

Eco-Digital Field Guide to Birdwatchers

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by

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Abstract

In this thesis I am tracking some of the ways in which humans and birds interact beyond traditional birdwatching and how humans are generating care for birds (and, sometimes, the rest of nonhuman environments). Bird memes, online bird clubs, and map-based bird tracking alongside feminist and activist mindsets give rise to challenges in how nature is defined and humans' place in the bird world. Birdwatching online becomes an opportunity for *making kin/d* such that those experiences lead to perseverance and conservation of birds and the cultivation of healthier ecosystems. With eco-consciousness in mind, extending a definition(s) of birdwatching grows and complicates communities. Some specific explorations, like into the international Feminist Bird Club, livestreamed bird nests, pigeon memes, eBird/iNaturalist, and other nodes surrounding birdwatching, form a web of connections between birds and humans. Ultimately, this thesis is an exploration of the spaces and practices of birdwatching, on and offline, in and out of nature.

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Mother



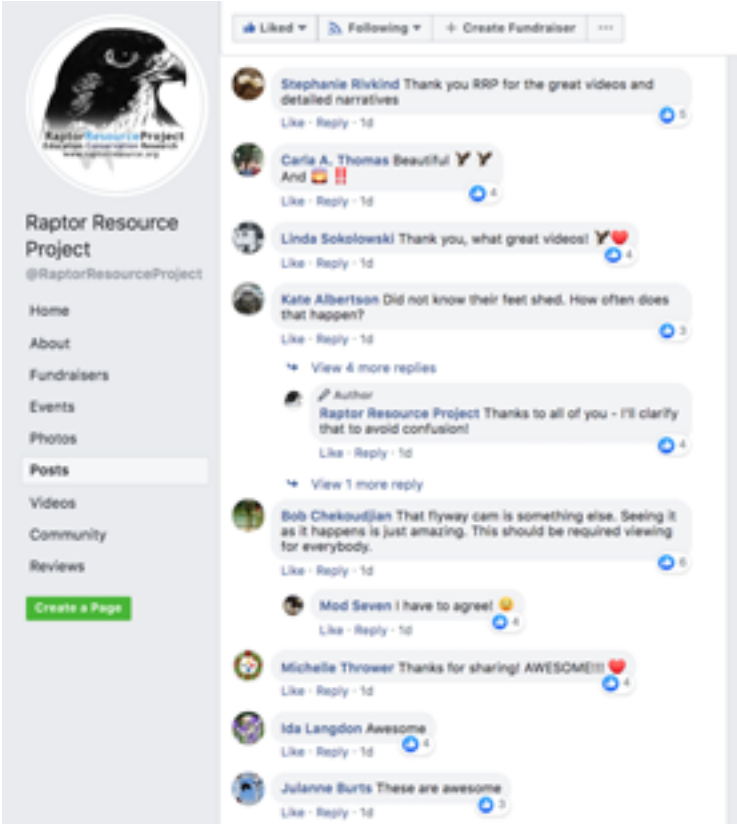
My mother checks in on her bald eagle every night. This female eagle is somewhere in Decorah, Iowa, near the Upper Iowa River. My mother is at home in Chicago, near the Chicago River. She checks in with her bald eagle via a

livestream video, always the top of her Facebook feed.¹ She often gives me updates on the eggs, on the mates, and on the wind as if the egg hatching, mate finding, and wind were all happening to her. About ten thousand people check in on this Mother Eagle every day, almost half of them returning viewers, my mother clearly not the only remote *carer*.² Regardless, Mother Eagle and my mother are *making kin*. My mother has donated money to the bird research organization, she is now mildly invested in Midwestern environmental politics, and she is learning about rituals and habits of care via other species. For her, the Mother Eagle is entertainment, is comfort, is a reminder of the world's scale. Without making the *physically* experiential connection with bird-watching, my mother bird-watches and has still come to care for birds. As she cares about *this* bird, the Mother Eagle, other bird content has begun to catch her interest: storks building nests on PBS, an email newsletter documenting warbler migration, an Instagram page documenting

¹ Decorah Bald Eagles BirdCam Livestream, *The Raptor Resource Project*, <https://www.raptorresource.org/birdcams/decorah-eagles/>.

² Statistics about the Raptor Resource Project's Decorah bald eagle live streaming come directly from the Project's person of contact, Amy Ries, via an email interview, March 2019.

orphaned shore birds. She and many like her are onto something, a new form of birdwatching that doesn't require the binoculars or hiking shoes but a mediation of screens, connected through their interest in and care of birds.



Remote carers and their supportive, enthusiastic comments on the Decorah Mother Eagle livestream via Facebook.

Histories



Huginn and Muninn, Norse



Horus, Egyptian



Tengu spirit, Japanese



Quetzalcóatl, Aztec

As long as human necks have been able to crane back and look into the sky, I'm sure we've been looking at birds. That extended, deeper history is vast and must be epic. Many ancient peoples around the world had gods or spirit personified as birds (consider the raven pair Huginn and Muninn from Norse mythology, Egyptian falcon-headed deity Horus, the Japanese bird-of-prey spirits tengu, or the bird-snake Aztec god Quetzalcóatl), which suggests that bird observations made an impact on building and defining cultures. The sky was, and to an extent still is, a mystical and almost impossible space, a fantasy to humans that could be engaged by looking up and watching those who could traverse it: birds.

