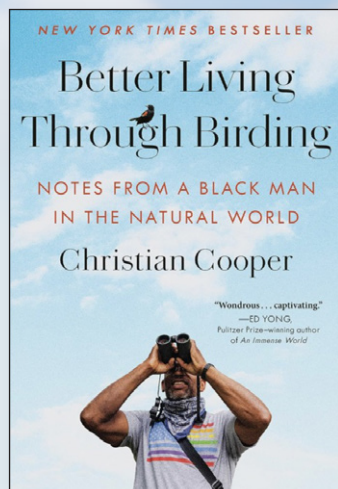




Books You Should Know About



Better Living Through Birding: Notes from a Black Man in the Natural World

BY CHRISTIAN COOPER

Random House, New York, 2023
283 pages, hardcover

In his page-turner of a book, Christian Cooper shares experiences in birding and in life leading up to the infamous racially based incident in New York City's Central Park in May 2020.

Cooper's book shows how decades of life spent looking at birds prepared him, in unique ways, to be a gay Black man in America today. It takes us inside a perspective of bird appreciation probably known to most readers of *BWD*, while opening us up to other important and telling experiences that few of us have actually lived.

In the summer after his sixth grade, a young Cooper memorized as many birds as he could from an "Eastern Peterson"—later enhanced by the acquisition of a "Golden Guide." That was while traveling in the family's VW camper-van cross-country from New York, through western Canada, California, and the Southwest. Along the way, he learned to identify black-billed magpies, Clark's nutcrackers, and much more.

He was hooked. Upon returning to the New York City region, he was able to connect with generous and mentoring birders both inside and outside the local Audubon club. But when Cooper couldn't run off to the outdoors, he escaped in the opposite direction, to the world of science fiction and fantasy. That combination—along with being a successful academic nerd—became part of his personality, all the while trying to deal with an emerging gay self-identity.

Getting through Harvard (including involvement in the Harvard Ornithological Club), eventually coming out, and an adventurous trip to Argentina preceded Cooper's move to Manhattan. There he began work at Marvel Comics and became part of the birding scene, especially in springtime in Central Park.

His experiences in Central Park—with "the Ramble" at the center—are replete with bird discovery, the crucial role of birding by ear, and stories of his varied "birding kin." He shares birds with others at all levels of experience, including elementary school children, and discusses the near-obsession of birdwatching.

Some dedicated birders may be tempted to skip the chapters on comics, superheroes, and Marvel in particular. There may be a desire to slip through Cooper's role in creating LGBTQ breakthrough heroes in the artistic genre. Resist that temptation; there is much to be learned from it all.

When laid off from Marvel in early 1996, yet armed with a decent severance payout, Cooper used that extra money and spare time for a trip to Australia. There he encountered a totally different avifauna with odd species and unfamiliar vocalizations—not unlike that of some other planet—and brought home lessons of discovery, generosity, and a view of racism different from that experienced here at home.

The narrative continues, with Cooper back in New York City, back at a revived Marvel, measuring the shock of 9/11, and describing travels to Tibet, Africa, and elsewhere in the Americas. Some trips include amazing birds and heavy-duty birding (e.g., East Africa), and some only mildly so.

Throughout the chapters, we follow Cooper's relationship with his immediate family—especially his difficult retired science teacher father—and balancing professional, filial, and birding life.

The backdrop of birding in Central Park remains constant in the book, whether describing the warblers festooning some trees in spring, the network of collegial birders, or even the history of Seneca Village, the mostly-Black community that by 1857 was evicted to finish building Central Park.

By the time the twelfth chapter of the book is reached, the reader has already been regaled with 10 of Cooper's 11 creative "Birding Tips" and all 7 of his thoughtful "Birding Pleasures," packed with lessons aplenty. They sometimes pop into the narrative without warning, but they all have a place and real value that soon become obvious.

Still, if knowledgeable birders and a chunk of the American public know anything at all about Chris Cooper, it is "the Central Park incident" in May 2020. This is when Cooper met up with a woman dog-walker disobeying leash laws in the much-birded and beloved Ramble section of the park.

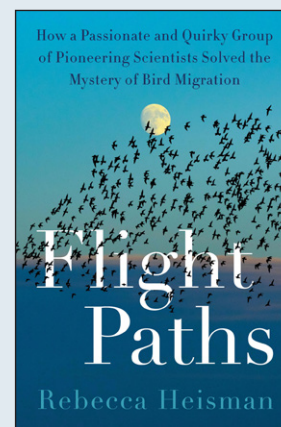
In the absence of regular law enforcement, birders at the Ramble—"by and large insanely nice people"—have had to modestly assert themselves, reminding irresponsible dog owners of the leash law. This particular incident deteriorated when the white female dog owner—recorded by Cooper—called the police: "I'm going to tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life." At that point she took the dustup to an entirely different—and potentially dangerous—level. It speaks volumes about how this random intersection of two lives became a national incident.

