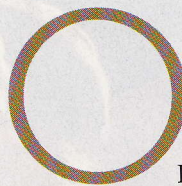


BEYOND PIGEONS

*Bird watching catches
on in the urban jungle*

by Susan M. Brackney
photography by Brian Smith



KAY, SO HE WAS DEAD. But he was also the most stunning wild bird I'd ever seen—probably ever would see. I'd been walking the city alleys of Bloomington, Indiana, when I nearly stepped on a lovely-but-lifeless Indigo Bunting. I recall lightly pinching his paper-thin

body between my thumb and index finger. With the smallest movement of my wrist I could make his electric blue head flop from one side to the other. His snapped neck made sense. After all, the neotropical migrant navigates with the stars. Flying at night, he probably never noticed that eight-story brick building smack in the middle of the city's buzzing downtown—until he smacked into it himself, of course.

True, mine was not exactly the sort of encounter most birders relish, but it served as my first glimpse of a relatively new pastime—urban birding. Sound like an oxymoron? Plenty of modern-day birders are happy to report it's not. While traditional birders go the distance to see their quarry in preferred habitats, their urban counterparts are happy to stay home, instead scanning their own concrete-covered environs for avian treasure. Greg Links, an avid birder and trustee at large for the Toledo Naturalists' Association, does a little of both. Sometimes he steals out on his lunch hour to look for migrants passing through downtown in the spring and fall. "It's a quirky little game," he says. "What kind of goody can we turn up in the middle of all of this?"

During one fall field trip Links and a group of urban birders found 58 species in an afternoon. "Those birds were all in downtown To-

ledo. Now, there were a couple of spots that were pretty wooded, so that was kind of cheating a little bit," he says. One of Links's favorite finds to date? A Connecticut Warbler walking along the library square. "That's a surprise. That's a bird of the Northern spruce bogs, and there it is walking on the sidewalk. With [urban birding] it's not so much the rarity of the bird as it is the uniqueness of the context," he explains.

It's not easy to pin down just who these newfangled birders are. According to the 2000 Census, more than 46 million Americans say they birdwatch in some form. "The demographics of birding in general have shifted fairly recently. It used to be two groups: the stereotypical little old ladies with their sneakers and binoculars, and then the other group of real hotshot, hard-core types who go out alone and list as many birds as they can," Links notes. And now? There are still those intense loners who live to look for birds and list those they find all by themselves, thank you very much. (Links counts himself among them: "We're out to go birding, not kibbitzing!") But that's changing. "Today I would say birding is probably pretty evenly split between men and women, and they are going out in groups," says Links. Turns out, there really

isn't an "average" urban birder. At least not yet, anyway. And there isn't any one reason why people scour their cities for birds.

For Sharon "Bird Chick" Stiteler, the hobby is part habit—and part obsession. An urban-birding blogger and author of the forthcoming book, *City Birds, Country Birds* (Adventure Publications), Stiteler has always been a city-based birder. "I grew up in Indianapolis, and my parents didn't necessarily have time to take me out to the middle of nowhere to go look at birds, so I would just watch them wherever I was," she says. Now in Minneapolis, the 32-year-old is so devoted that she carries a miniature telescope in her purse. "I honestly cannot help it. If I'm at a cookout or an outdoor wedding or something—and especially if it's spring and migration's going on—I'll have that with me," she says. It often comes in handy. During one outdoor gathering, a nighthawk migration flying overhead captivated Stiteler and, ultimately, the rest of the party as well: "You start pointing and looking up, and everyone at the table around you starts looking up, too. Before you know it, you're doing an impromptu lesson on nighthawk migration." When she's not urban birding, the freelance writer covers,



City dwellers like Boston's Fredericka Veikley (front) need not leave town to spy plenty of feathered friends.

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yes, birds, and consults for manufacturers of bird feeders and bird-attraction products. Stiteler also maintains bird feeders for friends on the side. "One of them was having a horrible time with something attacking their feeders at night, so I installed a night camera. We found out we had had a bear coming. It was eating the bird food and destroying the feeder!" she recalls.

Of course, city birders don't need night-vision cameras or mini telescopes to be successful. "Hundreds of people will go by in a day, and the birds are oblivious to them. Typically, I don't need binoculars because the birds are just eight feet away, in a little planting of flowers or something," says Karl Overman, a field-trip leader for the Detroit Audubon Society and assistant attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice in Michigan. Like Links, Overman squeezes birding in during his lunch break. He's been hooked since junior high, but he began to look for birds in urban settings about four years ago and has noticed more and more of them passing through the city.