Formally, birdwatching as an identifiable hobby arose around the early 1800s with the meeting of hunting hobbyists and those with rising interests in natural histories.³ Before this, however, the field of ornithology (the scientific study of birds) had been around for about 250 years, but its focuses were defined by looking at dead birds and deeply rooted in Christian

³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Hobby: Bird-watching," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bird-watching>.

agendas.⁴ Early ornithological efforts influenced books diagramming bird bodies, which were produced as science-art crossovers during the Renaissance. This was certainly one way to watch birds, even if they were dead ones. The 19th century shift in ornithology marked the beginning of a rejection of religious explanation in ornithology as well as a growing desire to appreciate birds for their beauty. This desire around the beauty was rooted in aesthetics and objectification rather than care. Bird hunting fueled this desire for beauty as it provided bird bodies that could be gazed upon as objects for extended periods of time without the chase. The history of hunting hobbies as a way for many to interact with wildlife is deep and dark, rooted in fear, sexism, colonization, classism, and other environmentally unfriendly issues. From poaching for luxury furs to safari tours to boys' Tinder profiles flexing their fish, hunting has persisted in the shadows of genuine interests in ecological studies and environmental conservation. For worse and then better, all these hunting-based ways to look at animals, however, did push humans to get curious and closer.

This aesthetic fascination led one John James Audubon to render his (in)famous *Birds of America* collection, which consists of 435 life-size paintings of birds in America (which was then still novel territory for Europeans interested in ecology). His legacy remains one of dedication and appreciation. He left his family, bankrupt, “with nothing but his gun [and] artist’s materials” set on the task of painting every bird he’d encounter (mostly in what is now considered the South of the USA, not all of America, as his



A sample painting from Audubon's *Birds of America* book, depicting a pair of Purple Herons.

⁴ T.R. Birkhead and I. Charmantier, *History of Ornithology*, (2009): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9780470015902.a0003096>.

collection title claims).⁵ That Audubon shot and killed all the birds he was declaring wonder for should not be neglected, as this is not care nor respect for the lives of birds.

In the mid 1800s, just as Darwin was putting together his ideas about natural selection based on studying (watching) the birds –mostly finches – of the Galápagos Islands, the first efforts to collect long-term data for scientific analysis began. These efforts were made possible only through the emergence of *citizen science*, the global effort to crowdsource materials and ideas beneficial to expanding science beyond institutions through voluntary specialist and nonspecialist participation.⁶ The earliest collection of data from volunteers (aside from weather data collection) were the lighthouse surveys in the 1880s.⁷ Volunteers for these surveys had to count the number of birds that would strike lighthouses, the number that would survive, and the number that would die. These volunteers were birdwatchers on a mission, watching birds without shooting them, given reason and permission to gaze into the sky without much other action. This citizen science survey, along with Darwin’s writings, the land abuse following the industrialization boom, and John James Audubon’s death (1851), coexisted with the very birth of euro-western understandings of environmental conservation.

In 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman proposed a new holiday tradition that would make huge waves in environmental conservation, that of the Christmas Bird Count.⁸ Since the early 1800s, one major idea of holiday fun (and national pride) was for men to go hunting and bring home the most dead birds while women rooted for them. Chapman wanted to do away with

⁵ “History: John James Audubon,” *National Audubon Society*, <https://www.audubon.org/content/john-james-audubon>.

⁶ “About Citizen Science,” *citizenscience.gov*, n.d., <https://www.citizenscience.gov/about/#>.

⁷ Sam Droege, “Just Because You Paid Them Doesn’t Mean Their Data Are Any Better,” Citizen Science Toolkit Conference, Ithaca, New York, June 2007, <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/citscitoolkit/conference/proceeding-pdfs/Droege%202007%20CS%20Conference.pdf>.

⁸ “History of the Christmas Bird Count,” *National Audubon Society*, <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/history-christmas-bird-count>.

that sexist hunting tradition, while at the same time eliminate the murder of birds for clothing, since feathers in hats and jackets were at the height of their popularity in eruo-western fashion. His effort was deeply inspired by feminists of the late 1800s who were fighting for the end of feathered fashion.⁹ The Christmas Bird Count, popularized via Chapman’s connections at the American Museum of Natural History, proposed to spend the holiday not by shopping for feathered clothing or shooting birds but counting different bird species. This Count unified families, gave women who were previously warned to stay indoors a *scientific* reason to get outdoors, and slowed the death of many birds.¹⁰ The first Christmas Bird Count had people in 25 different locations across North America counting 90 different species. Almost 120 years later (making it the longest continuous citizen science effort), the count is now a worldwide tradition. In the past decade, around 30,000 people participated in counting over 2,400 different bird species. Chapman set in motion a reason for many to look at birds, no longer necessitating guns and costing nearly nothing, and spreading the then-niche-and-novel hobby of birdwatching to other days of the year.

As early as the 1890s,¹¹ photographers were pointing their cameras at birds. Shooting at birds was being replaced with shooting birds. William Lovell Finley is one of the earliest known bird photographers and he was documenting birds in the early 1890s with a mission of conservation. As is common in history, he took all the credit for the work. However it is now known that his wife did much of the photographing, coloring, and observational note taking,

⁹ “Feathers to Feminism: On Animal Rights and Women’s Rights,” *Museum of Equality and Difference*, March 22, 2018, <https://moed.online/nl/feathered-hats-feminism/>.

