

THE BEST OF 'THE BIRD WATCHER'

50 Favorite Columns for The Record by Jim Wright

Foreword by Don Torino





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For Elby. May you always love nature.

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*On the cover:
Yellow Warbler. Photo by Jim Wright.*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to 'The Best of The Bird Watcher'

I wrote my very first "Bird Watcher" column -- about what to do when you find an injured or baby bird -- for The Record, the Herald & News and northjersey.com in the spring of 2009. The only guidance I got was that the column be about birds only, that it be local, and that I provide photos to go with each column. Good advice.

The column has appeared every other Thursday ever since. Depending on who you talk to, it's either too infrequent or too often.

Over the past decade, I've written 260-odd columns (hyphen optional), or roughly 156,000 words. I thought now might be a good time to share my 50 favorite columns in one place.

I've thrown in a few curveballs along the way, and they are represented here as well. The unexpected columns -- about my cat Pook's bird-watching abilities, for example, or the binoculars I inherited from my dad -- are my favorites because they were especially heart-felt.

I thought I'd begin this collection with my first column. I've had some most-helpful editors over the years, though I admit I was taken aback when my first editor, Marlaina



Cockcroft, overhauled my very sentence. I wrote: Welcome "North Jersey Birding." She gently suggested the column be called "The Bird Watcher" instead, and so it was.

Not being an expert, I do make mistakes, although my friend Stiles Thomas usually saves me from them by reading the columns in advance. The one time I figured I didn't need his help, I wrote that wild turkeys can run as fast as 55 mph. In fact, they top out at about 15 mph -- which is still fast. (I had been thinking, of course, of the wild turduckens of High Mountain, renowned for their speed.)

The chapters are by subject, and the columns in each chapter are presented chronologically. ■



FOREWORD

Bringing people and nature together is the most important thing we can do as citizens who care about the future of our environment.

It would be impossible for us to get people to be concerned about climate change, endangered species or habitat loss if they fail to feel connected to the nature that is right outside their door.

Getting families young and old, whether experienced or first timers outside and making them more aware of the wonders of the natural world is vital not only for the future of wildlife but also for our own physical and mental health.

And there is no one I know that brings the understanding and all the love of birds and nature to the public that Jim Wright does in his "Bird Watcher" column.

Whether Jim is writing about the best places to watch birds or his cat Pook, it is always with the utmost respect and admiration for the people, the places and the wildlife he cares so much about.

In a time when it seems the future of the environment is at the crossroads, "The Bird Watcher" does and will continue to play a big part in helping all of us have a better understanding of how incredible and complex our natural world is, from our backyards to the far-off places many of us just dream about.

We can all be sure that Jim will bring it to us as in the way only he can with love, humor and compassion.

Don Torino, President

Bergen County Audubon Society



*Above, Don Torino leads a BCAS bird walk. Left, a Red-shouldered Hawk in Allendale.
Photos by Jim Wright.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION
3	FOREWORD
4	TABLE OF CONTENTS
7	MY FIRST COLUMN: BABY BIRDS
9	ALL-WHITE CATBIRD STEALS THE SHOW
10	A BALD EAGLE CALLED ALICE
11	A GYRFALCON VISITS NORTH JERSEY
12	POE'S RAVEN LIVES ON
13	A VERY ODD DUCK IN CENTRAL PARK
15	MY NEIGHBORS, THE SCREECH OWLS
16	THE TRUE SIGNS OF SPRING
17	COOPS AND SHARPIES GOTTA EAT
18	THE OLD BIRDHOUSE
19	YOUR FEEDER'S PECKING ORDER
20	HIT THE DECK!
21	EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SUET
23	THE AMAZING HAROLD FEINBERG
24	THE KITE CHASERS

25	OF RATS, RAPTORS & POISON	46	FROM RABID RUNNER TO CALM BIRDER
26	THE MAGIC OF THE INCAS	47	A MOSTLY BIRDY CHRISTMAS TREE
27	'THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING BIRDS'	48	ALL HAIL THE RAPTOR TRUST!
28	THE ENDURING IMPACT OF 'THE BIG YEAR''	49	AN OWLISH DUTCH MASTER
29	JAMAICA'S COOL BIRDS -- & BIRD NAMES	50	BELOVED BINOCULARS & THEIR RARE PAST
30	THE BLUEBIRD MAN OF BERGEN COUNTY	51	THE REAL JAMES BOND
31	THE EGG AND I, A CAUTIONARY TALE	52	THE CASE OF THE CURIOUS CROWS
33	THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING ATHLETE	53	THE GENTLE ART OF STUMP-SITTING
34	A SHOREBIRD AT RISK	55	GARRET MOUNTAIN: BIRDER'S PARADISE
35	MEET THE TIMBERDOODLE	56	MY FAVORITE LOCAL HAWK WATCHES
36	IN PRAISE OF ROCK PIGEONS, SORT OF	57	HALIFAX ROAD — AN UNSUNG BIRDING SPOT
37	UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN ROBIN	58	MYSTERIOUS MILL CREEK MARSH
38	EVERYONE'S FAVE, THE NORTHERN CARDINAL	59	DOODLETOWN, A LEGENDARY WARBLER SPOT
39	JEEPERS, CREEPERS!	60	WHEN IN DOUBT, DEKORTE PARK
40	THE CRAZY (LIKE A FOX) KILLDEER	61	HISTORIC OLANA HAS IT ALL
41	HERE'S TO THE OYSTERCATCHER	62	UPPER MANHATTAN'S AUDUBON MURALS
42	CEDAR WAXWINGS HAVE IT ALL	64	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
45	POOK THE CAT, BIRDER EXTRAORDINAIRE		

Chapter 1

Welcome to “North Jersey Birding,” which will appear in this section every other Thursday.

A few words about me: I’m a former environmental reporter for The Record and the author of several nature books, including the upcoming coffee-table book “Hawk Mountain,” about the world’s oldest sanctuary for birds of prey.

I live next to the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale. As the name suggests, the 107-acre site was once home to two celery farms and is now a safe haven for birds, frogs, turtles and muskrats.

My goal is to make the column as enjoyable and informative about local birds and birding as I can. For this column to succeed, it needs readers who ask questions, suggest column ideas and flat-out tell me what they want to read about – and what they don’t. So feel free to e-mail me at celeryfarm@gmail.com.

Birds are ubiquitous and beautiful, and – especially this time of year – sometimes

fragile. A birding friend of mine calls it “the nervous season.” Just as many young people are graduating these days, young American robins, blue jays and mourning doves are leaving home as well. Empty-nesters come in every species.

What should you do when you come across one of those vulnerable young avian dropouts, which seem so prevalent these days?

“The first thing you should do is observe the baby bird from as far away as you can and see how young it is,” says Jennifer Kleinbaum, executive director of the Tenafly Nature Center.

She says that you’ll typically find two kinds of young songbirds – nestlings and fledglings – and each should be treated differently. Her nature center gets up to a dozen calls a week about what to do with these birds, and this is what Kleinbaum and her staff advise the callers.

“If it’s a pink, naked bird with no feathers, it’s a

nestling, and your job is to find the nest it fell out of,” she says. “The bird can’t move or fly, so it must have fallen relatively straight down, and you should look up and try to find where it fell from.”

The nests are typically on a lower branch, and you can often locate the nest simply by looking out a second-floor window. Then use a ladder to return the baby to its nest.

But what about touching a baby bird and leaving your scent on it – won’t that make the parents abandon it?

“It’s not really a concern because birds typically have a really bad sense of smell,” says Kleinbaum. “It’s better for a person to put a nestling back into the nest rather than do nothing. We’ve found that most parents return to the nest and start feeding them again.”

As for fledglings -- young birds that have grown feathers and left the nest -- Kleinbaum says that in most cases the best advice is to leave them alone: “Obviously, you have to get them out of



A baby robin waits to be fed. Photo by Roy Woodford.

the road or your cat’s mouth, but otherwise they’ll be OK.”

One other thing to keep an eye out for -- killdeer eggs. These quirky shorebirds lay their eggs in the oddest places -- on playgrounds, in parks, on gravel roofs. In recent weeks, I’ve had calls from people who found these strange eggs in Mahwah and Lyndhurst.

If you happen upon these beautifully camouflaged chicken-egg-sized eggs, let them be. The mother will be back to incubate them soon enough. ■

Chapter 2

EVERY ONCE IN A BLUE MOON, AN INDIVIDUAL BIRD BECOMES A CELEBRITY. HERE ARE THE FIVE MOST FAMOUS BIRDS I'VE COVERED.

ALL-WHITE CATBIRD STEALS THE SHOW

November 21, 2013

For several weeks last month, an all-white catbird made regular appearances in a corner of the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale -- much to the delight of bird-watchers seeking a glimpse of the rare or unusual.

The bird, first reported by Fred Weber of Waldwick, hung out in the general vicinity of nearly two-dozen gray catbirds along a 30-yard stretch of path now called Catbird Lane.

Many folks found the bird with little effort. Some saw it silently hopping along the ground in search of bugs. Some found it perched high in a tree, making that familiar discordant meow-like sound that catbirds so love to make. Still others said that it just popped out on a branch in front of them, as big as you please.

Every time I looked for the bird, I failed miserably -- to the point where I dubbed the bird "Moby Catbird," after Melville's elusive and novel great white whale.

When I finally espied Moby -- with the help of a charitable birder friend -- it hung around for 40 minutes

and even rummaged through some underbrush just a few feet away.

From what we observed, the bird's diet consisted of various berries of such invasive species as autumn olive, porcelainberry and asiatic bittersweet. We even saw it eat a caterpillar (catbirderpillar?) for Sunday dinner -- probably for the protein.

As Catbird Lane's berry supply dwindled, so did the catbirds, and I never saw Moby again. But questions about the bird continued. People wanted to know: "Is it an albino catbird, or something else?" and "Just how rare is it?"

The consensus of experts I consulted was that since the bird had dark eyes, not pink eyes, it was "leucistic" (from the greek word for "white") and not albino. Whichever way I pronounced "leucistic," however, the person I was talking with pronounced it another way. So now I just call it "all-white."

As for rarity, I could not find anyone who had ever seen or heard of an all-white catbird before -- not

even Hannah Suthers, a retired research assistant at Princeton University who has banded more than 25,000 catbirds in Mercer County over 45 years.

Suthers says that since the all-white catbird had not been reported elsewhere, the bird had been "very likely" hatched nearby.

Suthers finds catbirds fascinating because they're "so interesting to watch -- their personalities, the way they react to you when you're outdoors...They're curious and check things out."

As curious, you might say, as a cat.

Suthers' research at the Featherbed Lane banding station was instrumental in helping banders distinguish males and females outside of breeding season -- once considered impossible.

She has also learned that some catbirds in New Jersey now raise three clutches of young each year instead of the usual one or two -- a result, she says, of "the overall warming trend."

According to Suthers, New



This all-white catbird hung out at the Celery Farm in Allendale for almost a month. Photo by Jerry Barrack.

Jersey's catbirds migrate each fall as far away as Central America, with some over-wintering in Florida (as many humans are also wont to do) -- adding that one of her banded catbirds was later recaptured in Guatemala, some 2,000 miles away.

Suthers says that Moby could return to the Celery Farm in May: "They're very site-faithful. They come back to their territory every year as long as they live."

Who knows? Maybe "Moby Catbird" will begin a new chapter next spring. ■

[Editor's note: It never showed again.]

I need to make a confession. Although I am happily married, I have a huge crush on a looker named Alice. And it's the government's fault.

Alice probably doesn't even know I exist, but I've been spying on her with my binoculars and telescope for several years.

I know where she lives (Ridgefield Park), and when time allows, I watch her as she leaves and returns home. I watch her eat -- she loves sushi! I've even watched her groom herself in the morning.

I also found out where Alice is from. She's an uptown girl from Manhattan, and she just seems to get more beautiful every time I watch her.

Before anyone gets totally creeped out, I should probably mention that Alice is a bald eagle, named for Alice Leurck, the Ramsey photographer who took several wonderful digital images of the regal raptor flying over Overpeck Creek back in 2010.

When photographer Alice examined her pictures, she saw that the eagle sported an antenna on its back -- the sure sign of a transmitter. She also discovered that the eagle was banded.

In those days, I wrote the Meadowlands Commission's nature blog, and seeing a bald eagle was still a big deal. Eagle, osprey and peregrine falcon populations had plummeted over the past century because of trigger-happy humans (who saw eagles as nuisances or easy targets), the destruction of habitat, and the willy-nilly use of DDT and other chemicals.

By 2010, however, these raptors had made an amazing comeback, mostly for one major reason: Our government has protected and nurtured them. Without that intervention, they would have disappeared from New Jersey long ago.

Because Alice the eagle was banded, I could track down where she was from: the Inwood section of Manhattan, where she was banded as a nestling in 2004.

And darned if Alice didn't stick around Overpeck.

That was the start of my unrequited love. Never mind that Alice the eagle was already in a committed relationship. I was smitten.

Alice and her mate soon built a nest in Ridgefield Park (everyone could tell which one was Alice; we could see that transmitter antenna). They fledged two young in 2011, 2012 and 2013, and observers have counted three young heads in the nest this spring. You gotta love it.

What a difference five years make. Between the time that Alice the eagle was first photographed in 2010 and now, bald eagle sightings in North Jersey have become increasingly commonplace, and more nests are being reported -- from along the Palisades to waterfront property in Wayne.

Alice, alas, could have done a better job selecting a nest tree. The tree is located on a contaminated site being remediated as part of an ambitious multi-use development plan. What's more, thanks to Overpeck



*In this 2010 photo, you can see the transmitter on the back of Alice the bald eagle of Ridgefield Park.
Photo by Alice Leurck.*

Park's ever-growing popularity, Overpeck Creek near the eagles' nest has gone from backwater to a thoroughfare for crew teams and kayakers.

Under these trying circumstances, how long the eagles will remain in Ridgefield Park after this nesting season is up in the air. That's why it's crucial that humans give them as much breathing room as possible.

After all, bald eagles have become more than our nation's symbol. In North Jersey, they are also our neighbors. ■

(Update: As of March 2019, a pair of eagles was nesting in Ridgefield Park, but perhaps not the original Alice.)

For New Jersey birders, it was the biggest news since a pink-footed goose made its Garden State debut in Washington Township six years ago. Since Jan. 21, a rare gyrfalcon -- the largest falcon in the world -- has been appearing almost daily at the State Line Lookout in Alpine.

"The last time you had a chance of seeing a gyrfalcon in New Jersey was 27 years ago in Sandy Hook, so this is a pretty big deal," says Bill Boyle, author of "The Birds of New Jersey" and a leading expert on state birds. "The last one seen in Bergen County was in March 1950, in East Rutherford."

According to Boyle, there have only been 19 previous confirmed sightings of a gyrfalcon ever in New Jersey, and half of those were in the 1970s and 1980s. Although one was seen two years ago at Sandy Hook, it was a brief fly-by.

Boyle characterized the dynamic raptor, roughly the size of a female red-tailed hawk, as "an Arctic rarity that seldom comes this far south anymore."

The bird was discovered near the lookout by birder Mike Girone of West Orange, who said his "heart was racing and head was spinning" when he realized the raptor he had photographed that Saturday afternoon was a gyrfalcon and not one of the local peregrine falcons.

Birders have made a bee-line to State Line every day since then, filling the lookout's ample parking lot this past Saturday. That kind of turnout is typical on a beautiful fall weekend when the changing foliage is spectacular and raptors are streaming by the hawk watch on their way south, but not on a cold cloudy Saturday in late January.

Monday at lunch time, nearly two-dozen birders were scattered along the lookout atop the Hudson River Palisades -- binoculars, high-powered telescopes and long-lens digital cameras at the ready.

Although plenty of vultures and an occasional raven flew past, the gray-morph gyrfalcon apparently took

the day off, much to the disappointment of Garry Annibal of Montville and the other birders.

Annibal said he had also tried for the bird the previous Monday: "A birder from Pennsylvania and I spent a couple hours waiting in the rain, with no luck then either."

Contrast that to a couple of other days last week, when the gyrfalcon occasionally perched on a nearby branch for 20 minutes or more, to the delight of the birders on hand.

Annibal remains undaunted. If the bird is reported again, he plans to try a third time if his schedule allows. "I've never seen a gyrfalcon, so it would be a lifer," he said. "A gyrfalcon is a bird of the wild far north, and the fact that it made it all the way down here is amazing."

Judy Cinquina of Upper Saddle River saw the gyrfalcon fly across the Hudson on Friday but returned Monday in hopes



A rare gyrfalcon was a frequent flier at the State Line Lookout in Alpine. Photo by Ray Gilbert.

of a better look: "You usually have to go to Alaska to see it -- or Siberia or the top of the world."

What's been good for birders has been good for the lookout's small restaurant as well. "Business has been pretty solid, especially for this time of year," said Assistant Manager William Fronheiser. "We've gotten a lot of people who came here just to see the bird."

Will the elusive raptor return? Impossible to say. But if you're a cold-weather super-sized falcon, the next best thing to the Arctic might be a town called Alpine. ■

If you visit Philadelphia this summer, be sure to stop by the main branch of the Free Library in Center City. You'll be able to see a certain bird that you probably never knew existed beyond the pages of a poem.

This isn't just any bird, mind you. Although more and more of this once-unusual species are being seen in North Jersey, this particular bird is more than 150 years old.

It's from England. It made its debut in a Charles Dickens novel in 1841. And it's currently on display in a glass case in the library's Rare Book Department for all the world to see.

Maybe I should also mention the bird is big, it's black, and it just might be the most famous bird in all of literature.

Will I keep the bird's identity a secret? Nevermore.

