length)



Northern Parula, pen on paper illustration by Noah Frederick.

and is a diminutive of the word *pārus* /'pa:.rus/, which is akin to how English diminutives “kid” into “kid-die.” *Pārus* itself as a word is directly appropriated from the ancient Greek *πάρος*, a typical linguistic process in highly related cultures with highly related Indo-European languages. Which bird it is? It is a tit, endemic to Europe. If you have ever seen a Great Tit or a Eurasian Blue Tit, Carl Linnaeus’s 18th century analogy of the Northern Parula to such species rings true on the superficial level, if not on the genetic one.

The bird was originally called a *pārus* /'pa:.ru.lus/, a masculine diminutive, but over time the feminine diminutive, ending in an *-a*, supplanted the masculine in English. Although there are no attested uses of the word *pārus* or *pārula* from ancient, medieval, or Renaissance Latin texts, it is a word directly from Latin and understandable within it, and is not from the realm of neo-Latin used by ornithologists and other scientists for nomenclature. According to the norms of Latin pronunciation, *pārula*’s stress accent can only be on either the first syllable or the second and it would only shift to the second, if that syllable were heavy (containing a long vowel or two subsequent consonants, called a consonant cluster), which it is not. Other feminine diminutives directly from Latin used in English include *fībula* and *nēbula*, both of which have maintained the first-syllable stress and act as clear pronunciation analogues for words like *parula*.

But when I joined Dennis’s migration bird walks soon after I first saw the bird, many people around me pronounced it like *pa-RU-la, with the stress on the second syllable, making the same mistake I made at first (also violating Latin stress). Was a nascent pronunciation of the word developing before my ears? Was the standard well known in the first place?

The more I maintained the original pronunciation, the more pedantic I felt. Although I am Latinist—and this might be difficult to accept based on the

language’s reputation within the academy and wider culture—I am not a great pedant or prescriptivist about language for others, even if because of my particular personality, you will need to tear the objective case “whom” and comparative suffixes even on words like “handsomer” from my cold, sanguineous hands.

Prescriptivism punishes speakers of a language usually along age, racial, gender, ability, and class differences and attempts to forestall inevitable linguistic innovations that merely because of their novelty should not be scorned or stigmatized by older, so-called elite speakers of a language. Language is communication among humans and it should not be treated as a vehicle of policing and hegemony. Linguistic changes made by inventive native speakers of Latin bestowed us with Italian and dozens of other Romance languages still in use today. Diminutive nouns, like *pārula*, were different in Latin than they now are in some Romance languages, but these types of nouns still fortunately exist in new forms and colors and personalize those languages every day.

At first, I considered it might be best to accept the vicissitudes of a changing English and drift with the rest of the flock and pronounce the word *pa-RU-la. But inspired by the shepherds in Roman poetry, I believe my role in this birding community could be to pastorally care for us as a Latinist and lead us to greenest and healthiest grass, far from the wolves. As the ancient saying goes, prescriptivism is always linguistically and ethically wrong (*semper iniūstum et inēthicum aliēnōrum sermōnem prae-scribere*) except in this specific case, when it is right, imposed by me alone.

Two of my many duties as a professor of Latin language and literature by day are to teach my students to pronounce the language correctly *and* also to elucidate the manifold historical and concerted connections between Latin and English (connections

Other feminine diminutives directly from Latin used in English include fībula and nēbula, both of which have maintained the first syllable stress and act as clear pronunciation analogues for words like parula.

forcibly initiated by the French invasion of England in 1066 C.E. and continued deliberately during the coining mania and widespread vocabulary enrichment of the English Renaissance by writers like Shakespeare).



Illustration by Angie Co.

Many people know how influential Latin was on the English lexicon, with the language adopting thousands of words directly without any mutation or derivation. But in those adoptions by English speakers, the stress accent has historically very rarely shifted from the Latin when Latin words are used directly in English. For one example of many: *suī generis* /,su: i 'gen.ə.nɪs/. (A scan of the large language model that is my own brain on Latin confirms my claim.) Therefore, the stress of the Latin word *pārula* has direct implications for the stress of English pronunciation.