In part it's those plantings—whether in city parks, on courthouse lawns, or even school playgrounds—which have helped make the pursuit so fruitful. That's because well-planned green spaces in urban areas translate to more stopover points for migrating birds that become hungry or exhausted during each leg of the journey. "Birds are flying over in huge numbers, and they fly over at night. What happens is the sun comes up, and they've got to plop down somewhere," Links says.

If they've been flying over a large urban area, that "somewhere" can be tricky to find. Peter Dorosh, president of New York's Brooklyn Bird Club, imagines green spaces must stand out from a bird's eye view: "They see city parks and preserves as dark spots within the 'neon empire.' They know if it's dark it must be good landing." If it sounds like Dorosh has learned how to think and see like a bird, it's because he has. Other urban birders rely on their ability to detect specific calls to uncover the unexpected Blackpoll Warbler or other surprise songbirds, but for the 45-year-old Dorosh, who has been hearing-impaired since birth, urban birding remains a purely visual and intuitive experience. "I'm well acclimated and experienced in spotting birds with my very good vision and knowledge. I often rely on my instincts," he says. Dorosh's understanding of different habitat preferences, coupled with his exceptional vision, make it possible for him to spot even the most minute movements of songbirds who have landed under brush or among dense foliage.

As it happens, New York City has plenty of good landing spots for the hundreds of millions of migrating songbirds traveling the Atlantic Flyway overhead, and when even a small percentage of those migrants decides to drop in to rest, Big Apple birders get to see high concentrations of many diverse species. Dorosh knows a birder who lives in Staten Island, where the landscape is fairly suburban, who heads over to Prospect Park—in comparatively urban Brooklyn—each day during the migration seasons for that very reason. "He comes because he can see more birds—especially warblers—in shorter time and with less ground to cover in the very diverse habitats in Prospect Park. On very good

days, more than 20 species of warblers can be found," Dorosh says.

Now, thanks in part to the "heat island" effect of some large cities, Dorosh and other urban birders may have a little longer to look for their favorite fall migrants. "There are several species of birds that stay longer downtown than they do elsewhere. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ovenbird, Lincoln Sparrow. Those are birds that, if you go out on November first, let's say, the chances of you finding them in most parts of Michigan are, like, nil. But the chances of finding them in downtown Detroit are very good. The theory goes that it's because there's just enough heat to make these birds survive for a month more," says Overman. And after that? Rested and refueled, they'll head out for the next leg of the journey to their respective winter homes.

While city configurations may make for pretty good birding, let's face it, urbanization hasn't exactly been good for our feathered friends. The populations of many species have decreased during the past 40 years, while urban development continues to increase. "Urbanization reduces the size and quality of usable native bird habitat, thus limiting the amount of space and resources available to birds," says Steven Saffier, a science associate with the National Audubon Society. Breeding pairs are especially hard hit because appropriate breeding areas can only accommodate so many birds. Once those areas are occupied, any remaining "homeless" birds have a tough time finding nesting sites and food. Urbanization also changes the dynamics of natural areas, not just their size. "So, for example, interior forest birds such as Cerulean Warblers, Ovenbirds, Wood Thrush, and many other neotropical migrants require particular-sized tracts of unbroken forest. If a forest is split by urbanization, the habitat is rendered unviable," Saffier says.

Still, for highly adaptive species—think European Starlings, House Sparrows, grackles, and Canada Geese—urbanization's been a boon. The result? "It's almost like a McList. You go to McDonalds anywhere, and it's the same menu," says Caren Cooper, a research associate at Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "You can get to an urban center and it's going to be the same species, whether you are in New York or in Atlanta. When you get to the extremes of urbanization, sometimes the bird diversity is the same no matter where you are."

But plenty of folks are fighting that trend. Fredericka Veikley, a financial analyst at a hospital in Boston, is a "casual birder" who longed



Boston's Ramler Park, once an abandoned parking lot, now attracts a diverse range of birds—and birders.

to see more on her local urban ornithology menu. So, with an eye toward giving embattled natives like American Robins and Cedar Waxwings a leg up—and giving transient species a nice place to rest—she worked with Boston city officials, Northeastern University biologist Gwilym Jones, and other volunteers to transform a neighborhood eyesore into a viable avian habitat. What was once an abandoned, half-acre parking lot just blocks from Boston's Fenway Park is now a "parking lot" for nearly 200 species of wild birds.