That's right. The actual feathers-and-flesh bird that inspired Edgar Allan Poe to write "The Raven" sits safe and sound on the library's third floor, the gift of a

wealthy donor who collected all things Poe and who knew that the poem's blackbird had been inspired by the Dickens family's pet raven, Grip.

The talkative corvid was a minor character in Dickens' historical novel, "Barnaby Rudge." Poe, a book reviewer living in Philadelphia at the time, was amused by the literary blackbird's chatterings, which included comments such as "Never say die. Bow, wow, wow. I'm a devil, I'm a devil. Hurrah."

Poe gave "Barnaby Rudge" a favorable review but noted that Dickens could have used "the raven's croakings" to better advantage -- as harbingers to heighten the drama. In 1845, Poe took his own advice and wrote "The Raven," which became an instant classic.

Critics familiar with the writings of Poe and Dickens immediately saw the connection between the two ravens. Observed James Russell Lowell: "There comes Poe with his raven, like

Barnaby Rudge, Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge."

But how did Poe's inspirational raven end up in Philly?

First, the Dickens family had their beloved bird preserved after its unexpected death, the likely result of its drinking white paint in 1841. The taxidermy bird then sat on Dickens' mantel until the author died in 1870.

After that, the raven passed from collector to collector until it was purchased at auction in 1951 and endowed to the Free Library by Richard A. Gimbel, an avid Poe collector and one of the department store Gimbels.

The Free Library's Poe collection goes far beyond the world's most famous corvid. Gimbel also donated the only known copy of "The Raven" in Poe's distinctive hand, the manuscript for "Annabel Lee;" and the manuscript for "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Still, it is the taxidermy blackbird that is the show-



You can see the actual bird that inspired Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in Philly. Photo courtesy of the Rare Book Department, Free Library of Philadelphia.

stopper, huge and black and beautiful.

The other benefit of seeing Grip in all his shiny-feathered glory is you have an excuse to read "The Raven" again -- something most of us probably haven't done in years.

And that's one of the unexpected benefits of bird-watching. The hobby doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's a wonderful way to connect with all sorts of subjects, including incredible poems of yore. ■

Meet New York City's newest superstar. Charismatic and flamboyant yet totally out of place, he has attracted hordes of far-flung tourists and local gawkers since he began giving free performances in Central Park last month.

The accidental celebrity is an exquisitely feathered Mandarin duck, native to China and Japan. Nicknamed Mandarin Patinkin, after the famous actor/singer, he has garnered a huge following and fawning national coverage during his six-week run. And for good reason.

(Note: The Gothamist website reports the duck made brief appearances last month in Edgewater, on a walkway along the Hudson River, as well as a park in North Bergen.)

"The male Mandarin is spectacular," says Fred Virrazzi, a zoologist with Carteret-based National Biodiversity Park. "It's accepted as one of the most striking birds on Earth."

According to Virrazzi, "Our reaction is visceral and viral. We are sharing a basic behavior with birds. We are

compelled like the millions of past female Mandarins to this bewildering kaleidoscope of feathers."

Small wonder, then, that on a recent Saturday, admirers from as far away as California and Australia flocked to the edge of the pond in the park's southwest corner to see the duck that New York magazine has called "New York City's most eligible bachelor."

Mandarin ducks are typically shy, and this male tended to avoid people after he first mysteriously appeared in October but has grown comfortable with his surroundings, and on that recent Saturday he performed a one-duck show just off Fifth Avenue.

At one point, he perched on a rock near the shore and spent several minutes preening his fine feathers for all to see, then swam up to the spectators so they could snap cellphone close-ups. The other birds on the pond -- a handsome but fairly common male wood duck, an American coot and multiple mallards -- might as well have been invisible to the Tweeting hordes.

"Social media by definition overacts to subjects that are exciting, so it's hard to criticize or be surprised," says Virrazzi, a Secaucus resident. "Some of the media has poorly explained the event as rare, inferring that the individual bird flew directly from East Asia, which is untrue. In fact, the bird is banded."

That means he's not a wild duck. Most likely he was released by the human who raised him, or he escaped. And because park-goers like to feed birds, the Mandarin and other ducks on the pond are essentially free-range pets with communal owners, happy to stay put.

In the metropolitan region, Mandarins in the wild are unusual but not unheard of. Over the past decade, they've appeared off-off-Broadway in smaller arenas, such as James J. Braddock Park in North Bergen and the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale.

While one released non-native duck may not be cause for concern, the Mandarin duck population in several European countries mushroomed in the 1980s



This Mandarin duck attracted crowds to the Pond in Central Park for months. Photo by Fred Virrazzi.

and 1990s after many of the ducks were released or they escaped into the wild.

As a result, says Virrazzi, "there are more in Europe than their native East Asia. In Europe they compete for food and take over cavities to the detriment to native species." That's why he considers the Central Park Mandarin "an example of what not to do -- release exotic animals."

Virrazzi sees a silver lining: "The Mandarin is a floating textbook on various behavioral and ecological aspects of animals. It's a sexy science project so it could turn on a few people to care a bit more about animals." ■

Chapter 3

THE BACKYARD & JUST BEYOND:
ALL ABOUT OWLS, FEEDERS,
HAWKS, HUMMINGBIRDS,
PECKING ORDERS, & THE JOYS
OF PATIO BIRDING

The first screech owl egg appeared in the nesting box on this day three years ago, so at first I figured it was somebody's idea of an April Fool's joke.

But a day later, another egg arrived, then another. I knew for sure that the tiny raptor that my wife and I call Mrs. Ace was going to have a family, and that things would never be quite the same in our backyard.

Thanks to the wonders of technology (in the form of a miniature infrared video-cam and microphone), I have kept tabs on a screech owl nesting box in Bergen County since 2007. The past three Aprils, Mrs. Ace has laid a combined total of 14 eggs, and I have discovered a several surprising insights into screech owl behavior.

First, a little bit about these fierce birds of prey. This time of year, Eastern screech owls live in tree cavities and nesting boxes throughout northern New Jersey, yet people seldom see them.

If you stand quietly by the edge of a woods in the evening, you might hear

them call. Just don't expect to hear any screechy noises.

These owls' repertoire consists of a goose-bump-inducing whinny and a drumming call, which the owls use to communicate with mates and warn other screechers off their territories.

The owls stand about as tall as a soda can and weigh around six ounces. They come in two colors, reddish brown and grayish brown, and although they look cute as kittens, they are ferocious hunters that eat just about any moving thing that is smaller than them – from worms and fish to bats and other birds.

Just how fierce are screech owls? Consider this description, courtesy of a Mary Oliver poem: "a memo from the offices of fear."

Thanks to the nest-box videocam, I have learned a lot about these mysterious birds. For example, I had always thought that once a screech owl flew out of its nest at dusk, it did not return until dawn.

By watching videos of the owl box, I have learned that the screechers sometimes return during the night and stay anywhere from several minutes to an hour or more – to grab a bite or to call to a mate.

Contrary to what I have read, it appears that the female starts to incubate the eggs after the last egg arrives -- not after the first egg. I surmise this since the owlets usually hatch within 12 hours of each other, after incubating for about four weeks.

When they hatch, they resemble little balls of white cotton. The owlets then take another 30 days to develop enough to jump out of the box – typically around Memorial Day.

This month is prime time for these owls. Most females are just starting to lay their eggs – the only time they'll do so all year. They typically lay anywhere from three to seven eggs, typically a day or two apart.



A young eastern screech owl in a northern New Jersey backyard. Photo by Jim Wright.

One other thing I've learned: Any time you think you know their behavior, they'll immediately prove you wrong.

If you do see a screech owl, my advice is to take a quick picture or two if you insist but to otherwise let it be. They typically hunt from dusk to dawn, and they need to catch both some shut-eye and sunshine during the day. They get hassled enough by other birds. Please leave them alone. ■

For me, spring came eight days late this year. It wasn't the arrival of warm sunshine and crocuses, or the departure of the insistent snow and the chronically cold gray skies that plagued us for most of this young year.

Me? I set my calendar by the birds. Here's how it went.

One morning in late March, I rose early and visited the red-shouldered hawk nest around the corner from my home, and then waited patiently for signs of activity. After a half-hour, a hawk's head popped up to investigate a nearby squirrel, and I knew that Laura the Red-shoulder was likely starting another family.

When I returned home, I could see a female wood duck checking out a nesting box in the nearby Celery Farm Natural Area. I grabbed my camera and binoculars and walked slowly toward an observation platform in time to take a photo or two.

Sure enough, the female sat atop the nesting box

while the ornately festooned male swam below. With the scene came the knowledge that a new nesting season would soon begin.

The next few minutes brought one familiar face after another.

My first-of-year tree swallows landed on a perch 15 yards away.

My first-of-year double-crested cormorant swam near the platform.

My first-of-year American coot swam along the shoreline, bobbing its head and flashing those crazy red eyes.

The weather was finally warm enough for me to sit and enjoy the emerging bird life, and I felt exhilarated by thoughts of the warmer weather and nesting season to come.

As I returned to my house, I was humming "Hail, hail, the gang's all here" -- until I remembered that I had not seen a belted kingfisher or the great egret that had

been reported at the refuge in recent days.

Moments after I went inside, I spotted my first-of-year great egret fly into the shallows not far away, and I smiled.

Sometimes life is only as complicated as we make it. In this age of techno-gadgetry, I find that I enjoy old-fashioned tweets and other simple pleasures more and more.

Sure, I love still seeing bird species for the first time and learning more about them, but nothing is quite as rewarding as seeing familiar birds for a whole new season -- whether it's the feeder birds of late fall or the spring's new arrivals. They bring memories of seasons past and the promise of seasons to come.

The recent arrivals are even more exciting because they herald the imminent warbler and shorebird migration, warmer and longer days, and a whole new generation of hatchlings.



Tree swallows prepare for another nesting season. Photo by Jim Wright.

Rachel Carson said it best, in "Silent Spring, when she wrote: "There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."

That's why it's not the new bird songs that really lift my spirits and warm my heart -- it's those "repeated of frames of nature" that I have come to cherish. ■

They are North Jersey's most reviled backyard birds, the predators that attack your beloved feeder birds and reduce them to a pile of feathers.

They are sharp-shinned hawks and Cooper's hawks -- sharpies and Coops -- incredibly nimble raptors (think of fighter jets) of the forest that have adapted to suburbia.

At best, their presence in your yard means that no birds will be coming to your feeders anytime soon. The good news is that neither hawk (or almost any raptor, for that matter) is going to attack your family or pets.

The adults of both species have gun-metal-blue backs and heads, reddish chests, short wings, and long tails. The juveniles have brown heads and wings, and white chests streaked with brown. The bird books like to say that the sharpie is robin-size and the Coop is crow-size, but it's not that simple. More on that later.

And though you may hate me along with these two raptors when you read the next paragraph or two, I

have to say it: I love sharpies and Coops.

While I don't take any delight in the death of any critter, sharpies and Coops are part of nature, and they need to eat, too. If folks could pick and choose only the links they wanted in the food chain, it wouldn't be much of a chain anymore.

Think of it this way: A raptor eating another bird is as normal as a human eating another mammal. I eat beef on occasion, so who am I to criticize?

I concede that sharpies and Coops have seldom won any popularity contests. Consider this description of the sharpie from the 1895 book "Birdcraft":

"The sharp-shinned is one of the most destructive of our common hawks and shares with the [Cooper's hawk] the reputation of being an inveterate poultry killer, and it causes such havoc among songbirds that a black mark may be set against it to denote that it is a worthy target for rifle practice."

Fortunately, state and federal law make it illegal

to hunt or kill any type of hawk nowadays.

Both the sharpie and the Coop have adapted wonderfully to North Jersey's suburbs. In fact, Keith Bildstein, director of conservation science at Pennsylvania's Hawk Mountain, became interested in raptors when he was a boy in Secaucus because of Coops and (pigeon) coops.

Bildstein helped his father train and race pigeons. "My early encounters with raptors were with Cooper's hawks that were bound and determined to eat those pigeons," Bildstein recalled.

Bildstein says he was fascinated by "this notion that these predatory animals that were in suburban New Jersey, eking out an existence by eating other birds -- the fact they lived that close to us and under everybody's radar screen."

My problem with Coops and sharpies is that unless you happen to be a top-notch birder, they are hard to tell apart -- especially when they're dive-bombing your feeder.



A "shooper's hawk" hangs out near a feeder.
Photo by Jim Wright.

In general, Coops are larger than sharpies, but sometimes female sharpies can be as large as male Coops. And their other distinguishing features are so subtle that you'll probably have to photograph them from a few angles (including their tails) to figure out what species they are.

Because of the confusion, some birders have lumped these two accipiters together and dubbed them "shooper's hawks."

The all-inclusive label makes the raptors easier to identify, and "shooper's hawk": somehow seems more appropriate than "carpie." That sounds too much like a bottom-feeding fish. ■

If you don't love backyard birds, don't read this column. You won't understand.

Replacing a worn-out nest box is usually not a big deal. Nice memories of former tenants, soon forgotten. Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da. Life goes on.

This spring was different. A rickety nesting box that had stood in my yard for 15 years was on its last legs.

The inexpensive birdhouse was a gift from my mom just after my wife and I moved to Allendale. Its roof was sky blue, and its white walls sported fake miniature windows and door to make it sort of resemble a little human house. I doubted the decorations made the box more appealing to birds, but it still attracted occupants right away -- black-capped chickadees.

After nesting season, I opened the little wooden side door to find a floor covered with moss-like nesting material: cheap wall-to-wall carpeting for a young suburban couple's starter home.

Over the years, I watched the tenants come and go, including a downy woodpecker that moved in for a day one autumn. Every so often in winter, I'd even see a red-shouldered hawk perch atop the roof, perhaps hoping to grab a nearby meal.

But I eventually stopped being a diligent landlord. I forgot to clean out the box after each nesting season. One spring, I watched as OCD house wrens brought twigs, all the same size, into the nestbox. Birds need to redecorate new digs as much as humans do.

Last I had checked, house sparrows -- the bullies of the nestbox world -- had moved in and trashed the place before they left with their noisy clan.

Just as squirrels hijack a screech owl box and cram it with dead leaves, so too with house sparrows. So many leaves, so little room. I would not have expected anything less.

If my mother were still alive, she would have remarked that the sparrows left the nest box looking like the Collyer Mansion or -- her other favorite -- the wreck of the Hesperus. When I was young, I never knew exactly what either expression meant, but I understood. Mom was telling my brother and me that we were slobs.

When I finally cleaned out the nest box again this spring, I marveled at the distinct layers of nesting materials that had accumulated. It reminded me of those archaeological digs where each stratum of rubble represents a different civilization.

Alas, the spring cleaning also revealed that the wooden box was rotting. I made some minor roof repairs and tried to caulk around the foundation, to no avail. I knew the little birdhouse wouldn't survive the next storm.

I put up another nest box right away in hopes of attracting new nesters. Once again, chickadees were the first to check it out.



The old birdhouse had many tenants, including a downy woodpecker. Photo by Jim Wright.

I like the new birdhouse. It's straightforward and sturdy, but It will never quite replace our backyard Collyer mansion and the shelter it provided for so many feathered families over the years.

In a region where unassuming Cape Cods sell for small fortunes, that meager one-room wooden abode was one my favorite homes, a gentle daily reminder of my mom.

No big deal. Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da. Life goes on. After all, I tell myself, it was only a birdhouse. ■

Next time you fill your feeder, look more closely at the birds that show up and answer the following question:

"What's the pecking order?"

As many of us noticed over the years, North Jersey is one big backyard jungle. Some birds nip their way to feeder supremacy. Some cower. Some pick their spots -- zipping in for suet or a seed and then bolting. Others seem too dense to notice the competition around them. (Mourning doves, you know who you are.)

As for grackles, the less said the better. When these avian anarchists aren't pushing other birds aside, they are flinging bird seed in every direction.

In fact, if you look closely, your feeder is a symphony of complex behaviors -- everything from displacement to threat displays to appeasement. Even keeping track of who's pecking who can get complicated. Pecking orders may involve different species

as well as individual birds within a species. Just watch the tufted titmice.

Earlier this year, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology began tracking feeder interactions as part of its Project FeederWatch citizen science program. Between late February and April, 209 participants submitted 1,996 reports on the little dramas that unfolded at their feeders.

Eliot Miller, a post-doctoral researcher studying feeder hierarchies at the Cornell Lab, says: "We're finding that you can take that rather complicated, messy set of nearly 2,000 interactions between 85 different species and assemble those species into a fairly good approximation of a pecking order -- a linear dominance hierarchy."

According to Miller, "At the top of the pecking order right now we've got a bunch of species. In North Jersey, it would be some of the large aggressive birds -- blue jay, common grackle. And red-bellied woodpeckers and hairy woodpeckers are really dominant for their body mass."

One could argue that sharp-shinned hawks and Cooper's hawks take pecking orders beyond the pale -- they accounted for most of the 37 interactions where one bird ate the other.

In case you're wondering, Miller says the pecking order in your backyard is the same whether you have one feeder or many.

You might think that humans have always been aware of pecking orders in terms of birds and people, but the term is a surprisingly recent one.

You can thank the late Norwegian psychologist Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe. In 1921, as a graduate student, he coined the term "pecking order," to describe the hierarchy in barnyard chickens. As a child, Schjelderup-Ebbe tended to the family flock, and became so fascinated that he could tell one chicken from another and even gave each its own name.

Schjelderup-Ebbe's son, Dag, once told an interviewer that his father observed over time that the birds literally had an



*A dominant red-bellied woodpecker and a clueless mourning dove share some feeder time.
Photo by Jim Wright.*

established order that determined which hens would go to the feeding trough while others waited their turn. He eventually wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Oslo on the dominance hierarchy of chickens, or -- you guessed it -- their pecking order.

