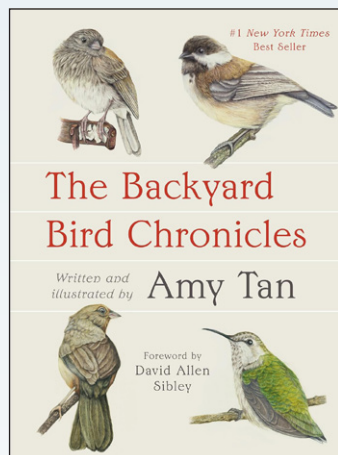


BOOKS You Should Know About



The Backyard Bird Chronicles

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED
BY AMY TAN

Knopf, 2024
320 pages,
hardcover

A self-proclaimed obsession with decoding the world of her backyard's

birds forms the basis of Amy Tan's *The Backyard Bird Chronicles*. If you saw that name and wondered, *Wait, THAT Amy Tan?*—yes, renowned novelist Amy Tan.

Via both concise notes and sketches ranging from blackline shape and form studies to detailed scenes in colored pencil, this book represents selected journal entries from September 2017 through December 2022. During that period, Tan documented in nine journals her wonder and delight in becoming intimately acquainted with birds.

As described in the book's foreword (by David Sibley himself, no less!) and brought to bear throughout the book, Tan's drawings and essays "carry a sense of discovery through drawings and observations" as a vehicle for studying her backyard birds. What sets this attempt apart from similar efforts is how Tan imbues those interpretations with her attentive and charming prose.

Tan began drawing in her mid-60s, which is astonishing, given the quality of the plates included in two sections toward the book's end. What's most enjoyable, however, is Tan's knack for turning the mundane into magic. With humorous captions (most parents no doubt will relate to the dialogue



Tan imagines between an adult crow teaching its juvenile crow to enjoy grit rather than junk food bits left by people), or in self-portrait personal encounters (studying a Bewick's wren eating suet under an umbrella during a heavy rain), or a few studies of a bathing golden-crowned sparrow about to migrate, this author and film producer's attention to detail and creative genius enliven her subject matter.

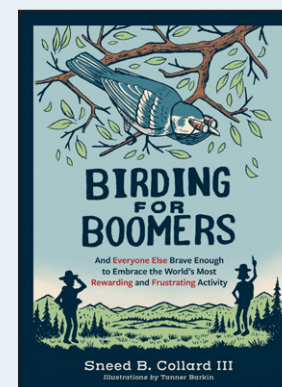
Even the account and accompanying drawings of an unfortunate hermit thrush window strike fatality demonstrate Tan's dedication to understanding everything she can about her visiting birds. As the late, great bird illustrator John Busby attested, adding brief notes to sketches should add something not implied by the drawings. Tan seems to innately understand this.

For those who likewise observe yard birds, Tan's chronicles hit several familiar beats: pulling feeders during a salmonellosis outbreak; sussing out the possibilities of how a vagrant American tree sparrow showed up in California; opting for hand-feeding an Anna's hummingbird at dusk versus the more ambitious daybreak; bemusedly observing the antics of late-summer fledglings; deterring squirrels (chili suet!); and observing which bird species are slobs (definitely lesser goldfinches).

Tan's reputation as an acclaimed author, not to mention her dedicated following, means that her pivot to bird observation is an opportunity to reach even those only casually interested in birds. Such a friend or family member would surely appreciate this collection of stories and sketches.

Of a mere second with a ruby-throated hummingbird in the hand, Tan writes, "It was enough. I was in love." It might take more than a second, but a reader of these chronicles might come away feeling similarly. And wouldn't that be a gift to the birds?