However, without the social media savvy of Cooper's sister, Melody, the incident might never have reached the general public. Cooper's 69-second video of the encounter went viral at the very same time as the video of the Minneapolis murder of George Floyd. Cooper, with clarity and patience, dissects the entire Central Park situation into six cogent lessons in Chapter 12, a real gift to us all.

Chapter 13 ends the book on a hopeful note, describing a visit to Selma, Alabama, drenched in civil rights history and home to red-cockaded woodpeckers, Mississippi kites, and chimney swifts.

The book is serious, but there is also irony, humor, and joy. With luck, readers will simultaneously learn much about the Black and gay birders among us. Yes, buy this book, and read it all, including the parts that you think don't relate to your own experiences.

—Paul J. Baicich



Flight Paths: How a Passionate and Quirky Group of Pioneering Scientists Solved the Mystery of Bird Migration

BY REBECCA HEISMAN

HarperCollins, New York, 2023
288 pages, hardcover

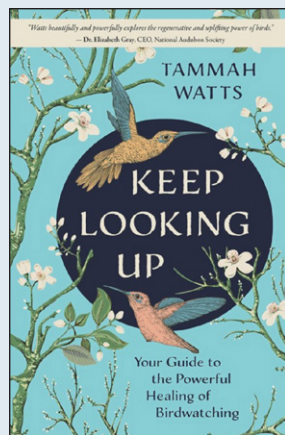
Flight Paths, Rebecca Heisman's engaging debut book, offers a lively narrative accounting of the various—and often unorthodox—methodology utilized to understand the many unanswered questions of bird migration, and some of the scientists who have made it all possible. That Heisman does this in a conversant manner is not an easy feat; after all, modern avian migratory research methodology includes genetic sequencing; geolocation; arranging receivers in arrays to triangulate radio tags; stable isotope analysis of feathers and claw(!) samples; Argos doppler shifts; and radar.

It would be a bit of an understatement to say that things have come a long way since electrical engineer Bill Cochran cut a hole in the roof of his station wagon to follow a thrush tagged with a radio transmitter from Illinois to Manitoba over the course of several nights. But the work of Cochran and other unconventional thinkers along the way shaped the current telemetry research practices underway at companies such as Cellular Tracking Technologies (cited in Chapter 4, and coincidentally where this reviewer works).

The timing of Heisman's book, given current climate challenges, is likely not accidental. After all, knowing where birds are going informs conservation decisions, which are typically funded only by data-driven research. *Flight Paths* is an important reminder that coordinating conservation efforts of migratory birds must be a global effort. Migratory birds depend upon multiple locales to breed, refuel during migration, and overwinter. A case study of spoon-billed sandpipers in the satellite telemetry chapter illustrates this point clearly by showing that recent research on this species has contributed to extending the predicted extinction date for the species by over a decade.

While the author remains agnostic to the various technologies she describes, clearly Heisman, a seasoned science writer with ornithological fieldwork experience, genuinely enjoyed the many interviews and onsite experiences that informed this storytelling. Readers curious to understand how

a 7,000-mile-nonstop bar-tailed godwit flight is logged, why John J. Audubon was not the “father of bird banding,” or what technology has shown about the importance of the Darién Gap to migratory movement will certainly want to check out *Flight Paths*. —Kelly Ball



Keep Looking Up: Your Guide to the Powerful Healing of Birdwatching

BY TAMMAH WATTS

Hay House, Inc.,
Carlsbad, CA, 2023

176 pages, paperback

With its soft blue color, framed by pale blossoms and hummingbirds stretched

out in flight, the cover for Tammah Watts’ book *Keep Looking Up: Your Guide to the Powerful Healing of Birdwatching* invokes feelings of wonder, ease, and curiosity.

These themes resonate throughout the book, as Watts invites us to explore bird watching, or birding (used interchangeably in this book), as a healing modality. Written as a narrative memoir and an in-the-field guide, this small portable manual is and isn’t about birds. It’s a compact starter tool kit and how-to guide about the healing power of birds, inviting us to slow down and use our available senses to pause, notice, and reflect in a meditative manner. No former birding experience or special equipment required.

A mental health practitioner, Watts delves into topics such as depression, anxiety, grief, and loss while sharing her own life story. She provides the framework for how to connect and heal through quiet and centered birding observations. Watts credits her own recovery to a yellow warbler, a lovely winged visitor she viewed out her window during her darkest hours.

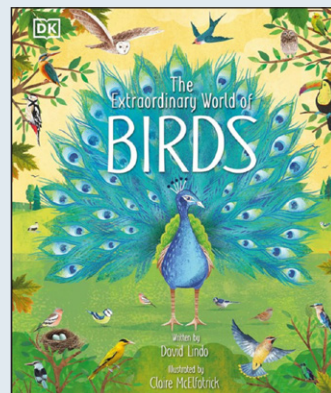
The welcoming and open nature of *Keep Looking Up* has an appealing and inclusive “meet yourself where you are” thread, in which bird watching can take place sitting or standing inside or outside, and that checking in with your safety level and health capabilities are also part of the process. Watts suggests connecting back to the space we share with birds, in the form of logging observations, journaling, and field sketching, as well as exercise prompts and time for reflection.

