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↑ Snowy Owl is among many bird species projected to lose significant amounts of their range due to the changing climate.

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INSIDE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2022 • VOL.36 NO.6

FEATURES

UP FRONT

COVER PHOTO
Snowy Owl
by Agami Photo Agency/ Shutterstock

FROM THE EXPERTS

More to read on BirdWatchingDaily.com

CONSERVATION
Recently in Hawai'i, a critically endangered 'Akikiki was brought into captivity after a 10-day search mission. The species, which is threatened by avian malaria, may go extinct in the wild as soon as 2023, experts predict.

CONSERVATION
The Santa Marta Sabrewing, a hummingbird only found in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains, was recently rediscovered. It was only the second time the species has had a documented sighting since it was first collected in 1946.

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Hawai'i DLNR; Yurgen Vega © SELVA-ProCAT

Birds are on the ballot

FOR THE BETTER part of the last decade, scientists at the National Audubon Society have been sounding the alarm about climate change by focusing on the future for birds if the climate continues to warm. In 2019, they released "Survival by Degrees: 389 Species on the Brink," a report that provides detailed forecasts for birds in North America under various warming scenarios. No fewer than 389 out of 604 species could be at risk if carbon emissions aren't cut back — and soon, the report said.

I find it overwhelming to consider the report as a whole. The projections about individual species, however, are both easier to understand and gut-wrenching in their specificity. This issue's cover bird, the crowd-enticing Snowy Owl, is projected to lose 53 percent of its summer range when global surface temperatures reach 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. We could hit that warming level as soon as 2026 or as late as 2042. At 2°C of warming, the owl would lose 77 percent of its summer range.

Of course, governments around the world need to do more to move humanity away from our carbon-fuel-based economies, but individuals can have an impact as well. On page 14 of this issue, writer Sneed B. Collard III explains that we birders can all do more to reduce our carbon footprints. This year, with mid-term elections coming up, that includes voting for candidates up and down the ballot who support pro-environment policies. Birds can't vote but make no mistake: Their future is on the ballot! Election Day is November 8. Please make sure you're registered — and go vote!

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BIRDING BRIEFS

SCIENCE • CONSERVATION • NEWS • EVENTS • LETTERS

Blackburnian Warbler is currently found at 32 national wildlife refuges in the continental United States during the summer. New research projects that when global surface temperatures reach 2°C above pre-industrial levels, the songbird will be lost entirely from the refuge system.

Ray Hennessy/Shutterstock

Climate warming threatens birds on refuges

Earth's global surface temperature is currently about 1.1 degrees Celsius warmer than it was in the late 1800s, and scientists project it will continue to climb in coming decades. If carbon emissions remain at their current levels, we can expect to surpass 2°C in warming around 2052, according to analysts at CarbonBrief.

Since the early 1900s, the United States has established more than 560 national wildlife refuges on more than 150 million acres, offering protections for birds, mammals, plants, insects, fish, and other wildlife. Refuges provide safe havens from development, but climate change poses greater challenges.

A team of researchers from Audubon and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently analyzed how bird communities would change on national wildlife refuges if and when we reach 2°C in warming. Their study appeared in the August 2022 issue of *Ornithological Applications*.

Approximately a quarter of bird species observed on refuges may be different by the 2050s, the authors say. Refuges may see a slight net loss of species in summer (from 109.0 to 102.0 species per refuge) and a net gain in winter (from 97.1 to 118.5 species per refuge). Some species may be lost from the entire refuge system, including Emperor Goose, Tundra Swan, and Black-throated Blue and Blackburnian Warblers.

Particularly vulnerable species may benefit in the near term from targeted management aimed at preventing species loss. "The refuge system has the capacity to mitigate loss for some of the most climate-vulnerable species in a Resist-Adapt-Direct framework," the authors say. "For example, managers can help the Clay-colored Sparrow by providing more grassland habitat via crop set-aside programs. The Nelson's Sparrow will likely benefit from resisting coastal wetland development. Regions of greater species turnover (i.e., at northern latitudes) might be prioritized for strategic additions of new refuges, ensuring proportions of habitats protected reflect the need."

STUDY: DROUGHT HARMS KITE SPECIES

A new study of a European raptor species suggests that climate change may have a significant impact on birds that are thought to be stable currently.

The Red Kite is a bird of prey that breeds in many European countries; its population is estimated at 60,000-70,000. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature classifies it as "least concern" on the Red List of Threatened Species.

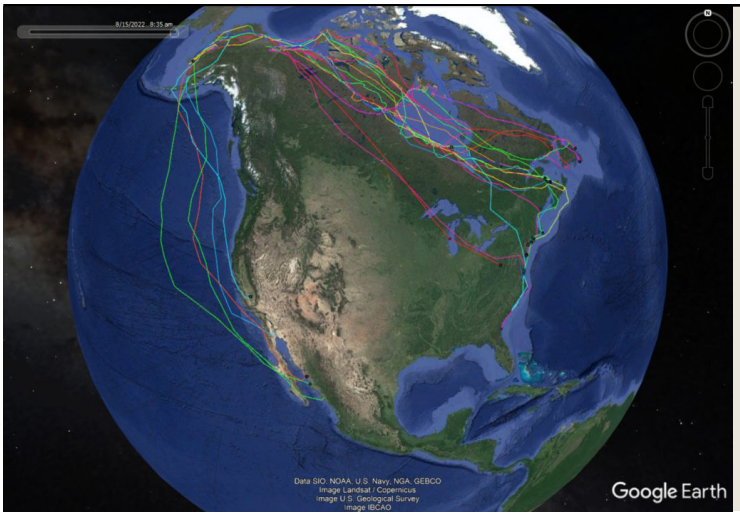
A long-term study of a Red Kite population, however, shows that when young kites are born during a drought, they remain disadvantaged throughout life. Since Red Kites can live up to 30 years, the findings suggest that extreme climate events can have a long-lasting impact on their populations, which are declining in some regions.

Fabrizio Sergio of the Doñana Biological Station and colleagues investigated the effects of drought on kites at Doñana National Park in southern Spain. The authors found that drought reduced both prey availability and the amount of food provided to chicks by parents, leading to leaner chicks and fewer chicks reaching adulthood in drought years.

They also indicate that experiencing drought as chicks did not provide an advantage in surviving subsequent droughts. Even if chicks survived the drought, the authors suggest their survival chances in later years were lower than that of kites born in years with typical precipitation. They included the long-term effects of drought in population projection models and found that they led to a 40 percent decline in forecasted population size and a 21 percent shortening of the time to extinction.

Red Kite is found in much of Europe, from southern Portugal to Sweden and the United Kingdom, as well as scattered locations in northern Africa. In this species, water levels are key determinants of prey availability, breeding performance, survival, and population trends.

In their report, published in *Nature Communications*, Sergio and co-authors conclude that increasingly frequent extreme climate events may be having greater consequences and eroding populations more quickly than is currently recognized.



Manomet; Fabrizio Sergio

Researchers from the nonprofit Manomet are studying the migratory movements of the Whimbrel, a long-distance migratory shorebird that is losing about 4 percent of its population per year. They're tracking the birds with GPS devices, and as this Google Earth map shows, all their tracked birds, no matter where they spend the winter months, breed at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northern Alaska. Individual lines on the map track the routes of Whimbrels that were tagged in Texas and Alaska this year and departed the Arctic between June 13 and August 15, 2022.

EYE ON CONSERVATION

A new partnership in Indiana stands to expand the breeding habitat for Prairie Warbler and other birds that rely on open-canopy forests.

Program aims to diversify Indiana forests

By Rachel Fritts, American Bird Conservancy

For thousands of years, southern Indiana was home to vast stretches of open-canopy oak-hickory forests. That was great for birds like the Prairie Warbler and Red-headed Woodpecker. But starting about 100 years ago, humans began to suppress the fires that clear the way for oak trees to grow. Since then, few oak saplings have been able to reach maturity, and species such as beech and maple — historically kept in check by the same fires that benefit oaks — have proliferated instead.

Beech- and maple-dominated forests are far less welcoming to many bird species due to their closed canopies, which result in denser and less-diverse forest floors. Oak canopies, in contrast, allow light to shine through, nourishing a wide variety of shrubs and grasses. The extra foliage in oak-dominated forests provides hiding and nesting places for birds, as well as housing a wide variety of invertebrates for them to eat. Oaks themselves are considered keystone species, treasure troves of resources for birds and insects. If they can't grow, even more life disappears.

Luckily, conservationists have a plan to bring oak-dominated forests back to southern Indiana. This fall, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and more than a dozen public and private partners came together to launch a new initiative called "Let the Sun Shine In — Indiana." It will use science-based tools to allow light to reach the forest floor, which in turn should help young oaks and other plants grow. The effort is modeled after a similar initiative, "Let the Sun Shine In – Illinois," which pioneered the approach.

Partner organizations will work together to conduct tree harvests to open the canopy, enabling oak saplings and groundcover to flourish. Then, the team will use carefully applied prescribed fire to enhance and maintain the treatment. The process will take several years.

The partnership will also help educate the public about the importance of active management in these forests. Cutting down trees and using fire can seem like counterintuitive stepping stones on the path to a healthier forest. Demonstration areas will help illustrate how these tools work, showcasing restoration techniques and the resulting phases of regeneration. If all goes according to plan, southern Indiana forests will, in time, be flooded with life-giving sunlight and a chorus of birdsong once again.

Rachel Fritts is writer/editor at American Bird Conservancy.

A fluffy Piping Plover chick.

A RECORD YEAR FOR PLOVERS

The Great Lakes population of Piping Plovers fledged 150 chicks in the wild this year from 72 distinct breeding pairs — the greatest number of chicks fledged since the population was listed as federally endangered in 1986.

For a chick to be considered fledged, it must live until at least 23 days old and be capable of flight. That's over three weeks that plover chicks are running around busy beaches and incapable of flight, making them vulnerable to predation, dogs off leash, and human disturbance. Monitors and volunteers at nesting sites spend hours each day checking on the birds, educating beachgoers, and protecting plovers from dogs, predators, and other threats.

Of those 72 pairs, 48 were in Michigan, which is the stronghold for this population.

Ten young plovers were captive-reared and released into the wild; six were set free at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, the site with the largest concentration of nesting Piping Plovers in the Great Lakes. One of this year's captive-reared birds was the first juvenile plover sighted on the wintering grounds in North Carolina.

Mark Teggas/Shutterstock; Marissa Haase/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

New resource highlights bird migration

In mid-September, the National Audubon Society revealed an interactive, free digital platform that combines bird distribution and migration maps with conservation data for 458 species of migratory birds. It's called the Bird Migration Explorer, and it was in the works for almost four years before it was launched.

Audubon and nine other conservation and research organizations created the platform, which incorporates data from more than 500 studies about birds.

The Bird Migration Explorer brings together three types of geospatial bird data: occurrence data from eBird Status & Trends models from Cornell Lab of Ornithology; connectivity data from the USGS Bird Banding Lab and Bird Genoscape Project; and tracking data from Birds Canada, the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, and hundreds of researchers from across the globe, who generously contributed their datasets to this project. Audubon scientists and cartographers consolidated these data to create animated and interactive visualizations to bring species migration to life on a map.

Audubon's new online Bird Migration Explorer tool maps the movements of more than 450 bird species.

The Bird Migration Explorer also draws point-to-point connections made by tracked migratory birds that travel between any two locations in the hemisphere. Users can see when and where local migratory species will be headed and what challenges they face along the way.

The site offers users three search options: bird species, locations, and conservation challenges. You can search, for example, by a location name or ZIP code and find the bird species that are found in the area and the conservation challenges they face locally. Learn more at www.birdmigrationexplorer.org.

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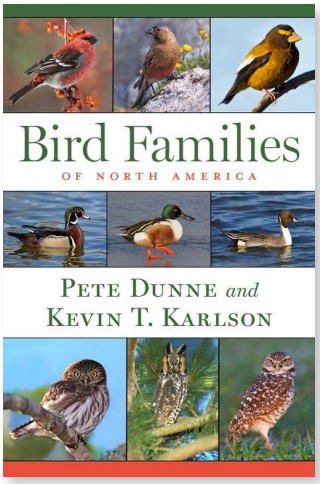


BOOK

Bird Families of North America

By Pete Dunne and Kevin T. Karlson, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021, hardcover, 288 pages, $26.

This book came out last year and seems to have flown under the radar of the birding public. That's too bad because it's a terrific resource. Pete Dunne and Kevin Karlson focus on the 81 bird families found in the continental United States and Canada. Each family is the subject of a brief introduction, and that is followed by a paragraph about each species within the family. Photos by Karlson and several other photographers illustrate the pages. Considering that the holidays are nearly upon us, this book would make a great gift for birdwatchers and/or your bird-curious relatives.

Erlend Haarberg/Bird Photographer of the Year

PHOTO CONTEST

Bird Photographer of the Year

Birds on the Brink

Norwegian photographer Erlend Haarberg received this year's grand prize in the international Bird Photographer of the Year (BPOTY) contest for his beautiful image (above) of a Rock Ptarmigan taking flight above the snow-covered mountains of Tysfjorden, Norway.