—Kelly Ball

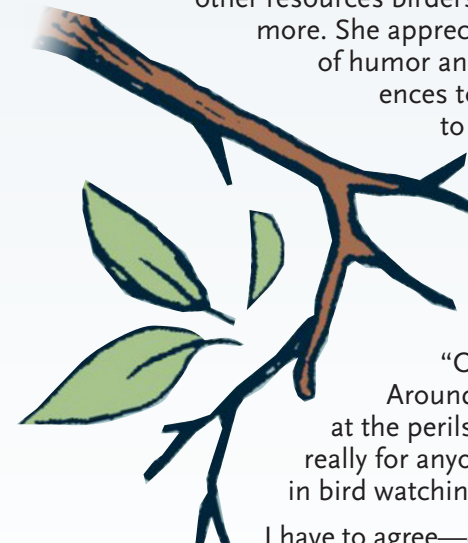


Birding for Boomers: And Everyone Else Brave Enough to Embrace the World's Most Rewarding and Frustrating Activity

BY SNEED B. COLLARD III
Mountaineers Books, 2024
224 pages, paperback

When I read the title of Sneed Collard's new book, my first thought was that this is the perfect book for my mom, a baby boomer who has been steadily wading into the bird-watching pool the past few years. I asked her to flip through and read the sections that interested her the most to get a feel for it, and when I checked back in with her the following week to see how it was going, she had read the whole thing!

Mom reported that she found it very informative and enjoyed both the overview of the hobby as well as the more specific direction it provides, like what to wear, brands of binoculars, publications and other resources birders should check out, and more. She appreciated the author's sense of humor and his occasional references to things that are sure



to resonate with boomers, like a mention of listening to the Rolling Stones' "Midnight Rambler" back in the day.

But, she also added, "Other than the 'Birding Around Barriers' part aimed at the perils of aging, the book is really for anyone of any age interested in bird watching."

I have to agree—even as a serious Gen X birder, I found myself pulled in by Collard's friendly and humorous voice, the many colorful and cheeky illustrations, and some nuggets of info here and there that were new to me. And, as I stare down turning 50 next year, I decided to give the physical limitations chapters a read. Even if I'm lucky enough to not encounter issues with vision or hearing or physical limitations, those sections offer some helpful insight to think about when birding with others who do.

—Jessica Vaughan
(with thanks to my mom, Vicky!)



Birding with Benefits

BY SARAH T. DUBB
Gallery Books,
New York, 2024
336 pages, paperback

My bookshelves are crammed full of bird books of all sorts, but not until now have they included a

birding romance novel. I'm declaring author Sarah T. Dubb the founding mother of birding romance, and I hope her *Birding with Benefits* is the first of many more to come in this new genre, because reading about our hobby in the context of romance is a darn good time! The birding world could benefit (pun intended) from more love and, shall we say, "spice"...

Without giving too much away, let me set the scene:

Celeste and John are strangers who enter a birding competition together at the urging of a mutual friend. John is a serious birder, and Celeste is... not. Also, Celeste is under the impression that she is to pretend to be John's girlfriend, and John is... not. But they decide to enter the six-week contest anyway, acting as a couple but DEFINITELY NOT really dating... except there is a growing attraction despite both of them being determined to stay single while recovering from previous relationships. And as the title suggests, somewhere along the way they decide to become birders with benefits...

And I'll leave it at that!

An aspect of *Birding with Benefits* I most enjoyed is how Celeste, as someone completely new to birding, slowly absorbs the birding culture. We birders can't help but laugh at ourselves a little with lines like:

"But you're a good... birder? Is that what I would call you?"

Her brows lifted at the phrase "regional birding community."

There were a lot of pockets at this park.

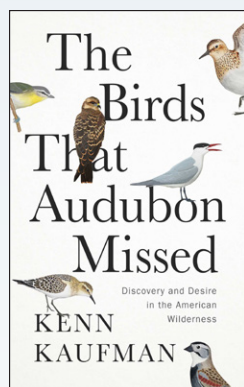
Oh these birders were adorable. "An honor system? For the whole contest?"

The author is a casual birder herself, so she knows how to speak the lingo, but as someone who came to the hobby more recently, she can also appreciate someone trying to navigate our world and some of the seemingly odd things we do. The birder/non-birder dynamic of the main characters offers opportunities to teach about birding, making this an appealing read for both those who identify as bird watchers and folks who don't.

Dubb was also conscientious in ensuring a realistic representation of a birding contest in the Tucson area, where the novel takes place (and where Dubb lives and works as a librarian). Birder readers will appreciate her attention to these details, and any reader who fancies a joyful romance novel will appreciate the care she gives to the details of Celeste and John's budding, um, "benefits."