¹⁰ Christy Ullrich Barcus, “Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count Turns 115: Why Does It Matter?,” *National Geographic*, December 26, 2014, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/12/141227-christmas-bird-count-anniversary-audubon-animals-science/>.

¹¹ Kenn Kaufman, “These Century-Old Photos Inspired Some of the West’s First Bird Refuges,” *Audubon*, Summer, 2018, <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2018/these-century-old-photos-inspired-some-west>.

especially within the series that the two shared with President T. Roosevelt to fight for the further conservation and preservation of land.¹² Together, they broke new ground by gathering information on birds via photos, not carcasses.

For decades, bird photography went hand in hand with bird conservation and awareness. The images would be shared to elicit respect for the beauty of nature, to portray birds' stories, or to share images of rare birds in areas threatened by industrialization and urbanization.¹³ As photography equipment became more easily available and affordable starting around the 1940s, the average birdwatcher could also become a bird photographer, and many did join in. The aesthetic standards for bird photos shifted to accept amateur photographers' photos that prioritized the visual information about the bird over the composition of the photograph.

With the ready access to digital photography common today, there are more and more images of birds circulating constantly. In an interesting immersive practice, birdwatcher and writer Paul Jepson wrote for the UK magazine *Geographical* to differentiate and find commonalities between birdwatchers and bird photographers. He suggests six types of bird photographers, creating a spectrum between the photographers who are just photographers (wherein birds happen to be in front of the lens for that moment), and the birdwatchers who use photography to enhance their hobby.¹⁴ This breakdown posits levels of passion, wherein said passion could prioritize either the environmental interaction, the art of photography, the conservation and documentation element of scientific photography, experimentation with hobby, or aesthetic fascination of an other. Jepson's types are an active attempt to define nuanced parts

¹² "A Look Back: William L. Finley," *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*, updated October 15, 2015, <https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/ConservationHeroes/finleyWilliam.html>.

¹³ Kaufman, <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2018/these-century-old-photos-inspired-some-vests>.

¹⁴ Paul Jepson, "The changing face of birdwatching," *Geographical*, October 26, 2016, <https://geographical.co.uk/nature/geophoto/item/1956-the-changing-face-of-birdwatching>.

of our larger mesh through the complication of technologies intermixing with this ancient idea of wildlife.



This hand-colored photo from the early 1900s by Irene and William Finley depicts a deceased bird, killed for its tail feathers and left dead near its nest. The Finleys were very against the feather fad of the time, hoping to expose the horrors of it through their photographs.



Patricia O'Donnell posted this phone-photo in the Chicago Ornithological Society Facebook group in 2020. It isn't of spectacular quality, nor is the bird's pose particularly stunning, however it more to say that she was there, she saw the hawk and wanted to share her excitement.



This photograph by Roger Schall (1904-1995) was part of a street photography series he did in Paris in the 1930s & 40s. It's an example of a photographer being a birdwatcher, even if just for a moment.

Birdwatching in the early-to-mid-20th century was largely shaped by the formation of the Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The Audubon Society, formed by George Bird Grinnell, an apprentice to John James Audubon's widow, Lucy Bakewell,¹⁵ had original aims to connect birdwatchers, influence government policies to benefit birds, and preserve bird habitats.¹⁶ The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, led by Arthur Allen who had "boundless energy and enthusiasm," focused on citizen science efforts, innovating technology to benefit bird

¹⁵ Lucy Bakewell was an educator and avid birdwatcher, although she did not kill birds as her husband did. George Bird Grinnell attended the school that Bakewell led and he claimed to have been deeply influenced by her. Despite his influence and her wide reach at the time, none of her research and writing work had been well documented. It's an unfortunate fate for her knowledge to die off with her, especially when someone with such power as Grinnell learned from her.

¹⁶ "History of Audubon and Science-based Bird Conservation," *National Audubon Society*, <https://www.audubon.org/about/history-audubon-and-waterbird-conservation>.

preservation, and working to increase the public's interest in birds so as to help conserve birds on a large scale.¹⁷ Both organizations are still around today and carry on those missions of conservation, preservation, education, community, innovation, and activism.

As the 20th century rolled on, the concept of a climate crisis began to form, and environmental activism seemed to join the ranks of anti-war demonstrations, labor rights activism, civil rights, and feminist discourse. In 1970, the first global Earth Day events took place, making environmentalism any and everybody's concern. Around this time, bird activists began to work with and for other species' conservation efforts, increasing the numbers of volunteers and citizen scientists on multiple fronts. This sort of collaboration and activist cross-pollination created stronger arguments and forces by crossing disciplines.¹⁸ Casual birdwatching was more ecologically minded than ever, focusing on habitat symbiosis and sensitivity for communities whether they be bird, human, or otherwise. Birdwatchers volunteered their time and identification skills for conservation efforts and led community efforts to get more people interested and invested in their environments.