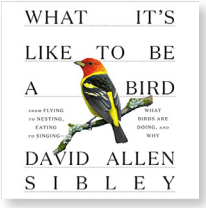
"High up in the mountains, the wind, snow, and cold maintain the iron grip of winter for many months on end. This is where Rock Ptarmigan thrive in an endless white landscape," says Haarberg. "On this particular winter's day, I was on my way to a mountain top. I had almost reached the summit when I spotted some ptarmigan tracks in the snow. Soon a bird took flight, with the dramatic backdrop showing what a harsh environment this bird calls home."

Photographers from all over the world entered more than 20,000 images into the competition. Organizers of BPOTY, the world's largest bird photography competition, recently announced the winners. You can see the gold winners in 10 categories, including the image that won the Young Bird Photographer of the Year award, in a gallery at www.birdwatchingdaily.com/photography.

AUDIO BOOK

What It's Like to Be a Bird

By David Allen Sibley, narrated by Evan Sibley, length: 7 hours, 56 minutes. 2022, Echo Point Books & Media. $19.95.

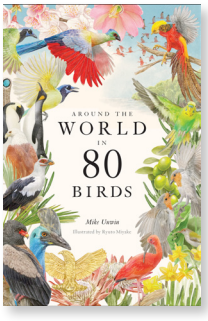


David Sibley's super-popular book from 2020, *What It's Like to Be a Bird,* is now available as an audio book. Sibley adapted the text to suit the audio format, and his son Evan Sibley narrated it. The book covers more than 200 species, including common backyard birds like nuthatches, jays, and chickadees. Sibley explains in nontechnical terms what birds do — and why — by answering questions such as, "Can birds smell?" and "Do robins 'hear' worms?" Available on Audible and iTunes/Apple Books.

BOOK

Around the World in 80 Birds

By Mike Unwin, Laurence King Publishing, 2022, hardcover, 224 pages, $24.99.



The White Tern of the Indian and Pacific oceans forgoes any nest construction and simply lays its egg in the hollow of a horizontal branch. The Common Raven exhibits "mental faculties on par with a chimpanzee's." And chicks of South America's Hoatzin hatch with two claws on each wing, which disappear before they reach adulthood. These are just a few of the facts that Mike Unwin shares in this new book. He focuses on 80 bird species, each of which is significant to countries or territories around the globe.

A Prairie Falcon perches on the so-called "Magic Stump."

Tyler Funk

FILM

The Magic Stump

Turnstone Strategies

Birders in east-central Illinois are fans of an old tree stump in a farmer's field because every winter it attracts rare-for-the-state Prairie Falcons, as well as Merlins, owls, and other raptors. Filmmaker Bob Dolgan tells the story of the birds and birders who visit the spot in this engaging and delightful 20-minute documentary. It premiered this fall at screenings in Illinois and will eventually be available on Vimeo.

This image of a Pileated Woodpecker is Laura's best through-the-window-glass photo, taken in November 2018 on the day the triple-pane window was installed. She used her camera's high-speed burst and took about eight photos. This was the only one showing the full length of the bird's tongue.

Photographing birds through windows

Avoid the pain of missed or poor photos with these tips for shooting through panes of glass

By Laura Erickson

JUST ABOUT ALL of us have photographed birds through a window at one time or another to verify an identification, document a rare bird, or create a keepsake of a cool sighting. Unfortunately, images through window glass can be marred by glare and reflections or obscured by window screens, dirt, or moisture between the panes. And autofocus may zero in on the window itself, rendering the bird out of focus.

One of my best pictures ever, of a Pileated Woodpecker with its long tongue fully extended, was taken through triple-pane window glass. The bird flew in just minutes after the brand-new window had been installed, so the glass was immaculate. But even the best photos taken through window glass would virtually always be better with the window open.

My dining room, family room, and home office serve as photo blinds, with easily opened windows looking out on feeders, birdbaths, and bird-attracting vegetation. Unfortunately, opening an unscreened window invites mosquitoes, wasps, and other insects into the house along with hot or frigid outside

Laura Erickson

air, so I do this only when I'm actively taking photos. Before I open the window, I pull the shade down over the upper pane on my double-pane window and close the shades on other windows in the room, turn off any lights, and close doors to the rest of the house. The few times a bird has flown in through a window when I've been photographing, it instantly turned tail and flew back out through the same open window, the only bright spot in the room.

There's no trick to taking photos through an open window, but if the window is closed when a good bird appears, opening it risks scaring the bird away, and some windows don't open. Here are a few tips for taking usable photos through window glass:

- If you have an ideal window for viewing birds, keep the window screen off except when you want to open the window for fresh air.
- Keep the window clean. Even the tiniest speck of dirt, and sometimes glass itself, can trick a camera's autofocus.
- Hold the camera as close to the glass as possible to reduce the area of glass you're shooting through. Bringing your camera closer to the window than its minimum focus distance also makes it easier to focus on the bird.
- When possible, shoot straight through the window rather than at an angle to minimize the effects of glass. Window screens always mar photos, but the effect will be minimized if you're shooting at right angles to the screen.

The principles of taking photos through a car window are similar, with a few extra considerations:

- Turn the engine off to prevent its vibrations from blurring your images.
- Photos through the side windows, even when closed, invariably turn out better than ones through the curved windshield.
- To hold a long-lens camera steady from a car seat, clamp your camera on a car window mount made specifically for this purpose, rest the camera on a beanbag set on the bottom of the window frame, or attach a short length of foam water pipe insulation or a pool noodle on the top of the glass. Pipe insulation has a lengthwise slit that makes it easy to secure on the window; you'll need to slit a pool noodle yourself.

My dining room, family room, and home office serve as photo blinds, with easily opened windows looking out on feeders, birdbaths, and bird-attracting vegetation.

Ironically, the windows that give us splendid looks at birds put those very birds' lives in jeopardy. Screens on double-hung windows are set on the outside and make the window more visible to birds. In my home office, rather than removing the screen, I sliced a large area of it where it attaches to the frame and affixed Velcro around the edges to hold it tightly closed when I'm not photographing birds. Screens on crank-open windows don't protect birds since they're inside the glass. However, you can find other ways to protect birds at those windows and others at American Bird Conservancy's website: abcbirds.org/glass-collisions.

Laura Erickson, the 2014 recipient of the American Birding Association's highest honor, the Roger Tory Peterson Award, has written 12 books about birds and hosts the long-running radio program and podcast "For the Birds."

The Explorers Club

How places like Big X Swamp and Bee Hive Hill sparked a lifelong love of nature

By Pete Dunne

MY JOURNEY AS a birdwatcher (the term "birder" had not been coined yet) began in the woods and overgrown fields behind my parents' ranch house in Whippany, New Jersey. To save you a Google search, Whippany is located about 25 miles west of Manhattan. It sits atop the eutrophic remains of glacial Lake Passaic and precisely where, I estimate, the retreating Laurentide ice sheet dumped its biggest load of rocks. Ask any of the kids who had to clear them by hand so their dads could have the flat, green lawns suburban homeowners dream of. Adjacent to my parents' rockpile was several hundred acres of publicly owned hardwood forest in early stages of succession, with red maple, pin oak, and white oak dominating.

The "Big Woods" were bisected by a powerline cut we called "the Meadows." Beyond were the three "Brickyard Ponds" and beyond that, several thousand acres of forest and wetlands known as "Troy Meadows." In sum, this was my playground and bird laboratory. The only rule in the 1950s and '60s was to be "home for supper." Otherwise, my time was my own, and from the age of 7, I was free to wander as far as "the ponds," a quarter- to half-mile from home.

It occurs to me that as the only surviving member of the Explorers Club, as we neighborhood kids called ourselves, I may be the only person alive who still recalls such hallowed points of discovery as "Big X Swamp," where the Mallards nested; "Bee

Hatchapong Palurtchaivong/Shutterstock

Hive Hill," where the screech-owl lived in the hollow old beech tree; and "Island Eight," in the third brickyard pond, where the Canada Geese nested in 1957. I write this article so that this precious storehouse of lore may not pass into obscurity.

Big X Swamp was a mere quarter-mile from home but a slog in the spring. It was named for the crossed drainage ditches dug by the mosquito commission that we (the swamp's self-appointed guardians) were obligated to dam every spring to keep the swamp properly flooded. In winter, we'd ice skate between the tussock grass and swamp maples and capture spotted turtles swimming beneath the ice. It was because of this endeavor that I learned not to put wet shoes in the oven to dry in time for Sunday church service. All you get is crinkled leather.

The Meadows were a marvel: part broom sedge, part brushy tangle, home to Field Sparrows, Maryland (now Common) Yellowthroats, Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warblers, and in fall, the overhead powerlines attracted migratory kestrels. They never let you get close enough to be sure of your identification. But that's what they were.

The Brickyard Ponds were a treasure trove of fun and discovery. It's where I saw my first Pied-billed Grebe and Belted Kingfisher, and where a blue-eyed boy once stood eye to eye with a golden-eyed Great Blue Heron. Both of us were too startled to move. The cove, just west of "Heron Beach," later renamed "Stevie's Beach" in honor of a local kid's many impromptu beer parties, was the place I saw my first Ring-necked Ducks. The flock pitched into the pond during a blinding March snowstorm and swam to within 10 feet of my crouched form — close enough for me to see the burnished copper ring around the neck of the drakes (the first and only time I've seen the bird's namesake trait). We were forbidden to swim in the ponds, so of course we did.

"Bullhead Cove," "Black Duck Cove," "the Hidden Road" — the list goes on until it disappears in the growing mist enveloping my mind. So, I commit these names to paper and to you, the newest member of the Explorers Club. The club meets every Saturday afternoon in McDowell's basement, where, after adding new items in our natural history museum, your membership will be made official by attending club officers. Insofar as we need a quorum of just one, me, and since you already have my vote, your membership is assured. Feel free to bring any shed snake skins, deer antlers, or abandoned bird nests for the collection. We already have nests of American Robin, Maryland Yellowthroat, Baltimore Oriole, and (gasp, sigh) even Cedar Waxwing. Just don't do something stupid like falling out of a tree to gain some prized exhibit. And fair warning. Bald-faced hornet nests may look empty but often are not. In winter, the insects are just dormant, and the heat in the basement is enough to make them active.

The Brickyard Ponds is where a blue-eyed boy once stood eye to eye with a golden-eyed Great Blue Heron. Both of us were too startled to move.

Other useful information: In summer, when drought drops water levels, the shores of the First Brickyard Pond often attract shorebirds; otherwise, summer birdwatching is pretty dull. But in July, a few migrating birds appear. My first Yellow-throated Warbler was on the trail to Heron Cove on July 4. You need not, as I long did, anguish about confusing the bird with Blackburnian Warbler. They're like apples and oranges, it turns out. The Hidden Road is a good place to flush grouse, and the screech-owl on Bee Hive Hill often sits at the entrance to his hole to catch the morning sun. Deer? Sometimes in the Meadows at dawn; red fox, too. The local crow with the touches of white in its wings is called Silver Wings. It likes to perch on the transmission towers and has a hoarse call.

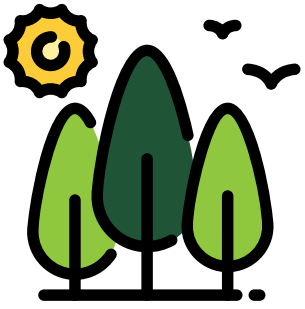
In August, hummingbirds sip from the tubular blossoms of the spotted touch-me-nots that flourish in the wet areas beside the abandoned railroad tracks. In winter, the brushy edge of my parents' property is packed with American Tree Sparrows, and the marshy area east of Big X Swamp hosts wintering Fox Sparrows. You'll hear them scratching in the leaves. Vesper Sparrows? Never found one, but Song Sparrows are common.

I should mention that my grasp of birds and their habitat needs was limited back then, accounting for my inability to find the grassland-dwelling Vesper Sparrow in woodland habitat. On a good year, you should find 50 to 60 bird species around home. And by the way, a bird that I'm pretty sure is a mockingbird has moved into the overgrown lot across the street. I know the range map says it ain't so, but there it is — white flashes in the wings and tail and all.

A closing note: Adults seem ever to anguish about getting young people involved in bird study. Actually, nothing could be easier or more natural. Just give your budding John James Audubon or Rachel Carson binoculars that fit their hands (6 to 8 power are fine) and a field guide. Their natural curiosity and Ma Nature's capacity to captivate will do the rest.

No courses, no organized field trips, just the latitude to let kids discover. The geographic parameters you set are up to you. Despite the latitude to wander at will that I enjoyed, most of the new birds I found were in the flowering oaks around our backyard in April and May. Birds love suburbia, that hybrid habitat where birds and humans meet. Just add curiosity, and you have a world of wonder to engage the next generation of explorers.

Pete Dunne is the author or co-author of many books about birds, including *Bird Families of North America, Hawks in Flight, Gulls Simplified,* and others. He founded the World Series of Birding and was the first official counter of the hawk watch in Cape May, New Jersey.



CLIMATE-FRIENDLY BIRDING

How to have a smaller carbon footprint while pursuing your birdwatching passion

BY SNEED B. COLLARD III

Illustrations by NikWB/Shutterstock

Birders who rode bicycles to a heathland area in the Netherlands scan the fields for birds. Biking rather than driving to birding sites is one way to reduce fossil-fuel emissions.