Known as Ramler Park, the spot officially opened in the summer of 2004, and has had plenty of time to become well established. Thoughtful planning means the birds can find essential natural food sources year-round: great stands of trees like white pines and sweetgums; shrubs such as cranberry viburnum; and perennial flowers including bee balm, oriental poppy, goldenrod, and veronica beckon to all manner of visitors. Scarlet Tanagers, Rufous-sided Towhees, Carolina Wrens, Green Warblers, and many other distinguished guests have all been spotted here. Aside from its myriad native plant species, Ramler Park's proximity to Muddy River and the Back Bay Fens also has something to do with its ability to attract birds. "What we wanted was a little piece of that action right in our neighborhood," admits Veikley, who's president of Friends of Ramler Park, the neighborhood group that helped shape the project. Some of its members are hard-core birders, but, she says, "Most of them are neophytes just awakening to all that is around us."

Besides good forage and cover for wildlife, there are touches for the park's human visitors, too. A tile-lined fountain burbles at the its center, brick paths wind beneath a striking pergola, and an ornate metal fence featuring soaring swallows nicely contains the area. "It was meant to be sort of a spiritual place. I don't want to start using those 'Kumbaya' words, but we made sure that there was no 'active' activity place there. There's no playground equipment. There's no place to play ball. It's really just meant to be the most beautiful place that it could be," Veikley says.

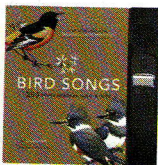
In the case of Ramler Park, so far, so good. But Cooper warns that

not all green spaces are created equal. It may sound counterintuitive, but some may be doing more harm than good: "There is some concern that green spaces can be ecological traps—habitat that looks good and draws birds in, but actually their population would do poorly there, because maybe there were a lot of cats around or something else was affecting their nesting success." Ecological traps can wreak havoc on migratory birds as well. "Maybe there are lots of window crashes or the food sources are really of such low quality that they didn't charge [the birds] up enough so that they could make it to their next stopover," she explains. "People are trying to understand if those things happen, and if so, how can we stop that from happening?"

Ultimately, urban birders just might have a hand in finding out. To determine how and why birds in urban environments thrive—or don't—Cooper and others are enlisting the help of citizen scientists willing to "bird" in cities year-round. (All right, so counting Black-capped Chickadees during the winter doldrums isn't nearly as glamorous as discovering a Boreal Owl passing through Central Park, but it's still important.) "We have been trying to recruit more people in urban environments into birding, and also encouraging people to bird in residential landscapes, because we are interested in understanding how urbanization is affecting all kinds of birds," she says. To that end, researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology launched "Urban Bird Studies" projects such as "Birds in the City," funded by the National Science Foundation (*see sidebar*). "Through the programs, everyday people who are interested in birds collect data that they submit and our scientists use that data to answer research questions about birds. It's everyday people participating in genuine scientific research," Cooper says.

That's good news for the birds doing their best to nest or migrate despite our growing cities. And in the long run, it's good for urban birders like me. Who knows? Maybe the next Indigo Bunting I see will be alive and well, safely clearing my city's rooftops as he warbles his way north this spring. ■

LOOK! UP IN THE SKY!



Sure, it's just good sense to look up when you're on the lookout for birds on the wing, but Steven Saffier, a

science associate for the National Audubon Society, reminds would-be birders to look really high in the sky. That's where you'll find aerial feeders like raptors, gulls, swallows, and swifts. "The last time I was in New York City, my colleague stopped in his tracks. Through the traffic sounds and the river of pedestrians, he managed to hear the

call of Chimney Swifts. We looked up through a canyon of high-rises and saw a flock flying above the buildings," he says.

Not sure you'd know a Chimney Swift if you heard one? Brush up on 250 North American birds—and hear their songs via *Bird Songs* by Les Beletsky (Chronicle Books, \$45). The full-color release features a built-in digital audio player, so you can listen to individual bird calls as you read up on their habits and habitats.

Another good urban birding bet? Any green space situated near well-established bird migration routes. Blogger

Sharon Stiteler (birdchick.com) admits she's partial to cemeteries: "They're some of the best places to go birding, because you don't get a lot of rowdy traffic going through them. Of course, you want to be discreet when you're watching birds in there. If you're passing a funeral, you obviously don't want to walk through with your binoculars."

And green spaces that are well-stocked with native plants like Purple Coneflower and Black-eyed Susan get urban birding bonus points since they provide high-grade fuel and cover. Karl Overman, of the Detroit Audubon Soci-

ety, has noticed that plantings mulched with leaf litter are especially good. "That seems to attract migrants and hold them for long periods," he says.

Once you've gotten good at spotting birds in your city or even the suburbs, you can learn to "conduct a transect" (that's science speak for "take a walk") in your area, record the number and types of birds you find, and submit your results to the Birds in the City project (urbanbirds.org). Another option: The Great Backyard Bird Count (birds.org/gbbc), taking place nationally from February 16 to 19.

—S.B.