

Meditations of a Beginning Birder

By Julie Cramer-Le

April 11, 2022, marked the one-year anniversary of my first eBird checklist. With that start, I submitted my first list, counting the red-winged blackbirds, grackles, and finches that were squabbling over my birdfeeder, scattering seeds across the lawn and making a cacophony of squeaks, whistles, clicks, and trills.

It turns out that good old-fashioned spite accomplished what my mother had been trying to do for over a decade and got me interested in the birds outside my window. Like many people, I was working from home in 2021, but my newfound commute-free time wasn't the impetus for birding. Instead, it was a neighborhood dispute. The person who lived across the street had been complaining that my next-door neighbor spent too much time sitting in his car in the driveway after work. I was extremely irritated -- I knew my neighbor and his wife both had full-time jobs and a daughter under five. I assumed those driveway moments (which never lasted more than ten minutes!) were just an effort to get a little quiet time alone before moving from job responsibilities to home responsibilities. If the neighbor across the street found people sitting in their cars minding their own business so annoying, well, he was going to have to contend with two households doing it!

It turns out, though, that sitting in your car in the driveway for an hour after work is pretty boring, so I decided to hang up a feeder in the tree right next to my car. At first, I mostly saw grackles, red-winged blackbirds and mourning doves. The grackles sucked me in. They would prance and strut around, puff up their glossy black feathers, and tumble in aerial somersaults as they knocked each other off the feeder. Then I started to notice how the squabbling would rain seeds down on the mourning doves underneath. The mourning doves were soft-looking, with sweet dopey faces, and were always the last bird to fly away if a car pulled through the driveway of our apartment complex, as if they were waiting until the last possible second to make sure they really, absolutely had to expend the energy. I liked the cardinal pair who eventually showed up, and the tiny stripey woodpecker that began to attend after I put out suet. I learned to tell the difference between the house finches and house sparrows, even though initially the females looked identical to me.

Then, one day, a new bird showed up, a soft brown bird about the size of a starling. I frantically texted my mom: What was this new bird? I deleted a million apps on my ancient smartphone so I could download the free birding app Merlin. It turned out that the new bird was actually the female of a bird that had been hanging around for a while -- the brown-headed cowbird. Not the most exotic of feeder visitors! But that rush of adrenaline and excitement stuck with me. I decided I needed to go further afield. I called my mom again and this time I told her that I was hoping she would help me buy some binoculars for my birthday.

Over the next eleven months, I logged 206 species of birds, most of them in New Jersey, with a few exceptions in New York and Pennsylvania. I am captivated by the diversity of birds within this small geographical area. I've been to the Raritan Bay Mudflats in South Amboy to see willets, oystercatchers, and grebes, and to brush up on my gulls. I've seen teals (both blue- and green-winged!), American coots, pintails, ring-necked ducks, gadwalls, and bufflehead at the Great Swamp. I've gone on NJ Audubon trips; I've gone out by myself and hiked around for hours in fields getting hot and sweaty and cranky. I've definitely trespassed on some private property. I've discovered so much of this state that I didn't know about or appreciate before -- when I look at overgrown meadows or stands of phragmites or chunks of forest as I drive by, I think to myself, "there are **birds** in there!"

I've learned why so many birders also know a ton about butterflies, trees, wild plants, and other wildlife. I see how interconnected everything is -- how the poison ivy berries feed the yellow-rumped warblers in the winter, how the irritating clouds of gnats sustain chimney swifts. I started planting a native wildflower garden to host caterpillars so the birds around my apartment can have protein-rich food for their nestlings.

It's hard to describe, except maybe to other birders, how joyful and wild it feels to stand in a marsh at 8pm, shoes slowly filling with water, raptly watching a woodcock turn in circles, peent-ing away, or why I

would get up at 5 am to drive down to Cumberland County to see a great horned owl on her nest. The exhilaration of seeing a new or elusive bird is incredible. It surges through you and makes you love the world around you fiercely. It feels like a connection between your consciousness and the greater scope of the universe, something both personal and on an existential scale.

The day after we put my beloved cat to sleep due to kidney failure, I went birding near Spruce Run and saw my first two hermit thrushes. I stood in the trees just off the path, the sun through the leaves scalloping the forest floor like the pattern in a shorebird's wings. I thought about how everything is interconnected, how my parents had come to take Penny's body and bury it in their garden, where she would break down into energy that would nourish the grass and plants, and those plants would grow into hosts for insects that would feed birds, and how the hermit thrushes, with their spotted breasts and ruddy tails, would eat and grow and die and go back to the earth too. I thought about how many tiny things make up the world around us and are constantly moving through life and death, and how sometimes we are consequential to them and sometimes we are just watching through binoculars while they hop from branch to branch.

The magic of birding is that it opens the door into this realization, or at least it did for me. It's given and still gives me a greater appreciation for the natural world and the natural patterns that are part of it. I get excited when I see a rail or a kinglet, but I also get excited for turkey vultures and herring gulls, for the role they all play in keeping the environment balanced. I look forward to expanding beyond my northeastern home and hope this year is just the first of decades.

Not bad for a project that started with a little neighborly spite.

Photo credits:

- 1) Robin LaCicero, Audubon Photo Award 2018
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