Alas, Schjelderup-Ebbe was done in by departmental shenanigans, and he was forced to pursue his career elsewhere. Later efforts to receive academic recognition in Norway for his research failed. As it turned out, he just couldn't penetrate the university's pecking order. ■

Let me tell you about my new favorite kind of birding, designed especially for warmer weather.

I call it patio birding, and it couldn't be easier. All you have to do is sit outside on your deck or porch or balcony around sunset and take in the sights and sounds of midsummer.

Of course, doing some advance preparation helps. That means filling your feeders, including one or two for the hummingbirds (and downy woodpeckers).

To reinforce the summer mode, I hung a birch suet feeder, which I filled with something called Bark Butter. It's a bit expensive but it seems less likely to drip than peanut butter on hot days. The birds go crazy for it, and the birch feeder reminds me of Maine -- one of the classic places to spend a summer vacation.

Patio birding also means getting a comfortable chair and a table for your lemonade. For some, it will mean forsaking your air-conditioning for a half-hour or so, but you'll survive.

It also means using a bug repellent -- but more on that at the end of the column.* This column is about birds, not bugs, after all.

The next step is to sit, watch and listen -- no earbuds or cellphones allowed. No books or Kindles or newspapers, unless you are reading my column.

You'll be amazed at all the crepuscular (I like to write the word since I can never pronounce it) activity your non-human neighbors are engaged in.

Here's a sample of what I've seen and heard of late:

For starters, it wouldn't be dusk without the song stylings and other vocalizations of the northern cardinal. You're probably familiar with their distinctive song, but that clack-clack call you hear is likely them as well. Cardinals love dusk. I don't know why. They just do.

Up in the trees, I heard the house wren family chattering amongst themselves. Since this happened to be a Saturday evening, I

figured the young birds were clamoring for the wren equivalent of pizza.

Just about then, a male ruby-throated hummingbird stopped by the feeder or a hit of sugar water, his red-sequined throat glittered in the fading light.

When I checked the dusk sky, I could see chimney swifts zipping around, eating every bug in their flight path. A few tree swallows joined in briefly for a bedtime snack. Some grackles, starlings and red-winged blackbirds flew home to their roots.

Soon, the lightning bugs put their blinkers on, and the evening was magical.

But the biggest treat was seeing a northern flicker fly over, its yellow underwings glimmering in the sunset.

Finally, the night patrol arrived, big brown bats darting back and forth. They were doing an excellent job of killing bugs, and it was time to call it an evening.

As the summer wears on, the common nighthawks will return, and the chimney swifts should increase in number as they fatten up for their migration.



*A tufted titmouse wolfs down some Bark Butter.
Photo by Jim Wright.*

Your backyard or balcony offers a whole 'nother world at dusk. Admission is free. All you have to do is step outside, stop, look and listen.

* When it comes to deterring mosquitoes and other patio pests, I like to go old-school. I light punks, just like the way the kids in my neighborhood did when we were young. You can get them a lot of places -- the Vermont Country Store calls them "punk sticks," and on Amazon they are "mosquito repellent incense sticks." ■

The time has come to address a certain four-letter word. Many of us find it slightly gross. Others just ignore it. But diehard backyard birders (and many birds) just can't offer enough of it.

I am talking, of course, about suet -- that weird, typically greasy stuff that comes in pricey blocks the size of a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich.

Herewith, the 10 most pressing questions you've always wondered about suet but were too chicken to ask.

1. What exactly is suet? You probably don't want to know, but if you insist, the answer is at the end of this column.*

2. Why should I offer suet to my backyard birds? Many birds dig it, and it's a great energy source.

3. Suet seems to come in more flavors than frozen yogurt. Do birds care? My informal studies indicate that the birds eat the suet regardless of brand or flavor. They seem to eat Very Berry Songbird Cake with the same relish (or no

relish) that they eat a cake of Woodpecker Delight. Perhaps if someone taught them to read the labels...

In short, even though suet seems to come in nearly as many flavors and brands as cat food, wild birds are not nearly as finicky as cats, and generally have better attitudes. But I digress.

4. Can I make my own suet? Yes, but I file the question in my folder marked "Life Is too short to ..." If you insist, feel free to Google it.

5. Can suet go bad? Depends on the type of suet, and whether you let it hang out with a rough crowd. (I'm guessing you saw that one coming.)

6. Can humans eat suet? Yes. I am told that Suet Pudding, Dead Man's Leg and Spotted Dick are traditional English dishes that contain suet. These dishes have not yet caught on in the United States. For the life of me, I can't understand why.

In other words, if you are snowbound this winter and the only food in the house is a cake of suet, you can

probably eat it if you are starving, but be aware that it may lead to a hankering for sunflower seeds, peanuts, flax seed, Nyjer seeds and, in the worst cases, mealworms.

7. Can vegetarians in good conscience feed their birds suet? Why fret about such things? Offer your birds vegetarian suet. (Again, Google it.)

8. What about peanut butter? Yes. You can even smear it on a pine cone or a tree.

9. How do I stop starlings and grackles from eating all my suet? Put the suet in a feeder that hangs the suet upside-down, or use a small Taser. (Kidding.)

10. How do I keep squirrels from eating my suet? Get a really, really good baffle or hire a 'round-the-clock security guard.

***What is suet, exactly?** According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "Suet is technically defined as the hard fat around the kidneys and loins in beef and mutton, but in common usage, most kinds of beef



North Jersey woodpeckers, including this red-bellied and this hairy, love suet. Photo by Susan McTigue.

fat are also called suet and can safely be fed to birds. Suet is particularly attractive to woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, jays, and starlings. Wrens, creepers, kinglets, and even cardinals and some warblers occasionally visit suet feeders. Animal fat is easily digested and metabolized by many birds; it's a high-energy food, especially valuable in cold weather."

Pig fat, on the other hand, is called lard or, as the hog farmers say, "suey." ■

Chapter 4

PEOPLE, PLACES, & MORE:
TWO INSPIRING BIRDERS,
A GAME-CHANGING FILM,
MACHU PICCHU, JAMAICA
& A STRANGE EGG

As the spring birding season starts to get into high gear, I thought I'd write about Harold Feinberg of Hackensack, who is something of a legend -- even if he would never admit it.

Harold turned 83 this year, and he doesn't get around like he used to. This is the first spring in more than 25 years that he hasn't led bird walks in New York's Central Park. But he still attends the monthly Bergen County Audubon Society meetings when he can, wearing his signature beret and generally holding court.

Harold has contributed so much to birding that the group has named its annual conservation award for him.

Those contributions began way back in the mid-1940s, when as a teenager in the Bronx he was leading Boy Scouts on nature walks -- because all the older potential scoutmasters were away, serving in World War II.

One of the teens that Harold mentored was a young man named Sandy Komito, who later

became one of the world's top birders -- and at this writing still holds the record holder for the number of bird species seen in North America in one year. Sandy tallied 745 a quarter-century ago.

Sandy was going fishing in Van Cortlandt Park in The Bronx in 1946 when he bumped into Harold, who started pointing out birds and allowed Sandy to use his binoculars.

"I now had this piece of magic in my hands, because I could get eight times closer to the bird," says Sandy. "I looked at this incredible yellow bird with black wings and black cap. I had never seen anything so beautiful."

Then, with his naked eye, Harold pointed out a red-tailed hawk, and Sandy was in awe -- and hooked for life. He would be the first of many that Harold would inspire.

Harold went on to military service, college, and a career as a land-snail expert at the

American Museum of Natural History. He is the

author of "Encyclopedia of Shells" and "Simon and Schuster's "Guide to Shells."

Over the years, Harold has seen the hobby of bird-watching evolve, from part of the lunatic fringe to the mainstream.

Harold says. "When I started birding, only men birded, and you were considered insane and weird."

He says that when he studied at Brooklyn College and took out a girl, "I never let her know I was a birder or she never would have gone out with me."

Harold points out that times have changed to the point where not only birding is a very popular pastime, but "there's a predominance of women in birding" as well.

Pam Mistretta of North Arlington is one of Harold's many disciples, going on many of his bird walks over the years.

"I learned most of what I know about birding just walking behind Harold on those field trips," Pam says. "I positioned myself close to him so I wouldn't miss what



*Harold Feinberg of Hackensack has mentored bird-watchers for more than 60 Years.
Photo by Jim Wright.*

he was saying. A born teacher, he educated the group as we went along -- a key comment here and there, tidbits regarding field marks and behavior.

"As my love of the hobby deepened with my understanding, so did my love of the man himself," Pam adds. "He is a warm, fun, sometimes whimsical human being, a humanist as well as a conservationist. Harold is not only a leader; he is also a teddy bear."

And what advice does legendary birder Harold Feinberg have for new birders?

Simple. "Relax and have fun." ■

I am not one of those folks who like to “chase” birds, driving 90 miles to East Cow Lick and back in hopes of seeing some rare gnatcatcher that may or may not still be there.

But on a day-off earlier this month, a friend and I decided to go after a pair of Mississippi kites that have been setting up house near the Visitor’s Center in Sterling Forest State Park, just over the New York border off Route 17.

I got a lot less than I had expected, and plenty more. Let me explain.

That morning, I had failed to see a rare prothonotary warbler that had been reported near my home. I decided I wanted something to show for taking a vacation day -- like a Mississippi kite.

This medium-size raptor is “found in scattered localities across the southern and central United States,” according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and occasionally seen in New Jersey. I had never seen one anywhere.

The notion that a pair might be starting to nest in view of humans in a 20,000-acre forest seemed incredible. The birds had been seen regularly for more than a week, they had perched and posed for photographers, and their location was just a 20-minute drive.

What’s more, the birds appeared regularly in the morning and then again at 1:30 and/or 3 p.m. What did we have to lose, besides a gallon or two of gas?

We arrived at the Visitor Center parking lot in plenty of time for the alleged 1:30 show. Word of the kites had spread far and fast. Three women from Long Island had been waiting patiently since morning, to no avail. Two separate guys from Pennsylvania were also there to behold the kite.

Driving a couple of hours to see a pair of birds? Suddenly, my buddy and I seemed sane by comparison.

Alas, the kites were no-shows for their 1:30 performance, and someone

reported seeing them flying southwest toward Ringwood State Forest. Frowns all around. Maybe it was a Friday thing.

My friend and I took a short hike and returned for the next scheduled performance, which had attracted by a few more birders.

At 3 p.m. on the dot, a solitary kite was spotted flying toward the parking lot -- low enough to see, high enough to make for crummy photos.

The bird flew over, gracefully swung around and made another pass. And that was it. The show should have been called “Gone in 60 Seconds.” Only one of the birds had made an appearance, and it never perched or provided any great photo-ops.

My friend and celebrated our good fortune nonetheless. We saw the bird we came for, and we were home 20 minutes later.

I soon learned that the rare warbler had been



A Mississippi kite perches on a tree in Sterling Forest State Park. Photo by Jerry Barrack.

hanging out next to my backyard most of the afternoon. I never did see it, but I didn’t mind.

My photos of the kite turned out mediocre, as expected, but a photographer buddy offered to share one of his photos for this column, so no loss there.

I realized that “chasing” birds is not just about seeing or photographing a new species. Like many road trips, it’s a nice excuse to get out of a rut, visit different places, meet new like-minded folks and chat with a good friend along the way.

Seeing the Mississippi kite? Gravy. ■

Late last year, Ridgefield Park resident Steve Quinn got an amazing phone call. His neighbor had just spotted a rare owl in a backyard spruce.

Quinn and his wife rushed to get a look at an exotic barred owl -- on New Jersey's threatened list and never seen in town before. But upon finding the owl sitting on the ground, their excitement turned to dismay. The bird was in distress.

Quinn, a member of his town's Environmental Commission and an experienced field ornithologist, carefully picked up the owl, discovered blood on its belly and under its tail, and knew what had happened: The bird must have consumed a rodent that had eaten poison.

Moments later, the mysterious-looking owl -- best known for its distinctive "Who cooks for you?" call -- was dead.

Quinn, staff naturalist at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, says it was pure happenstance that the owl landed in his neighbor's yard: "Just imagine how many raptors are inadvertently poisoned

this way and wander off sick and die in areas where they can't be found."

A month later, Quinn is still upset. "Most people, if they really knew how bad this poison is, how it kills and threatens wildlife, they would likely not use it or not hire exterminators who do," he says.

But the death of the barred owl, first reported in the Ridgefield Park Patriot, at least might raise North Jerseyans' awareness of the dangers of rat-poison baits. These toxins cause internal bleeding and often a slow death for rodents, and for any raptor that consumes the poison second-hand.

The widespread use of these poisons not only endangers all owls, hawks and other wildlife that prey on rodents, but outdoor pets that eat rodents as well.

Perhaps the best-known raptor to die from eating a poisoned rodent was Lima, a mate of famed Central Park red-tailed hawk Pale Male. She was just about to lay eggs when she died.

What's the answer? Looking at the big picture, Quinn wants legislation to prevent

these toxins from being used irresponsibly (and entering the environment), but for now he is promoting practical steps that homeowners, businesses and towns can take on their own.

One example, according to Quinn, is to replace the rat poison with a so-called snap-kill trap, which is available enclosed in a plastic box so that only rodents come into contact with it.

"My town responded immediately and in a very positive way," says Quinn. "They severed their contract with the exterminator that was using this stuff, and I put them in touch with an exterminator who uses snap-kill traps only. The new exterminator also advised the town on how to properly store and dispose of refuse properly and alter conditions that attracted and harbored rats in the first place."

David Johnson, director of the Virginia-based Global Owl Project, concurs that poisons are a "Band-aid approach" to tackle rodent problems: "[Rat poison] is not a realistic fix to the underlying issue."

Johnson advises disposing



This barred owl died shortly after this photograph was taken, likely collateral damage from a poisoned rodent. Photo by Stephen R. Quinn.

of garbage in secure containers and closing the access points for rodents in homes and businesses so that the poisons aren't needed outside or in.

Rather than inadvertently killing raptors with poisons intended for rodents, Johnson says, people should actively attract owls by providing nest boxes and maintaining cavity-bearing trees.

"Owls are very efficient predators of small mammals," says Johnson. "They are on your side! With owls working nights, and hawks working the days, we are getting 24-7 small mammal control. This is something to be promoted -- not undermined with poisons." ■

Machu Picchu, tucked deep in the Andes Mountains of Peru, is the most spectacular place I have ever birded.

This 4,000-mile trip of a lifetime required two plane rides totaling 10 hours, two hours by car, two hours by train, and a final 30 minutes by bus to visit an engineering marvel that essentially has been frozen in time for half a millennium.

You're probably thinking: This guy traveled for the better part of two days to see one of the world's most celebrated places, and he went birding? Sort of.

Birders are often perceived as a clan as foreign as the Incas, and my wife and I garnered some raised eyebrows and crooked smiles as we looked at blue-and-white swallows and rufous-collared sparrows.

Not to sound defensive, but I took far more photos of the archeological site than of the avian sights, and I found our behavior far less bizarre than that of the hundreds of tourists who constantly took cellphone

photos of themselves with their ubiquitous selfie sticks.

After all, as my wife and I wandered through the labyrinth of terraces, walls and warrens, we could not help but appreciate all of Machu Picchu's splendor, including its natural wonders. And when you have a spectacular bird's-eye view that's nearly 8,000 feet above sea level, you're going to see the birds that come with the view.

About an hour into our visit, one of the dozens of local guides escorting the swarms of tourists noticed our binoculars and said, "you must be birders."

I nodded and asked if we might see an Andean condor, the mountains' iconic bird.

"I doubt it," he replied, "but you could see an American kestrel" -- one of my favorite falcons and a threatened species in New Jersey.

Sure enough, just before we had to leave, a handsome male kestrel materialized and zoomed around Machu Picchu like

he owned the place. He would perch in a tree, on an ancient stone wall, or atop the re-thatched roof of the landmark Caretaker's Hut.

As we watched this pigeon-sized raptor, I realized that kestrels likely knew this mountain long before explorer Hiram Bingham and National Geographic put it on the map just over a century ago -- and long before the massive complex was built for Inca emperor Pachacuti in the 1500s.

It is said that in the region's Quechua language, "Machu Picchu" means either "old mountain" or "old bird," and I couldn't help but think they were referring to the kestrel, one of nature's timeless emperors of the air.

The small falcon was the last bird we saw at Machu Picchu, and in some ways it was the "best" bird of the visit.

The sight of him connected us with home and reminded me that the "American" in the kestrel's name includes the Southern Hemisphere as well.



Bird's eye view of Machu Picchu in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Photo by Jim Wright.

When I think back on our visit, I will remember the sun peeking over the Andes, the mystical mist that encompassed the sprawling compound that morning, and the mind-boggling engineering effort that created this enduring monument in stone. But that kestrel will come to mind as well.

After all, an integral part of Machu Picchu's allure is its breathtaking setting. Amid the mountains, above the ravines and rivers, beyond the history and the wonderment, will always be the birds. ■

Waved albatrosses, lava gulls, and boobies galore: A recent eight-day trip to the Galapagos Islands brought daily looks at some of the most remarkable birds I've ever encountered.

Oddly enough, the natural-history cruise aboard a 78-foot motor yacht also offered frequent looks at close cousins of birds often seen in North Jersey, from great blue herons to ubiquitous yellow warblers.

Unlike most birding trips to Latin America, where you're apt to see hundreds of species, this trip to the archipelago yielded roughly 50 species. But half were "life" birds that I'll never set eyes on again.