Jarreteira/Shutterstock

With heat waves broiling vast tracts of the Northern Hemisphere this past summer, most people have little choice but to confront Al Gore's inconvenient truth: Human activities are on course to make the planet unlivable not only for people but also for most other species. For birders, the truth of climate change comes with an added inconvenience. Rising temperatures and their consequences imperil the animals we most love, and our own birding activities often make the global situation worse.

After realizing that I put more than 6,000 miles on my minivan's odometer while birding last year, I ran a poll on the Facebook birding page Redpolling to see how many miles other birders drove. I figured my total must be near the top, so imagine my surprise when I found that of the 95 people who voted, more than half — 55 percent — drove more than 10,000 miles last year in pursuit of birds. And 29 percent logged more than *20,000 miles* — and we're not even talking about the airline flights birders take!

To be clear, I do not roll out these numbers with any kind of judgment. It's awesome that so many people are passionate about birds, and, no doubt, my son, Braden, and I have combusted our share of gasoline on birding treks. These informal results, though, do raise a critical irony: In chasing birds, we are also helping doom them. How do birders try to resolve this glaring conflict? One obvious answer is by curbing our use of fossil fuels, but how?

Considered compromises

In my poll, several people volunteered that they bird primarily by bike — a great choice and one that confirms my conviction that the bicycle is one of the Top Ten Inventions of All Time. Other birders live in urban areas where efficient mass transit can get them to and from birding sites. Braden and I got to experience this kind of birding on a recent visit to New York, and we loved it. Both options, though, do limit the range of species one can see, and for those who want to see *everything*, well, other compromises must come into play.

One aspect of my own reduced-carbon compromise is this: I almost always try to combine my birding trips with work or other travel that I would have done anyway. I have been fortunate, for instance, to get invited to speak about birds and other topics at various schools, conferences, and festivals around the country — an opportunity to bird new areas without burning up much extra gas. Last summer, Braden landed a job conducting Northern Goshawk surveys in California's Sierras. To get there, he first considered flying, but for years we had been planning to bird Arizona again. "What if I drive you

The Tamarack Fire burns in eastern California just south of Lake Tahoe in July 2021. The average number of acres in the U.S. that burn annually in wildfires has almost tripled in the last three decades.

Trevor Bexon/Shutterstock

Audubon rates the Northern Pygmy-Owl as modately vulnerable to climate change at 1.5°C and 2°C of warming but highly vulnerable at 3°C of warming.

RobDemPhoto/Shutterstock

to California via Arizona?" I asked, and Braden jumped at the idea. Did we use up more fossil fuels than if he had flown directly to his job? Probably — but not nearly as much as if we had taken a separate trip to Arizona *and* he had flown.

Speaking of birding together, it is a no-brainer that we should carpool with other birders whenever possible. I know. I know. Many of us prefer birding alone, but even if you bird with a friend only half of the time, think of how much gas you are saving. I also have been birding much more locally these days, and it's something I hope that many birders consider. It may not be as exciting as jetting off to Texas, Colombia, or Ethiopia, but getting to know my local birds better has greatly improved my identification skills and my understanding of avian behavior. You also can spice up your local birding by doing a neighborhood, city, or county Big Year — or, better yet, a bicycling Big Year.

Still, there is more — much more — each of us can do.

Spend money, save the planet

I often write about birding organizations that need our support (see "Rising to the Challenge" in *BirdWatching's* September/October issue), and it ought to be basic to all birders that we donate to organizations that work to conserve birds (see the sidebar on conservation groups at right). I'm not talking about $5 here or there. I'm talking about monthly, sustaining contributions — as much as we can afford. In the face of the climate crisis, however, I'd like to urge everyone to up their games even more.

A birder on social media described how she equipped her house with solar panels *and* bought an all-electric vehicle — which seems like a perfect solution for people who

BIRD-WORTHY CONSERVATION GROUPS

Listed here are 10 organizations that take significant actions to help protect and conserve our planet's precious birdlife and other natural resources. They all accept financial support. Rather than making a one-time donation, become a sustaining member whenever possible. Even if you can give only a few dollars a month, the funds help the groups plan their activities better and be more effective at helping birds and other wildlife.

- American Bird Conservancy, *abcbirds.org*
- American Birding Association, *aba.org*
- Center for Biological Diversity, *biologicaldiversity.org*
- Conservation International, *conservation.org*
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology, *birds.cornell.edu*
- Ducks Unlimited, *ducks.org*
- National Audubon Society, *audubon.org*
- National Wildlife Federation, *nwf.org*
- The Nature Conservancy, *nature.org*
- Union of Concerned Scientists, *ucsusa.org*

In addition, regional, state, and local Audubon chapters and bird clubs do their part to educate about climate change and advocate for greener policies.

drive to bird. The problem? The $50,000 to $70,000 necessary to accomplish it! For many, the costs are simply beyond reach, but for many others, let's get real: *If we can afford to fly to Costa Rica, the Falklands, or Tanzania to bird, we can almost surely buy a hybrid or all-electric vehicle.* And, of course, our green conversion doesn't have to be accomplished all at once.

This year, my family decided to take our own first step by installing solar panels on our house. An electricity audit determined that we needed about $14,000 worth of panels to cover our household electricity needs each year, so we took a deep breath and went for it. How are the panels? Awesome. For one thing, federal tax breaks immediately lowered the actual costs to about $10,000, but the panels also should pay for themselves in six to eight years, which is longer than in much of the rest of the nation.

In less than five months, though, our panels have already kept 6,385 pounds of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere. Well, sort of. It takes the panels four to eight months to "earn back" the energy needed to manufacture them, but from here on out, we are helping solve the climate problem, not exacerbating it. Oh, and these panels are in Montana — the fourth-most-sun-starved state in the lower 48!

For my family, the next step is to get an electric vehicle (EV). That is beyond our means now, but the sweeping new "action package" passed by Congress and signed by President Biden may put that possibility within reach not just for us but for most Americans. Details of the Inflation Reduction Act can seem a bit overwhelming upon first read, but a closer look reveals that the law facilitates a revolutionary boost to our nation's clean energy production. This includes introducing and continuing significant tax credits to Americans who want to install their own solar panel systems or buy electric vehicles. The EV credit is especially important. A $7,500 credit existed before, but it expired once a manufacturer sold 200,000 units of a particular model. The new bill removes that limitation, helping many more of us take the electric vehicle plunge.

The author recently had solar panels installed on his house in Montana. He says that with the electricity they generate, they should pay for themselves in six to eight years.

MAKING OUR HOMES GREENER

Headline-grabbing tax breaks in the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act include incentives for Americans who purchase big-tickets items like electric vehicles and solar panels. The law also encourages homeowners and renters to make their homes more energy efficient in several other ways. It includes tax credits and discounts for installing heat pumps for heating and cooling; replacing gas stoves with induction or electric models; upgrading electrical panels, insulation, air sealing, and ventilation; installing heat-pump-based water heaters; and other green options. The tax benefits begin in 2023 and are slated to be in place for 10 years. Learn how you can make your home more climate friendly at rewiringamerica.org.

Avian politics

Even more important than buying our own electric vehicles and solar panels is to support and vote for candidates who will continue to enact legislation to curb greenhouse emissions. Unfortunately for the notion of bipartisanship, these days that restricts voters almost exclusively to Democratic candidates. A 2021 study by the Center for American Progress revealed that more than half of all Republicans in the U.S. House and Senate still fall into the "climate denier" camp. Given today's extreme partisanship, it's not surprising that not a single Republican voted for the Inflation Reduction Act—despite that fact that tens of millions of Republican voters are as impacted by the climate emergency as everyone else. Even if we can't all install solar panels or buy an electric vehicle, birders can help reverse this situation by donating to and canvassing for pro-environment candidates and sharing our knowledge and enthusiasm with friends.

I am sure you can come up with other ideas for how you can lower your carbon

Range-restricted North American birds that are highly vulnerable to the warming climate include Spectacled Eider (top) and Yellow-billed Magpie. The eider's range extends from the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta of western Alaska across northern Canada. The magpie is endemic to central California. Each will likely lose substantial territory at 1.5°C of global warming.

Agami Photo Agency/Shutterstock; Hayley Crews/Shutterstock

footprint to help birds. Maybe you'll decide to eat less meat, helping to free up immense swaths of agricultural land to make way for carbon-gobbling forests. Or perhaps you'll work to purchase more of your food locally, saving on the fuel needed to transport it. The point is that we *all* need to get involved more deeply — and now. As a scientist and a writer, I have no doubt that Earth is on the brink, and we birders form a critical block of citizens who have both the knowledge and the ability to make a difference. If that is not enough of an incentive, taking action has one additional benefit: It makes us feel better about the world, improving our mental health.

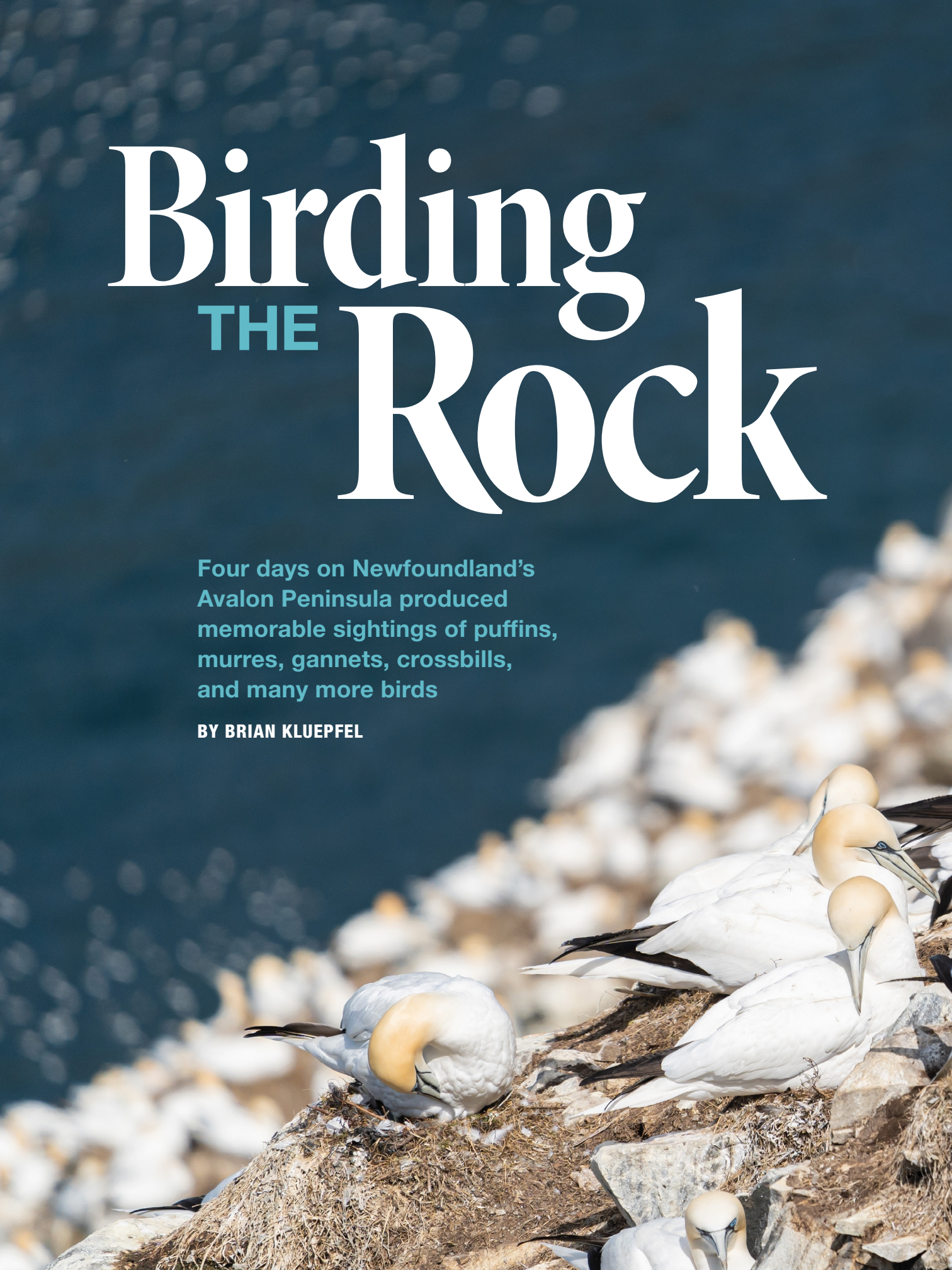
Come to think of it, isn't that like birding itself?

Sneed B. Collard III is the author of more than 85 books for children and adults, including the award-winning adult memoir *Warblers and Woodpeckers: A Father-Son Big Year of Birding* and the kids' science book *Woodpeckers: Drilling Holes & Bagging Bugs*. He is a popular speaker at schools, conferences, and birding events. Keep up with his and Braden's adventures at FatherSonBirding.com.

Birding THE Rock

Four days on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula produced memorable sightings of puffins, murres, gannets, crossbills, and many more birds

BY BRIAN KLUEPFEL



Northern Gannets sit on their nests on a rocky cliff at Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve on the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland. It is one of three gannet colonies around Newfoundland and one of only six in North America.