Here, I am not averring we pronounce Latin completely authentically in English. I often wince at standard pronunciations of Latin in English, one of the worst being *prīmā faciē* to my ear: English /'pɪi:mə 'feɪ.fə/ versus Latin /'pri:ma: 'fa.ki.e:/. I pray for forgiveness to the immortal gods above and below when I do not roll my Rs pronouncing the phrase. But notice the *stress* of the words *prīmā* (PRI-ma) and *faciē* (FA-cie) in English do not differ from the Latin. One exception to this trend is *incognito* whose emphasis should be in-COG-ni-to /ɪŋ'koŋ.ni.to:/ in Latin and not *in-cog-NI-to /,ɪn.kɒg'ni:.toʊ/ as it has become in English. Even when other birds are referred to in English with direct Latin and Greek words (such as

various phoebes of the world, the various ibises, and the Vesper Sparrow), the stress accent is convergent with that of Latin and/or Greek. But the Calliope Hummingbird, whose namesake is the goddess of epic poetry, has two standard pronunciations in English, and they are both divergent from the Greek (and thus, Latin) stress. In English, we say either /kə'laɪ.ə.pi/ or /'kæ.li.ʊp/, stress accent on the second or first syllable, but in ancient Greek (and Latin) it should be Cal-li-O-pe /kal.li'o:.pe:/.

This respect of Latin stress in English should make sense. The people who were explicitly assuming these words into English in the 15th and 16th centuries to fabricate the more elevated registers of the language may have even spoken Latin in their day-to-day lives, as it still was the *lingua franca* of the educated and powerful in Western Europe at the time. Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, a Dutchman and one of the great classical scholars of the Northern Renaissance, was invited to England in the early 16th century partially to ensure the education of the elite countrymen in both Greek and Latin and their refined proliferation.

So what is my proposal? I believe there is still time to rout this lamentable drift of the stress accent of *parula*. But, as a teacher of language, I must strongly advise that direct correction seldom works well. It activates people's affective filters and defensiveness about not being correct. It is best to lead by example. When one of you hears *pa-RU-la from another birder, repeat back PA-ru-la to your interlocutor. "Why, yes, I love the sound of the PA-ru-la on this fine May morning. I wonder if there are more." When the Northern Parulas return in the fall flying south to food and warmth, be the change you want to see in the world and remember what your erudite community Latinist wrote about how Latin manifests itself and is honored in English. 🐦

WANTED:

TRIP REGISTRARS

Individuals needed to help manage participant lists, carpooling, and email communications for club trips. For information, email info@brooklynbirdclub.org.

Photo Gallery: Eliot Jenkins



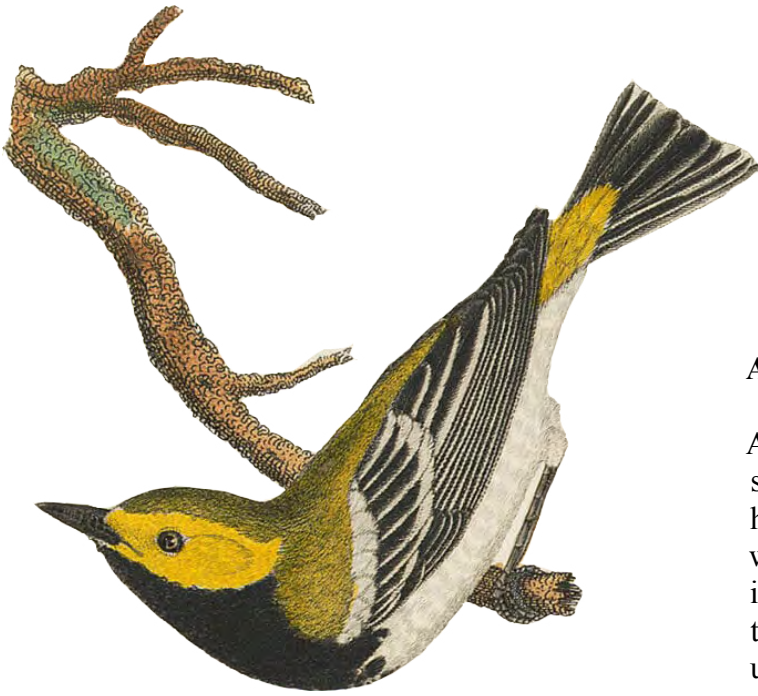
House Finch in Prospect Park.



Wood Duck (top) and Blue Jay (bottom) in Prospect Park.



Black-throated Green Warbler in Green-Wood Cemetery.



A Lady Bird Once Told Me

At the buzz of the first warbler
sighting of the season, our shoes
hastily laced, binoculars in hand,
we settle into our usual spots
in the park, sleepy faces
tilted perpetually
up. A parade of colors—shades
of bottled sunlight, polished seastone,
persimmons overripe—
flash in and out
between the leaves. The warblers
arrive with blazing faces and fanned tails,
singing their names for all to hear. Love
is attention, I'm told. Then we love more
than most, leaving our friends behind
at bars and cafes, mid-convo,
mid-dream,
to catch a beady eye glancing
down at us from the leaves, we
a momentary curiosity.
The warblers return
to the beetles and flies.
They'll leave us behind too
under the moonlight,
following
as they have always done,
as we wish to do,
the rhythm of the seasons.