Although I'd heard you can get insanely close looks at most birds in the Galapagos, you have to experience it first-hand. When you walk along a path through the middle of a breeding colony of blue-footed boobies, they act as though you don't exist. They go about their lives, eating, sleeping, courting and mating just a few feet away.

These seabirds are one of three species of boobies

seen on the islands. Like the other two, they got their name from the Spanish word for clown, "bobo," and they live up to the label. While the blue-footed boobies are graceful fliers and able fishermen who plummet like javelins from the sky to catch their prey, they are downright goofy on land. They waddle rather than walk, with those Tiffany-blue webbed feet leading the way.

Truth be told, my wife and I almost passed up this chance to travel with a few friends from North Jersey. Several years back, we had heard how a tourism glut was ruining the Galapagos, so we were conflicted. We wanted to visit this storied archipelago, located 600 miles off Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, but we did not want to contribute to its demise.

As it turned out, our cruise had just 11 passengers -- including three folks who were doing trail maintenance for the Galapagos National Park Service. Our boat, the Samba, is Galapagos-owned and operated, so the money

we spent in the islands stayed there, unlike the humongous cruise ships we saw. We even retrieved the occasional pieces of flotsam and jetsam we encountered as we walked along the islands' otherwise-pristine beaches.

In the grand scheme of things, our environmental footprint was relatively small. Am I writing this to ease my conscience? Sure. But I'd like to think that if more folks visited the Galapagos the way we did, the archipelago would retain its uniqueness for years to come.

The trip's one disappointment was a tiny one -- about the size of a sparrow. I had heard so much about Charles Darwin's finches and how they had influenced his theories on evolution, yet when you see them ... Well, it's just hard for them to compete for attention with the archipelago's big, colorful and downright amazing other birds. The finches, though pretty cool, weren't exactly show-stoppers.

During Darwin's monumental voyage about



Blue-footed boobies are among the charming but strange birds you'll see in the Galapagos. Photo by Jim Wright.

the HMS Beagle in the 1830s, he wrote in his journal: "One might really fancy that from an original paucity of birds in this archipelago, one species had been taken and modified for different ends."

As British ornithologist David Lack showed in the 1940s, that's exactly what had happened: A species of finch evolved into more than a dozen species that filled distinct niches. Some act like sparrows. Others are like warblers or woodpeckers. The birds were not known as "Darwin's finches" until Lack labeled them as such.

I hope that the more I know about these finches, the more interested I'll become. Let's just say my attitude is evolving. ■

Five years ago, a movie called "The Big Year" opened. The premise was shaky for a major Hollywood comedy/drama: Three die-hard bird-watchers compete to see who can see the most bird species in the continental United States in one calendar year.

In its favor, the movie starred Jack Black, Steve Martin and Owen Wilson, and it was based on a non-fiction best-seller of the same name. But audiences weren't buying.

The movie cost \$41 million but grossed a measly \$7 million worldwide during a seven-week run. Those numbers made "The Big Year" of the 40 worst major movie openings in history.

The Hollywood Reporter called it 2011's biggest flop, with the qualifier: "... if you define 'flop' as a movie that cost a lot to make but earned little." Clearly, this rotten tomato was headed straight for the compost pile.

Then a strange thing happened. "The Big Year" came out on video, and it

started to find an audience. On guided bird walks back then, I noticed more and more new faces. The reason was often the same: Folks said they'd seen "The Big Year," and birding looked cool.

Regional or local Big Year competitions sprung up. You didn't have to drive or fly thousands of miles to participate. There was an informal statewide competition in New Jersey, for example, and I organized one for the Meadowlands.

One of the local contestants, Ramon Gomez of West New York, had birded only occasionally before. The reason he signed up: "The Big Year."

"It sparked my interest big-time to start birding," recalls Ramon. "I went bought a new pair of binoculars and a field guide right away and started birding at Garret Mountain. Then to my good luck, the Meadowlands, which was closer to home, was doing a Big Year and I joined the fun."

Ramon became a tad obsessed: "Just like the movie, I was birding in every

kind of weather, extremely hot summer days and bitter-cold winter days. I also birded by canoe, kayak and pontoon boats on the Hackensack River and Kearny Marsh -- all while working full-time Monday through Saturday on the overnight shift."

Gomez eventually was one of the big winners of the event, seeing a jaw-dropping 171 species of birds in the Meadowlands in 365 days -- including a Great Horned Owl perched along a road in Lyndhurst in December.

Gomez says that he still keeps a pair of binoculars and a field guide in his car everywhere he travels, adding: "I'm happy to say I'm a trustee of the Friends of Garret Mountain and Rifle Camp Park."

I blame "The Big Year," and so does Ramon.

The movie also likely reinvigorated the idea of a continental United States "Big Year." The seemingly unsurpassable record of 748 was set by long-time Fair Lawn resident Sandy Komito in 1998, before the 911



Ramon Gomez birding the Kearny Marsh during his 2012 Meadowlands Big Year. Photo by Antonio Gomez.

attacks made hopping on a plane at the last minute and chasing down a rarity a thing of the past.

In 2013, Boston birder Neil Hayward broke the record by just one bird, and this year, two birders already broke Hayward's record -- in July. The last I checked, John Weigel (an American expatriate based in Australia) had seen at least 762 species, and Olaf Danielson of South Dakota had seen at least 759 -- with three months to go.

Clearly, birding has reached a whole new level, and I'd like to think the movie "The Big Year" and Mark Obmascik's 2004 book that inspired the film had something to do with it. ■

My wife and I just returned from a week of birding in Jamaica, where we saw all sorts of spectacular birds, from exquisite streamertail hummingbirds to potoos, a nocturnal creature straight out of J.K. Rowling.

One thing we did not expect: We enjoyed the birds' local names almost as much as the birds themselves. At first, the trip seemed like a typical birding trip, where your brain gets bombarded with a variety of arcane bird names -- rufous-crested so-and-so's and olive-throated whatever's.

But our trusty guide, Ricardo Miller, added a wrinkle. He not only gave us the bird's standard name but its nickname as well. Thus, brown pelicans became Old Joe, and the ubiquitous turkey vultures were John Crow.

One of my favorites was the rufous-tailed flycatcher, a large bird known locally as Big Tom Fool. Ricardo explained that the bird was named for its lack of caution. It has never learned to be wary around humans, which has made it a favorite target of young boys with

slingshots. Ditto a smaller cousin, the sad flycatcher, also known as Little Tom Fool.

Another favorite was the crested quail dove, a.k.a. the mountain witch, an elusive bird of Jamaica's famed Blue Mountains. The bird got its name for its haunting call.

The message became clear: Folks in Jamaica love language almost as much as they love their birds, and the birds are all the more fascinating because of it. The colorful names give Jamaica's birds an added dimension. They are identifiable not only by their calls or appearance but by their personalities or their role in Jamaican culture. This got me to thinking...

Purists may rightly roll their eyes at what I am about to propose, but here goes: Birding would be more enjoyable if more imagination had gone into the naming of most of our North American birds. Rather than relying on diagnostic descriptions that have given us a blur of birds with similar-sounding names, wouldn't it be great if more birds had entertaining

names as well?

For example, every backyard birder in North Jersey knows that the bird with the stupidest name is the red-bellied woodpecker. This dynamic bird has a bright-red head and faint pink on its belly. Common sense would dictate that it be called a red-headed woodpecker, but apparently that name was already taken. Thus, the bird-namers went with "red-bellied." Seriously? That was the best they could do? This colorful bird deserves a colorful name, not a confusing one. How about nicknaming it "big drummer," or something with panache?

Or take the common yellow-throat. Do you know how many warblers have yellow throats? Too many. What separates the common yellowthroat from many other warblers is its black mask. From now on, I am calling it the Zorro warbler.

Similarly, a few sparrows have white throats, but only white-throated sparrows sing "Peabody, Peabody." Henceforth, they are Peabody sparrows. Ditto the



Coming to a natural area near you later this month, the Zorro bird, a.k.a. the common yellow-throat.
Photo by Barbara Dilger.

Carolina wren, which should be nicknamed for its call, "Cheeseburger, cheeseburger."

My approach is not total heresy. The mourning dove is so named because of its sorrowful call. Juncos got their name because they are so junky-looking, (Just kidding. Please, just kidding.)

North Jersey already has a few colorful nicknames for its birds. Pigeons are sometimes called Paterson peregrines, and house sparrows are called black-throated browns, as if they were warbler wannabes. Any more suggestions? ■

If you leave the beaten path in Allendale's Celery Farm Natural Area, cross the Brotherton Bridge and take one of the two narrow trails that head north, you'll go through an area known as Barbara's Bog.

To look at the flat wooded area, you'd never know that it was once a cow pasture, and a very special one at that. It was here, in the mid-1950s, that a World War II veteran got an idea that helped revive the bluebird population of northern New Jersey.

The land was owned by the local milkman, Fred Rogers, who let townsfolk picnic there. Back then, my friend Stiles Thomas was a young insurance broker and bird-watcher who had noted that he was seeing fewer bluebirds in the area.

One beautiful spring day, as Stiles, his wife Sis and some friends spread out their lunch on a blanket in Rogers' pasture, Stiles saw a bluebird. He ran home, grabbed a nesting box he had built and raced back to the meadow.

No sooner had Stiles secured the box to a nearby tree than a bluebird flew in.

A lightbulb went off. The reason Stiles hadn't been seeing many bluebirds was that as more and more housing developments replaced meadows and woods in North Jersey, these beautiful blue and reddish birds had fewer tree cavities to build their nests in.

Stiles decided to help them out. Inspired by an Illinois doctor who'd put up thousands of bluebird boxes over two decades, Stiles started to build birdhouses out of old orange crates. By trial and error, he learned how to make them the most attractive to prospective bluebird tenants, including his discovery that the nesting boxes had to be at least 300 feet apart or the bluebirds would spend their time fighting over their turf instead of starting families.

Stiles soon put up the nest boxes, free of charge, in every meadow where the property owner would allow. Stiles also worked hard to get others involved,

publishing articles and offering free instructions on building bluebird boxes to anyone who'd send him a self-addressed stamped envelope.

In all, Stiles put up almost 200 bluebird boxes over a five-year period in Allendale, Saddle River, Upper Saddle River, Wyckoff, Ramsey, Franklin Lakes, Mahwah and Waldwick. He monitored all of them once a week during nesting season, creating two routes of 10 miles each. Over that stretch, 144 pairs of birds nested successfully, including 44 that had second broods in the same year.

His success was trumpeted in an Audubon magazine article about "the Bluebird Man of Bergen County" and in the Reader's Digest.

Fast forward more than six decades to early 2016, when Stiles heard that a friend had seen a bluebird in her meadow near New Paltz, N.Y. He insisted on driving there and putting up a bluebird box he had built, free of charge.

Six weeks later, when



*A bluebird uses a nesting box that Stiles Thomas installed two years ago.
Photo by Jim Wright.*

spring was going full throttle, a pair of bluebirds set up housekeeping. They've had a couple of broods of baby bluebirds there since then.

But Stiles was only getting started. He's now offering his plans to one and all, free of charge. If you email me at celeryfarm@gmail.com, I'll send you a pdf of the 1959 magazine article called "5 Ways to Attract Birds" -- which includes his original plans.

That way, you can build your own bluebird box and keep up the tradition. If bluebirds don't move in, other birds will. ■

I am sharing the following true story to:

- A.) Embarrass myself
- B.) Offer an instructive tale.
- C.) Both of the above.
- D.) None of the above.

The answer, as you'll see, is "B," though "A" certainly applies. Here goes.

The story began early last month, when my wife and I saw turkey vultures and black vultures hanging out on a barn across the street from our home.

We thought that was great. Vultures -- nature's garbage disposal system -- are cool and unusual. And they are so ugly (by most human standards) that they're always fun to watch.

What's more, we suspected the vultures might be entering the barn up by the rafters, and we commented that it would be most excellent if a pair nested there.

Fast forward two weeks. One afternoon, I looked in our front yard and found a giant egg-shaped object in the mulch.

At first, I thought it must be

some sort of giant round mushroom. But upon closer inspection, I decided that it was a huge hatched egg.

Now you may find this odd, but I happen to have a plastic reproduction of a bald eagle egg that I use for my birding talks. Thinking quickly, I put the eagle egg next to the mystery egg -- and voila! -- they were the same size.

I knew that it was unlikely that the mystery egg was from an eagle, so I got out a book and looked up the size of vulture eggs. Voila again!

I also knew never to assume, so I put the mystery egg in a plastic bag in the freezer for further investigation and then called my friend Stiles (a font of information on bird-related topics) to ask what he thought.

His reply: "Don't you think it's a Canada goose egg?"

Arrgggh! Instant mortification. Of course, he was right again (darn it!).

Sure, there's a barn across the street, but there's also a natural area beyond our

backyard, where dozens and dozens of Canada geese have been molting after nesting season.

It was far more likely that the mystery egg in our yard came from a Canada goose than from a raptor.

My problem was thinking in a straight line, trying to match my sighting with my expectations rather than starting with a clean slate and viewing the situation objectively.

The corollary to that line of reasoning is one of my favorite axioms: "When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras" (unless you live in the wilds of Africa).

A couple of years back, I heard the noted field-guide author and bird expert David Allen Sibley talk about the pitfalls of bird identification.

He said no one should expect to identify birds easily because "we're all primed with expectations and wishful thinking. Your brain can turn almost anything into almost anything else."

His point: We often see what



A turkey vulture looks for its carrion luggage in North Jersey. Photo by Jim Wright.

we want to see. "People have a hair-trigger response to make sense of what's around us, and there's no shame in that," he said.

Perhaps, but I'm still embarrassed.

Moral of the story: When it comes to most questions in life, think horses not zebras. Otherwise, you'll likely end up with a big fat goose egg and not even know it. ■

Chapter 5

GREAT LOCAL BIRDS:

WOODCOCK, KILLDEER, CEDAR

WAXWINGS, SANDPIPERS

AND OTHER NEARBY FEATHERED

CROWD-PLEASERS

They weigh less than a dime, yet they fly non-stop over the Gulf of Mexico. Their feet are too small for them to walk, yet they can fly upside-down and backwards, thanks to gossamer wings that beat 50 times a second.

They are ruby-throated hummingbirds -- among the world's most amazing athletes. And you can see them often and up-close this summer a lot more easily and inexpensively than you might think.

Why ruby-throated hummingbirds? They are the only hummingbird species that nests on the East Coast, and North Jersey is a good place to see them.

"I think the most fascinating thing about our hummingbirds is the fact that these birds, who weigh a tenth of an ounce, migrate hundreds or thousands of miles per year," says Patrick Scheuer, director of New Jersey Audubon's Lorrimer Sanctuary in Franklin Lakes.

"Most spend the winter in Central and South America and return to the north to raise young," he says.

"Years ago, people did not believe that such a tiny bird could make such a trip so they assumed they hid in the feathers of migrating Canada geese and hitched a ride with them."

Hummingbirds typically arrive as early as late April and can stick around well into the fall. These days, they typically are raising young or sitting on eggs. The males, by the way, are the ones with the bright-red throats; females' throats are white.

Many birders attract these little marvels with native honeysuckles and nectar plants as well as hummingbird feeders, but a simple nectar feeder is a relatively inexpensive addition. Most models are available in birding stores or hardware stores or online for \$20 or less.

I like the window model because hummingbirds are inquisitive and will fly right up to the glass -- offering amazing views. Because the recommended hummingbird food is sugar water, the costs are minimal to keep your hummingbird well-fed.

Here are two important hummingbird feeder tips to make your life easier.

Tip One is standard -- don't dye the water red in hopes of attracting hummingbirds. The feeders themselves are red, so no point in gilding the lily. Buying special red-colored hummingbird nectar is a waste of money, and adding red dye to it is a waste of time.

Tip Two is a bit unconventional: Instead of boiling the water for the concoction to impede mold growth, use distilled water. The goal of boiling water is to delay its fermentation by removing impurities. Distilled water costs less than a dollar a gallon, and you can prepare a large batch that should last you a week.

Fun fact: There really is no such thing as a fun fact unless you are under the age of seven or are too easily amused.

Hummingbird feeder basics: Put up your feeder as soon as possible. If the hummingbirds aren't in your area, they will be any day.



*A ruby-throated hummingbird sips from a local feeder.
Photo by Joe Koscielny.*

Change the water every few days, especially when the weather is hot and sunny. Otherwise, the sugar water will ferment.

Keep your feeders up for two weeks after you see your last hummingbird in the fall -- there may still be migrating hummingbirds in need of a pit stop.

If woodpeckers and other mooching birds are a problem, you can buy a hummingbird feeder without any perches. These feeders look pretty cool, like large Christmas ornaments.

Helpful website: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/humm/> ■

For the past month, this region has been experiencing a huge migration of one very small shorebird. Yet I'll bet that most North Jerseyans are totally unaware of this exodus from the north -- and unaware that this shorebird is in trouble.

The bird in question is the semipalmated sandpiper, one of the world's great athletes.

Weighing less than an ounce, and with a wingspan of just 14 inches, the semipalm flies from its breeding grounds in northern Canada all the way to South America each summer.

What's more, the bird travels in huge flocks. Several times in the past few weeks, as part of a New Jersey Audubon Society research project on shorebirds, I have counted thousands upon thousands of these birds roosting in Carlstadt near the Hackensack River. Thousands more have been reported on a dock in Little Ferry and on several mudflats in Lyndhurst and North Arlington.

In spite of these numbers, the New Jersey Department

of Environmental Protection has classified the semipalm as a species of "special concern."

What's going on? How can these birds be in big trouble if tens of thousands fly through here every summer?