For centuries, Newfoundland has been a maritime and avian crossroads. The island, home to tough people infused with humor and tenderness, is affectionately called "The Rock." Independent to the bone, locals refer to the day that Newfoundland became a province (March 31, 1949) as "the day Canada joined us."

The violence of the sea and underlying tectonic action have left their mark. The Rock's stunning and picturesque cliffs are evidence of millennia of shifting tides and seismic disruption.

The island's birding legacy is strong: John James Audubon collected here in 1833; Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher devoted the first two chapters of 1953's *Wild America* to their experience on the Avalon Peninsula, North America's easternmost point. And Peterson provided many of the illustrations for 1961's *Birds of Newfoundland*.

The Avalon makes up the southeastern portion of the island of Newfoundland. It covers more than 3,560 square miles (9,220 sq kilometers) and has recorded nearly 400 bird species. I spent four days exploring the Avalon in June learning about the place: its Irish-imbued music and language, seafaring legacy, and, naturally, the avian population that inhabits its rugged shores. Let me tell you about the experience.

Day 1:

Getting our bearings

On my first day, our tour group received the lay of the land from Shawn Doyle, a tour guide (and school teacher, musician, and hockey defenseman) from the town of Petty Harbour. By 11:30 a.m., he had us singing the classic Irish ballad *The Fields of Athenry* in the van en route to Cape Spear Lighthouse.

After visiting the famed lighthouse, we walked part of the 336-kilometer East Coast Trail, from Marconi's Signal Hill to the village of Quidi Vidi (pronounced *kidd-ee vid-ee*) and its iceberg-infused beer. On the way, we did our first real birding, spying an American Pipit on the path, a Dark-eyed Junco singing lustily from a pine, and a Bald Eagle soaring above. The massive eagle's nest farther down the path, however, was abandoned. From the brewery deck, we spotted terns and Mallards fishing the inlet.

Day 2:

Puffins, crossbills, and ptarmigan

We drove south out of the city of St. John's on Highway 10 (the Irish Loop), which follows the Atlantic coast to the southern end of the peninsula. Our guide this day was Jared Clarke, the founder of local birding tour company Bird The Rock. He noted that the endless dark-green backdrop of the Avalon is 99 percent coniferous forest. Northwest of the Avalon, on the remainder of Newfoundland, the landscape has more deciduous forest and therefore more redstarts and other warblers.

Stands of purple, pink, and white lupines line the road like sentinels fronting the white spruce and eastern larch boreal forest. We were in the height of wildflower season, and the roadsides were a constant visual delight. Despite the sun and flowers, however, we would finish the day on the southernmost sub-arctic tundra in the world.

At Witless Bay, south of St. John's, we watched hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Great Black-backed Gulls wheeling above, waiting for waves of fish. Turning down Gus O'Reilly's Road, we passed a lagoon and saw a pair of Common Loons. Farther south, in the town of Saint Michaels, we peered over stands

Two Northern Fulmars pause at their nest on an oceanside cliff. The species, which numbers about 20 million individuals worldwide, is found in subarctic regions of the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans. The Avalon Peninsula is home to sites where fulmars breed, including Ship Island off the eastern coast.

Previous spread: pkuberan/Shutterstock; This page: Ondrej Prosicky/Shutterstock

An Atlantic Puffin takes flight while its partner holds nesting material. The species is the provincial bird of Newfoundland and Labrador. About 95 percent of all North America's puffins breed around the province's coasts. The largest colony is at the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve south of St. John's.

Mourning Warbler is one of about a dozen warbler species that breed on the Avalon Peninsula. It nests in clearings within forests and other woodlands and is present in Newfoundland from late May through October.

of alder bushes (whose cones were ready to burst) toward islands that were dotted with colonies of Common Murre, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Atlantic Puffin. The sandstone cliffs were streaked with guano. One of the islands is also home to Northern Fulmars, often in pairs, necks affectionately entwined.

Later, we passed a pond with Ring-necked Ducks, a distant Wood Duck, and a beaver dam. Along a fire road to an old village wiped out by a 1929 hurricane, we spotted a Purple Finch and a Black-and-white Warbler visiting bunches of buttercups and purple clover. Meanwhile, a junco trilled from a treetop. Behind stands of elder trees, we found Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Pine Siskin, and an elusive Mourning Warbler. Then, along a beach road, a humpback whale broke the surface, so we went down to the town of Ferryland for a better look.

In the town, at the Colony of Avalon, which is widely recognized as the best-preserved early English colonial site in North America, we witnessed what Clarke called a "cultural and natural phenomenon." The capelin, small sardine-like fish, were "rolling" or coming ashore in droves to spawn on the only soft-sand beach to lay their eggs. Hundreds of seabirds hovered, adroitly picking the fish from the water. Terns were especially deft at this. And local people with makeshift nets, plastic buckets, and rubber boots collected some of the fish, which they would either eat or use as fertilizer.

Our next stop, 12 miles south, was the village of Renews, a site famous for off-course accidentals, like European Golden-Plover, Common Shelduck, and Wood Sandpiper. Behind the lupine-lined roads,

pixuberant/Shutterstock; FotoRequest/Shutterstock

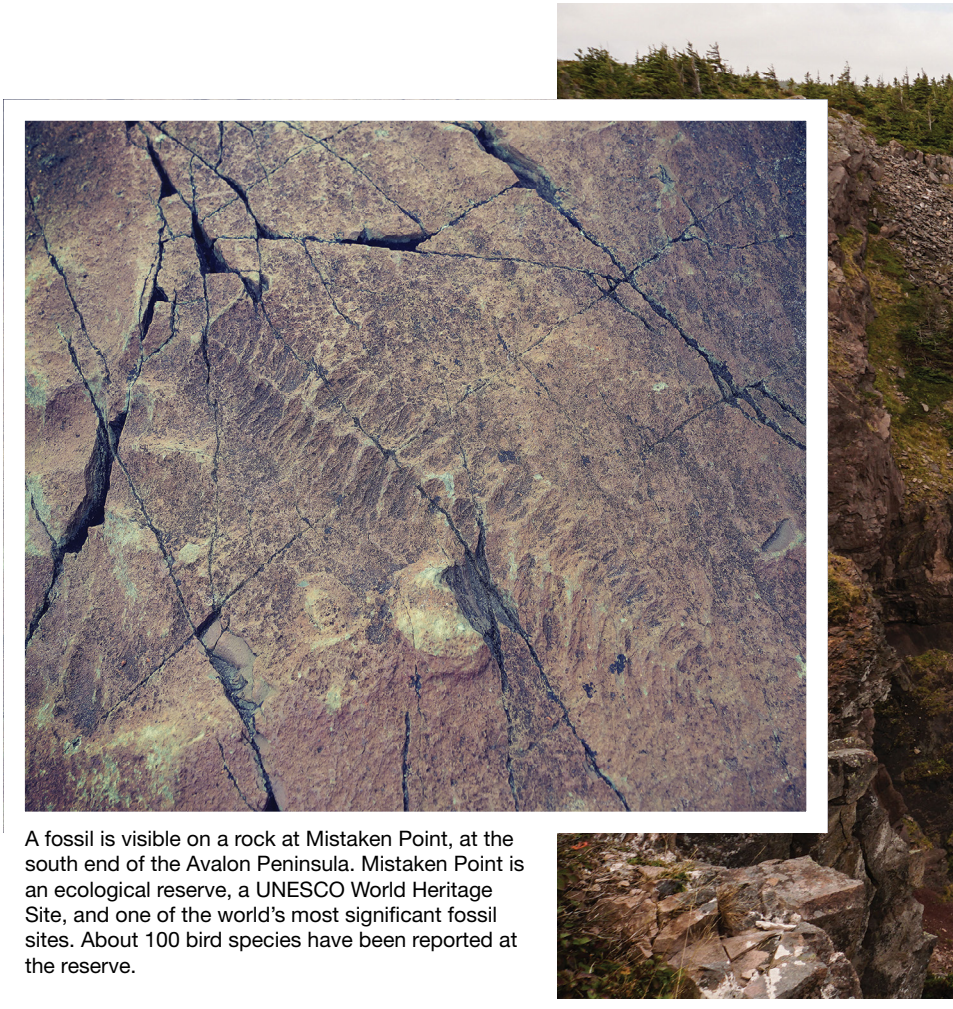
we spotted a harbor seal in the, well, harbor. A popular house feeder proved a finch fiesta, with Red Crossbills, Pine Siskins, and Purple Finches vying with Blue Jays for space. Clarke noted, as a point of local pride, that the crossbills are the endemic *Loxia curvirostra percna* subspecies of Red Crossbill. Soon afterward, at Renews Beach, we looked over red bog grass at a surefire birder's delight: both Arctic and Common Terns flitting about on the island paralleling the shore.

Over a hill, it was suddenly colder and looked like Scotland. We had hit the sub-arctic tundra, and before we knew it, a Northern Harrier was swooping for voles on the boulder-strewn lunarlike landscape. It was dotted with glacial erratics, heath stubbornly clinging to life in the fog, and bonsai-sized balsa fir and black spruce trees — "tuckamore" in Newfoundlandese — provided the little forest cover in the area.

We bypassed Cape Race but were told that in late fall, it's a good site on the migration path of Snowy Owls. Well-named Mistaken Point (site of 94 shipwrecks between 1864 and 1904) is a UNESCO heritage site for the earliest known fossils of vertebrates — a big leap forward in life on earth. For the hardcore birder, accidentals like Northern Wheatear and European Golden-Plover of more recent evolutionary vintage are of more interest.

St. Shott's was the end of the line and seemingly the end of the world, as a foghorn blasted through any pretense of indifference. A Spotted Sandpiper seemed relatively unperturbed by it all as it perched on a wire fence. We drove a lonely road that proved to be a boon as we spotted Common Eider en route to the lighthouse. Blue flag irises provided popup color through the wet fog, and we saw a trio of Harlequin Ducks — "Lord and Lady" to old-school locals — bobbing determinedly on rough water.

So, this tuckamore stuff, eh? Well, we were determined to see a Willow Ptarmigan, and on the way to the lighthouse, we used a few comic playbacks (ever heard a ptarmigan?) across from Our Lady of Fatima Cemetery, where one was spotted earlier in the day. Returning, the playback worked like a charm, and we attracted a rather boisterous male and hen. The nestlings they were protecting, six tufts



A fossil is visible on a rock at Mistaken Point, at the south end of the Avalon Peninsula. Mistaken Point is an ecological reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and one of the world's most significant fossil sites. About 100 bird species have been reported at the reserve.

Alisa_Ch/Shutterstock

Newfoundlandese for birders

Newfoundlanders have a unique Irish-tinged vocabulary, and, in fact, 26 distinct local dialects have been described, according to Destination St. John's spokesperson Jeanette Yetman. Evarts G. Loomis noted some of the colorful local bird names in his 1945 *Auk* article "Notes on Birds of Northern Newfoundland and Labrador:"

Shearwaters:
Hagdown

Fulmars:
Noddy

Leach's Storm-Petrel:
Mother Carey's Chicken

Ivory Gull:
Ice Partridge

Red-throated Loon:
Whabby

Atlantic Kittiwake:
Tickelouse

Black Guillemot:
Sea Pigeon

Red-breasted Nuthatch:
Upside-down bird

Yellow Warbler:
Yellow Hammer

Common Redpoll:
Sprucebird

The rocky cliffs of Cape Spear, near the city of St. John's, mark the easternmost point of land in North America, excluding Greenland. According to eBird, more than 200 bird species have been reported at Cape Spear.

of gray, scattered as we walked across the spongy and uneven heath. Then the nesting pair flew directly at us — feathered chicken-feet menacing my colleagues crouched on the turf with their cameras.

Perhaps since ptarmigan are still hunted here, our presence was none too welcome. We took our photos and our leave, back on the Irish Loop in time for dinner in St. John's.

Day 3:

Warblers and more puffins

About 20 minutes southwest of the city, we headed down Cochrane Pond Road, a rutted dirt farm-way in the Goulds. This is Avalonian boreal forest with three essential trees: balsa fir, spruce, and eastern larch. It would be a good day for warblers.

We saw a Blackpoll Warbler and then a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in a dead tree just beyond the bunchberry (a dogwood relative) and the clumps of "devil's paintbrush" interspersed among the hog grasses. A Yellow-rumped Warbler sat up briefly on a spruce; Clarke noted that some species like Gray-cheeked Thrush have experienced an 80 percent decline in the past 30 years, in their case because of the introduction of the red squirrel to the island.

A Wilson's Warbler topped a dead snag; in fact, we got a really good look at a pair before the walk was over. The three-note song of the White-throated Sparrow was obvious; a pod of Canada Jays made a bit of a racket, fussing over their charcoal-gray babies. A flicker was in the mix somewhere, and an immature Great Horned Owl zipped over the treetops and the dirt road.

As we prepared to get in the car, a Northern Goshawk flapped easily over the fields of hay, lined by "goowiddy," a shrubby mix of sheep laurel, Labrador tea (an Athabaskans First Nations herbal concoction), and purple rhododendron. This stop alone garnered 21 species, including five warblers.