As a whole, the world's population of birds declines for now,¹⁹ and perhaps with the recent reports on accelerating environmental destruction,²⁰ the bird species variety and overall population may never rise. Given that birdwatching history generally follows humanitarian needs and concerns, this current digital-influences-all era alludes to a collective feeling about the

¹⁷ Tim Gallagher, "A Century of Bird Study," *Cornell Lab of Ornithology*, January 2015, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/a-century-of-bird-study/>.

¹⁸ Gallagher, "A Century of Bird Study."

¹⁹ Marc Devokaitis, "2018 Global Report: 40% Of World's Birds Are In Decline," *The Cornell Lab All About Birds*. June 13, 2018, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/2018-global-report-40-of-worlds-birds-are-in-decline/>. AND "Audubon Declares a 'Bird Emergency,' Demands Immediate Action After Scientists Reveal Huge Losses of North American Birds," *National Audubon Society*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.audubon.org/news/audubon-declares-bird-emergency-demands-immediate-action-after-scientists-reveal>.

²⁰ World Meteorological Organization, *WMO Statement on the State of Global Climate Change in 2018*, 2019, https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=5789.

environment, one that respects wildlife from a distance and simultaneously complexly integrates wildlife into one of humanity's inescapable, seemingly damaging, yet with a glimmer-of-hope technologies, the internet. This day and age is seeing many young people get into birdwatching as an extended interest in bird memes. To understand digital birders as much birders as those with their shoes in the grass is to accept a shift in connectivity, a shift that emphasizes a growing awareness of global connectivity.

Ms. Stiletto



Coming upon this very pixelated²¹ image of a homing pigeon wearing edited-on stiletto boots in a Facebook comment thread, my mother asked me what it meant.²² She watches her eagle even when a storm or high viewership breaks the signal up so intensely that the livestream is no more than ninety-some full pixels, but

Ms. Stiletto, pigeon meme, bird to watch.

my mother couldn't find meaning within this pigeon. I told her it is a bird meme, for sharing with a friend to make them laugh, or to consider

looking at pigeons again in a more fashionable light. I watched her watch the bird image until her phone screen went dark.

I'm not sure if my mother remembers the meme, but I've been making kin with the stiletto pigeon. Welcoming it into my texts and direct message inboxes, it's a bird unbound by seasonal migration. Pigeons have, of course, not migrated via a seasonal change in North America for over a century.²³ Similarly, bird memes, no matter the species, make sporadic appearances, incoming reminders of their existence even if you've been in the office in winter all

²¹ My mother said pixelated, the internet would have said "crunchy," "crispy," or "deep-fried." Anyway, the quality is definitely such on purpose.

²² While my mother saw this image on a Facebook comment thread posted by Libby H., I have seen it circulated before then, so presumably Libby H. is not to credit for the image. Asking a friend who is well versed in bird meme images, she thought she had seen it as early as 2015, but had no proof. Through a reverse image search on Google, the image is first located on a page from 2016, however when clicking the link, the image was not seen on the page. The *Way Back Machine* and *Know Your Meme* couldn't help me with this one. A meme is a hard thing to cite.

²³ Herb Wilson, "Migration and Orientation; Homing Pigeons and Pigeons Gone Bad," *Maine Birds*, October 30, 2017, <https://web.colby.edu/mainebirds/2017/10/30/migration-and-orientation-homing-pigeons-and-pigeons-gone-bad/>.

day. Bird meme migration is not seasonal but emotional, strung along by human choice. Ms. Stiletto was a visitor to my messages during December as a party invite, and she graced my Twitter feed early in August protesting the massive cuts in environmental protection policies. She's a versatile visitor, delivering, delivered.

I'm making kin with Ms. Stiletto to see her as my equal. So that she can see me as equal. To begin to understand that one's positionality may be equal with everything around them can generate respect and kindness.²⁴ Interdisciplinary feminist Donna Haraway, writes about kindness across and between any beings as "making kin."²⁵ She uses the word kin beyond traditional familial relations, in order to borrow from what ideal family feelings or practices *might* be (those of mutual respect and tender understanding), saying "the kindest [are] not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives, without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch[es] the imagination."²⁶

Haraway's expansion of kin to building kindness acknowledges the importance of recognizing interconnectivity. Interconnectivity, briefly, is one's own understanding of a universal web, a mesh of sorts that covers all and links all (making the butterfly effect more concrete²⁷).²⁸ Interconnectivity can start with a meditation on how one's body is physically connected to their setting, but then continues to the abstract, intangible, or invisible things across/within/beyond the globe.²⁹ Interconnectivity can also be the moment of wondering if the

²⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 28-31.

²⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 103.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ And what about making the butterflies affect the concrete? When the mycelium can eat concrete at a large scale, you can bet butterflies en masse will be there to eat and heal, not mad that humans put so much concrete down, but most certainly anticipating the weeds that will show up around the cracks next.

²⁸ Morton, 28.

²⁹ And inside it, and of it, and throughout it, only used to be on it, have the potential to be with it, etc, etc.

birds watch the birdwatchers (they do).³⁰ Birdwatchers in general have at least a basic grasp on interconnectivity, albeit often a passive or subconscious one. Even when it only pertains to the individual birdwatcher and the bird their eye is on, the birdwatching code expects respect towards the environment.³¹ The birdwatching hobby requires an openness to expanding awareness of one's position within larger interconnectivity. It's about being kind to other kin, becoming kin to be kind, kin of kind(ness) and all kinds of kin.