The answer is simple: Three decades ago, roughly four times as many semipalms migrated along the mid-Atlantic Flyway. Population studies of these birds in their major breeding grounds near the Bay of Fundy have shown an annual 5 percent drop for more than a decade, and their numbers in their two prime wintering areas in South America, Suriname and French Guiana, have declined since the Eighties from 2 million birds to 400,000.

"Being a species of concern doesn't imply that very few individuals of a species are left -- it is just a reflection of populations dwindling to the point where they may become threatened, endangered or extinct in the future," says New Jersey Audubon's Nellie Tsipoura, who is leading the shorebird study. "By some estimates, populations of shorebirds have declined by an order of

magnitude (10 times) in the past 20 to 30 years."

The challenges facing the semipalms are similar to those facing the red knot, whose drastic population declines have made it one of the most publicized birds in New Jersey. Both birds migrate from South America each spring, typically stopping only once or twice on their way to the Arctic Circle as they race to begin their short breeding season.

One of the key northbound stopovers for red knots and semipalms is along the Delaware Bay, where they fatten up for the rest of their marathon flight by eating the eggs of horseshoe crabs. When the commercial harvesting of horseshoe crabs escalated a couple of decades ago, populations of both species started dropping.

Although New Jersey passed a law banning the harvesting of horseshoe crabs, other states along the Delaware Bay have taken no action. (The semipalms' southbound trip, with stops in North Jersey, is far less hurried; red knots are seldom seen here.)



Semipalmated sandpipers' numbers have declined for decades. Photo by Jim Wright.

Tsipoura says that fact such a large proportion of the semipalmated sandpiper's entire populations migrates through New Jersey makes it crucial that we do all we can to help them.

"Any protection we can offer them here is protection for the entire population," she adds. "...We are stewards of our natural resources, and we need to protect our wildlife to the best of our ability."

Sounds like reason enough for me.

In case you are wondering: Semipalmated sandpipers got their name because their feet are partially webbed -- another word for "palmated." ■

To introduce you to one of the goofiest birds on the planet, I offer this appropriately offbeat column.

Meet the American Woodcock, a robin-sized bird now appearing at a damp woodland near you.

How strange is Scolopax minor? Consider some of its many nicknames: "timberdoodle," "bog-borer," "big eyes," "wood snipe," and -- my favorite -- "mud bat."

As the Cornell of Lab of Ornithology points out, the woodcock is a bit of a contradiction -- a shorebird that likes the forest. Did I mention that its eyes are located toward the back of its head so it can better look around for predators while it dips its head to feed? Or that its ears are located between its eyes and bill?

My friend Mike Limatola, who has been leading a guided walk to see woodcock in the Great Swamp each March for more than a decade, says: "They like forest edges and open fields with brush and damp

soil that attracts earthworms -- their favorite food."

By one account, the crawlers constitute 60 to 80 percent of a woodcock's food intake -- which proves you don't have to be a European history buff to enjoy a diet of worms (or old jokes).

A woodcock is a worm-catching machine. A squat bird with big feet and a long bill, it reportedly stamps its feet to stir up the worms, then uses the outer portion of its bill like a pair of tweezers to extract its slimy prey from the ground.

I have read that the tip of its bill has sensors that can detect worm mucus in the ground for up to 24 hours. (I don't know about you, but anytime I read the phrase "worm mucus" in a newspaper, I know I am living large.)

For Limatola, marsh warden of the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale, the attraction is simple: "I like these birds because of their unusual look -- that long bill and those big eyes -- and their beautiful coloration." He says that

these days the best time to see them and their spectacular courtship display is at dusk.

Ah, yes, that courtship display. The males put on moves that make your best TV dance-show contestant look downright mundane -- and they announce their arrival in the twilight with a strange buzzing noise onomatopoeically called a "peent." (You can't make this stuff up.)

As for the display itself, it involves flying in circles as high as several hundred feet in the air while making odd chirps that the females apparently find irresistible.

I love this description of the courtship display by T. Edward Nickens, writing in National Wildlife more than a decade ago:

"Suddenly, I hear it: a faint, trilling twitter like the turning of a rusty screw. The sound rises toward the sky, where it seems to hang suspended in the gloaming. And that's when I see the bird, a fist-sized ball of feathers orbiting high overhead: a woodcock.



This American woodcock was photographed a few years ago at the Celery Farm Natural Area.

Photo by Kevin Watson.

"The bird scribes two large circles, then suddenly cascades toward the ground like a falling leaf, chirping in the descent. He lands near a trio of tall cedars and struts about with a stiff-legged gait. Then the woodcock catapults toward the gibbous moon again, in an exuberant sky dance designed to attract breeding females."

If you'd like to see a courtship display, here are a few places where woodcocks have been seen/heard in action this month: Along Disposal Road in Lyndhurst, Halifax Road in Mahwah and Laurel Hill County Park in Secaucus. Just be sure to take a cold shower when you get home. ■

In hindsight, I should have been embarrassed. I was standing on a bird-observation platform in the natural area near home when someone spotted a rock pigeon flying our way.

Uttering a mild epithet, I scrambled down the steps and hightailed it toward my yard in hopes of arriving in time to see the pigeon. No luck.

That was several months ago, and to this day my quest remains unfulfilled: After living in Allendale for 12 years, I still have not seen a rock pigeon from my property.

Mourning doves, the pigeon's elegant but equally blasé cousin, I get by the dozens. Bald eagles, Wilson's snipes, red-breasted grosbeaks and more: I have seen all these birds from my yard over the years, including more than 80 species from my yard in 2011 alone. But nary a rock pigeon.

Many folks would chide me to be more careful what I wish for. After all, we've all read about some schlep

who has dozens of pigeons infesting his yard and treating his house and patio like an enormous statue. No one wants that.

So let me be clear. I don't actually want a rock pigeon at my feeder, just an admiring glimpse of one in flight sometime will do -- so I can add it to the list of birds I've seen from home.

In fact, one of the differences between my yard and the small Central American nation of Belize is that I have seen a rock pigeon there twice. Both times I was on a birding tour, and our bus was chugging through a small town when someone spotted a pigeon on a pole. The bus burst into cheers, delighted they had added an unexpected bird to their trip total.

All of this has made me realize two important lessons.

One person's rock pigeon is another person's rarity.

I may never see pigeons in my yard, but I spy them every time I go to downtown Allendale, less than a half-mile away as the dove flies.

My guess is that pigeons congregate there and in downtowns nationwide because food is readily available and because...

Contrary to popular belief, pigeons are not birdbrains (figuratively speaking).

Pigeons have learned that downtowns provide plenty of open sky so they can better see a raptor approaching. Pigeons have also deduced that if they congregate, they have lots of eyeballs to look for those predators.

When the pigeons stray from home, they could become fast food for the town's assorted raptors. If you have ever seen a pigeon get clocked by a peregrine falcon at high speeds, you understand perfectly why they like to play it safe.

In short, to mix a metaphor, a pigeon may be a chicken for living downtown but it's a sitting duck if it leaves.

Or think of them as doves, not hawks.

What's more, pigeons apparently have the ability to distinguish which raptors



I've seen rock pigeons in Old San Juan, but not my backyard. Photo by Jim Wright.

pose a threat. They may hightail it at the sight of a Cooper's hawk, but as I learned when I photographed pigeons by the Allendale train station last week, they couldn't care less if a bald eagle soars overhead.

Finally, rock pigeons -- especially trained ones -- have incredible homing instincts. According to pigeon.org, the record distance is held by a pigeon owned by a Mr. R. W. Taubert of Texas, which flew home 2,039.065 miles in 43 days, 10 hours, in 1937.

Footnote: Pigeons are pigeon-toed (literally speaking). ■

Who doesn't like the American robin? The bird's reputation for being one of the first signs of spring may be a bit overstated, but it is smart, determined and industrious. And because it is seemingly so ubiquitous, most folks take it for granted.

To find out more about robins, I consulted Rick Wright (no relation), author of "The ABA Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey," due this August. The Bloomfield resident is also a senior leader with worldwide birding tour provider WINGS. Rick not only can identify a bird on the wing with ease, but he can also probably let you know its age, sex, destination and what it had for breakfast (not necessarily worms).

Robins are traditional a harbinger of spring, but aren't they around all winter?

Like most short-distance migrants, American robins engage in a "push-pull" migration, our birds moving to the southern U.S. for the

winter -- but being replaced themselves by robins from breeding areas to the north of New Jersey.

If robins are around in the winter, why don't we see more of them?

Boisterous, conspicuous, and confiding in the breeding season, robins in the winter tend to be quiet and retiring, and spend far more time quietly eating berries in wet woodlands than running after worms on suburban lawns.

What' are your favorite and least favorite things about robins?

My favorite thing about robins is their loud pre-dawn song in spring. My least favorite thing about robins is their loud pre-dawn song in spring. I also love the chuckling conversations they have with each other on warm summer evenings as they go to roost.

Any unique behavior that most folks aren't aware of?

A lot of people, even long-time birders, don't realize how distinctive the movements of robins

are: not just the run-and-stop feeding action on the ground, but the slightly hesitant wingbeat in sustained flight and, especially, the invariable tendency of the birds to flick their wings and shudder their tail when they land on a branch. Once people learn to watch for it, they enjoy being able to predict what the bird will do when it lands.

What should you do if robins start building a nest above, say, the sliding doors to your patio?

Many robins nest in close proximity to people, even on window sills and door frames, where they can be very trusting.

It can be inconvenient for a few weeks if the active nest is above a door you use, but the inconvenience is far outweighed by the pleasure of watching the adults incubate their robin's-egg-blue eggs and then stuff worms into the enormous yellow funnels that pass for the beaks of their nestlings.

Just use another door for three weeks or so, and make



American robins a harbinger of spring in the Northeast but ... Photo by Jim Wright.

sure that children and household pets know to keep a respectful distance from the nest.

If you're worried about droppings, just put a shallow cardboard box on the ground or floor beneath the nest and change it every week or so.

Does the early bird really catch the worm?

Robins don't seem to have much trouble catching worms whatever the time of day. What the early bird really "gets" is first stab at a good nest site, on a secure branch or ledge, protected from wind and storms and high enough to be out of reach of predators. ■

... Perhaps because the winter is so long
And the sky so black-blue
Or perhaps because the heart narrows
As often as it opens -- I am grateful
That red bird comes all winter
Firing up the landscape
As nothing else can do.
– Mary Oliver, "Red Bird"

No bird is more beautiful this time of year than the male northern cardinal. To see this crimson bird on a snowy day is one of the joys of an often desolate January, and a symbol of hope -- of warmer days ahead.

Even when you can't see a cardinal, chances are you'll still know when it's nearby, thanks to its clarion and appropriate call of "What cheer, what cheer, what cheer."

The fact that cardinals frequent most North Jersey bird-feeders -- they love to eat seeds -- makes them all the more popular in these parts.

(Just in case anyone is wondering, the male is the bright-red one, the female is more of a poached salmon. The female also sometimes sings -- one of the few in the bird world to do so.)

If you feel like you know your backyard cardinals like you know your next-door neighbors, it's probably because you do. These birds stick close to home year-round. After watching them survive the winter, you'll see the male courting the female at the feeder, giving her a seed with his beak to hers. Later, after the babies fledge, you can see Dad help feed the young ones the same way.

Is it any wonder, then, that the cardinal is so popular? It is the official bird of seven states -- Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and West Virginia. And it is the name of innumerable sports teams. Last time I checked, from Arizona (pro football) to St. Louis (Major League Baseball) to Louisville

University to Westwood and Pompton Lakes high schools and so on.

The only time some folks dislike the male cardinal is in spring, when he sometimes goes overboard when protecting his turf. Not only does he drive other male cardinals away, but he may also attack his reflection in a window or car side-view mirror, thinking it is a competitor.

Believe it or not, the cardinal was once a rarity in this region. In fact, the northern cardinal, despite its name, was not nearly as northern as its name would imply. As Bill Boyle notes in his definitive book, "The Birds of New Jersey," cardinals were rare in North Jersey a century ago, with ornithologists noting a considerable population jump 50 to 60 years ago.

For many, the cardinal has spiritual significance as well as brilliant beauty -- and not simply because it was named for the Roman Catholic cardinals, with their bright-red vestments.



Northern cardinals like to visit feeders early in the morning and late afternoon. Photo by Jim Wright.

Consider: the poem that is quoted at the beginning of this column is from Mary Oliver's collection "Red Bird: Poems."

The book ends with "Red Bird Explains Himself," in which she writes: "I am ... of the earth and I am of the inexplicable beauty of heaven where I fly so easily, so welcome, yes, and this is why I have been sent, to teach this to your heart." ■

One of my favorite bird species sometimes dines in the woods beyond my Allendale backyard, but I seldom see it -- even when it's around.

It's called a brown creeper, and at first glance, you'd think this little guy must have overslept the morning that Mother Nature was handing out charisma.

It's not a bit flashy or noisy or colorful. In fact, at first glance you may not even see it at all.

As for that name, it is a little, well, creepy -- as well as accurate. Every time I've spotted this low-profile bird, it has been crawling up a tree. It's the original tree-hugger, if you will.

Even when it flies, invariably to the base of a nearby tree, the creeper keeps things short and quick because it would rather forage than flit.

The creeper is an undistinguished brown and white, with a white belly and a hard-to-remember (and high-pitched) one- or two-note call. It also has a

long stiff tail that it uses for support and balance as it searches for food along the tree trunks.

Think of it as a skinny nuthatch, decked out in camo and sporting a narrow curved bill.

The creeper may have been short-changed in the looks department, but it just could be the world's most upwardly mobile bird. Because of its particular feeding strategy -- to pry little bugs or vegetative matter from the trunks of trees -- it always works its way up a tree, gleaning morsels of this and that with its dainty but longish bill.

As John Burroughs describes it, "The brown creeper, with his long, slender, curved bill, takes what both the nuthatch and the woodpecker miss. Working together, it seems as if they must make a pretty clean sweep."

Although few non-birders have probably even seen a creeper, I don't think of the

brown creeper as particularly shy or secretive. They seem oblivious to humans.

On this date a few years back, I was with a group of birders who watched one for at least 10 minutes along a trail at DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst. The bird was working its way up one tree trunk after another, seemingly unaware of the two dozen folks taking photos as they oohed and aahed over its goofy shenanigans.

I see brown creepers most often around this time of year, as well as in winter and late fall.

One place I have never seen a brown creeper is at my feeders, even though I've read that they eat suet, hulled sunflower seeds or peanut hearts. How about you?

In honor of this bird, I have even waxed (or waned) poetic.



The brown creeper could be the world's most upwardly mobile bird. Photo by Barbara Dilger.

*Jeepers, Creeper, shinnying up the tree.
Nobody sees you, a feathered worker bee.
Few folks care that you're so drab and small.
Heck, most folks don't notice you at all.*

*But as I watch you working your plan.
I've become Your biggest fan.
Some folks see life as a half-empty cup.
But for you, things are always looking up. ■*

Before birding took me under its wing, I used to run lunchtime laps on Fairleigh Dickinson's old quarter-mile oval in Teaneck.

One day as I headed down the backstretch, a strange bird popped up and darted ahead of me. Although it appeared to have a broken wing, I couldn't keep up. At the end of the straightaway, it flew off, and I thought our little competition had ended.

But once I reached the backstretch again, there stood that crazy bird, daring me to race. So I did, and off it went, screaming like a demented dentist's drill.

With the same result. Two more laps, two more defeats for Jimbo. I gave up.

Back at work, I described my strange encounter to a bird-watching friend. She knew immediately what had happened: I was too close to the nest of a shorebird called a killdeer, and its defense strategy was to lure me away from the nest with its broken-wing schtick. Over and over.

Since then, I have encountered nesting killdeer many times, and I now know to leave them alone. Sometimes, however, the killdeer decide to have a family in the worst possible place, like the pair of killdeer currently nest in the parking lot of my local swimming lake.

How were the killdeer to know the lake would open for the summer after the female had laid four eggs under a shade tree? How were they to know that the spot was one of the prime places to park on a hot summer's day?

When an acquaintance told me about the nest, I jumped into action. I marked off the nest site with yellow caution tape, and a homemade sign that proclaimed: "CAUTION: Ground-Nesting Birds. Do Not Disturb!"

Calling it a nest is being generous. It's just a small depression in the grass and gravel, cradling four eggs exquisitely camouflaged to

blend in with the ground. If you didn't know they were there, you'd never see them -- or realize that you had driven over them with your car. Hence the warning sign.

So far, so good. But when that violent thunderstorm hit North Jersey early last week, I had visions of the brown-speckled eggs getting swept away in a torrent of water and pebbles. Fortunately, when I checked the next day, the nest was like Francis Scott Key's star-spangled banner -- still there. For all their dentist-drill whining, these birds are tough dudes.

Although killdeer are classified as shorebirds, I've never seen one at the beach, a la their plover cousins. But I have seen them in the Meadowlands in late February, sitting on piles of snow by the side of the road -- among the first birds to arrive back on territory each year.

I'm not sure when the killdeer head back south or how far they travel, but I've occasionally seen some in North Arlington on Christmas



A killdeer stands amid four eggs in its nest -- a slight depression in the ground. Photo by Jim Wright.

Bird Counts, so I am guessing many don't go much past the Mason-Dixon Line.

Killdeer eggs take 22-28 days to incubate, and the babies arrive with downy feathers and their parents' trademark black necklace. The youngsters starting zipping around the day they hatch, which means folks parking at the local lake have to be on their toes (and brake pedals).

BTW, did I mention the killdeer may have another batch of eggs this summer? ■

One of the niftiest birds you'll see down the Jersey Shore this summer (if you're lucky) is the American oystercatcher.