After hitting local landmark Bidgood's Freshmart for a snack (salted capelin, yes; jarred seal flipper, no thank you), we trod the wooden walkways of Bidgood Park: full of Cedar Waxwings, sensitive ferns, waterthrushes, alder, dandelion, and orange and red wildflowers as well as prom-goers in their Wednesday best. Black-and-white Warblers vied with Yellow-rumps for territory. We glimpsed a trio of Rusty Blackbirds across the swampy expanse; forget-me-nots dotted the landscape as a septet of waxwings, one eating a

chrisontour84/Shutterstock

Canada Jay (above), formerly known as Gray Jay, is found throughout most of Newfoundland and Labrador, including many locations on the Avalon Peninsula. Newfoundland is home to a subspecies known as *P. c. sanfordi*, which is smaller and darker than the widespread *canadensis* subspecies.

Northern Goshawk (left) is a powerful bird of prey of woodland areas, particularly coniferous and mixed forests. It is found in many areas around the Avalon Peninsula, especially along the eastern coast.

dragonfly (not the usual berries), gathered on a tree.

Later, aboard a boat operated by O'Brien's Whale and Bird Tours, we were treated to a pod of humpbacks so close we could almost feel the spray. (The boat sailed out of Bay Bulls, which is named for the once-common Dovekie, or "bull bird.") Whales are wonderful; no doubt about that. But our birding group was there for the second-largest colony of Atlantic Puffins in the world, and it didn't disappoint.

The numbers don't really tell the story: 25,000 Atlantic Puffins, perhaps 25,000 Common and Thick-Billed Murres, plus a handful of Razorbills and Black Guillemots. It's an incredible sensory overload of so many birds in one place: puffins flapping hummingbird-like to keep their stocky bodies above the waves, kittiwakes careening everywhere, murres tending fastidiously to their cliffside nests. Eagle-eyed Clarke spotted a single Lesser Black-backed Gull and Northern Fulmar near the island — real treasures for the listers on board.

Our comical but knowledgeable narrator for the trip, Con O'Brien, noted that as apex predator of the isle, the Great Black-backed Gull eats four to six adult puffins per day. "It's a real bird-eat-bird world out there," said the laconic founder of the band Irish Descendants. Con later "screeched us in," a tradition that involves a silly hat, a song, and a shot of nostril-clearing local rum. We survived.

Day 4:

Gannetry in motion

Our final day began in fog as the van sped past shimmering ponds and shrouded bays. Just west of St. John's, at 310 meters (1,017 feet) above sea level, we reached the highest altitude on the island; it has subalpine plants akin to the Rockies — subtle shifts in a dramatic landscape.

We parked and crossed a 1929 bridge over the Salmonier River — a fisherman was downstream, hopeful for the river's namesake. A Wilson's Snipe whistled overhead, its beveled feathers producing the only sound. Fox Sparrows and American Goldfinches joined the chorus.

We were constantly crossing waterways in this aqueous place: the Rocky River, then the Colinet River to the top of St. Mary's Bay, the Little Salmonier River, then the Little and Big Barachois Rivers, and finally, the Beckford River. On Route 92 South, we zoomed past Branch, an Irish village doppelgänger known for its sheep and snowcrab boats. Freshwater kettle ponds dotted the spongy meadows lining the road; their fantastical and otherworldly dimension were crucial in selecting nearby Lear's Cove to film

Vaclav Matous/Shutterstock; Brent Barnes/Shutterstock

Disney's forthcoming movie *Peter Pan & Wendy*.

The road led to the home of one of the largest seabird colonies in all of North America: Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve on the southwestern shore of the Avalon. The reserve is a spectacle even from afar, the water flashing turquoise and dark blue, sheer cliffs draped in guano — and a heady whiff of the pungent stuff tingles the nostrils a full kilometer away.

The unique landscape is in the Eastern Hyper-Oceanic Barrens Ecoregion: "flat to rolling, frequent fog, and arctic-alpine plants." We saw some scotch lovage — a cabbage-like plant that the endemic short-tailed swallowtail butterflies feast upon. Caribou or reindeer moss lent distinctive orange and yellow hues to the rocks, its growth enriched by the nitrogen of untold bird droppings. We were fortunate enough to spot a pair of caribou across the same field where we crouched in the misty folds of moss, studying the carnivorous femme fatale of flowers, the purplish pitcher plant, Newfoundland's official plant.

But really, Cape St. Mary's is all about the gannets.

With their six-foot wingspans, subtle golden-brown heads, gray-blue bills, and blue eyes, mature Northern Gannets are startlingly beautiful. So, imagine seeing about 30,000 of them at once: screeching, diving, clacking bills with their partners, and tending eggs, little tufts, or awkward babies, depending on the nest. Like Bald Eagles, gannets don't achieve their full essence until their fourth year.

A certain Paddy Conway of St. Brides (and his mule) led *Wild America* authors Peterson and Fisher to St. Mary's 70 years ago, slogging through boggy footpaths for 10 miles. "Diving from a height, headfirst, like slender arrowheads into the deep blue water beyond the surf," Fisher wrote of the gannets.

AndreAnita/Shutterstock

A Northern Gannet stands on a cliff at Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve. The birds are gleaming white with golden-brown heads, blue eyes, and gray-blue bills. They make dramatic dives into the ocean in search of fish, beginning as much as 100 feet above the surface. They tuck their wings back just before they hit the water, forming the shape of a spear, at about 62 mph (100 kph).

Our trek — from a modern visitor's center — was many times easier than Peterson and Fisher's, but not all birders have been as cautious as we; to wit, an excerpt from "collector" John C. Cahoon's 1889 notebook:

"I climbed to the top of 'Bird Island.' [300 feet]. The fishermen said no one has been ever before to the top and that two men have been killed in the attempt. The Gannets and Murres nearly carried me off and I was obliged to fight my way with a club. I could not get down on my own and was obliged to be taken off by means of a block and rope…" Two years later, Cahoon died in a similar incident at Cuslett, 16 kilometers down the coast.

After Bird Rock, we might have expected a letdown, but at Bird Cove we saw a Great Cormorant on another wave-swept rock, a nice one for the list. Soon afterward, we discussed the distinguishing details of the uncountable black-and-white cliff-dwelling murres: a "bridled" murre is simply a Common with a white eye-ring and line; Thick-billed Murres are blacker than the Common's charcoal hue.

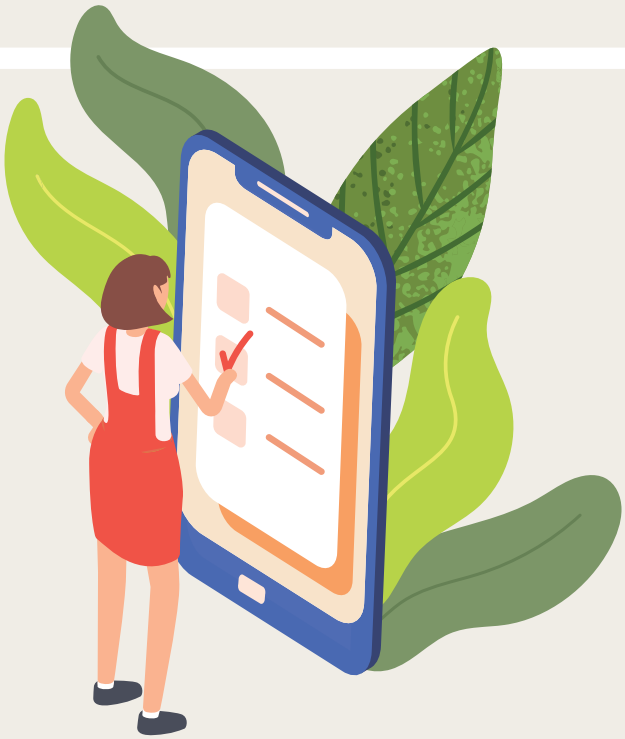
A Northern Harrier popped up again on the road out, just near the 13-kilometer turn-in to the reserve. Past that, going north again, bunches of pitcher plants appeared among the moss. We tramped into the springy, porous fields and even tasted a last-year bog cranberry, growing right next to lovely purple swamp orchids known as the "dragon's mouth." Our feet were getting rather moist.

On our return to St. John's, two Greater Yellowlegs tiptoed a farewell dance around a tidal pond.

Back in St. John's, our group enjoyed a final dinner and pint (or two). We restless birders had to return to our continental nests. For me, the lyrics of *St. John's Waltz,* by Avalon native songwriter Ron Hynes, seemed apt:

So leave the wayward free to wander,
Leave the restless free to roam;
If there's rocks in the bay, if it's old cliché,
You'll find your way back home.

Brian Kluepfel watches raptors and other birds from his porch in Ossining, New York, and is a contributor to Lonely Planet and Fodor's travel guides. In past issues of *BirdWatching*, he has profiled Ecuador's Black-breasted Puffleg, Bolivia's Blue-throated Macaw, Costa Rica's Great Green Macaw, and the Harpy Eagle.



Planning ahead

How to use eBird to prepare for your next birding adventure

BY DOUGLAS REITZ AND CHARLOTTE PAVELKA
PHOTOS BY DOUGLAS REITZ

GoodStudio/Shutterstock

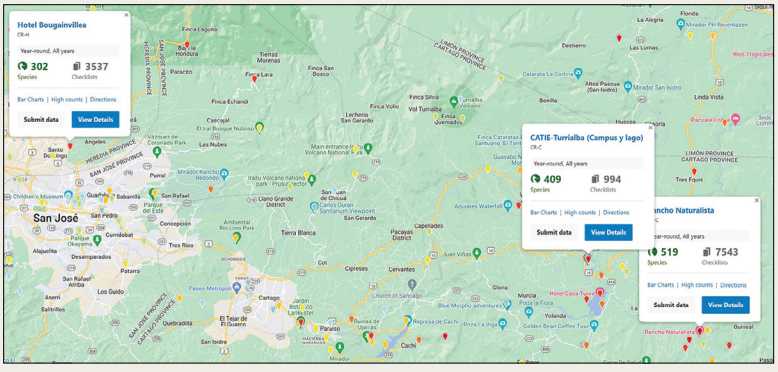
A boat tour on the Rio San Carlos in Boca Tapada, Costa Rica, offered the authors an opportunity to see critically endangered Great Green Macaws and this stunning Scarlet Macaw.

Longing to see some new birds? Whether you go on your next birding adventure with a birding tour company or travel on your own, you will significantly enhance your experience if you use eBird, the popular website operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, to familiarize yourself with the expected birds before your trip.

Of course, it's nice to have a guide help you locate particularly hard-to-find birds, but too much reliance on guides can keep you from learning to spot and identify birds on your own. Before each of our birding excursions, we take time to review and learn about the field marks, songs, and habitats of birds we expect to see on our trip. With a little bit of upfront review, you can be a better birder and be able to find birds in the field more effectively on your own.

There has never been a better time to plan your next birding adventure as there is today, considering all the new birding applications and resources available to help us find our target birds. In this article, we're going to use our recent

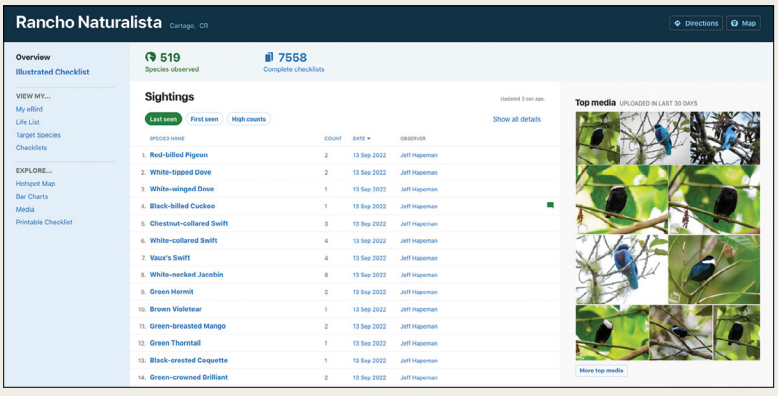
The authors found this pair of Crested Owls at the bird-friendly residence of guide Jose "Cope" Perez. The female owl (right) is larger than the male. The species ranges from southern Mexico to Bolivia.



Use the "Explore" function in eBird to dig into information about individual hotspots that you plan to visit during your trip. We identified these three hotspots in eBird — Hotel Bougainvillea, CATIE-Turrialba, and Rancho Naturalista — and planned the first part of our trip through them on our way to the Caribbean slope. We started reviewing the bird species in these and other areas about one month in advance of the start of our trip.

GoodStudio/Shutterstock

King Vulture is the largest vulture in the Western Hemisphere, except for the condors. The authors saw this bird in the Boca Tapada area. Its orange caruncle is visible on its beak.



Taking the time to review expected birds in advance of your trip will pay off in the field. For any eBird hotspot, click on its name, such as Rancho Naturalista, and you'll see a screen like this one, showing the list of bird species observed in this area. Any photos or other media uploaded from the site within the last month are shown at right. You can sort by "last seen," "first seen," or "high counts," and the list can be narrowed to the birds most likely to be seen during the month(s) of your trip. Pictures and information about each bird can be viewed as you scroll through the list.

trip to Costa Rica as an example of how to utilize eBird to its full potential. It had been 10 years since we had last visited Costa Rica, and that time, we were in the southern part of the country. For this trip, we planned to focus on the country's northern half. In the weeks before leaving, we relied heavily on eBird. We used it to improve our knowledge of the region's birds and plan the trip around key birding hotspots. We made a point of exploring a variety of habitats across the region in hopes of finding more birds. Our itinerary included about a dozen hotspots that we visited during our 23-day trip.