—*James Wu*

Black-throated Green Warbler by Alexander Wilson, sampled from
Plate 17 of *American Ornithology* v. 2, 1810.

From Wasteland to Grassland: Hope in Unexpected Places

By Arabella Pajoochi



Buttercup Farm Audubon Sanctuary, Dutchess County. All photos by Arabella Pajoochi.

The chirps of crickets and the occasional metallic songs of Red-winged Blackbirds were the only sounds that punctuated the otherwise quiet July morning. A veil of haze hung over the rolling grassland surrounding me, promising another day of oppressive heat in the heart of the Hudson Valley where I live. Waist-high grasses, interspersed with an array of both native and invasive plant species, held within them an assortment of grasshoppers, beetles, and caterpillars, with sparrows and Indigo Buntings dining on this insect buffet. But the absence of certain voices—those of grassland birds—was impossible to ignore. There were no flute-like melodies of Eastern Meadowlarks, or scattershot R2-D2 notes of Bobolinks, or shrill cries from American Kestrels hovering in search of prey.

While monitoring grassland birds over the last few years, I've discovered that the absence of these

birds is not unusual; in many places, this silence has become an increasingly familiar feature of the landscape. And not only in the Hudson Valley, or in New York, but across the continent. Since 1970, North America has lost an estimated three billion birds, a staggering statistic that's often shared throughout the birding community, and no group has suffered more than grassland birds, whose populations have declined in that time by over 720 million individuals, or roughly 53 percent. Some species have suffered even steeper declines, like the Thick-billed Longspur (82 percent decline), Eastern Meadowlark (76 percent), and Grasshopper Sparrow (over 70 percent).

These shocking declines are unsurprising when one considers that the habitats upon which grassland birds depend are seeing a similar fate. Across North America, more than 62 percent of the grassland biome has disappeared; the areas that remain, often

fragmented and altered by invasive species, face a myriad of additional pressures, often resulting from human activities.

But to understand why our grasslands have, in many respects, fallen silent, I think it is important to understand what these ecosystems are, and what their avian inhabitants need to survive.

Far from being barren stretches of land, grasslands are among the most diverse ecosystems on Earth. The term “grassland,” referring to the largest biome on earth that covers roughly 43 percent of the land surface, encompasses an incredibly broad range of habitats, vegetation, and ecosystems. At its core, however, the term remains consistent and generally refers to non-wetlands that are covered by at least 10 percent vegetation, most of which consists of flowering plants with broad leaves and soft stems (forbs) or plants that have narrow leaves or stalks and grass-like aspects (graminoids).

Despite their ecological importance, grasslands are often overlooked. When individuals are asked which ecosystem is most effective at capturing carbon, the typical response is a forest. In fact, grasslands store a third of the Earth’s carbon and, most importantly, do so hidden underground in their extensive root systems. Unlike the aboveground carbon stored in forests, this underground network allows grasslands to retain carbon even during droughts and wildfires. As climate change intensifies, that resilience makes the preservation of grasslands increasingly important.

Just as grasslands themselves are often overlooked and underappreciated, so too are the avian species that depend on them for their survival. Grassland birds require vast expanses of open habitat, often 10 to 30 acres or more—to breed successfully, raise their young, and survive. Most are ground-nesters, relying on dense continuous vegetation—forbs and graminoids—intact and free of disturbance to conceal their nests and protect their young from predators. As grasslands continue to be fragmented, degraded, or converted, these birds are losing the ecological conditions on which their survival depends.

Threats Abound

Every year, more than a million acres of grassland in the United States alone are transformed into farmland, whether for crops to feed us or to feed the animals bred for consumption.

For grassland birds, the problem extends beyond the outright disappearance of grasslands. Appearances of suitable habitat can sometimes be deceiving, and an open expanse that appears to promise safety may instead result in a different fate. In the Hudson Valley, for example, ground nesters may select a farm field that seems suitable as breeding habitat, only to have that field mowed or plowed at the height of their breeding season. The result is devastating: nests and eggs are destroyed and any nestlings hidden among the grasses are usually killed before they have a chance to fledge. A study from 2023 found that early spring mowing had the potential to impact 24 to 61 percent of grassland species’ nests, underscoring how modern agricultural practices can seemingly transform suitable breeding habitats into ecological traps for the birds.

I watched such a tragedy unfold not far from my home. One late June, after an expansive field was sold and agricultural practices changed there, Eastern



Eastern Meadowlark at a property near the author’s home,
Dutchess County.