To me, this cool shorebird looks like a weird gull with a snowman's nose -- thanks to that huge skinny carrot for a bill.

As author Neltje Blanchan wrote more than a century ago, "The brightly colored bill, twice as long as the head, compressed like a knife blade toward the end, is the chief distinguishing mark ..." The oystercatcher uses it to pry open meals.

Toss in pale pink legs and those eye-catching eyes -- bright orange, ringed by red -- and this is one shorebird that you'll have no trouble identifying.

"They're a bird with a very dramatic appearance that appeals to new birders as well as experts, and their whistling calls are integral to the New Jersey coastal atmosphere for me," says Don Freiday, a freelance naturalist and photographer based in Cape May.

The other nice thing about oystercatchers is that when you come across them

sauntering across the sand, they may not fly away. In fact, they'll probably ignore you and allow you to get some nice looks.

Nonetheless, it's best to leave them be. Freiday, who has been observing oystercatchers since he surf-fished in his early teens at Sandy Hook, suggests beach-goers "enjoy them, but from a distance so they can spend their time foraging and caring for their young."

Oystercatchers are in a spot of trouble in many places, although they seem to be holding their own in New Jersey.

According to a recent report by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, oystercatchers and many other coastal species are in trouble because of "pressures from sea-level rise, coastal development, disturbance from human recreational activities, and the threat of oil spills."

In New Jersey, the picture appears a bit brighter, at least for now. In the late 1800s, oystercatchers were extirpated in the Garden State because of over-hunting by so-called "market

gunners," who shot them and shipped them to markets and restaurants in Philadelphia and New York City.

After the practice was outlawed around 1900, however, oystercatchers have slowly made a comeback. According to Freiday, there are approximately 400 nesting pairs in New Jersey nowadays, up slightly in recent years, "plus about 1,000 that winter -- at least in milder winters."

Freiday says one recent change is that instead of nesting on beaches, more oystercatchers are nesting on salt marshes, where "they are less vulnerable to human disturbance but still vulnerable to predators and sea level rise."

I saw oystercatchers in Cape May earlier this summer, nesting in dunes roped off from the general public. That strategy seems to offer some protection, even if calling an oystercatcher's nest a "nest" is being charitable. Like killdeer's nests, they are just depressions in the ground, and their mottled eggs are similar as well.



A pair of oystercatchers forage on a Cape May beach. Photo by Jim Wright.

The difference is that killdeer babies hatch and are soon running around and eating on their own, while young oystercatchers depend on their parents for the first two months because their bills aren't yet strong enough to open their shellfish entrees.

"I'm always happy to see oystercatchers, and in my work I've been lucky enough to find quite a few nests and see young being fed -- always very exciting," says Freiday.

Oystercatchers seem to adapt to all sorts of places and conditions. In fact, I hope to see some oystercatchers in the Galapagos when I visit next month -- though Freiday says they are a different subspecies. Can't win 'em all. ■

Behold the wondrous waxwing!

This mysterious North Jersey year-round resident is occasionally seen -- but almost never at feeders -- and heard even less.

In recent weeks, I have been fortunate to see these charismatic birds in the Meadowlands, Allendale and Ringwood. Since area birders will be seeing them more and more in coming months, I thought it was time for a column about these feathered vagabonds.

Most notably, Mother Nature spared no expense in the cedar waxwing's design, from its pinkish head (complete with a crest and a raccoon mask) to the tips of its wings, which look like they had been dipped in scarlet sealing wax. The tip of its tail looks as though it was dipped in wax as well.

I have always been taken with naturalist John Burroughs' description: "The silence of the cedar-bird throws a mystery about him which neither his good looks nor his petty larcenies in cherry time can dispel."

But for a full description, it's tough to top the old "Burgess Bird Book for Children":

"They were about the size of winsome Bluebird, but did not look in the least like him, for they were dressed almost wholly in beautiful, rich, soft grayish-brown. Across the end of each tail was a yellow band ... "They were slim and trim and quite dandified, and in a quiet way were really beautiful."

Burgess did not describe the waxwing's call, perhaps because it is heard so seldom.

But cedar waxwings do speak. They have a high-pitched call that sounds like a soft but shrill whistle. Alas, as folks grow older, the waxwing's call may get more difficult to hear. The inability to hear a waxwing is often the first indication that a birder is losing his or her sense of hearing.

The collective noun for these birds, by the way, is "a museum of waxwings." Really? That's the best they could come up with? Why

not a "whistle of waxwings"? It's more accurate, and alliterative to boot.

One reason that waxwings are seen only occasionally in these parts is that they don't typically care for feeder offerings. They love to eat -- and share berries. They also enjoy hairy caterpillars but avoid a diet of worms (a little old history joke there, free of charge.)

Later this year, look for the waxwings in flocks feeding on berries together, often near flocks of similarly feasting robins. Cedar berries are particularly popular, hence the name.

One thing you might see cedar waxwings doing that robins almost never do is share their berries by sitting on a branch next to one another and passing the chow down the line.

Noted ornithologist Edward Forbush noted more than 100 years ago that the birds pass along the food because they "were so full that they had room for no more -- a condition in which they can afford to be generous."



Cedar waxwings are among the region's most beautiful birds. Photo by Jim Wright. Photo on right by Dennis Cheeseman.

Forbush did concede that the manner in which it is done, and the "simulation of tender regard and consideration for each other exhibited, render it a sight well worth seeing."

A bird that shares more than your average kindergartner! How can you not like that?

As for the waxy look on the tips of their tails and wings, it's actually a form of wax and apparently designed to attract the opposite sex (when sharing the berries doesn't work). ■



Chapter 6

MY 9 FAVORITE COLUMNS, FEATURING
A BIRDING CAT, A SPECIAL PAIR OF
BINOCULARS, AN OWLISH DUTCH
MASTER & MORE

My wife Patty likes to watch birds almost as much as I do, but the real bird watcher in our house is Pook, our black cat.

With no real job or household duties aside from killing an occasional bug, she spends most of her daytime hours sitting on the table by the picture window and watching the parade of birds going to our backyard feeders. For Pook, it's the feline version of Public Television -- seldom exciting but commercial-free.

I don't mean to brag, but Pookie is getting to be a pretty good bird birder. She can ID woodpeckers, chickadees and mourning doves, because she makes a different weird little noise depending on the species. Downy woodpeckers are particularly vexatious for some reason, eliciting a weird "ack ack ack" noise from her that I mistook for a furball at first.

As best I figure, Pook has a yard list of 30 species or so. She could do better if

she could ID all the different sparrows but, then again, so could I.

Pook particularly enjoyed this past winter because of all the snow. The yardbirds were especially easy to spot against a white background.

Pook's fascination with birds had not been without sacrifices on our part. We have removed the feeders attached by suction cup to our windows. We were getting great looks at woodpeckers at the nut-suet feeders, but Pookie was beside herself -- even tried scaling the window screens. We didn't even consider putting up the window nectar feeder for hummingbirds last summer. Pook would have gone apoplectic.

As you may have figured, Pook is an indoors-only cat, even though she was once a street cat in Brooklyn. We do so not only because we love birds but because we love Pook.

We have had many other cats over the years and allowed them outside, with

the same sad result. They were hit by cars (bad years for Goodyears) or, in the case of Dirty Harry, exposed to a poison.

That's one reason the American Humane Association strongly encourages owners of domestic cats in urban and suburban areas to keep them indoors. Other reasons include parasites (ticks and fleas or toxic chemicals, anyone?) and diseases, including rabies and feline leukemia.

As for protecting birds, keeping cats inside is a no-brainer. Few cat owners like to hear this, but the evidence keeps growing that domestic cats are a leading killer of North American birds.

In January, researchers from the Smithsonian Institution and Towson University published a first-ever study in the *Journal of Ornithology* on the number of young birds killed by domestic cats on



My cat Pook likes to sit by the window and watch birds, and vice versa. Photo by Jim Wright.

the prowl. The study, which focused on baby gray catbird deaths in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, found that cats were the primary culprit, responsible for nearly half of the deaths from predators. (Sad to say, this gives a new meaning to their name, "catbird").

The American Bird Conservancy estimates that cats kill hundreds of millions of birds in the United States each year. Pook is doing her part to keep the bird death rates down. How about you? ■

Once upon a time, I used to be a fanatical runner. I was so competitive that I ran under a pseudonym -- Billyjoe Speed -- and removed the labels from my singlet, shorts and racing flats just to eliminate the unnecessary weight. Pretty sad, looking back.

Then I moved next to a place called the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale.

The nature refuge has a perfectly flat mile-long trail that circles a large pond, and I envisioned myself running laps without concern for dodging vehicles or pounding my legs on asphalt for hours on end.

But a strange thing happened. As I ran, I started noticing the birds and turtles and frogs, and I realized that's why most people visited the place -- to enjoy nature. What's more, my running around and around in a loop interrupted their enjoyment and often spooked the critters that they were watching.

So I started running less and appreciating nature more. I stopped running in the Celery Farm, and when people wondered why, I replied: "Do people run through the Metropolitan Museum of Art?"

I knew my racing days were over during a five-kilometer "fun run" in Bogota one beautiful May morning, about a year-and-a-half after moving next to the Celery Farm. During the race, I heard a blue jay, then a cardinal, and then a Carolina wren. Before I knew it, I started counting bird species instead of minding my pace.

What had come over me? I had lost my single-mindedness, my edge. (And truth to tell, I was getting slower.)

These days, I run solely for exercise, and when my route takes me through a wooded area, I'll stop to gaze at a red fox or pause when I detect the insane call of a pileated woodpecker.

I am happy to say I have not become as fanatical about birding as I was about running.

I need to work harder on my birding IDs -- especially all those confounding calls that other birders sort out so effortlessly.

I have had to refresh my memory big-time the past couple of months when the warblers and shorebirds have arrived again on their way south.

And I am still scratching my head at a first-year plumage or drawing a blank on other bird IDs along the way.

But the beauty of bird-watching is that it brings me in touch with all sorts of nature. It's no coincidence that so most of the folks who go butterflying or dragon flying started out as birders. I am learning all the time -- about birds, for sure, but also about butterflies and bugs and all sorts of plants.



The distinctive call of a Carolina wren can be heard 100 yards away. Photo by Barbara Dilger.

As long as I am learning more facts than I forget, I'll consider myself ahead of the game.

Autumn is here. The humidity and biting insects are disappearing. What better time than now to get outdoors and head for the nearest woods, wetlands, hawk watch or meadow?

Nature awaits us always, but especially in the heart of autumn. ■

Every year I vow to write a column about my Christmas tree, then somehow manage to forget by the time that December rolls around.

Perhaps the forgetfulness is subliminal. Maybe I am a tad embarrassed about the Wright-Finn family Yule tree.

I do know that some people groan, hoot a little or laugh incredulously when they spy the evergreen in the corner of the living room.

The reason is simple. The tree is decorated almost completely with birds -- raptors, bluebirds, cardinals, herons, you name it -- plus the obligatory small white lights.

Folks may scoff, but I think the avian ornaments make a lot more sense than most decorations I see in stores. After all, what does a Yankees or Jets insignia -- or Mickey Mouse or a Dunkin Donuts logo -- have to do with the winter holidays? A relative once

gave me an ornament that was a miniature pool cue and eightball. Now that says Christmas!

Seriously, does any ornament except for birds on a tree really make sense -- or by extension, squirrels and chipmunks and an occasional raccoon?

Like many folks, I have a special affection for various ornaments -- one that my wife and I received as a gift for our late-December wedding, several that we bought on memorable trips to Massachusetts, Cape May and the Eastern Shore.

Some just remind me of my favorite birds. Not surprisingly, a half-dozen of the ornaments are owls. But we have a few exotics in there as well, including a toucan and a peacock at the top of the tree.

Each December, we add a new bird ornament or two, and add to our memories as well. Like many of the birds we see in the wild, a couple of our ornaments have

gotten a little bedraggled over the years -- but ours are incapable of molting.

One of these years we are going to do a Christmas Tree Bird Count -- the trouble being that several of the birds seem to be figments of the ornament designer's imagination (or some species I've never seen).

The other nice part: Many of our Christmas trees have been live trees that could be planted outside at winter's end.

A few of the trees died, but a couple of them have flourished in our backyard, near enough for the birds to use as shelter but far enough that the squirrels can't use them to crash the feeder buffet.

One little yew tree (it had to be yew) has not grown at all in the seven or eight years since we planted it, but the dickie birds seem to like it -- especially when there's a sharp-shinned hawk in the neighborhood.

Our other favorite is a plain old white pine that



Bird ornaments have perched on our tree for more than a decade. Photo by Jim Wright.

has grown to more than 11 feet tall. Now, it's a prime hangout for sparrows and titmice and chickadees. A decade ago, it was our Christmas tree, adorned with different sort of birds.

What's so strange about that? ■

Last month, I took a little road trip with a belted kingfisher from Oakland, a baby American robin from Hasbrouck Heights, and an eastern phoebe from Tuxedo Park. It didn't turn out exactly the way I wanted, but I am a richer person for the opportunity.

I picked up the trio at the Franklin Lakes Animal Hospital on a Wednesday morning. They were tucked away in ventilated cardboard cartons. I felt like a UPS guy picking up parcels.

If I had not glimpsed the kingfisher, I would not have believed its improvised carrier contained a bird at all. The box was so light that it felt empty -- a stark reminder of how delicate these birds can be, regardless of how dynamic and athletic they seem.

A stubborn traffic jam on Interstate 287 near Morristown notwithstanding, the ride proved uneventful.

To break the monotony, every few minutes I'd ask my passengers how they were doing. Aside from an occasional chirp, they kept to themselves.

Maybe it was just me projecting, but it was almost as if they knew our destination was the avian version of the Mayo Clinic, The Raptor Trust, near the Great Swamp.

I parked in the lot set aside for injured-bird transporters, then took the parcels into the waiting room, one by one. A staffer efficiently checked them in and brought each into the ER for evaluation.

I stood there for a second, awaiting the next step, but my job was done.

Five days later, when I checked to see how the three patients were doing, I began to grasp just how busy The Raptor Trust is from late spring through mid-August.

When I asked Raptor Trust spokeswoman Diane Soucy what had become of the baby robin, she said that she had no further paperwork on the bird -- which meant that it was healthy and "placed in the general population."

The Raptor Trust, it turned out, was raising 800 baby robins that had fallen out of their nests.

Diane said that the phoebe was also doing well, but regretted to report that the kingfisher had died. X-rays showed that it had the equivalent of a smashed collarbone. It had been placed in a freezer, she said, and will be donated to the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

Over the years, I have helped transport a great blue heron, a Cooper's hawk, a red-shouldered hawk, a black skimmer and a Canada goose to The Raptor Trust. Some did not survive, but others lived to fly another day. Regardless of the outcome, the trips were memorable and worthwhile.

Each of my passengers was a dramatic reminder that wild birds face all sorts of perils in our densely populated region -- and each raised my admiration for all the folks who help injured or orphaned birds, especially The Raptor Trust and its North Jersey drop-off location.

As I finished this column, I received an email from



An injured belted kingfisher is one of the many birds saved by The Raptor Trust. Photo by Jim Wright.

Donna Pontrelli of the Franklin Lakes Animal Hospital, who regularly transports patients to The Raptor Trust.

She was still saddened by the kingfisher's death, but she had come to grips with the notion that her passengers had a roughly 50-50 chance of survival.

"I realize how important it is to try, really try, to help these wild and beautiful creatures," Donna wrote. "Sometimes they do not make it due to injury or just a tough life out there, but it's that chance we take. ... Being connected in this way is meaningful."

Amen. ■

I blame the owl.

Ever since the 1990s, when I happened upon a painting by a 17th-century Dutch artist, I've had bird paintings on the brain.

I was visiting Boston, and a docent at the Museum of Fine Arts was explaining a still life. She pointed out that the artist's name meant "owl" in old Dutch, and that he signed his name by painting a small owl on the canvas. (Think of Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his movies.)

Although I wasn't into birds yet and I soon forgot the artist's name, the factoid about the owl lodged in my head. As the years passed, whenever I visited an art museum, I'd inquire about the Dutch artist whose name meant "owl." Docents would appear confused and say, "Who?"

Undaunted, I'd search the museum's old still lifes for owls. I didn't find any, but know what? By studying the still lifes, I came to grasp the symbolism often hidden in these spectacular works of

art -- the follies of human vanity, the fleetingness of time, and more.

I soon began looking for birds in landscape paintings, and gained a new appreciation for them as well. Sometimes, I even felt that birds were "missing" in a painting, and figured the artist had painted it from memory in a sterile studio.

Nowadays, when I get the chance, I enjoy birding in art museums. I count as many birds as I can in the paintings, and try to identify each species. I am not very good at it -- especially when the art and birds are from overseas -- but I find myself studying works I might have otherwise passed by.

Earlier this year, in the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, N.C., I happened upon another painting by the "owl guy." It turns out his name was Jan Jansz. den Uyl, and only three museums in the entire United States have one of his still lifes.

In addition to the paintings in Boston and North Carolina, a third Den Uyl is

in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, in Hartford, Conn., a two-hour drive from North Jersey.

The Atheneum's Den Uyl is an elegant oil painting with a not-so-elegant name: called "Still Life with Ham." The perfectly balanced composition features a table with a white cloth, a brown tablecloth, two pewter plates, a bowl of pea soup, some half-eaten bread and a silver beaker.

So what's the big deal?

If it weren't for this painting, the artist likely would have remained in obscurity forever. On his other still lifes, Den Uyl didn't sign his name at all. He just painted one of his little owls. As a result, for centuries his works were mistakenly attributed to other artists.