Doing our homework with eBird and the other resources described here paid off: We were able to observe 340 bird species across 82 eBird checklists, including 200 life birds during our trip. Plus, Doug took more than 15,000 photos along the way.

In general, we enjoy the thrill of finding and identifying birds on our own. We only used guides for about 10 percent of our birding time on the trip. The lodges on our trip were a great source for finding and connecting with local guides. For example, Crested Owls were high on our target list and, in general, they are difficult

to find without a guide who knows where to find them. We heard about guide Jose "Cope" Perez in Guápiles through a Costa Rica Birding YouTube video. His bird-friendly residence and nearby areas gave us good looks at Crested Owls, White-tipped Sicklebill, Great Potoo, and three-toed sloth.

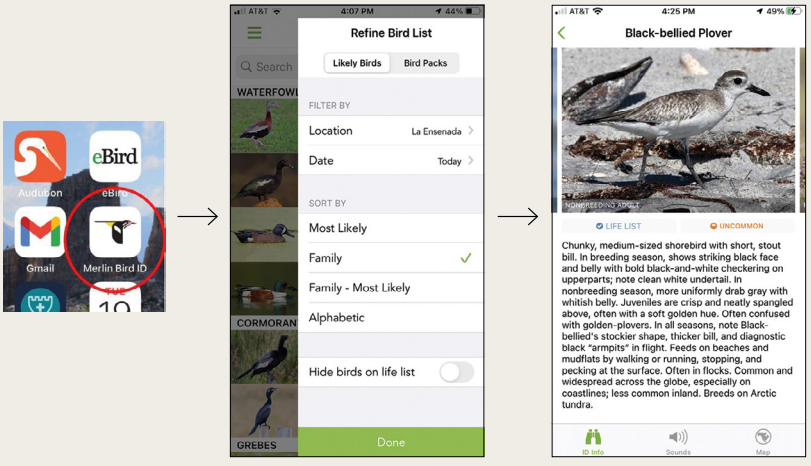
Field guides can be an important resource for locating hard-to-find target birds such as King Vulture, Great Green Macaw, and Scarlet Macaw. Based on recommendations, we stayed several days in Boca Tapada in the far north near the Nicaraguan border during the second part of our trip. The remote location paid off, allowing us to spot all three targets.

We also took the time to plan the logistics of our adventure since we did not go with a birding tour company. Although it requires planning time, traveling on your own has many benefits. If traveling with a partner, the trip cost for two can be typically half the cost of group tours. Added benefits include greater flexibility to tailor your birding and non-birding activities to your preferences, a better mix of hotels and restaurants, more opportunities to have conversations with local people when not in a group, and more of your tourism dollars can go directly to local businesses.

Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages and trade-offs in time and effort. Before the trip, we reviewed Costa Rica travel advisories online, in travel guides, and those issued by the U.S. State Department (travel.state.gov). When we had questions or concerns about travel, we would ask lodge personnel about the safest route to travel. While it is beneficial to have basic Spanish language knowledge (which we have), it is not essential for traveling on your own in Costa Rica, since most restaurant and lodge workers speak at least some English.

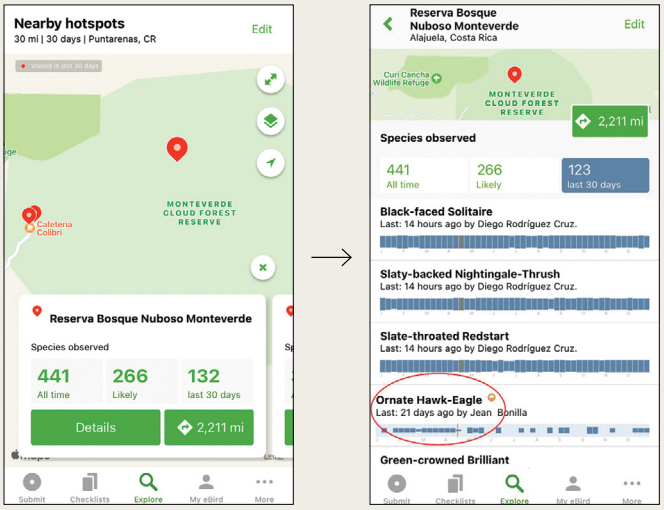
We booked all our lodge accommodations online before the trip (we prefer Booking.com but more remote locations require making reservations directly with the lodge) so that we could reserve more desirable lodges during a popular travel time (March). We rented a 4-wheel drive SUV that gave us extra road clearance, which was beneficial but not essential on the more rugged, potholed roads up to Boca Tapada in the north. We always rent from an established U.S. rental company, which can be helpful in rare cases of rental disputes.

Whether you are a beginning or experienced birder, there has never been a better time to plan your next birding adventure if you take advantage of the wealth of new tools and resources now available to all birders.



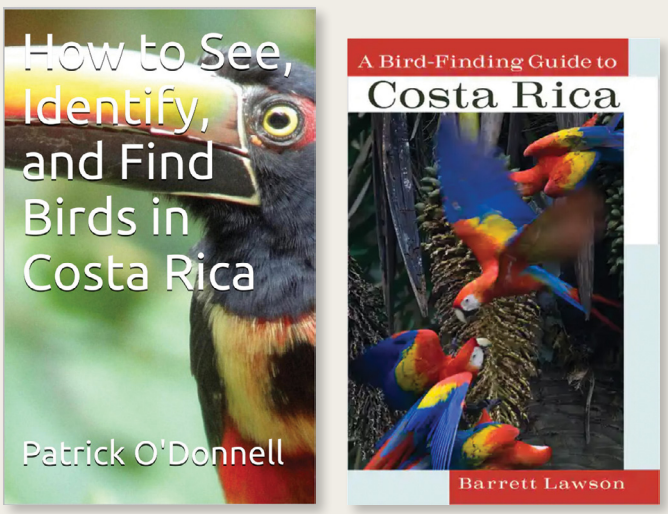
We came upon this group of four shorebird species perched in the branches of a mangrove tree at La Ensenada on the Pacific slope. The sight certainly surprised us since we normally encounter shorebirds foraging on the beach or in mudflats! A Whimbrel is in the center, and it is partially blocking two Willets behind it. On the branches around them are four Ruddy Turnstones. However, we had trouble identifying the bird in the upper left of the photo. That's when the Merlin Bird ID app came in handy. A quick review indicated that it was a Black-bellied Plover, which we didn't recognize without the black belly seen on breeding adults. We scrolled through the photos and saw a non-breeding adult, confirming the ID.

Douglas Reitz and Charlotte Pavelka have been birding for over 10 years in Lake County, Illinois, and around the world. They are retired, lead birding walks for various organizations in the Chicago area, and are actively involved with conservation work.



While you are on your trip, you can continue to explore nearby hotspots using the eBird Mobile app. Tap "Explore" at the bottom of the screen, and you'll see a map of nearby hotspots within a 30-mile radius that have recorded sightings within the last week. You can tap "Edit" to adjust the radius or the number of days of recent sightings. You can then tap the full list, recently tallied birds, or a refined "target" list. Or tap on one of the hotspots in the map to pull up a current list of likely birds at that site. Tap on "Details" to bring up a list of bird species observed recently.

On our trip, we looked up the Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve and decided to go there. We hoped but didn't expect to see the Ornate Hawk-Eagle. However, we did find it. The tip-off to the eagle's presence along the trail was distress calls coming from a group of white-faced capuchins. To our delight, the raptor stayed put and allowed us time to photograph its intense gaze as it scanned the forest for prey.



The guide on the left, a Kindle eBook, was very helpful for finding birding hotspots, while the guide on the right (a hard copy) was a helpful resource throughout our trip.

BIRDING APPS AND RESOURCES

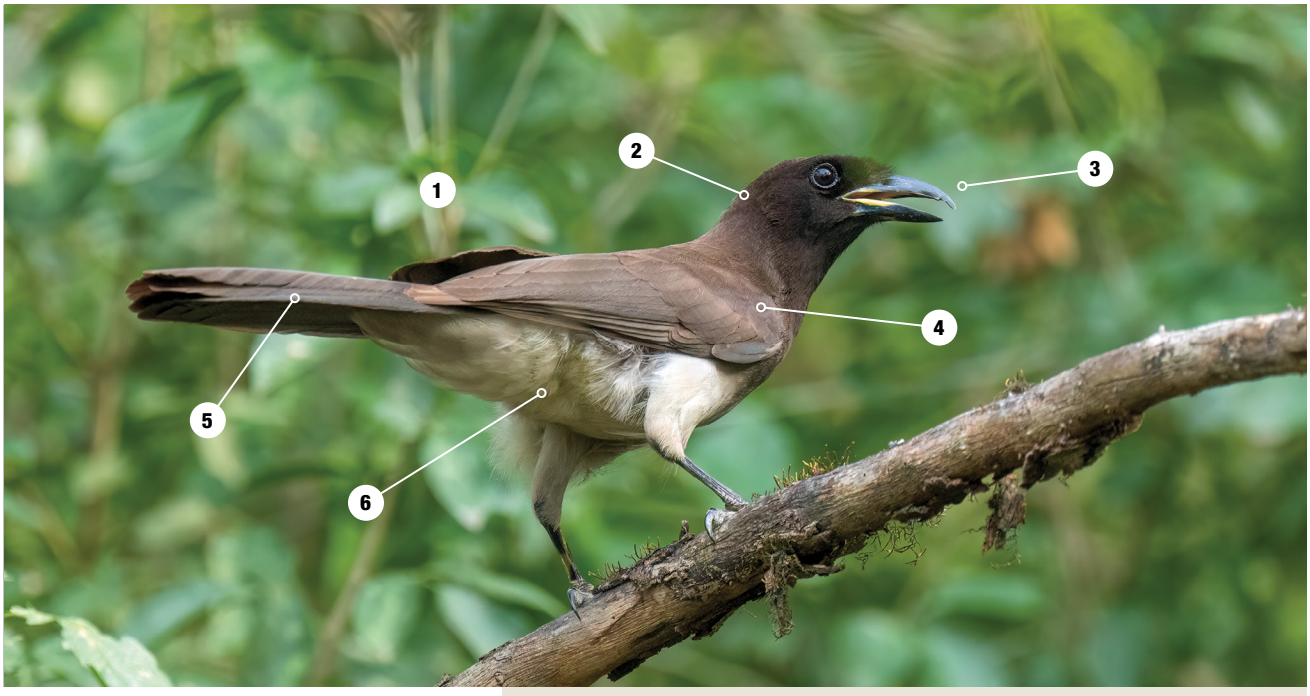
eBird.org
An online platform for recording bird sightings and observations from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

eBird Mobile App
A free app that is perfect for recording sightings in the field. For tips on how to use it, see "A Beginner's Guide to eBird Mobile" at madisonaudubon.org.

Merlin Bird ID App
Available free to download. It uses eBird data to show a tailored list of birds based on your location and time of year. Worldwide coverage. The app includes a Photo ID feature that can help you identify birds in photos on your smartphone's camera roll. Similarly, the Sound ID feature gives you real-time matches to bird calls and songs that can be detected by your phone's microphone. It can work offline once it is installed on your phone and your location is set. Currently available only for birds in the United States and Canada, but other regions are being added.

BirdNET Sound ID App
This app allows a user to select part of a recording that is of interest in hopes of identifying the bird. It can pick up and ID faint sounds that Merlin may not be able to. Wider geographic coverage (3,000 species currently), including Costa Rica. Must have internet availability, so it does not always work well in real time in the field.

ID TIPS: Mexican border specialties



Brown Jay, adult or near-adult
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

Text and captions by Kenn Kaufman
Photographs by Brian E. Small

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES are imaginary lines drawn by humans, of course, and birds don't recognize them. But for birders working on their lists, those lines can take on great importance. Some of the most popular birding spots in the United States are along the Mexican border, and species that stray north across that border are among the greatest attractions.

Bird species everywhere shift their ranges, usually in small degrees, and local birdlife is changing all the time, at least in subtle ways. Such changes are more likely to be noticed along a boundary like that between the U.S. and Mexico. I have been birding the border areas, especially in Arizona and Texas, ever since I was a teenager in the 1970s, so I've had plenty of opportunity to think about these changes in the avifauna.

KEY FIELD MARKS

1. Much larger than other U.S. jays
2. Sooty head, darker than back, with no crest
3. Bill mostly or entirely black in adults, mostly yellow in juveniles
4. Dull brown back, wings, and chest
5. Long, dark tail (farther south, many have white tail tips)
6. Lower underparts creamy to off-white

LOOKING FOR BORDER BIRDS

- **Where to look.** Chances for stray Mexican birds are best near the border itself, but good habitat farther north — such as streams in canyons or isolated woods — may produce.
- **When to look.** Different species have different seasonal patterns, some of which are mentioned in this column.
- **Study ahead of time.** A rare wanderer from Mexico may not *look* rare. Study your field guides to prepare to recognize unusual finds.
- **Tune in to the network of birders.** In hotspots near the border, where many birders visit at all seasons, rarities might be discovered any time. Check the local rare bird alerts regularly if you want to make sure you don't miss nearby possibilities.