Bobolink in Drayton Grant Park at Burger Hill, Dutchess County.

Meadowlarks, possibly breeding, were flushed from that field by an approaching tractor. If their eggs or nestlings didn't succumb to the tractor's blades, the crows who trailed behind likely finished what the tractor had started. Within days of this field's haying, the meadowlarks departed, taking their melodic songs with them. Today this field is hayed regularly, and in the absence of suitable habitat, the meadowlarks have vanished from it.

But even grasslands that remain undeveloped can lose their ability to support grassland birds. Throughout North America, invasive plant species are spreading, choking and outcompeting native vegetation and transforming open grasslands into dense habitat unsuitable for breeding.

The conservationists who manage the land in the areas I monitor are locked in a perennial battle against invasive plants such as Autumn Olive, Multiflora Rosa, Purple Loosestrife, and Mugwort. Their spread does more than simply replace native plants; they're responsible for decreasing the insect populations that

grassland birds rely on to feed their young, while fragmenting the uninterrupted habitat they need to successfully breed. Proper habitat management remains crucial for preventing grasslands from disappearing beneath shrubby species. In the Northeast, delayed mowing has been the preferred approach to accommodate the nesting cycles of grassland birds; however, conservation scientists have found that invasive species also benefit from this practice. As a result, scientists are refining their approach to grassland management. At the grassland I monitor, for instance, the mowing schedule is determined by the absence or presence of grassland birds in the (late) summer. For the most part, grasslands can no longer be allowed to grow without human intervention. That time has passed, and grasslands instead require active management to preserve their ecosystems and their avian residents.

The Decisions We Make

The challenges facing grassland birds extend beyond the outright loss of grasslands. Even when open habitats remain, the decisions we make about how these landscapes are used can determine whether they continue to support the species that depend upon them. On a large scale, the growing demand for renewable energy presents an important conservation challenge, and one that is increasingly contentious.

Solar energy is essential in addressing climate change, but where utility-scale projects are built matters. Utility-scale solar, for instance, requires up to 10 acres per megawatt of capacity. When intact grasslands are converted for infrastructure, the already limited habitat available to grassland birds is further reduced. Moreover, physically imposing objects, such as solar panels, create an illusion for grassland birds. These large structures not only physically fragment and destroy the land, but they also, based on our understanding of how birds perceive their surroundings, create the illusion that the grassland is significantly smaller than it is, according to Jason Hill, an ecologist with the Vermont Center for Ecostudies. This altered perception renders the habitat even more unusable for grassland birds who are so dependent on these increasingly scarce habitats.

The consequences of our choices are not merely limited to large-scale development. Even seemingly small actions can affect vulnerable species. One recent summer morning, while participating in a butterfly

count at a sanctuary that had recently changed its habitat management practices through the efforts of a local Audubon chapter, we observed a dog owner enter the preserve with his dog off leash. Only an hour earlier, we'd come across a male Bobolink in the same field. If the Bobolink had been tending to a nest, this off-leash dog could have disrupted his breeding attempt or harmed eggs, nestlings, or fledglings.

Protecting grasslands requires us to recognize that seemingly ordinary decisions—where we build, when we mow, whether we leash a dog—determine whether these landscapes remain living ecosystems capable of supporting grassland birds and the myriad of other organisms who depend on them.

Hope in Unexpected Places

Although protecting the remaining fragments of intact habitat is essential, the future of grassland conservation, and the avian species who inhabit them, may also require creating new habitat in unexpected places. One such opportunity lies in the conversion of capped landfills into grasslands.

A striking example of this is at Freshkills Park in Staten Island, where the conversion of a capped landfill has created new habitat for grassland birds where previously there was none. Once a landscape of diverse wetlands, the site was later transformed into the world's largest landfill, becoming an accidental magnet for gulls and other opportunistic species. The first two of its four trash mounds were capped in 1997, and later, in 2006, restoration efforts began to establish a range of habitats, including grasslands, wetlands, and tidal flats across the site. Today, at roughly a thousand acres, Freshkills Park contains the largest grassland habitat in New York State, supporting, among others, a breeding colony of over a hundred pairs of Grasshopper Sparrows and, occasionally, small numbers of state-threatened Sedge Wrens.