I was excited to take the book out into the field and utilize some of the new-to-me prompts and deepen

my experience with birds. It was also a reminder of how much I loved to settle into a sit spot, senses heightened, attuned to one bird, observing it in such a way as to go unnoticed. With a pen and notepad, Watts’ book will make a great companion for my next birding adventure.

Keep Looking Up is one woman’s personal and honest life experience, her highs and lows and her gratitude, as well as an invitation and a companion book for healing, through the power of birds.

—Roniq Bartanen



The Extraordinary World of Birds

WRITTEN BY
DAVID LINDO

Illustrated by
Claire McElfrick

DK Publishing,
New York, 2022

80 pages, hardcover

Fans of David Lindo, aka “The Urban Birder,” are familiar with his contagious fascination for all birds—any bird, anywhere, at any time. He’s built a career as a naturalist, writer, public speaker, and tour leader, among other talents, by demonstrating to his audience how accessible birds are to all of us, anywhere in the world, if we only look up.

I was delighted to learn that Lindo was bringing his vast bird knowledge to a new format: a children’s book, published by DK, known for producing beautiful, engaging books that invite page-turning and repeat reading. Lindo’s words thoughtfully woven into Claire McElfrick’s vibrant art make for an immersive but playful experience uncovering the world of birds.

When I sat down with my five-year-old to look at the book for the first time, it took us some minutes to get past the cover alone, as she wanted to point out each of the dozen or so birds, excitedly identifying the ones she knew. Because the pages are filled with art and photographs intermixed in elegant collages, this is actually how most of our “reading” of the book goes—a lot of pointing, exclaiming, and tangential conversations about the birds we’ve seen on our own birding adventures.

Reading the book with my almost eight-year-old is a different experience. The images and page design certainly appeal to her as well, but she is more drawn to the many tidbits of text interspersed among the bird images. It’s a treasure trove of elementary-age-appropriate explanations of bird families, behavior,

habitat, and more, supported by hundreds of fun facts about selected bird species sprinkled throughout. On more than one occasion, she has recounted some of her new nuggets of knowledge to me with a proud little smile.

This is a book we keep coming back to because there is simply so much to take in, visually and cerebrally. It is eye candy and brain candy for children (and adults!) of all ages. Caregivers and their young budding birders will enjoy sharing the experience of reading this book together, and the limitless avian conversation it invites. —Jessica Vaughan

This Is a Book for People Who Love Birds



BY DANIELLE BELLENY

Running Press Adult,
New York, 2022

152 pages, hardcover

Like a bird in the hand, *This Is a Book for People Who Love Birds*, by Danielle Belleny is a jewel to behold and study. Intended as an eye-catching introductory title for the bird-curious, Bellany’s book merges conversational,

big-picture content with more species-specific trivia applied to a representative group of North American birds (including Mexico) across forest, ocean, grassland, and other habitats, illustrated by Canadian artist Stephanie Singleton.

“The audience for this book could be my own family,” says Bellany, who is a wildlife biologist and science communicator. “They weren’t interested in birds at first, but eventually became birders through me.”

Her prose is likewise friendly, encouraging, and inclusive of the beginner birder, especially a bird-curious reader who hasn’t seen themselves represented in the historic birding scene. As a Black author, Bellany speaks directly to and for an audience historically left out of the majority white birding establishment, sharing a brief history of birding itself, clarifying how birding culture has slowly evolved to become more inclusive with increased accessibility to birding locales, centering more mindful birding (Bellany also celebrates competitive birding), and the reconsidering of honorific names for birds, as some examples.

In the “How to Find Birds” section, the inclusive oversight continues. From parking lots to cemeteries to watching webcams as a birding practice, Bellany demystifies the spaces where someone might find birds. Even the birds themselves are mostly

accessible, depending on where you live in North America. The gallery of suggested birds in the book are easy to see (plumage and size), not hard to find (occupying open and human-built landscapes), and accessible for viewing (within range of a walk, bus, or car ride).

In producing the book, Bellany encountered the challenges of abundant bird information, and having to choose what to include in her book designed for beginners. “There is so much bird knowledge out there that I combed through,” she says of the anecdotes she selected for each species in the bird gallery. She could only guess what readers might have seen before. Would readers know that bald eagles forage landfills or that a mockingbird, for all its mimicry, cannot trill?

This Is a Book for People Who Love Birds will appeal to a wide beginner birding audience as an inspiring prompt and pleasurable read. Readers of *BWD* might consider it (and companion magnet set and 500-piece puzzle, illustrated by Singleton) for those in your life who still wonder at your zeal for birding. The book promises engaging, accessible information about birds that might just fledge new birders among those who pick it up. —Bryony Angell