Throughout the Southwest, the general trend is for species to expand their ranges northward, perhaps reflecting the gradual warming of the climate. This has been going on for a long time. The Great-tailed Grackle, now abundant and widespread, was never recorded in Arizona before 1935, and it didn't reach California until the 1960s. The Five-striped Sparrow, Buff-collared Nightjar, and Thick-billed Kingbird were not seen north of the border until the late 1950s, and now they're found in Arizona every year. In Texas, the Ringed Kingfisher was only a rare visitor before the 1970s, and the same was true for Clay-colored Thrush before the 1980s; now they are both easy to find in the southern third of the state. Before the 1990s, Tropical Kingbirds were summer residents in Arizona but unknown in Texas (aside from one old record). Now they are common in southern Texas as well, remaining all year.

Not all northward expansions have been so smooth. Eared Quetzals have appeared in Arizona mountains several times since 1977 and have even nested there, but after each micro-invasion, they may disappear for several years. Brown Jays colonized the Falcon Dam area of southern Texas in the 1970s and were found reliably for about three decades; then their numbers dropped, and they've been absent since about 2012. But they are still common just a short distance south of the border, and they could reappear any time.

Ace photographer Brian Small had caught up with many of the border specialties in the southwestern U.S. in past years. But to build up his collection and fill in some gaps, in May 2022, he took the next logical step: He traveled to northern Mexico. In the Cumbres de Monterrey National Park in Nuevo León, he found an abundance of subjects for his lens, including many that are among the most sought-after species on the U.S. side of the line.

For this column, we selected seven of the birds that have the most unusual or surprising histories in the borderlands. We hope you'll enjoy this gallery of some of the most intriguing birds on the continent.

Crimson-collared Grosbeak, adult male
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

Classified in a genus by itself, this unique grosbeak is endemic to northeastern Mexico. Often skulking in dense thickets, it may be detected first by its thin, whistled call. The colorful adult males are unmistakable; females and immatures are mostly dull olive but with the same black hood as the males. Crimson-collared Grosbeaks are rare strays to southern Texas, found most often in the lower Rio Grande Valley but with some occurrences halfway up the Texas coast. Most records are for fall, winter, or early spring. Some winters produce mini invasions, with up to a dozen or more individuals found at scattered locations; some of these birds may remain for weeks, to the delight of visiting birders.

Rose-throated Becard, adult male
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

Widespread in lowlands from Mexico to western Panama, this species barely enters the United States. Single specimens were found in Arizona in 1888 and in Texas in 1891, but it was another half-century before the species was detected north of the border again. Then, in the 1940s, nesting populations were discovered in southern Texas and southeastern Arizona. In both regions, numbers increased for a few years and then declined. Currently, the becard is mostly a rare winter visitor to southern Texas and a very uncommon local resident in Arizona, sporadically nesting. Two distinct subspecies are represented in these areas: those of northeastern Mexico and Texas (like the male in this photo) average darker than those seen in Arizona.

PEERING BEYOND THE BORDER

At first thought, it might seem that any tropical bird could appear anywhere along the U.S./Mexico border. But, in fact, distinct patterns emerge about where these birds appear.

It's worthwhile to spend time studying maps of northern Mexico to understand why certain birds show up where they do. For example, relatively few tropical land birds wander north into California. Why? Because immediately south of that state is the peninsula of Baja California. Baja has some distinctive endemics but far fewer tropical species than the adjacent mainland of Mexico.

The Mexican mainland just south of the border features lowlands along both coasts (south of western Arizona and southern Texas), a high central plateau (south of New Mexico and western Texas), and mountains separating the plateau from the coastal plains. In Arizona, most interesting stray birds come from the mountains, not the desert lowlands. Southern Texas extends farther south and receives more vagrant birds overall, both from the humid Gulf lowlands and from isolated mountain ranges close to the border. In general, first U.S. records are more likely to be found in southern Texas than in southeastern Arizona, and even fewer are expected in the area in between. But there are always exceptions. Central New Mexico hosted two of the most amazing vagrants of this century: a Sungrebe in 2008 and a Rufous-necked Wood-Rail in 2013. Anything is possible!

Bushtit, male, "Black-eared" form
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

At one time, the "Black-eared Bushtit" was a major target for birders visiting Big Bend National Park in western Texas. It looked like Bushtits elsewhere in the western interior but with a black face mask. Studies in the 1960s showed that it wasn't a distinct species but part of a complex pattern of variation. Black on the ear coverts is most prevalent on males (especially juveniles), least frequent on females (especially adults), and increases toward the south. In Big Bend, black ear patches can be seen on all the juvenile males, more than half the adult males, about half the juvenile females, and none of the adult females. Elsewhere in the West, juvenile males sometimes show black on the face.

Morelet's Seedeater, adult male
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

Until the mid-1960s, this seedeater was fairly common in weedy fields at the southern tip of Texas. It disappeared from that region and is now seen regularly farther up the Rio Grande Valley, mostly in the area from Falcon Dam to Laredo and Del Rio. Its name has changed more recently than its status: It was called White-collared Seedeater until 2018, when it was split from another form in western Mexico. Male Morelet's Seedeaters from farther south in Mexico and Central America are crisply patterned in black and white, but Texas males always have a mottled look like the bird in the photo. Females, drab buff with narrow wing bars, are best identified by their small size and stubby, rounded bills.

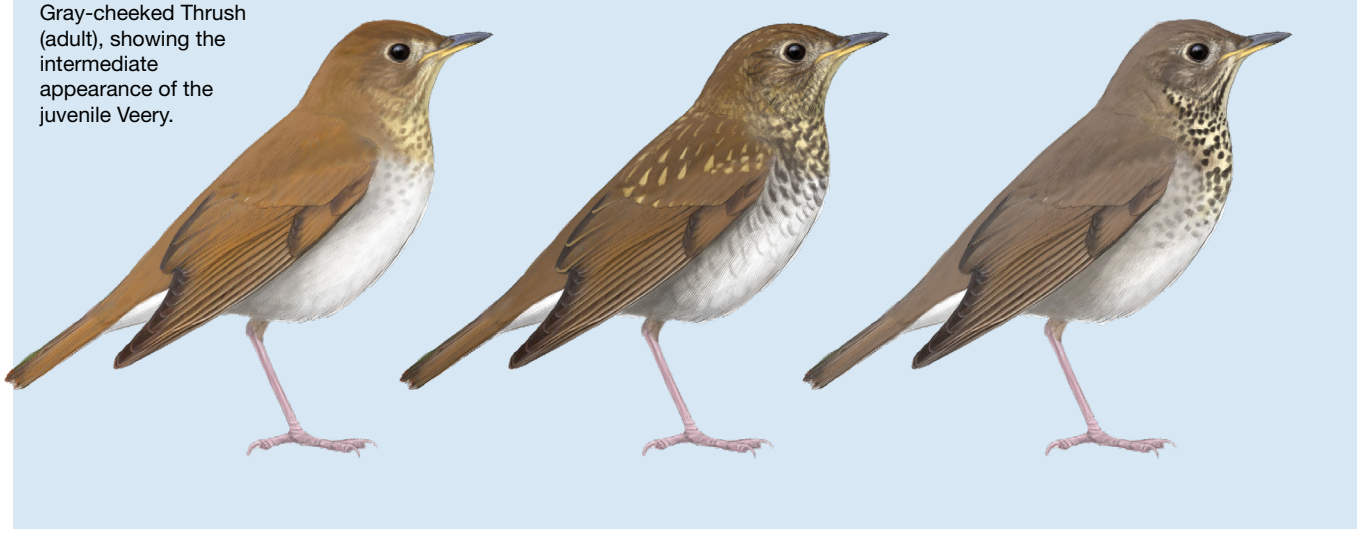
Crescent-chested Warbler, adult
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

Pennsylvania birder Dan Heathcote, on his first visit to Arizona, found a Crescent-chested Warbler in Garden Canyon of the Huachuca Mountains in September 1983. It was enjoyed by many (including me) over the next 12 days. This was the first Crescent-chested ever documented in the U.S. Remarkably, a pair was found in a nearby canyon the following spring, and there have been many sightings since, averaging about four per decade. Records have come from throughout southeastern Arizona (and once from western Texas), mostly from mountain canyons but also from along lowland streams. The small crescent on the chest can be faint or absent on females, and the bold white eyebrow makes a better and more consistent field mark.

Golden-crowned Warbler, adult
May in Nuevo León, Mexico

A member of a distinctive tropical group of warblers, the Golden-crowned Warbler has a long history north of the border. At the southern tip of Texas, two specimens were collected in 1892, and one was sighted in 1943. The first modern record was of one in Brownsville, Texas, in December 1979 that stayed for two months. Since then, Texas has had almost 30 more records. Most have been in the lower Rio Grande Valley between late fall and early spring, and many have involved individuals that remained for weeks. There are also records for the central Texas coast (including one that returned for three winters) and single records for Louisiana, New Mexico, and Colorado — impressive for a bird considered non-migratory!

Kenn Kaufman is the author of many books on birds and nature. Brian E. Small is a nature photographer whose photos illustrate many books.



Left to right: Veery (adult), Veery (juvenile), and Gray-cheeked Thrush (adult), showing the intermediate appearance of the juvenile Veery.

Keep an open mind

When we spot an apparent rare bird, it's critical to consider other possibilities

Art and text by David Allen Sibley

ONE OF THE most difficult challenges in bird identification (as in life) is to keep your mind open to all possibilities. We all have a desire for certainty. We want to know the answer, with no ambiguity, yes or no, and once we have settled on an answer, we resist any challenge. We tend to emphasize only the evidence that confirms our answer and to ignore or discount evidence that refutes it.

As we learn to identify birds — building up a mental library of what birds look like in different seasons, lighting, postures, etc. — we need to be sure those birds are correctly identified. Some are not, that is a given, but we must be wary of drawing conclusions based on uncertain sightings and constantly testing, confirming, and reconfirming all the field marks we think we know.

I can illustrate this with an experience I had last August near my home in Massachusetts. Peering into a thicket, I saw several Veeries and one different-looking thrush. It was in juvenile plumage, darker and drabber brown above, with much heavier dark spotting on the breast and dusky flanks — all field marks of Gray-cheeked Thrush. It was cooperative, and I watched it for about two minutes, confirming all the field marks.

This would be a remarkable record, exceptionally early for a fall migrant and maybe the first time a Gray-cheeked Thrush in juvenile plumage had been recorded in Massachusetts! But I was confident of the identification and thought this bird's arrival might be related to the ongoing drought in the region.

Researching the subject later for some illustrations, I found photographs of Veery in juvenile plumage that looked dark with heavy spotting. This gave me some momentary doubt, but I was still convinced that it had to be a Gray-cheeked Thrush, now based entirely on the dusky flanks.

It took a couple more days, and a conscious effort to think about it objectively, to conclude that it was almost certainly a juvenile Veery, regardless of how dark I thought the flanks were.

Mistakes are inevitable, and our natural tendency to resist admitting them will lead to more mistakes. On the other hand, our misidentifications offer great learning opportunities if we are open to that, and I think this is a way of thinking that can be learned and practiced. Beware of claiming absolute certainty, and practice stepping back and thinking, "What else could explain this?" Your bird identification skills will be better for it.

David Allen Sibley is the author of *The Sibley Guide to Birds, Second Edition, What It's Like to Be a Bird*, and other books. In our last issue, he wrote about subtle differences between Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers.

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Scan to learn more:

An American Oystercatcher watches over its chick on a beach. Marie Read took the photo using the tilting screen on the back of her camera as shown on the next page.

The next chapter

Bird photography for older photographers

Text and photos by Marie Read

LAST WINTER, AT the tender age of 71, I underwent a procedure that would have a major impact on my life: a total knee replacement. My previously stiff and painful arthritic knee has improved substantially, and I'm pretty much back to my normal active lifestyle. But the healing process was slow and the physical therapy challenging, and I confess there were days when I despaired of ever again moving around easily with my photography gear.

That started me thinking about ways we bird photographers might update our equipment to take advantage of new technology and innovative products, as well as adapt our techniques and our own behavior to let us pursue our passion as we grow older and less mobile.

Downsize

Bulky cameras and giant telephoto lenses are par for the course for any serious photographer. Two decades ago, I sometimes would carry around two entire systems. My primary bird gear was a Canon DSLR body fitted with a 500mm f/4

telephoto lens supported on a tripod. Slung over my shoulder was a second body with a 100-400mm zoom lens for birds in flight. As the years passed, though, lugging all that weight sapped my energy and motivation. Bird photography was no longer fun. The solution? Downsize!

Luckily, this is the perfect time to lighten that load. We now have mirrorless cameras that are more compact and lighter in weight than their DLSR predecessors. Three years ago, I switched to a mirrorless Sony a9, whose fast and accurate autofocus system made it the best option for bird photography at that time. Since then, all the camera manufacturers have jumped into the fray with a wide array of mirrorless bodies, including models in Canon's R series and Nikon's Z series, as well as Sony's a1 and a9 II, OM System's OM1, and others. (For detailed recommendations, see "Camera makers embrace mirrorless technology" by William Jobes, BirdWatching, July/August 2022 issue.)