Like Freshkills, Croton Park in Westchester County demonstrates how heavily altered landscapes

can be transformed into valuable habitat. In 1927, a landfill was established atop one of the 508-acre park's hills; by the time it closed almost 60 years later it contained more than 10.4 million cubic yards of garbage. Beginning in 1992, the landfill underwent an extensive capping process designed to prevent the runoff of contaminants into the surrounding landscape. This project was not simply an effort to avoid further

pollution and contain waste; it also created an opportunity to restore native ecosystems and create habitat to attract a diversity of species. On the former landfill's hills, native plants, including various species of milkweed and wildflowers, were planted to support Monarch Butterflies, while additional seed mixes were sowed to provide sustenance for insects, small mammals, and the many bird species that now visit it—275 and counting on eBird.

This approximately 86-acre grassland has become a productive habitat for grassland birds, offering nesting grounds during the breeding

season and an important stopover during migration. On winter visits to Croton Point, I've watched Horned Larks and Eastern Meadowlarks forage across the snow-covered fields—a scene that would have been unimaginable when the site was a landfill. The presence of these birds is as a reminder that landscapes once defined by human waste can be transformed into places that sustain a diversity of life. Across the country, from Puente Hills Landfill in Los Angeles, California, to the Athens-Clarke County Landfill in Georgia, states are adopting or have adopted similar grassland restoration projects.

In the US alone, there are more than 3,000 active landfills and more than 10,000 capped landfills that cover millions of acres, some of which could offer promising opportunities for transformation into biodiverse grasslands. Capped landfills present unique conservation opportunities: they are unlikely to be redeveloped and yet the way in which they are managed—woody vegetation is not allowed to

The presence of these birds is as a reminder that landscapes once defined by human waste can be transformed into places that sustain a diversity of life.

compromise the sealed trash underneath—can create the very habitat grassland birds require. The size of many landfills further increases their potential value. Grasshopper Sparrows, for instance, require roughly a hundred acres for successful nesting and breeding. Given that the average size of a landfill here is roughly 600 acres, even a portion of a capped site could provide meaningful habitat for a variety of species.

As grasslands continue to disappear and the species that rely on them decline, we must become creative in our solutions. Protecting existing grasslands, restoring depleted habitats, and improving current agricultural practices must remain at the center of conservation efforts, but Freshkills Park and Croton Point show us restoration can occur in even the most

unlikely places. Capped landfills will never supersede the importance of protecting existing grasslands; they, do however, represent another chance to provide habitat for species that have lost so much of theirs.

I was reminded of this during a visit to Drayton Grant Park, where over 67 of the 76 acres are maintained as a grassland and mowed late in the season to give nestlings a chance to fledge and survive. On that sunny August day, songs of Bobolinks filled the grasses that swayed gently in the early morning breeze. There is still hope, I thought. Perhaps grasslands throughout North America, those that have always existed and those newly created through restoration, will once again fill with the songs that make them such sublime places. 🐦



Buttercup Farm Audubon Sanctuary, Dutchess County.



Gallery: Flycatchers by Marleny Rafferty

Olive-sided Flycatcher.
All artwork: colored pencil on paper.



Clockwise from top: *Least Flycatcher*, *Willow Flycatcher*, *Great Crested Flycatcher*.



Alder Flycatcher (left), Acadian Flycatcher (above).



Photo Gallery: Hyun Young Kim

Wood Duck family in Prospect Park.

Mallard at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.





Brown Thrasher in Green-Wood Cemetery (top) and Black-throated Blue Warbler in Prospect Park (bottom).

The Return of Flaco: A Review of “Wild Inside”

By Ryan Goldberg

One night in August, I went to see “Wild Inside,” director Penny Lane’s new documentary about Flaco, the Eurasian Eagle-owl that in 2023 escaped the Central Park Zoo and became a celebrity over his year of freedom. On my way to IFC Center, where it was playing, a violent rain seemed to find all the old streambeds in Greenwich Village. Sixth Avenue flowed like a river. Even in this city, I thought, nature finds a way. It can be paved over, it can be crowded in by skyscrapers, it can even be caged—but given a chance, it will break free.

That’s the Flaco story, and it has been told and re-told many times before or since his death in 2024. (I hope that’s not a spoiler.) He’s the only bird I know of whose death was front-page news. I wrote about Flaco before, but I was not a regular visitor of his. I think you had to live in Manhattan to be. Reaching him in Central Park, where he spent most of his time, was at least an hour-long subway trip. I know many birders who not only never went to see him but snickered at the idea. I think that sentiment came largely from the fact that as a birder you couldn’t count Flaco on your list, since he was a captive bird, released.

But I followed online, glued to reports on his daily happenings as given by a small group of wildlife and birding photographers who followed his every move—even when that took him out of Central Park and to the Lower East Side, where Flaco surprisingly showed up around Halloween of 2023. It is his paparazzi that push the film along; it is as much their story as it is Flaco’s. He only ever knew human company—first in the zoo, then in the park, and even on the uptown fire escapes and courtyards he frequented in his final months. I was happy to relive all this.

