

Birding While Injured

By Gary Metzger

For as long as I can remember Audubon has touted bird watching as a wonderful way for almost anyone, anywhere, to connect with the natural world through the enjoyment of birds. Birds are wildlife that come to us in our back yards, in our parks and in the wonderful forests and wild lands that we have in abundance here in Pennsylvania. The message has also been that birding can be a lifetime activity, not something we “outgrow” like our favorite athletic endeavor. My wife, Joan, and I have recently fully experienced just how accurate that Audubon message really is.

OK, the “injury” was a surgical procedure to replace Joan’s worn out hip joint—the point is that prior to the surgery, and during the month and a half recovery period, her mobility was limited to tootling around the house. Around this time, mid-June, word began to spread about a “songbird mortality event” in the Mid-Atlantic states and recommendations came from the Pennsylvania Game Commission and from Audubon that bird feeders should be taken down to avoid congregating birds and possibly spreading this mysterious illness. So there we were in mid-summer with no birds at our feeders and the spring migration and early summer breeding season behind us. Obviously then the bird watching that is normally such a joyous part of our lives would have to be put on pause.

Not so much, as it turns out! I bundled Joan into the car and we toured some of our favorite, vehicle accessible birding locations: the entrance road to Lime Bluff Recreation Area, the parking area up on the hill at Glacier Pools Preserve, the parking area at Muncy Heritage Park, our favorite back road birdy spots in our part of Lycoming County, and especially the remote, dirt roads in the nearby State Game Lands, State Forest Lands and ridge tops and forested valleys in the general vicinity of our home near Hughesville. In spite of our inability to “hoof it” through any of this wonderful habitat, and the fact that much of the spring migration and early summer breeding activity was winding down with the season, we were finding and identifying 40 to 50 species during each 2 - 2.5 hour outing. We were delighted, and frankly a little amazed that we could find birds in such abundance this way.

Full disclosure here— many of the species we encountered we identified by ear. We were able to positively identify the birds by their songs and calls, even though we couldn’t always see them from our roadside vantage point. We would drive along or park with all the windows and the moon roof of our vehicle wide open, and the songs would come flowing in. Some we knew well and heard and saw frequently like Northern Cardinals, Song Sparrows, Field Sparrows, Eastern Towhees, Eastern Meadowlarks, Blue Jays, Wood Thrushes, Red-winged Blackbirds, House Sparrows, House Finches, House and Carolina Wrens, etc., etc. Others we had to use our Audubon Bird app on our iPhones to study the photos and listen to the recorded calls and songs before we were certain we had our bird. Was that a woodland American Robin, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak or a Scarlet Tanager? How about that Hooded Warbler; or was it a Chestnut-sided Warbler, or an American Redstart? Those birds took some time, and the study and learning is a big part of what we love and find so intriguing about bird watching.

A month or so ago the Cornell Lab of Ornithology added a new feature to their Merlin bird identification smart phone app. This “Birding By Ear” feature is going to be incredibly helpful to anyone who wants to learn about birds by the sounds they make as well as what they look like and where and how they live their lives. The feature allows you to push a sound ID “microphone” and record a bird sound on your phone, and the Merlin app identifies the bird—incredible! It’s not 100% accurate and Cornell doesn’t recommend using only the sound ID feature to identify a given bird, but it certainly is a tremendous help. Our experience with the new feature so far has been extremely positive.

The message I’m trying to convey here is that we can still really enjoy our area’s wonderful bird life even if one’s personal mobility is limited, or if one’s sight and/or hearing aren’t what they once

were. With a pair of binoculars, a couple of free smart phone bird identification apps, including Merlin's "Birding By Ear" feature, and an appetite to learn about and enjoy the world of birds, we can truly look forward to a lifetime of bird watching!