Author Marie Read uses the camera's tilting rear screen rather than the viewfinder to view the subject. This is more comfortable than lying prone to photograph birds from a low angle. The camera and lens are mounted on a tripod head atop a Skimmer Ground Pod.

Let's not forget lenses. Downsizing doesn't mean sacrificing the telephoto reach so vital to get a decent image size of our small and flighty subjects because there's a new generation of lightweight, compact telephotos to pair with the mirrorless bodies. Among the various options, Nikon's 500mm PF and Canon's RF 100-500mm have proven themselves to be awesome bird lenses. Pro friends who use them report good results even when paired with a teleconverter. My current bird lens is Sony's 200-600mm, a terrific zoom that covers almost the entire focal range of my two previous telephotos. How's that for a weight-saving switch!

It's true that these compact zooms are not as fast as the big prime lenses with their large, light-gathering front elements, meaning focus acquisition may be a little slower (particularly in low light and/or when used with a teleconverter). Despite that, for me, the mirrorless revolution has been a game-changer. Bird photography is fun again!

Take a load off

Gone are the days of lugging around a huge tripod-mounted rig resting on your shoulder! Many photographers find the new cameras and lenses to be easily hand-holdable. But neck strain and back fatigue still can be a problem during long hours in the field. Fortunately, a number of great products make it easier to carry gear and have it always at the ready.

One thing sure to lead to a pain in the neck is hanging your camera 'round your neck on the manufacturer-provided strap. Instead, switch to a cross-body camera sling strap, a design that angles the strap across your chest, redistributing the camera and lens weight away from your neck and shoulders. My strap of choice is from BlackRapid (blackrapid.com). Another recommended brand is Peak Design (peakdesign.com).

Or you can use a wearable camera support that holds the camera close to the body rather than dangling from a strap. Consider the waist belt made by

Spider Inc. (spiderholster.com). It uses two metal plates: one attached to the camera that clips onto the other on the belt, holding the camera in place. One of my photographer friends swears by this system, finding it much more comfortable than a strap to carry her camera/telephoto combo. Or consider a camera harness such as those made by Cotton Inc. (cottoncarrier.com) that holds the camera close to your chest. Hands-free designs such as these are a great option if you need to use hiking poles for stability while walking around.

Trudging along a beach through deep, soft sand carrying heavy gear can be particularly tiring. You might prefer a beach cart. Choose one with large wheels and/or fat tires with thick treads because these types tend to move most smoothly and easily over bumpy ground and across sand. The typical beach cart used for family outings has four wheels, but another suggestion is a two-wheeled "beach rolly" such as the Eckla Rolly Beach Trolley. It's pricey but has been recommended by photographers.

Gone are the days of lugging around a huge tripod-mounted rig resting on your shoulder! Many photographers find the new cameras and lenses to be easily hand-holdable.

The lowdown on low-angle shooting

The most compelling bird images are shot from the subject's eye level. For ground-dwelling species, that requires getting down on the ground, something that becomes a lot more challenging as we get older. (Yes, getting vertical again is even harder!) Typically, you lie on your belly with the camera supported either on a ground pod, a tripod with flattened-out legs, or even directly on the ground, and then crane your neck upward to look through the viewfinder. Ouch! Luckily, there's an easier way, thanks to new camera design. Rather than compose through the viewfinder, use the tilting rear screen found on many newer models. Now you can sit, rather than lie, on the ground, angle the screen out, and look down onto it. That should help you avoid neck strain. Composing via the rear screen does take practice, especially if the subject is moving around, but once you get used to the new method, it works well.

Some photographers might think a right-angle viewfinder attachment would achieve the same effect. But to see through the viewfinder requires leaning down lower than looking at an angled-out screen, leading to neck and/or back pain. Furthermore, these attachments are not available for most camera models, and in my experience, the one-size-fits-all types don't fit anything very well.

Crawling around to approach birds can wreak havoc on sore, aging knees. Knee pads, such as those made for construction workers or for gardening, can help. It was many months before I dared put any weight on my new knee, and even a year post surgery, I still can't tolerate the dense foam and/or hard shells of conventional knee pads. Instead, I purchased Total Comfort memory-foam knee pads, recommended by orthopedists. Now I can crawl around like a 2-year-old!

Use it or lose it

It's important for bird photographers of any age to be in good physical shape, but staying fit is even more important for older folks. Having stamina, strength, good balance, and flexibility will keep you out in the field with the birds longer and help avoid injuries. So, renew that lapsed gym membership or sign up for a fitness class, ideally one that includes weight training and stretching, such as Jazzercise or Pilates.

While we photographers need to stay fit to best pursue our craft, the converse is also true: Bird photography itself provides health benefits, encouraging a healthy outdoor lifestyle that's good for body AND soul! Think of it as a win-win situation — a positive outlook to keep in mind as we head into this new stage of life.

Marie Read is an award-winning bird photographer and author. Her photos and articles have appeared in *BirdWatching, Living Bird, Nature's Best*, and other magazines. Her book, *Mastering Bird Photography: The Art, Craft, and Technique of Photographing Birds and Their Behavior* (Rocky Nook), was released in 2019.

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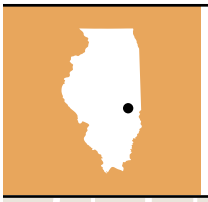
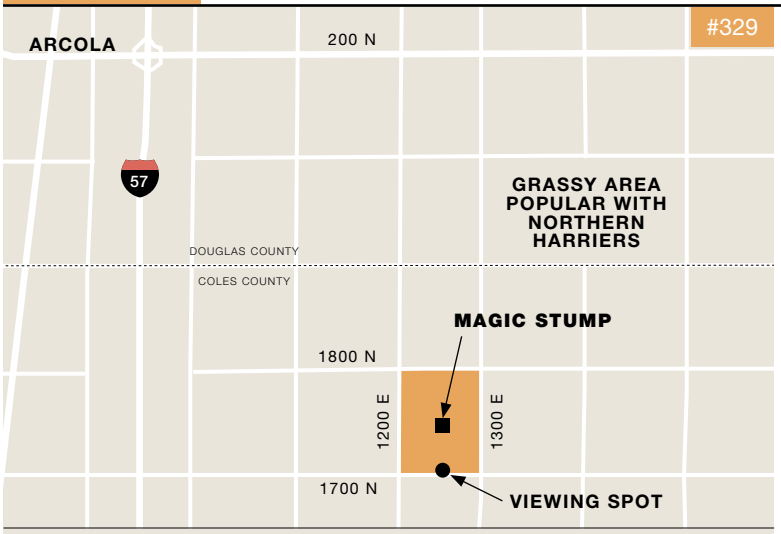


The Magic Stump

COLES COUNTY, ILLINOIS

39°37'36.95"N 88°14'23.10"W



One of my favorite things to do on frigid winter mornings is drive out to agricultural fields and look for roadside birds, particularly raptors and passerines like Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs, and Snow Buntings. Perhaps no place in Illinois symbolizes winter birding like the Magic Stump, an old Osage orange tree that has garnered local renown for being the winter roosting site of two highly uncommon Prairie Falcons.

It's not just the stump and the falcons that are the attractions, though. An array of wintering raptors can be found all around the surrounding farm fields, including American Kestrels, Merlins, Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawks, and Short-eared Owls. Smith's Longspurs can be found in the fall and early spring, and flooded agricultural fields are havens for shorebird species, including American Golden-Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Wilson's Snipe. For the best experience, a scope or 10X-plus binoculars are highly recommended.

It's a harsh environment — temperatures often drop to single digits, and wind is almost constant — but the reward is the wide diversity of species in a place that doesn't particularly stand out on a map. *— Bob Dolgan. Bob is a Chicago-based birder and filmmaker who recently completed a documentary about the Magic Stump (www.themagicstump.com).*

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT
Agricultural fields, with prairie borders and intermittent wetlands.

TERRAIN
Flat, with subtle ridges. Mostly car birding, with occasional stops to set up a scope. Very little walking necessary. Drive the grid of county roads for at least a few hours.

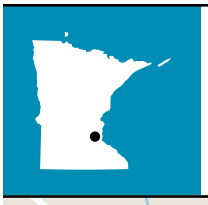
BIRDS
Year-round: American Kestrel, Bald Eagle, Eastern Meadowlark, Horned Lark, Killdeer, Red-tailed Hawk, Migration: American Golden-Plover, American Pipit, Peregrine Falcon, Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Savannah Sparrow, Smith's Longspur, Vesper Sparrow, Wilson's Snipe. Winter: American Tree Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, Merlin, Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Short-eared Owl, Snow Bunting, Golden Eagle (rare), Snowy Owl (rare), Gyrfalcon (rare).

WHEN TO GO
First light is ideal. Best lighting at sunrise and sunset. Activity all day in winter.

AMENITIES
Nearest gas stations, restaurants, and other services are in Arcola, approximately 8 miles from the area around the stump.

ACCESS
The stump sits on private land and only should be viewed from the road. Take caution when exiting your vehicle as speed limits are 55 mph on many of the roads. Avoid the dirt road west of the stump, 1200 E, when it's wet as the local farmer maintains it, and it will get rutted when muddy. A roadside location that provides a nice view of the stump from the south is 39.623237, -88.239199.

TIPS
Layer up, and be sure to wear gloves.



Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

44°56'34.19"N 93°5'53.02"W

The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area is a unit of the National Park Service that covers 54,000 acres alongside the Mississippi from the suburb Ramsey southeast through the Twin Cities and on past the city of Hastings. You can find lots of birds, dragonflies, reptiles, mammals, and other wildlife along the 72-mile stretch of the river.

You can access the recreation area from a few dozen regional and state parks, nature sanctuaries, dams, and other properties. It also has two excellent visitor centers, one in Minneapolis and another in St. Paul. I recommend starting at the Mississippi River Visitor Center, which is located in the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul. It has interactive exhibits, and you can pick up maps and get tips on recent notable bird sightings from a park ranger. In addition, ranger tours, field trips, and other events are available through Mississippi Park Connection (parkconnection.org).

One access point that I enjoy is Crosby Farm Regional Park, which is mostly a floodplain forest with more than 6 miles of paved trails. On a recent visit, I saw Yellow Warblers, Great Blue Herons, and other species that nest along the river.

— Caroline Blaha-Black. Caroline is a freelance writer, author, and master naturalist who lives in Wisconsin. She wrote about a Hawaiian hotspot in our last issue.

AT A GLANCE

HABITAT
Prairie, forest, river, floodplains.

TERRAIN
Trails range from easy and flat to more demanding and steeper. Paved roads. Some locations within the recreation area wheelchair-accessible.

BIRDS
Spring through fall: Killdeer, Eastern Bluebird, American Coot, Double-crested Cormorant, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Wood Duck, Great Egret, Baltimore Oriole, Brown Thrasher, Spotted Sandpiper, Bank and Tree Swallows, Tundra Swan, Yellow Warbler. Winter: Northern Flicker. Year-round: Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Red-tailed Hawk, Belted Kingfisher.

WHEN TO GO
Year-round.

AMENITIES
Visitor center open daily 9-5, closed Mondays, free admission, with modern wheelchair access and ramps.

ACCESS
Partnership park that encompasses federal, state, regional, and local public lands. Open daily year-round, though some properties may close on holidays. Hours vary by property. Check each park for more information, fees, and hours.

TIPS
Stay on trails and designated overlooks. Do not enter closed-off areas. Never walk on the ice-covered river, and be careful around the edge of bluffs. Bring water, hat, sunscreen, backpack, sturdy hiking shoes.

FOR MORE INFO
Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, www.nps.gov/miss.

FINAL FRAME

CANON EOS 70D, CANON EF300MM F/4L IS USM LENS

JARED CLARKE

Humpback whale and Great Shearwater

In August 2020, Jared Clarke was on a near-shore pelagic boat trip in Bonavista Bay, off the northeastern coast of Newfoundland, when he made this incredible photo. Dozens of whales and thousands of shearwaters were in the area. “Believe it or not,” he says, “I was initially following this shearwater with my camera when the whale decided to photobomb the bird’s moment in the spotlight!” The photo was just one highlight of an astonishing day of observing wildlife. Clarke and his shipmates tallied 29 bird species, including 20,000 Sooty Shearwaters, 7,500 Common Murres, 2,500 Great Shearwaters, 1,000 Black-legged Kittiwakes, 250 Northern Gannets, terns, puffins, Razorbills, shorebirds, and a single Great Skua that was wearing a leg band. The band numbers revealed that it had received the jewelry on Fair Isle in northern Scotland — more than 2,100 miles across the ocean.

Blackburnian Warbler
Photo: Javier Gonzalez,
SPI Birding, Nature Center & Alligator Sanctuary

OPEN WATER OR WETLAND?

Where will I view from today?

It's a nice day – the bird blinds on the water look inviting. Then again, the 3,300 feet of boardwalk across the marsh might be the sweet spot. Shoot! I almost forgot about the five-story viewing tower. Decisions, decisions...

If I was a rare bird, where would I be?

That's as hard as it gets.

South Padre ISLAND

sopadre.com

Roseate Spoonbill
Photo: Javier Gonzalez,
SPI Birding, Nature Center & Alligator Sanctuary