The film runs chronologically, beginning the night of February 2, 2023, when Flaco’s zoo enclosure, not much larger than a bus stop, was vandalized. He flew out, but he didn’t travel far. He was first spotted about six blocks away on the sidewalk of Bergdorf Goodman. Lane, the director, starts the film here. The first interview is of one of the first New Yorkers to spot him. He recalls pointing out the owl to people as they passed, but most nodded and kept walking, as if to say, what’s another owl on the sidewalk? But when the cops showed up and taped off the scene, a crowd formed. Nobody knew what to do. The cops placed a small pet carrier on the sidewalk near Flaco and waited for him to walk inside. He did not.



“Wild Inside” (2026), directed by Penny Lane. Official film poster.



Film still from "Wild Inside."

Flaco flew into Central Park the morning after his escape, but as the film shows, to call it flying was not very accurate. After a lifetime of captivity—he had hatched in a North Carolina bird park in 2010 before being sent to the zoo—he didn't have much strength to do that. He crashed into branches while making short flights from one tree to the next, tiring himself out. He was lashed by icy winds in exposed perches that no native owl would ever choose. Zoo employees, none of whom ever spoke to the press, tried to recapture him for a week, mainly by using traps baited with a white lab rat. He had never caught prey on his own, and he was starving.

But as the attention around Flaco swelled, his most diehard followers did not want to see this story end. Using the #FreeFlaco hashtag, the Manhattan Bird Alert live-tweeted the zoo's recovery efforts, and dozens of people rushed to the scene and milled around those traps like bodyguards. On day eight, the wildlife photographer David Lei, one of the film's main human subjects, photographed Flaco with a rat in his beak. He had learned to hunt, and within a few days the zoo quit trying to capture him. The rest is history.

At the time, I remember scientists making the case for Flaco's capture. It was an unpopular opinion,

though, and only a few people in the film give voice to it. One works at an out-of-state bird sanctuary where Flaco's "uncle," called Emerson, lives. The way the film portrays this wildlife professional is as a villain of the story. He is challenged with questions from behind the camera in between footage of Flaco learning how to be an owl and doing big and funny and interesting things. Flaco was not bred for this kind of life, the argument goes. Also, Eurasian Eagle-owls are apex predators, and Flaco, if he survives, might drive off native birds like red-tailed hawks or peregrine falcons that nest in or around Central Park.

I certainly felt ambivalent. But who would be cruel enough to want to see him returned to his tiny home with a few tree branches and fake rocks? David Lei says he wanted to see Flaco captured but he changed his mind once Flaco caught his first rat. Bruce Yolton, the writer of the blog *Urban Hawks*, followed Flaco religiously, but he expresses dismay that the zoo didn't try harder or longer to recapture him. Fearful of bad press, they let this captive animal figure it out on his own, he says. Yolton notes this early in the film and predicts his untimely death.

But it was impossible not to get swept up by Flaco's adaptation to the wild. And Central Park is indeed that. The footage in the film is outstanding, and

the best and most beautiful parts place Flaco in the urban ecological context he was thrust into. Yes, Flaco was non-native, but so are the European Starlings and House Sparrows we see, as well as the Norway rats he dined on. Nighttime footage of Flaco bathing in puddles on the North Meadow ballfields or hopping on construction equipment at the Harlem Meer or picking rats out of a large compost pile—parts of the park I have only encountered during daytime hours—also shows coyotes and foxes and raccoons. Other footage shows all the birds that make their home in the park. All this reminded me of “All That Breathes,” another documentary produced, like “Wild Inside,” by HBO, about raptor rehabbers in Delhi. That film often cuts between scenes with low-angle shots of all the critters that emerge from the cracks of a very polluted city.

It was easy to anthropomorphize Flaco. He wanted to be free; he was interviewing to become the city’s new rat czar; he went looking for love on the Lower East Side and found dating in New York as hard as it is for the rest of us; he enjoyed staring into apartment windows because we’re all a little voyeuristic here. While watching him in Central Park, Jennifer

Ackerman, the bestselling author of “What An Owl Knows”—she’s identified only by her first name in the film, as all the interviewees are—says she wishes she could go inside his head and learn what he’s thinking. Of course, we’ll never know. Was he afraid? Was he confused? Was he happy? Another science writer argues that since he didn’t attempt to return to the zoo, he didn’t want to live there. He’d rather be free.