Fun fact: For those of you who enjoy audiobooks, the main characters are voiced by a real-life couple, Mia Hutchinson-Shaw and Evan Sibley... yes, *Sibley*. As in the son of David Sibley. And no, this was not planned, and the serendipity of Evan voicing John the birder is another bit of the fun that makes *Birding with Benefits* a welcome addition to the birding canon.

—Jessica Vaughan



The Birds That Audubon Missed

BY KENN KAUFMAN

Avid Reader Press/
Simon & Schuster, 2024
400 pages, hardcover

Kenn Kaufman has produced an enviable and informative

product with *The Birds That Audubon Missed: Discovery and Desire in the American Wilderness*. He gives us a significant view of both natural and American history, with the initial focus on the times and activities of John James Audubon. But it's more than that, and by end of the second chapter, the reader will become aware of some of what Audubon, along with what many of his artistic and ornithological peers, had to overcome, for better or worse.

Both to identify and understand the birds they observed, they had little to serve as a compass or map for the task. Kaufman skillfully describes the often understandable confusion they faced in melding ducks, bypassing shorebirds, shuffling raptors, stumbling through gulls and terns, untangling thrushes, and mixing warblers, vireos, and flycatchers. These are just a few examples!

And all this is within a context of explorers not having an adequate grip on "the species concept," set in a scene practically overwhelmed by a framework of European bias.

While Audubon may be the seminal center of this background history and story, he is not alone. The narrative also includes the

inimitable Alexander Wilson, always somewhere in the background (whether alive or dead), and his loyal defender, George Ord. Among many other characters, some with major parts to play and others with supporting roles over the decades of early American bird discovery were Charles Bonaparte, John Townsend, Thomas Nuttall, and Spencer Baird.

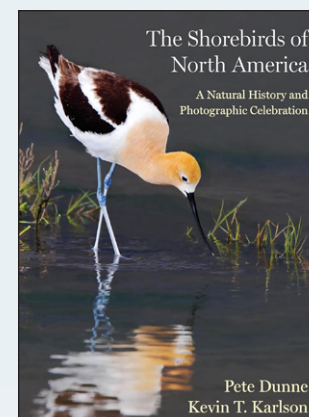
There is also a continuing sub-theme of nasty rivalry, fraud, thievery, plagiarism, and dubious claims, all engaged in an obsessive race to describe and or illustrate as many North American birds as possible.

In this mix of science, exploration, egos, and a need for recognition, there is, nevertheless, the wonderful breakthrough in art that Audubon created. It is this appreciation that drives Kaufman himself to take on a novel pursuit, the ambitious production of Audubon-style art, and presenting it for species that Audubon never found or recognized. Many of these artistic efforts are included in Kaufman's written "Interludes"—a mix of side stories, detours, and reflections.

What might otherwise have been viewed as an act of hubris is, instead, a further nod to the very best of Audubon. Kaufman's color "Audubonesque" works are a delight in themselves (e.g., western and Baird's sandpipers, Swainson's and gray-cheeked thrushes, Kirtland's warbler, thick-billed longspur, and both Clark's and western grebes).

There is also much more in this book, including the last chapter—"The Search Never Ends"—describing recent species' discoveries and a hint of what may still await. In the process, Kaufman not only provides us a balanced assessment of Audubon and his near-contemporaries but he also gives us a glimpse into ourselves and our pursuit of birds. This saga is Kenn Kaufman at his best, and anyone with an interest in birds and natural history will find it a worthy read.

— Reprinted from the July 2024 *Birding Community e-Bulletin*, by Paul J. Baicich and Wayne R. Petersen, available at refugeassociation.org/birding-community-e-bulletin.



The Shorebirds of North America: A Natural History and Photographic Celebration

BY PETE DUNNE & KEVIN KARLSON

Princeton University Press, 2024
304 pages, hardcover

Pete Dunne is having a big year—in the book world, that is, with two must-reads published in 2024. First was the release of *The Shorebirds of North America*, co-written by fellow renowned shorebird expert Kevin Karlson. The reference book is a tribute to Peter Matthiessen's classic 1967 *The Wind Birds: Shorebirds of North America*, and builds upon its bones with the knowledge gained about this specialized group of birds in the intervening decades. This is the third book Dunne and Karlson have penned together, following *Gulls Simplified* (2018) and *Bird Families of North America* (2021).