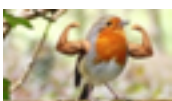
This particular homing pigeon – from a species often dismissed for something garbage-like, worthless, annoying, too many and all the same – is unique, marching forward, meshed with human attitudes. While Haraway may argue that shaping the understanding of birds to fit into human standards is a problem that disregards some of the specialness of birds, perhaps this way in to respecting birds is better than total disregard.³² Despite the passivity of memes – or the larger notions of escape associated with social media interactions – memes that depict birds act as a reminder (to the viewer) of the mere existence of birds. For many humans in urban, industrialized zones with little nonhuman animal interaction, this reminder can be helpful. Perhaps the bird with edited-on muscular arms elicits a soft smile and nothing else when scrolling through Instagram, but later on, when outdoors, you might see a bird and have to think, “dang, what if they really did have human arms?”³³ Suddenly that bird is a little less alienated from the human viewer, given that the small passing thought is imagining connectivity. Respect

³⁰ University of Bristol, "Birds Can Tell If You Are Watching Them -- Because They Are Watching You," ScienceDaily, May 5, 2008, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080430075912.htm.

³¹ The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (UK) and the American Birding Association (USA) present two of the most widely circulated Codes of Ethics for birdwatching, both of which detail respect for outdoor spaces and encountered wildlife. The formal Codes and truncated versions are available internationally at many field houses, park stations, forest preserve information booths, and cultural centers, so they are widely available and read.

³² Haraway, 60.

³³



built through any entry point means a second look was taken, and if a pigeon on first look means nothing but on second look can enter the human brain under the premise of fashionista or party guest, or whatever else, why not embrace that interaction?

Feminist Bird Club and Other Kind Birders

Making most of its connections via the internet, the now-global Feminist Bird Club is an exemplary bird-people group that takes advantage of social media connections and has respectful offline action. In her essay *A Feminist Revolution in Birdwatching*, author and birdwatcher Olivia Gentile traces the rise of feminist birdwatching, writing about how birdwatching groups regularly had a concentrated group of outwardly sexist men and that it was only a matter of time until women formed birdwatching groups that openly focused on and featured women.³⁴ Historically, most birdwatchers were wealthier white men because they were more likely than others to have the financial stability and the time to get outdoors as leisure.³⁵ Men have also had the privilege of being gazers (in line with Laura Mulvey's *male gaze*), whereas, until recently, women were not to look but only be looked at. Women faced belittling attitudes from male birdwatchers, the groups of men becoming predatory to the few or individual women, and the competitive culture that men brought to the activity.

Florence A. Merriam wrote the first North American birdwatching field guide (*Birds Through an Opera Glass*, 1889), which has been celebrated and appreciated since its publication. Despite her numerous contributions to ornithology, Merriam was still rejected by men in the field simply because she was a woman. Her writing was aimed towards women and young people, written unpretentiously so as to make birdwatching and ornithology approachable for those whom she knew would get no help from men. The generalized versions of these troubles – that men at large have had and still have tendencies to be condescending, frightening, and

³⁴ Olivia Gentile, "A Feminist Revolution in Birding," *Medium*, April 13, 2019, <https://medium.com/@oliviagentile/a-feminist-revolution-in-birding-95d81f4ab79b>.

³⁵ Dorceta E. Taylor, "American Environmentalism: The Role of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Activism 1820-1995," *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (1997), 19.

aggressive towards women – are larger societal problems. Seeing solutions or alternatives to dealing with these issues within birdwatching, however, is working across differences, across difficulties, to stay *more* alive. Gentile, following in Merriam’s footsteps, also brings to light deeper activist concerns and concepts of active empowerment that aren’t seen so much in birdwatching groups serving predominantly men. Feminist birdwatching groups make efforts to collaborate more than other groups through bird-related career building, candid networking, charity fundraising, and direct environmental activism.

Currently, birdwatchers and ornithologists’ racial and gender diversity has been and continues to be an uphill battle, but one that results in meaningful collaborations. Diverse birdwatching groups have the virtue of a deeper pool of experience and knowledge that can and does influence wider inquiry, imagination, and respect for birds and their ecosystems. For example, self-trained ornithologist Tiffany Adams notes that “ecosystems don’t stop according to neighborhoods,” directly addressing how some geographical places are avoided as potential spaces to birdwatch based on negative stereotypes.³⁶

Furthermore, the rise of birdwatching groups and spaces specifically welcoming or only for marginalized peoples illustrates a beautiful aspect of the mesh that directly, on a non-abstract and daily level, impacts birdwatchers: inclusivity. Birdwatchers vary in how they identify the activity for themselves: some call it a hobby, some a career, a sport, meditation, social opportunity, research. Regardless of the birdwatcher’s preferred term, a spark or full explosion of liveliness accompanies the activity for them. The meeting of various types of birdwatchers, from all sorts of backgrounds, echoes Anthropologist and scholar Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s idea of

³⁶ Glenn Nelson, “Birding is Booming. So Where Are the Black Birders?,” *Yes! Magazine*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/dirt/2019/03/20/birding-where-are-black-birders/>.