His followers were legion—from the birders who searched for him every day and night with ba-zooka-like lenses and thermal cameras, to those who painted murals of him and got tattoos of him and wore shirts with him on it. They saw in Flaco what they wanted to see. A New Yorker. An immigrant making it here. A symbol of uncaged wildness. And for them, it was a fun ride.

But was it for Flaco?

On the one-year anniversary of his freedom, David Lei gives out hats bearing Flaco’s visage to

his fellow Flaco-razzi. “Happy Flacoversary,” he says. It’s a joyous day, as Lei, his partner Jacqueline Emery, and a few other regulars hurry after Flaco on the Upper West Side as he flies between apartment buildings and townhouses. By then he’d left Central Park and could be found hooting for hours on a water tower or some other promontory, waiting for a mate that would never answer. “No wild Eurasian Eagle-owl hoots that much,” Bruce Yolton said at the time. Flaco hadn’t lost his appetite for rats, but he was also seen eating pigeons.

Inside, though, he was dying. Just three weeks later, on a cold winter night, he was found face down on West 89th Street in a concrete courtyard surrounded by concrete buildings. He had collided with a

building and was dead by the time rehabbers from the Wild Bird Fund reached him. His manner of death suggested a weakened state—toxicology reports showed four kinds of rat poison in his system as well as pigeon herpesvirus. As the film rightly points out, this awful end already claims the lives of many urban raptors here every year. Yes, given a chance, nature will find a way. But we do so many things to stop it.

After Flaco’s death, Yolton, who followed Flaco that whole year, admits to feeling guilty about his role in all this. It’s one of the most poignant moments. Though he always expected the bird was going to die in a bad way, he couldn’t pull himself away. “I was having so much fun with him,” he says.

And isn’t that the story, too? “Wild Inside” reminded me that Flaco gave us much more than we gave him. He brought people together across the fabric of this city, from classrooms to barber shops, uptown to downtown, first dates to long marriages. A vigil at his favorite oak in Central Park drew hundreds of people the day after he died, many of whom left cards, drawings, and photos. I teared up reading their words, seeing their heartbreak. They missed Flaco, but they knew they were also going to miss the gatherings. This was better than anything you could find on a screen. It didn’t cost a dime. It was a remarkable story, and it was fun. 🐦

*They saw in Flaco
what they wanted to
see. A New Yorker.
An immigrant making
it here. A symbol of
uncaged wildness.*