Then, in the late 1930s, a European art historian came across the Atheneum's "Still life with Ham" and noticed a small owl on the large silver vessel in the center of the painting, and a signature underneath: "J D Uyl."



Jan Jansz. den Uyl the Elder; Still Life with Ham, c. 1640, oil on panel, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1937.472

This is the only known painting that Den Uyl signed with both his name and his owl. "Still Life with Ham" became a Rosetta Stone for art researchers. They looked for the owl cameo in other mid-17th-century Dutch still lifes and rediscovered other Den Uyls, now worth millions of dollars.

I blame the owl. ■

If you've watched birds for awhile, you probably have a favorite pair of binoculars. Maybe you like how they focus, or the way they let in light on an overcast day, or just their heft in your hands.

My favorite pair are my first. They weigh almost four pounds, which makes them impractical for bird-watching. They aren't very powerful either: 7 by 50s. And they're more than 70 years old.

They are military binoculars from World War II (more on that later), and they were my dad's. Pop died when I was young, so they've been mine almost my entire life.

Last week, for Veterans Day, I got out the binoculars and absorbed some memories. I grew up with them, after all, and I like to remember my brother and I taking them on car trips with our mom and being amazed how different they made the world look. The coolest thing was they were fixed focus. Because of the way the lenses were ground, our eyes did all the adjusting.

A favorite photo of my daughter, Corie, is from her toddler days, clutching the binoculars. She is tiny as she stands next to me in a field in Sugar Loaf, N.Y., trying to hold the binoculars up long enough to peer through them -- backwards.

(I should have known she wouldn't grow up to be a bird-watcher, but back then I wasn't much of a birder either.)

I remember visiting my first hawk watch in the 1990s. I brought my dad's trusty binoculars. I figured my fellow birders would be impressed. To my disappointment, they politely pointed out that my binos were ill-suited for the task at hand, seeing as how they weighed a ton. I persisted nonetheless, scanning the skies until my biceps ached.

Since then, I've owned several birding binoculars, but I still like my dad's best. After researching them online last week, I like them even more.

I remembered as a kid hearing my mom say they were German submarine binoculars, but it never quite made sense -- why would you use binoculars to look for Nazi subs?

Still, they were an odd shade of green, as you'd expect from something issued by the U.S. Army. They were built like a tank, and Pop served in a tank destroyer battalion. The clincher: They had "Capt. John S. Wright" engraved in tiny letters.

After five minutes on the Internet, I discovered that my mom had been right. I just hadn't heard her right. The binoculars had been made by Zeiss for German U-Boat crews. A pair currently sells on eBay for \$999.

I also learned that near the war's end, when thousands of German soldiers surrendered en masse at the Elbe River, my father's Fifth Armored Division confiscated a huge cache of these very same binoculars,



*World War II binoculars are still my favorites.
Photo courtesy of Jim Wright.*

and that the commanding officer said every soldier should get a pair. That explained how a U.S. Army captain obtained a pair of German U-boat binoculars.

Do I find it weird owning World War II German binoculars? Nope. In fact, I cherish them more than ever.

The fact that my dad likely received them as part of a mass German surrender is tangible testament that the United States and our allies won the war and saved the world.

How many birders hold binoculars with that kind of global history and those kinds of personal memories? ■

As any serious James Bond fan knows, the fictional British secret agent was named after an actual American ornithologist. With the movie "Spectre" grossing well over \$750 million worldwide and a book of author Ian Fleming's letters just published, what better time to look into the dossier of birding's Mr. Bond?

As it turns out, the real-life James Bond wasn't just any old bird expert. He was a world-renowned authority.

How 007 got his name: Fleming lived in Jamaica after World War II in an estate called "Goldeneye," where he wrote his first 007 novel, "Casino Royale." When casting about for a name for his protagonist, the author had an unlikely inspiration. One of his favorite books was 'Birds of the West Indies,' by James Bond. The blandness of the name appealed to him, so he went with it.

In 1961, the ornithologist's wife wrote to Fleming, inquiring about the identical names. According to "The

Man with the Golden Typewriter," the recently published collection of Fleming's letters, the best-selling author explained in a letter to Mrs. Bond that he wanted his secret agent to have an anonymous-sounding name -- "the very reverse of the kind of 'Peregrine Carruthers' whom one meets in this type of fiction."

In the letter, Fleming also acknowledged: "Your husband has every reason to sue me ... I can only offer your James Bond unlimited use of the name Ian Fleming for any purposes he may think fit.

"Perhaps one day he will discover some particularly horrible species of bird which he would like to christen in an insulting fashion..."

When Fleming met Bond: In 1964, six months before he died of a heart attack, Fleming met Bond and his wife at Goldeneye and gave them a copy of "You Only Live Twice" and inscribed it: "To the real James Bond, from the thief of his identity, Ian Fleming, Feb. 5, 1964 (a great day!)"

This signed copy sold at auction for \$82,600 in 2008, nearly two decades after the ornithologist died.

Uncovering the real James Bond: Author David R. Contosta, who wrote a biography of the ornithologist James Bond, got to know the ornithologist in his last years. He went by the name of Jim Bond, and he was anything but dashing.

"So far as I know, all friends, associates, and family members called him Jim," says Contosta. "Jim struck me as a quiet, unassuming, modest man. Although he was ill at the time, [his wife] Mary said he had always been that way."

Bond's lasting legacy: And what a notable career Jim Bond had. A graduate of Cambridge University, he was a curator of ornithology at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and leading authority on birds of the West Indies.

Bond went on dozens of expeditions to the Caribbean to build a notable collection of bird specimens, most of which are housed at the



Ornithologist James Bond holds a specimen of a rare eskimo curlew shot by a hunter. It was the last of its kind ever seen alive. Photo Courtesy of David R. Contosta.

Academy of Natural Sciences. That collection, along with the "Birds of the West Indies" -- now part of the renowned Peterson Field Guide series -- will likely be his lasting legacy.

Fleming's Other Literary Birds: Ian Fleming's 007 short story "For Your Eyes Only" begins with this: "The most beautiful bird in Jamaica, and some say the most beautiful bird in the world, is the streamertail or doctor hummingbird."

Fleming first learned of the bird, no doubt, in Jim Bond's "Birds of the West Indies." Streamertails are also part of the Bond bird collection in Philly. ■

Time for a mystery. In honor of Perry Mason, let's call it "The Case of the Curious Crows."

Here goes: One morning last spring a North Jersey birder was sitting in his living room, minding his own business, when he saw a distant black bird atop one of the many wood duck nesting boxes that populate the large pond in the natural area nearby.

He grabbed his camera and ran to the closest observation point. When he arrived, he saw a crow perched ominously atop the nesting box while Mom and Dad wood duck swam nervously nearby.

It was nesting season, and they were no doubt concerned about the passel of eggs inside the box.

The crow finally flew off, and the female wood duck flew up to the box and reclaimed her turf. When the birder glanced around the pond, he counted at least six crows standing on nesting boxes around the lake.

Several crows headed for the wood duck box nearest the birder and drove off the female duck. Two crows sat atop the box, and two more circled.

After all four crows flew, both the male and female duck returned to the box, only to be strafed again by crows. One crow even craned its head and peeked inside the nest box before they all eventually flew away.

Here's the mystery: What the heck was going on? The crows, legendary for their intelligence and mischief, were not after the eggs. And the crows did not really attack the ducks so much as show them who was boss.

Oddly, the crows had staged their little raids in silence, so the birder wasn't sure which kind of crow was responsible.

What the heck had the birder witnessed? I turned to crow sleuth Rick Radis of New Jersey Audubon.

"I've watched crows and ravens since I was a kid, and I've seen that behavior

before, but only once with wood ducks around," says Radis.

"I've seen fish crows and American crows look into and create a ruckus around nest boxes on a number of occasions," says Radis. "Crows are regular nest robbers, and wood duck eggs would be tempting, but crows couldn't get through the hole."

Radis wonders if the crows might have been scouting for their nemesis, owls.

"There's a nest box in Great Swamp that year after year has screech owls, and from time to time I've seen crows land on the box, look inside, and start screaming for others to come look."

Radis says that legendary bird expert "Roger Tory Peterson loved crows, and he once told me to look at scenes of fender benders and other road incidents. He said you will almost always see a crow around looking down from a pole or tree, checking out the action. I've found this to be almost always so."



A crow threatens a wood duck nesting box in North Jersey. Photo by Jim Wright.

Peterson's other crow theory: Crows are smart enough to get bored and to hassle other bird species just for the fun of it.

"So ... food, predator, curiosity or boredom," says Radis. "Who knows the mind of a crow?"

What do you think? ■

Now that days are growing longer and migration is getting into full swing, I'd like to suggest a different birding strategy.

Instead of walking through woods or wetlands with binoculars at the ready, why not take a minimalist approach. Simply head for your favorite bench or observation platform and chill -- with a few conditions.

1. Go alone.
2. Bring nothing but binoculars, sunscreen, bug spray, drinking water and a large helping of curiosity.
3. Find a place where you often see birds.
4. Turn off all electronics.
5. Sit still -- even closing your eyes and just listening once in awhile -- and let the birds (and butterflies) come to you.

I discovered this approach inadvertently a decade ago. When I started birding and exploring the Celery Farm, the 107-acre natural area behind my home in Allendale, I tried to view the preserve from every angle. I'd walk the one-mile loop counter-clockwise, then clockwise, just for different

perspectives. Saw mostly the same stuff, just from different angles.

A Few years later, I was invited to a spring solstice event at one of the Celery Farm's observation platforms. The plan was for several of us to arrive just before dawn and motionlessly meditate for 10 minutes or so.

Trying to be a good sport, I went along. After a few minutes, the strangest thing happened. Several wood ducks, notoriously skittish near people, swam past the platform.

I had never seen one get that close. The reason, I realized, was that whenever I had been on the platform, folks were constantly moving around or talking or both -- in other words, just being human.

As it turns out, I wasn't the first to discover this Zen-like approach to watching nature.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, once wrote:

"Happiness is a butterfly, which when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight

upon you."

Otis Redding might have found it akin to sitting on the dock of the bay, just a bit more purposeful, perhaps.

The poet Emily Dickinson put it this way: "To make a prairie, it takes a clover and one bee, One clover, and a bee, And revery. The revery alone will do, If bees are few."

Nature writer Charles Fergus dubbed it "stump-sitting" in an essay of the same name.

Here's the opening: "I went stump-sitting the other day. I walked up the mountain, stopped at the first good stump I came to, and set myself down. I had no idea what I would see. Maybe a porcupine, an old gray-faced buck, or a hawk. Maybe nothing...

"As the birds feed around me, I spot a flashy dresser among the bankers' suits: a black-throated blue warbler," Fergus continues. "Unlike the regulars in the flock, who stay at home year-round, the warbler winters in the Caribbean."

Stump-sitting is a style of birding that savors new



A Black-throated Blue Warbler calling at the Tenafly Nature Center. Photo by Patrick Carney.

observations about familiar birds and other critters over adding new species to your life list. That suits me fine.

Last fall, The Times of London published an article on the five simple things to do daily to stay sane. Although some may say the advice is too late to do me any good, I took heart in one of the five, which sounded a lot like stump-sitting:

"Be curious," The Times advised. "Noting the beauty of everyday moments as well as the unusual and reflecting on them helps you to appreciate what matters to you."

To paraphrase part of the Fifth Amendment, "You have the right to remain silent." ■

Chapter 7

9 GREAT PLACES TO ENJOY BIRDS
FROM GARRET MOUNTAIN TO
THE CATSKILLS, THE REGION
OFFERS PLENTY OF PLACES WITH
BIRDS & HISTORY, TOO

If you watch birds mostly in your backyard, chances are you may not know about the avian attractions of the Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park. The 568-acre recreational area, located south of Paterson, is considered to be one of the best places to see migrating spring warblers on the entire East Coast.

Don't feel bad if this comes as news to you. Heck, Passaic County Government, which operates the park, doesn't even list "bird-watching" as one of the top activities offered there.

So let the word go forth. Over the six weeks, a parade of beautiful songbirds will use Garret Mountain as a migration stopover or a prime nesting spot.

Already this spring, palm warblers, yellow-rumps and bluebirds have made their way to Garret, and another dozen warbler species should be in view over the next week – ranging from common yellowthroats and

northern parulas to blue-winged warblers and black-throated greens.

The major reason that the mountain is a magnet for migrants is geography. Garret, located at the north end of the first Watchung Mountains, provides a perfect rest stop for the tiny birds that have been traveling up the Atlantic Flyway from as far away as Central America. Some may travel hundreds of miles more into Canada.

"Birds flying north on the ridge drop into the park or circle back instead of continuing over the city of Paterson to the next ridge, High Mountain," says Chris Takacs, a long-time birder who has made the park his second home. "Garret has everything a migrating bird needs – food, fresh water and shelter."

The results are a bird-watcher's paradise where up to 100 species of migrating birds can be seen in a single day in May.

On a recent Sunday, Takacs and I got good looks at the early arrivals, including Chris' favorite Garret Mountain bird, the eastern phoebe. We also saw woodpeckers galore, most notably northern flickers flashing their yellow feathers. I was so busy scanning the trees for birds that I almost missed Garret's great panoramic views.

The promise of a birding smorgasbord is what lured Takacs to the vast park in the first place. "Growing up in Clifton, I was already familiar with Garret Mountain, but I didn't know its significance for migrating songbirds," says Takacs, who heads the Friends of Garret Mountain Reservation, a non-profit group that helps maintain the park.

"As beginning birders, my wife Linda and I purchased Bill Boyle's 'A Guide to Bird Finding in New Jersey.' Bill called Garret Mountain 'the premier spot in the state for migrants.' That was good enough for us."

Takacs' advice for first-time



An eastern phoebe – "Garret's harbinger of spring" -- is a mid-March arrival that nests in the park. Photo by Jim Wright.

visitors: " Spend some time around Barbour's Pond, but the east ridge overlooking Clifton can be outstanding around sunrise."

Other solid advice for newcomers: sign up for one of the many guided walks planned by local nature clubs in the coming weeks. Experienced birders will take you to the best spots and point out some of those hard-to-identify little songbirds.

Garret Mountain is open every day from dawn to dusk. ■

For raptor lovers, these are the days of great expectations.

The great annual fall hawk migration is beginning, and several local lookouts are about to start their counts of southbound raptors.

Montclair, State Line in Alpine, and Mount Peter in Warwick, N.Y.

For sheer numbers and spectacle, it's tough to top the peak broad-winged hawk migration in mid-September. On Sept. 16 of last year, for example, Montclair and State Line both counted more than 2,350 broad-winged hawks, and Mount Peter tallied more than 1,800 two days later.

I love watching raptors each fall for other reasons, and I'll bet that if you try it, you may agree.

A visit to a hawk-watch has become one of my rites of autumn. Like picking apples, attending a high school football game, or buying a farm-stand pumpkin at, going to a hawk lookout is a time-honored communal

outdoor activity. (Being the first one there, to see the sunrise is a spiritual pleasure all its own, but it's not the same as hawk-watching.)

The two key words are "communal" and "outdoor." Going to a hawk watch is to be part of a group of friendly, outgoing folks who enjoy the fresh air and camaraderie almost as much as seeing the first bald eagle or peregrine falcon of the day.

Being outdoors during hawk-watching season is especially invigorating. Autumn, with breezes as cool and crisp as a winesap, is the one season you can almost taste.

Hawk-watching is also the most relaxing form of bird-watching. Instead of walking and looking for birds, the raptors literally come to you -- or at least fly past close enough for you to see them.

You sit, you snack, you chat with the folks around you. After a few visits to a hawk watch, you'll recognize familiar faces and a new set of friends.

With time and practice, you'll even become adept at telling a sharp-shinned from a Cooper's or a red-tail from red-shoulder, but an ability to ID a fast-moving raptor is not required.

In fact, for beginners, it may be better to just observe quietly for a while before venturing an identification.

Here are thumbnail sketches of my three favorite hawk watches within an hour's drive of North Jersey:

Montclair Hawk Lookout: The nation's second-oldest continually manned lookout. Open Sept. 1 to Nov. 30; located atop a 500-foot basalt ledge on the First Watchung Mountain, with great views of the Manhattan skyline and metro region; steep climb up steps to the lookout; bring a lawn chair, everything you'll need for your visit.

Mount Peter Hawk Watch: The nation's third oldest continually manned hawk watch and oldest all-



Cooper's hawks are just one of the 16 species of raptors that migrate past area hawk watches each fall. Photo by Karl Soehnlein.

volunteer hawk watch. Open Sept. 1- Nov. 15. Located just off Route 17A by Kain Road: A short slightly uphill walk from the parking lot; seating for approximately a dozen folks; near my beautiful old hometown of Warwick, N.Y.

State Line Hawk Watch: Open Sept. 7 to Nov. 15. Located off the Palisades Interstate Parkway, 532 feet' above the Hudson River. Wheelchair accessible; restrooms and a refreshment stand. ■

We heard it first -- that booming, almost hysterical cackle of a call.

Next, we glimpsed it flying through the woods: a huge black shape with flashes of white on the wings.

Finally, we watched it land on a fallen tree trunk down by the river, and saw that unmistakable Woody the Woodpecker head. For once, my wife and I not only got great looks at the often elusive pileated woodpecker, but this dynamic bird stuck around long enough for us to show it to some curious hikers.

Welcome to an under-appreciated birding spot in Mahwah known to insiders as "Halifax Road" -- a great place to see a variety of migrants and other great birds this time of year. Recent sightings there also include a blue grosbeak.

Hikers, walkers and fishermen may know this stretch of the Ramapo River as the Continental Soldiers Park area. Lake Henry, at the

park's western edge, is part of the prime birding zone as well. The path around the lake is a mile long, so you can get some exercise as well.