“livable collaborations.”³⁷ The “livable” part of collaborating around birdwatching means inclusion, open-source and supportive education, encouragement, and respect. Dorceta E. Taylor, an environmental sociologist, critiques most contemporary environmental activism for lacking the ideological, political, and radical diversity to make collaboration and conservation livable due to a culture of racism, classism, and sexism.³⁸ Therefore, the growing participation of demographically diverse birdwatchers generates work across human differences and that community sets into motion more environmental collaborations.

The people who have previously been left or forced out of birdwatching in any of its forms now force collaborations, support the aliveness of birds, build communities of birdwatchers, and, in the long run, vitalize other environmentalism and eco-stewardship. Furthermore, the birdwatchers who engage with social media as a part of their birdwatching practice are working across differences, as the internet can too easily be a trap into nonaction, a library of misinformation, and a hole of despair.³⁹ When birdwatchers watch (out for) birds online, they challenge the need for the distinction of *virtual* as a distinguishing element, just as urban birdwatching constantly challenges the notion of *natural*. Watching (out for) birds online, the spaces of real, virtual, natural, and unnatural connect the birdwatcher’s kinship, or rather the birdwatchers as a kin-ship. Birdwatchers have and make kin, but their kin(d/ness) is also a vessel, boat, a swift mover across fluid bodies, going between other outdoor hobbyists, scientists, legislative committees, activists, artists, and others who are tangential.

³⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Mushroom At The End of the World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 31.

³⁸ Taylor, 56.

³⁹ In this sense, the internet has tendencies to be a *blasted landscape*, to work with more of Tsing’s vocabulary.

Having the focused groups – like the international Feminist Bird Club, but also the national LGBTQ+ focused Out in Nature birdwatching group and other identity-focused birdwatching groups – that modern birdwatching offers builds stronger communities that respect individuals beyond their differences. While perhaps still niche and smaller in number, identity-focused birdwatching groups help to expand who can be part of the web of birdwatchers. These groups are necessary because they provide a specific and welcoming space for those who get left out. The birdwatching groups recounted by Gentile – and all others that I have found to be actively inclusionary – aim to promote care across lines of identity.

In Orion, one of the more popular American Environmentalist Magazines, writer and wildlife biologist Dr. J. Drew Lanham published a satirical article titled “9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher,” which is a list of commentary on how black people are excluded from and actively harassed in their birdwatching experiences.⁴⁰ This article is a reminder that mainstream environmentalism (in hobbies, conservation publicity, and government eco-policies) are still racist. Despite this, Lanham is also active in connecting black birdwatchers together to speak and write about the necessity of black voices in birdwatching. Zookeeper Corina Newsome echoes Taylor’s research on inequality in environmentalism by specifically pointing out the lack of opportunities and care for black students trying to study natural sciences. Newsome says that this lack of opportunities and care in higher education leads to a lack in community of black students interested in wildlife. This sort of ripple effect delayed her inevitable obsession with birds and set her career back a few years while fellow white students got there earlier.⁴¹ Despite the challenges Lanham and Newsome face head on, they are both facilitating communities of black

⁴⁰ J. Drew Lanham, “9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher,” *Orion*, October 23, 2013. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/9-rules-for-the-black-birdwatcher/>.

⁴¹ Amy Meadows, “For the Love of Animals,” *Diversity in Action*, November 2019.

birdwatchers, both largely with the help of Twitter, and reimagining the kindness that can be made while black people make kin with birds.

Outdoor birdwatching groups aren't the only groups changing the face of birdwatching and redefining the mesh; online birdwatching is another step of inclusion for the birdwatching community. There are still so many people who cannot afford the luxury of time to walk around parks and forests looking for birds. Beyond the lack of time or resources, some people view birds online due to different physical or mental abilities, limited locations, or simply preference. Viewing birds through a screen is an activity more like watching a movie than other post-hunting hobbies,⁴² but watching *for* birds – having an active role in the interface – hatches a digital form of birdwatching.

Online birdwatching entails seeking out all sorts of pixelated, cybernated birds: updates on someone else's birdwatching trek, bird memes, pet bird social media accounts, bird sightings on Google street view, and so on. There are varying levels of investment in digital birdwatching, from proud members of groups that utilize the traditional hobby's name – such as Google Street View Birding or Fantasy Birding⁴³ – to those who are more passive in that they follow a bird meme account and just accept the birds as they come up during a casual scroll. Many who see birds online do so at their own pace, without regards for the structures in and histories of the outdoor hobby. They see birds and acknowledge them, no need to be the first to lay claim to seeing it or naming it. This placidity may be seen as passive, but it can also be seen as

⁴² Post-hunting hobbies are what I call hobbies reliant on the concept of the outdoors (any space dedicated to cultivating life for mostly non-human species, such as parks, forest preserves, nature trails, jungles, etc) that do not rely on hunting or any form of entrapment or killing of living species to experience, immerse with, or appreciate the landscape the human is in.

⁴³ *Birding* is another term for *birdwatching*, with debatable differences. There are arguments that the words are one in the same, and arguments suggesting the former is more active or competitive meaning the latter is passive or slower. Personally, I use them interchangeably so as to overturn the hierarchy.

adaptability to scrolling media and acceptance of the mediation. The more involved online birdwatchers, on the other hand, are often more willing to share knowledge and experience.