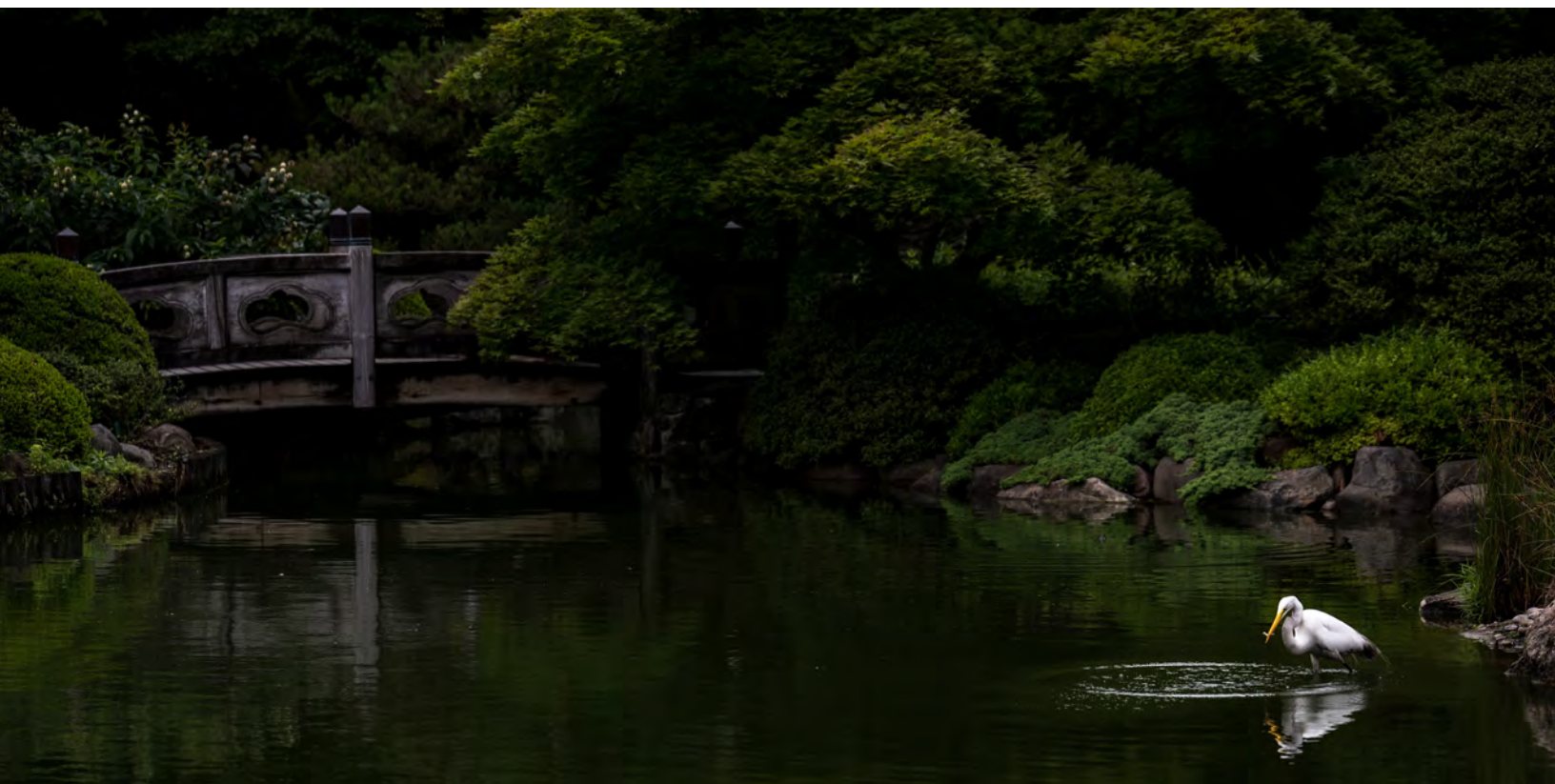
Photo Gallery: Sean Krepski



Great Blue Heron in Prospect Park.



Least Sandpiper in Prospect Park.



Great Egret in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.



**Photo Gallery:
Sandpipers in Prospect Park
by Seth Barr**



Least Sandpipers.



Semipalmated Sandpiper (left) and Spotted Sandpiper (right).



Solitary Sandpiper in the foreground and Least Sandpiper in the background.

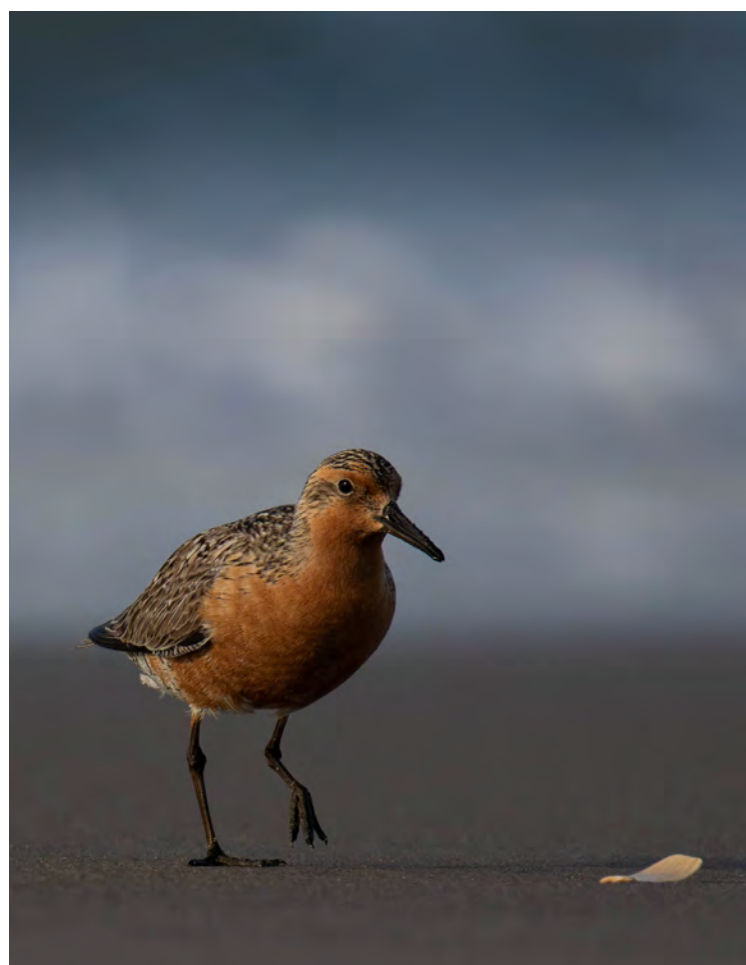


Bluebird by Toni Simon.
Gouache on paper.

Photo Gallery: Marc Brawer



Lesser Yellowlegs at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.



Short-billed Dowitcher (top) and Red Knot
(right) at Breezy Point.