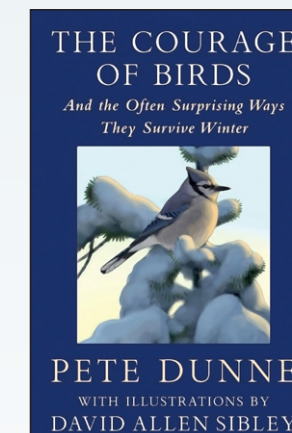
The first 50 pages of Dunne and Karlson's latest book are devoted to general shorebird knowledge, including habitat, predator defense, plumages, foraging and feeding, courtship and breeding, migration, and mortality—all written in almost poetic prose that one does not expect to find in a title deemed a "reference book." As someone who has been striving to learn shorebirds more determinedly over the past couple of years, the compelling storytelling nature of this section heightened my appreciation for this particularly interesting bird group.

The remainder of the book is devoted primarily to species profiles, organized by the five shorebird family groups: stilts and avocets, oystercatchers,

plovers, sandpipers and allies, and jacanas. Within the groups are multi-page descriptions of all 52 shorebird species known to breed in North America. But this is not a field guide, and again, the friendly prose transcends a flat presentation of identification facts.

Enhancing the enjoyable text is the inclusion of hundreds of striking and thought-provoking photographs (primarily taken by Karlson) that go well beyond identification shots and are accompanied by insightful captions highlighting the behavior, habitat, or other features captured in the image.

The authors' clear love for this special group of birds shines through on every page, and even the birder who looks upon learning shorebirds with trepidation is likely to be pulled into this celebration of "the unrivaled splendor of shorebirds."



The Courage of Birds and the Often Surprising Ways They Survive Winter

BY PETE DUNNE
ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID ALLEN SIBLEY

Chelsea Green Publishing, 2024
192 pages, hardcover

"It must take great courage to be a bird, or great faith," writes Pete Dunne in the preface to his second book released this year, *The Courage of Birds*. Specifically, Dunne explores the winter lives of North America's breeding birds and the unique strategies these "hardy survivors" employ to overcome the harshest season—a subject that has been of special interest since he was a child.

"Part mystery, part love story, *The Elvis Bird* is the suspenseful novel of birder and college professor Benjamin Miles who is on a quest to solve a murder that may or may not be real - all the while looking for a bird that may or may not be extinct."
- Devi S. Laskar
Author of *The Atlas of Reds and Blues* and *Circa*



Follow Benjamin Miles in this sequel to *The Elvis Bird* as he travels to California to visit an old mentor but ends up investigating a murder and golden eagles.

Miles finds intrigue and suspense on Highway 1.

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Dunne sets the stage with a delineation of birds that migrate to survive (with tiers of migration based on distance traveled examined more closely later in the book) and birds that overwinter in the far north, with both groups facing their own perilous challenges. From there, all angles of contributing factors to winter survival are examined: the structural sophistication of feathers, advanced circulatory systems, roosting, mixed flocks, the impact of agriculture, and—a bit closer to home for most *BWD* readers—the proliferation of backyard bird feeders, to name a few.

The science is integrated into Dunne's personal observations over the past 50 or so years, as he recounts particularly harsh winters like that of 1977, which froze countless Atlantic brants to the beach near his New Jersey home; balanced with humorous anecdotes such as that of his stern high school football coach "Teddy Bear" shedding a tear over the V-formation of flyover Canada geese; and even a recap of an "Imbolc Big Day" (Imbolc usually falling on February 1) to demonstrate the number of hardy survivors one can appreciate just outside one's door on any given winter's day.

A deeper dive into some especially hardy species takes a closer look at their specialized adaptations, including that of many birds associated with winter—owls, ducks, shorebirds, chickadees, sparrows, and more. And all of this is richly complemented by a dozen or so of David Sibley's exquisite illustrations of many of the species in peaceful winter scenes.

—Jessica Vaughan 