Since the creation of social media, the number of outdoor birdwatching participants has greatly increased.⁴⁴ The global connections intrinsic to the internet make for a strong relationship between social media groups and birdwatching groups. There is a community aspect in both, communities that thrive as knowledge grows and gets shared. Be it through image or video (or even emoticons and emojis),⁴⁵ looking at birds online is adding to the benefit of birds offline in skies, and looking at birds via screens is still making kin, simply online.

⁴⁴ Catherine MacIntyre, "The rise of millennial, urban-dwelling birders," *Maclean's*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.macleans.ca/society/the-rise-of-millennial-urban-dwelling-birders/>.

⁴⁵ For example, (o▽ o) and (°<°) are emoticon birds and 🌐 are 🐦 bird emojis.

R-e-s-p-e-c-t: Looking and Seeing and Watching

But then I settle down and realize: my nature ain't got to be that hard. My epic is
right before me.

- Kimberly Ruffin, 2019

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, take care... A little respect, I get tired.

- Aretha Franklin, 1967

In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues that “staying alive—for every species—requires livable collaborations.”⁴⁶ *Livable*, here, is synonymous with symbiotic, productive, empathetic, and exceptional. Her statement also demands inclusion and that *aliveness* will need to mean open-sourced and supportive education, and recurring encouragement. Tsing later states that “collaboration is work across difference” to emphasize that diversity and open-mindedness are the goals, whether working towards creating a small-scale community or global ecological care.⁴⁷ All in all Tsing is talking about *respect*.

Respect, etymologically, means to look back at. When going out into nature to show respect, I have to start with looking back again. If I went in thinking I knew the trees and knew the bugs, I'd easily dismiss the landscape. I look back, behind me, and to the left and right, and *look again*. The mildest collaboration in those moments is my ability to look *again* at the area. The act forces me to work across the differences of presumed knowledge, some level of apathy, and dismissal. *Looking* goes beyond the sense of sight in rethinking respect; I'll consider the smells and textures and sounds to not just look again but *feel* again. After taking in my immediate surroundings, to look again sometimes means briefly researching something about the

⁴⁶ Tsing, 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

local space, perhaps finding a map or understanding the tree markings or finding out about how the fauna want to be treated. Consider this a moment of collaboration, where my gain in knowledge or perspective shift is a way to livably work with the ecosystem that I enter. Nonhuman animals, plants, and fungi have spent ages changing their lifestyles to adjust to human behavior while humans do little adjusting in a considerate, nondestructive way. Going into an outdoor space with abundant wildlife, an act of collaboration on my end not only keeps the home I'm entering a little more liveable, but it also alters my appreciation.

Birdwatching is more an act of looking again than just looking. Most birdwatchers have to look with their own eyes and then lift up their binoculars to look again (closer). And then check again without binoculars and then put the binoculars back up. And again and again. Until they see what they wanted, or thought they saw, or something else instead. Looking again and again, birdwatchers build up respect for the birds. Repeating the act, it becomes about more than the visible bird one is after; audible birds become of interest and get cared for, then the hurt and dead birds, then the bushes and trees, then the park or forest, and so on. Each time she revisits/relooks at Mother Eagle, my mother is deepening her respect. Looking again builds an undeniable, webbing respect.

Looking again to build respect can be a grounding technique in activities that engage with nature. For humans, looking again requires some patience and openness (to defy presumptions). While birdwatching generally engages in a practice of looking again, the mindfulness associated with that can sometimes get detached, like in the practice/performance of a Big Year. In a Big Year, a birdwatcher tries their best to *look and watch and see* the most bird species in one calendar year. (As of 2019, John Weigel holds the crown for most birds spotted in

one year at 836 species.)⁴⁸ Many birdwatchers who partake plan extensively for this year; they take off work, line up numerous trips around their country or the world, and invest in high quality birdwatching gear. One would think with all this looking, and lots of looking again, moments for respect would be abundant.

Unfortunately, Big Years are rushed, competitive, and considered not as pro-environmental as hobbyist birdwatching by some.⁴⁹ In a Big Year, birdwatchers are more likely to trespass and stray off designated walking paths, all in the name of a passion that ends up seeming more like manifest destiny.⁵⁰ Birders on a Big Year often get wrapped up in corporate races for new birdwatching technology such as cameras, cold weather gear, and binoculars, which is just another way for corporations to profit off of wildlife without giving back.⁵¹ While Big Years have garnered corporate funding for nature preserves and endangered bird protection, and rounded up media interest to produce pro-bird(watching) content, it still feels exploitative and anthropocentric (and self-centered) rather than genuinely for the birds. Big Year's entire premise is frankly exclusionary, since many birdwatchers will never have a shot at racking up an extensive bird list in one year due to travel costs and the demanding time requirements, and people with different abilities may have trouble getting to the less-accessible remote locations that many birds make as their only homes.

⁴⁸ "Big Year Standings," *North American Rare Bird Alert*, 2019, <http://narba.org/big-year-standings>.

⁴⁹ Cooper, Caren, Lincoln Larson, Ashley Dayer, Richard Stedman, and Daniel Decker. "Are Wildlife Recreationists Conservationists? Linking Hunting, Birdwatching, and Pro-Environmental Behavior." *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 79, no. 3 (2015): 446-57. This study provides a statistical way to consider what makes a birdwatcher a conservationist, via their "pro-environmental behavior" metrics.