The place is such a paradise for birders that Doug Morel of Mahwah has visited there roughly once a week for more than a decade, and not just because it's five minutes from his house.

"It's an appealing spot for me because, for a relatively small site, it has a decent variety of habitat types -- rushing river, small pond and lake, forest, wooded wetland and nice meadow floodplain."

According to Doug, the best times are when spring or fall migration is at a peak. "Morning, just after sunrise, can be rewarding," he says. "The rising sun hits the trees along the river and wakes up the meadow."

Doug says rubber boots are a must for the meadow in spring. He also advises

that a first-time visitor "allow a good two to three hours to slowly explore the site. There are a few little side paths to view interesting areas that can hold surprises. Look and listen in every direction. Pish softly and tally a big list!"

This nifty greenway is located near Ramapo College along Route 202 (Ramapo Valley Road), not far from Bergen County's Ramapo Reservation and the Darlington School House, headquarters for the New York/New Jersey Trail Conference.

From a birding standpoint, the only downsides we encountered on a recent visit were several strands of monofilament fishing line dangling from the trees and lots of dogs off leash - even though dogs are not allowed in the park, according to the Trail Conference website.

Monofilament line can entangle unsuspecting birds and eventually kill them. Dogs off-leash tend to flush birds. ■



A pileated woodpecker was one of the highlights of a recent visit to Halifax Road. Photo by Jim Wright.

One of my favorite winter birding spots comes with an “only in North Jersey” tag. Where else is a beautiful marsh next to a Bob’s Discount Furniture store and just across the turnpike from a Walmart?

Experienced birders in the region know that could describe only one spot -- Mill Creek Marsh in Secaucus.

The recently revamped 209-acre site, which offers wide walking paths and panoramic views, is a terrific place to see green-winged teal, northern shoveler and other ducks, as well as an occasional northern harrier and kestrel.

On New Year’s Day, I even saw a rare Orange-crowned warbler there. In all, nearly 200 species have been reported at the marsh, located not far from Route 3 West.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the marsh is this: The 209-acre site was once blanketed in the invasive reed phragmites

and earmarked for 2,750 townhouses. In the 1990s, the state bought the property and remediated it. Upgrades included re-establishing tidal flow from the nearby Hackensack River, building open-water impoundments and a small network of paths, and replacing the most of the phrags with spartina, birches, groundsel and other native flora.

I’ll take teal over townhouses and additional traffic any day.

In addition to the birds, the park’s other cool attraction is the array of ancient cedar stumps -- a reminder of what the Meadowlands must have looked like hundreds of years ago, before Europeans arrived in large numbers

Unless the tide is very high, you can see the remnants of a stand of Atlantic White Cedar in the impoundments. The trees once covered as much as a third of the region, until settlers started cutting them down for roofing shingles,

barrels, railroad ties and even roadways (they put the “plank” in Paterson Plank Road).

When the state dug out the impoundments, they discovered the stumps buried in the muck. The fact that the wood had not rotted after all those years is testament to cedar’s durability.

The trails, severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy, were recently rebuilt by the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority.

Last spring, with the help of a grant from the Bergen County and National Audubon societies, the NJSEA installed plantings to provide habitat for both butterflies and birds at the entrance and along the trail.

In warmer weather, you can explore the marsh by kayak or canoe and see wonderful shorebirds and wading birds, notably snowy egrets. Just launch at Mill Creek Point Park, next to the Hackensack River, and paddle down the creek. ■



The walking trails at Mill Creek Marsh offer breathtaking views. Photos by Jim Wright.

Doodletown. Doodletown. Doodletown.

For years, every May, I've heard the name repeated over and over, like a mantra for zoned-out birders.

"Doodletown is the place to go to see cerulean warblers," one birder would say.

"I saw my first hooded warbler there," exclaimed another.

"What a cool place," chirped a third.

Doodletown. Doodletown. Doodletown.

I heard the name so often that I took a strong disliking to it. Who wants to go birding in a place that sounds like the name of a retirement home for cartoonists? The place had to be sketchy.

Besides, I was perfectly content walking around my hometown nature refuge and a few favorite spots in the Meadowlands. In contrast, Doodletown was up in New York State, near the Hudson River in Bear Mountain State Park.

Last spring, I finally conceded that I was being stubborn and that other birders must be onto something. Birders don't

waste their time going to spots that are unproductive.

So I looked into Doodletown, and became fascinated -- not just by the birds but by the history, which often go hand in hand. I had to admit that I'd never birded in a ghost town before.

Once a small but thriving hamlet founded before the Revolutionary War, Doodletown may have gotten its name from the extensive logging done in the area back then -- by one account, logging in 1700s was called "doodling." Who knew?

Even though the hamlet continued to thrive into the 20th century, the homes were eventually bought out by the state to make way for a small reservoir and a ski slope that never materialized.

Now the hamlet has the feel of a town that time forgot. All that remains are a worn-out road, lots of cement steps leading nowhere, the foundations of homes, a few cemeteries and telephone poles wrapped with vegetation. If you told me the place was haunted, well ...

Alas, by the time I decided to visit Doodletown with a friend last June, the warblers had waned, and the walk from Route 9W up Doodletown Road was far steeper than we had bargained for. (Jimbo did not do his homework.)

This year, I decided to visit this hot spot in May, when migration was -- and still is -- in full swing. Leading the way was an expert local birder, Carol Weiss of the Rockland Audubon Society, who has birded the site for more than three decades. She knows the places to find all sorts of warblers in Doodletown, and most of the local lore as well.

Over the course of our vigorous four-hour walk, we saw an insane number of awesome birds, an avian who's who: indigo bunting, rose-breasted grosbeak, ruby-crowned kinglet, Baltimore oriole and a dozen species of warbler. The "wobblers" included cerulean, hooded, Blackburnian, blue-winged, Nashville, American redstart and Louisiana waterthrush. In all, we tallied 43 species.



A hooded warbler sings at Doodletown. Photo by Jim Wright.

If you aren't a great birder, do what I did: Go with someone who is. The best way to become a better birder is to go birding with one.

What's more, the hamlet is filled with helpful signs about former residences and glimpses of the past, including the route that British troops took through the hamlet on their way to attack Forts Clinton and Montgomery in 1777.

In short, anyone who's looking for a new place to go birding and take a walk through history at the same time should keep three words in mind.

Doodletown, Doodletown, Doodletown. ■

If you're looking for one of the best birding spots in all of North Jersey, bar none, I have four words for you: DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst

Over the years, more than 265 species have been reported in the one-square-mile park -- the most for any site in North Jersey.

One of the great things about the sprawling park is that it's a terrific place to go birding and take nature photos in the colder months -- with five miles of trails and a beautiful view of the ever-changing Manhattan skyline to the east.

"DeKorte has so many diverse habitats within the park that you never know what you might see -- including lots of ducks and possibly raptors," says Bergen County Audubon Society president Don Torino, who has been leading walks in the park for years.

His advice for walk participants: "Come early and dress warm. Winter winds can be brutally cold in the Meadowlands."

The best place to view wintering waterfowl is along the three large tidal impoundments that are home to hundreds of canvasbacks and dozens of ruddies, buffleheads and other species of ducks this time a year.

If the impoundments aren't frozen, a great place to view the ducks as they chill on the water is on the half-mile-long boardwalk known as the Marsh Discovery Trail, which goes out into the most popular impoundment for bird-watching.

The park attracts lots of other wintering birds, including natty white-crowned sparrows and an occasional orange-crowned warbler.

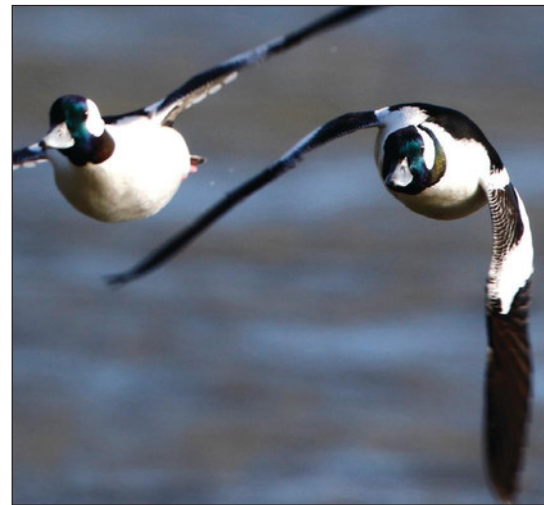
This month, birders and photographers have flocked to DeKorte to see a rare-for-

this-area Lapland longspur, a sparrow-size bird that breeds in the Arctic tundra. In the winter, longspurs typically prefer grasslands and prairies. This guy has been hanging out with the song sparrows along the park's Transco Trail. Will it stay around to ring in 2017? Only time will tell.

I must confess I'm a bit partial to DeKorte Park. When I worked for the Meadowlands Commission, from 2008 to 2014, the sprawling park was my home base. I loved to go birding there on my lunch hour, and I helped organize dozens of bird walks like Sunday's event over the years.

One of my favorite spots in the winter is nearby Disposal Road, where you can get great looks at northern harriers and other raptors as they hunt the region's former landfills.

If you're lucky, you might see a wintering rough-



Buffleheads are a winter attraction at DeKorte Park. Photo by Dennis Cheeseman.

legged hawk (a beautiful cousin of the red-tailed hawk). If you're really lucky, you might even see a Snowy Owl, which have been known to hang out atop the landfills every couple of winters or so.

One final bit of advice: if you've never been to DeKorte Park, use a map app like Waze or Google Maps and type in "Meadowlands Environment Center" to get there. The park is the closest thing to the middle of nowhere you'll ever see in Bergen County. ■

Looking for a day trip that combines birding, history and art?

I know just the place.

It's called Olana, about a 90-minute drive or so up the Hudson River, and it offers 250 acres of birding at one of the most picturesque spots in our region.

Olana is a New York State historic site that's best known for the former hilltop mansion of Frederic Edwin Church, the greatest American artist of the mid-19th century. But birders know it as a spot where they can reliably see scarlet tanagers, eastern bluebirds, pileated woodpeckers and plenty more.

On a recent Thursday, I walked the Olana estate with four excellent birders from the Alan Devoe Birding Club of Columbia County, N.Y. They birded 'em for six hours (God bless 'em) and tallied 58 species. I joined them for four of those hours and, with their help, I saw or heard 50 of those species. They were far better at identifying

birds by ear than I am, which really helped big-time with the warblers.

The best moment for me was when a Baltimore oriole and rose-breasted grosbeak perched on the same branch. That was during peak migration two weeks ago, but my guess is you'll still get plenty of looks at cool birds like the eastern towhee that seemed to pose for my camera.

Kathryn Schneider, author of "Birding the Hudson Valley," to be published next year by the University Press of New England, was one of our group on that sunny May morning. She says one of the great things about birding Olana is that it's right by the Hudson River, where birds find food during migration. And because it has habitats ranging from woods to wetlands to open fields, it's a good place to see birds year-round.

For Schneider, another nice plus is the site's network of old carriage roads. "The roads are not steep, since

they were designed for donkeys and horses mostly. So they're great for walking and birding, and there are no cars on them so you don't have to look out for traffic."

Beyond the birds, there is the immense Olana itself, a spectacular mixture of Victorian and Persian architecture adorned with brick, wood, slate, ceramic tile and stenciling. Outside, nearly 500 feet above the Hudson, you can enjoy panoramic views of the Catskill Mountain region.

Ironically, Olana is so spectacular because Church developed acute arthritis. Unable to paint, he turned the entire site into his canvas, designing the villa and altering the landscape by turning a swamp into a lake, creating woodlands, and planting gardens and orchards.

The result is a terrific destination for birders, hikers, art lovers and history buffs. ■



*Olana was built by unparalleled Hudson River School artist Frederic Church in the 1870s.
Photo by Jim Wright.*

Tips: Wear sturdy shoes, bring water and an energy bar or two. Sunblock and insect repellent are good ideas, and as with other natural areas be aware of ticks. Expect to get a mild case of warbler neck — a lot of these birds like to eat insects near the tree tops. The site is open from 8 a.m. to dusk. Olana's main house is open for tours Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m.- 4 p.m., but best to make reservations well in advance because they sell out.

For more info: olana.us.

I've gone birding twice in Manhattan this year, and seen some amazing birds -- sandhill cranes, a saw-whet owl, a gigantic American redstart and dozens more.

But I didn't go to Central Park or even the American Museum of Natural History. And aside from some starlings and a lot of pigeons, I didn't see any birds on the ground, in trees or in the air.

All the birds were on buildings -- painted on buildings, to be exact. They are all part of an ambitious public art installation in Upper Manhattan, the Audubon Mural Project. It's the brainchild of art dealer and former Teaneck resident Avi Gitler, who opened a gallery on Broadway in 2014 and commissioned an artist to paint murals nearby to attract attention.

When the artist painted a flamingo, a lightbulb went off. John James Audubon, the father of American birding, spent the last decade of his life living on a huge farm in the area and is

buried just five blocks away. Avi decided all the murals should be of birds.

After two paintings were completed, Mark Jannot, a neighbor who worked for the National Audubon Society, asked if Avi would expand the project to raise awareness of the non-profit's groundbreaking report on birds and climate change. Instead of doing several murals, would Avi consider creating murals of the 314 North American birds threatened by global warming in this century?

The first surprise, says Avi, was how challenging it is to find real estate to paint on: "New York City is a place where it's hard to get everyone to agree on something, and it's hard to persuade landlords at a time when real estate is doing so well to change the status quo in any sort of way."

So far, a bunch of artists have done murals depicting 83 of the birds, and the results have been spectacular -- from a fish crow above a gas station at 155th and Broadway to a pair of gigantic, hyper-realistic grosbeaks several

blocks south. Another favorite, Audubon himself contemplating a cerulean warbler awaits on 149th Street, just around the corner from Avi's gallery.

Some of the basic murals may cost as little as \$600 to create, but the more elaborate ones -- which require special city permits, a small motorized crane and a lot of paint -- can cost upwards of \$10,000. The project is funded by grants and donations. The artists receive a small honorarium and a growing audience for their work.

The project won't paint just anywhere. "We're looking to beautify, so we're looking for unloved spaces," Avi says. "We like walls where there's a lot of peeling paint, or brickwork that's seen better days or has a couple of old faded [graffiti] tags."

Through it all, Avi has found the project rewarding. He beams when he sees people taking pictures of the murals, and takes pride in how the neighborhood has embraced the art -- including two bars that have



This American redstart is just one of more than 80 bird murals in Upper Manhattan. Photo by Jim Wright.

named drinks after the murals. Hogshead Tavern serves a drink called the Purple Finch, and Harlem Public has one called the American Redstart.

In Upper Manhattan, the project has a new partner -- NYC Audubon, which is doing monthly two-hour walks to see the murals and Audubon's grave.

"It's a great project in the way it engages the public and the street space and mixes art, conservation, history, and science," says NYC Audubon's Gabriel Willow. "The fact that it happens to be in the neighborhood where John James Audubon lived and is buried gives it an extra resonance." ■

This summer, I made a pilgrimage to a rustic log cabin in the foothills of the Catskills. It's home to woodpeckers and warblers, but I wasn't there for just the birding.

The place is Slabsides, home to the legendary nature writer John Burroughs, who built the one-room retreat by hand in the late 1800s and wrote some of his most inspired writing about the value of nature there.

Slabsides, a National Historic Landmark and a Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area site, is part of the 197-acre John Burroughs Nature Sanctuary. It's located not far from 9W and the Hudson River in West Park, N.Y.

The pristine natural area is a bit over an hour's drive from northern New Jersey (just type in "John Burroughs Slabsides" on your map app), and it's well worth the trip. In coming weeks, as the temperatures cool off, it'll be even better.

Mark DeDea, president of the John Burroughs Natural History Society, a long-time birder and Slabsides aficionado, leads free birding walks there every year. The walks, free and open to the public, are held in conjunction with the John Burroughs Association, which owns and maintains the sanctuary.

The walks typically begin with Joan Burroughs (the author's descendant) reading an appropriate passage about nature, and they end with a visit inside the cabin itself.

"My great-grandfather's words really come to life at the nature sanctuary," Burroughs says. "This is the land that inspired much of his writing. There's a peacefulness and a tacit respect for nature. It's not the Rocky Mountains, but you can feel the majesty of nature's creation there. There's always something new to experience, small and large."

"Not to sound too corny, but I feel a connection to the man there," says DeDea. "I grew up fishing the same tiny tributaries he caught trout in as a boy, and then as an adult I was fortunate to befriend his flesh and blood -- Joan -- and have access to Slabsides and see the very implements he used and walk the land he worked."

DeDea is one in a long line of Burroughs admirers that includes Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and Theodore Roosevelt. Burroughs and the 26th president shared a love of birds, and Burroughs even went bird-watching with Roosevelt in the nation's capital.

Wrote Burroughs: "On our return trip, I passed another night at the White House, and in the morning early we went out on the White House grounds to look for birds, our quest seeming to attract the puzzled attention of the passers-by."

Burrough's foremost legacy is his lyrical writing,



John Burroughs wrote some of his classic nature essays at Slabsides. Photo by Jim Wright.

in which he championed the preservation of open spaces and the natural world.

A wooden sign on a tree near the cabin sums up Burroughs' philosophy. It's from his classic 1908 essay, "The Art of Seeing Things."

"If I were to name the three most precious resources of life, I should say books, friends, and nature; and the greatest of these, at least the most constant and always at hand, is nature." ■

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Great Blue Heron. Photo by Jim Wright.



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THE BEST OF THE BIRD WATCHER