

Life on the Wing

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A fourth grader carries a 2002 field guide, now yellowed and torn, and a pair of undersized Bushnell's binoculars along the paved bucolic trail. New colors and sounds vie for her attention: yellow, orange, indigo; "warble", "chip-chipee!" A life-size paper mache falcon hangs somewhere in the elementary school where she learns that you can teach about birds as a job.

Her mom later homeschools her in a small rural town, and as the migrants fly by, she has the time and space to study ecology and taxonomy. Her dad sets up an eBird account in high school—she uses it as they go hiking in the nearby counties.

Bird banding, surveys, and monitoring programs, college ornithology assignments and trips...a central part of that fourth grader maturing into the real world. And there she finds a job where at times, she indeed teaches about birds.

What is the proverbial "it" about birds? From urban ledge to backyard feeder, the world of birds is an accessible one. Each species has such a personality of its own, from paranoid chickadees to curious owls or proud swans. They are the constant not only in the life of a hobbyist, but that of the everyday. The muse of the artist, the solace of the homebound, the thrill of the chase. Restless twitchers travel to the ends of the earth in pursuit of avian rarity.

Even still, nesting raptors over a hospital bird-cam quell the anxieties of a child. Metallic sheen, feathered plumes, and complex patterns are only the beginning of an aesthetic we see in the absence of ultraviolet light.

In a way, birds personify what is pure in the world. Creatures living in true form and function, without a conscious doubt or worry. Then add a bit of whimsy. Take the aerial acrobatics of a dozen nighthawks, or the glistening fragility of a hummingbird. Deep in the forest, the metallic song of a thrush reverberates off encompassing trees, while the eccentric nuthatch hops down a tree trunk with a precious seed in its beak.

Purely appreciation, one may spend over an hour on a roadside to watch ducks and shorebirds in a flooded field. In this mindful calm of nature or the community of knowledge, the avian world can provoke and enhance.

As of late, birds have been pushed to the sidelines for assignments and appointments. Do I really have time to entertain that persistent email about the rare seabird twenty miles from my house? Yes.

In dreary rain, wind, and the company of several strangers, I sort through monotonous gulls and terns. A daring sanderling darts across the sidewalk six inches from my converse, not to be confused with the numerous killdeer in the grass. After half an hour, a grand black form with white-edged wings sails across the horizon. Soaring with a weight and wingspan uncommon to Ohio, the sight creates a momentary bond among the observers. We stand in awe of this pelagic drifter—the Long-tailed Jaeger—until it disappears behind the hillside.

There is a chase and a stillness, a rarity yet a familiarity. And I feel like myself.



A male Indigo Bunting



A Northern Saw-whet Owl



A Long-tailed Jaeger

