



Want to Help Save Birds? Drink Bird-friendly Coffee.

BY KELLY BALL

As a rule, anything related to bird conservation lights my fire. My morning coffee is the kindle for said fire. Imagine my delight when I was approached about writing a piece to explain AND SAMPLE bird-friendly coffee! Clearly, I was born to do this.

WHY BIRD-FRIENDLY COFFEE?

Simply put, one barrier to successfully convincing folks to integrate buying bird-friendly coffee as part of their coffee-drinking habit is appreciating the why. It's like this: Growing coffee beans is a major economic driver for Central and South American countries, where, incidentally, many of our favorite North American neotropical migrant species travel to wintering grounds, not to mention the even more numerous resident bird species.

Historically, coffee was shade-grown, under the canopy of mature trees, but aggressive deforestation over the past few decades to accelerate and expand coffee production has resulted in catastrophic habitat loss for these migratory birds. Deforestation in African coffee-producing countries has had a similar effect on flora and fauna there, as well. By clearing trees en masse to create sunny coffee plantations, growers enjoy large short-term yields of coffee, but at a hefty cost. Not only does dramatic deforestation disrupt biodiversity but coffee beans ripen faster in full sun, meaning the beans do not have time to mature to their full flavor profile potential. It's estimated that about 75 percent of global coffee harvesting occurs in these or similar conditions.

There is no throttling back on this all-important export for developing countries. In order to balance the demand for this vital export with reducing the devastating impact of deforestation, coffee producers and local farmers alike are exploring options for more sustainable farming techniques.

One example is agroforestry, a land management policy that strives to satisfy agricultural necessity—planting coffee-bean trees—near the edges of still-forested areas. In this way, fragmented forests will regenerate, restoring habitat for not just birds but all living things impacted by deforestation. And coffee trees grown near edges of forest will mature more gradually, producing coffee with a richer, more natural flavor.



A study published in the renowned journal Science in 2019 declared that three billion birds have been lost in the US and Canada in the past 50 years, sounding an alarm that startled birders and nonbirders alike. (Visit 3billionbirds.org to access the full study.) While it is true that massive national efforts are required to reverse this trend, researchers have identified seven things individuals can do to help save birds. In the coming year, we will be taking a closer look at each of these actions, starting with perhaps the easiest of them all: drinking bird-friendly coffee.



All the elements for a peacefully caffeinated morning interlude.

WHAT'S BIRD-FRIENDLY COFFEE?

Reforestation of habitats in both South and Central America and Africa means that migratory and year-round resident bird species will benefit—and, hopefully, reverse population trends of particularly threatened species. For birders who love their coffee and who wish to support efforts for more sustainable coffee production, I recommend choosing to drink coffee that is Smithsonian Bird Friendly® certified. This certification means the beans

were grown with the most stringent standards. Additionally, all Smithsonian Bird Friendly® coffee is also organically grown, so you can enjoy your coffee knowing that it is free of pesticides.



(Note that coffee labeled simply as organic may not be bird-friendly, as the designation does not include criteria for shade cover. Likewise, coffee labeled only as shade-grown may not be bird-friendly, as that designation is not regulated.)

WHY IS IT MORE EXPENSIVE?

If you are unfamiliar or barely familiar with the bird-friendly coffee designator, you are in good company. Researchers from Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Virginia Tech recently surveyed more than 900 birders to better understand their coffee-drinking habits. As it happened, only 38 percent had heard of Smithsonian Bird Friendly® coffee, and of these respondents, only 9 percent were purchasing it.

Is it the cost that might deter bird-loving coffee drinkers? It's true that bird-friendly coffee is a bit pricier than many conventional coffee options. This is because trees grown in less-than-

full sun produce fewer beans, and they take longer to ripen. However, if you care about wildlife, you likely already purchase organic vegetables and fruits. The additional expense is worth minimizing the environmental impact—so, too, is it with bird-friendly coffee!

I would like to propose that if converting entirely to bird-friendly coffee is cost-prohibitive, that coffee-drinking birders consider integrating, say, one bag of bird-friendly coffee a month, or every three months, into their routine. Note, too, that many bird-friendly coffee companies offer a discount for subscribers, with options for the frequency of delivery.

SO HOW DOES BIRD-FRIENDLY COFFEE TASTE?

Time for some levity; let the taste-testing commence! A friend and I sat down at her place to sample three bird-friendly coffees. Finally, an imperative disclaimer: She's fond of sweetened creamer, so I opted for the alternative: nonfat



milk. My usual, however, is half-and-half. Please trust that I calibrated my expectations to account for this tragic substitute. Note, too, that the roasts reviewed reflect just one of many options from each bird-friendly coffee company featured below. We encourage you to visit the websites of each company to learn more about available decaffeinated and roast varieties.

Something as simple as buying bird-friendly coffee can go a long way to increase habitat for migratory and resident birds in Central and South America, like the Altamira oriole.



BRUCE WUNDERLICH



Sample #1

American Birding Association

SONG BIRD NICARAGUAN COFFEE

\$17.50 / 12 oz.

www.aba.org/product-category/songbird-coffee/

I am a medium-to-dark roast coffee drinker, and to my palate, this seemed like a perfect option for those looking for a light roast. (If you prefer a strong cup o' joe, adjust either the amount of water or beans when brewing.) From first to last sip, absolutely no acidity detected. This nutty, smooth roast has an easy-drinking flavor. **BONUS:** For every bag of Song Bird coffee sold, 1 percent of proceeds are directed to the ABA's Young Birder programming.



Sample #2

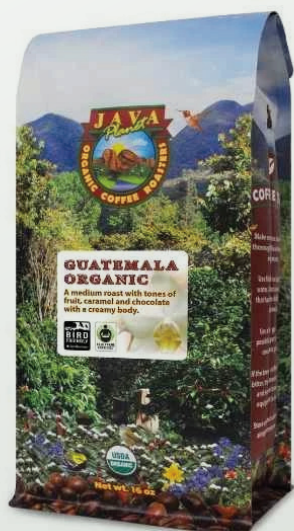
Birds & Beans

WOOD THRUSH MEDIUM ROAST, PERU

\$13.95 / 12 oz.

birdsandbeanscoffee.com

This medium roast delivered a rich, full-bodied flavor. I appreciated its flavor complexity, as I detected subtle sweet notes in each sip. As with Song Bird's Nicaraguan Blend, as a person who likes a strong-ish cup of coffee, I brew this with less water for maximum flavor potential. This is also the least expensive of the three coffees sampled, but I would not have guessed it based on the quality. My friend's local Wild Birds Unlimited store conveniently carries a variety of Birds & Beans coffee, so she grabs a bag whenever she stops by to stock up on her bird seed.



Sample #3

Java Planet

GUATEMALA ORGANIC

\$17.99 / 16 oz.

jporganiccoffee.com

For a richer, more chocolatey flavor, you would be well-served to try this roast. Sometimes a fuller-bodied coffee will mean more acidity, but we were both pleased by this roast's smoothness. Java Planet is also a family-owned business, which earns it some bonus points with me—not that I needed further convincing to keep drinking it!

These are only three of many certified bird-friendly coffees available. Visit the Smithsonian's Migratory Bird Center site for more information on what brands are bird-friendly and where they are available in person and online: tinyurl.com/drinkbirdfriendlycoffee. 

*A decade ago, **Kelly Ball** had an epiphany and realized she didn't have to wait until retirement to become a birder. She recently relocated to Cape May, New Jersey, where she can spend more time with one of her favorite seabirds, the black skimmer.*



VISIT US AT:
jporganiccoffee.com/drinkbirdfriendly