⁵⁰ Melissa Milgrom, "The Big Year According to Birders," *National Audubon Society*, November 7, 2011, <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-big-year-according-birders>.

⁵¹ Of the major companies producing gear marketed specifically for birdwatching, I could not find any that made their products out of sustainable materials, and very few that donated any of their profit to bird conservation causes.

Beyond the debatable *environmentalness* of a Big Year, the event is elitist and creates fanfare for birds that are “exotic” as compared to those that are in the USA and England (where most competitive, big-listing Big Year birders are from). Writer and Chicagoan Kimberly Ruffins challenges the Big Year by creating fanfare for her local birds that often get dismissed or overlooked: the sparrows, robins, pigeons, and cardinals. In her essay “Shout Out to the Birds of My Everyday Epic,” she poeticizes about these “average” birds in Chicago, thankful for them as signifiers of nature at large, of urban animal perseverance, and of interconnectivity. She specifically mentions birdwatching on Chicago’s West side, an area famously marked as dangerous and decrepit for systemically racist reasons, forcing the reader to look again at Chicago’s West side (or their idea of it). She reframes the West side as a place that can hold the strength of Cooper’s hawks and liveliness of red-winged Blackbirds. Challenging the Big Year, putting emphasis on the everyday and local, casual birdwatchers build respect for what might be considered old news or plain.

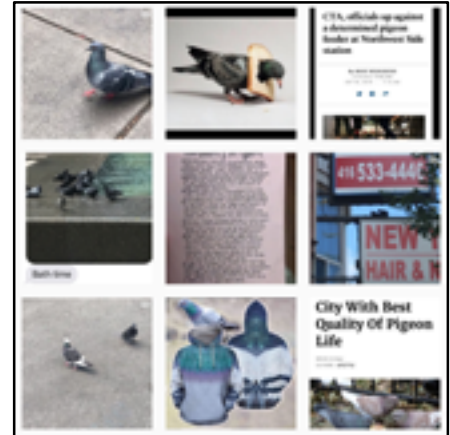
Emphasizing the plain and local, Instagram’s capacity to curate and share images has



International pigeons being shown off on the popular pigeon Instagram account @pigeonsfans.

sparked a gaggle of accounts for and about pigeons. Praise for individual pigeons, pet pigeons, pigeon facts, pigeons caught acting strange on camera, pigeon memes, international pigeon glamour shots, and so on. All these pigeons get “likes” just like friends, family, and celebrities. Like Ms. Stiletto, each Instagram’d pigeon gets a second look; it’s not a scam but a demand. While Instagram gets critiqued for normalizing

“posed” happiness and the “likes” replacing active appreciation and respect, the social media platform has made heroes of underdog pigeons, respectfully putting them in the limelight, and inspiring thousands of Instagram users to start caring for pigeons offline. In Las Vegas, someone is truly demanding a double take on pigeons by putting tiny cowboy hats on them.⁵²



A sample of some pigeon memes and candid pigeon videos collected on the appreciation Instagram account @pigeonsonline.

First getting some buzz via a Facebook video, the cowboy-hat-wearing-pigeons were getting watched across the internet and across the world. Like positive propaganda or an intricate attempt to give pigeons a signifier of their local culture (cowboy hats often representing some general idea of the American West), it’s difficult to dismiss these pigeons. And then I must wonder and dare to care, what would my local epic Chicago pigeons wear?



“They look like happy pigeons to me,” said Charles Walcott, a Cornell University ornithologist. “It is hard to know, of course, because they will not talk to us.”

⁵² Christine Hauser, “Someone Is Putting Cowboy Hats On Pigeons In Las Vegas,” *New York Times*, December 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/us/pigeons-cowboy-hats-las-vegas.html>. Caption of quote on the two photos of pigeons with cowboy hats comes from this article.

Looking again often leads to the virtue of caring. *Care* is a connection, and care between species so that a nonhuman one can have a place in a human's life posits them as kin. In discussing a redefinition of *kin*, Haraway states that "it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time)."⁵³ The care formed while birdwatching, that undeniable, webbing respect, forces a human to challenge their understanding of species hierarchy. Birdwatching mandates a double take, the quick look and the slow look, to be able to observe and absorb. Most often, it's mediated by binoculars, but happenstance birdwatching – like the sudden notice of a bright male cardinal on my window sill or the surprise swoop of a crow onto the street – can create the double take, too.

Citizen science (and the birdwatchers within it) are often in the realm of the double take. Their work is split between being a hobby and a scientific or cultural contribution, therefore having two lenses to look through. Whether or not the movements are under the premise/guise of *citizen science*, the powerful amateurs who prove that there are people actively caring provides hope, continues to make kin, and has tangible effects.⁵⁴ Their volunteered time and effort to look for themselves, for their own experience, and then look again for science, for communities is a deep form of respect felt across kinds. Powerful amateurs are making kin by making kindness.

On the surface, the cowboy hats seemed like an opportune way for observers to make kin with pigeons. Unfortunately, the hats were glued on, causing distress and physical harm to the pigeons. Like so many cases of animal wonder and abuse, the spectacle was ultimately done without regard for the wellbeing of the birds, only the human viewers. A volunteer group

⁵³ Haraway, 103.

⁵⁴ To the best of my ability I cannot find if the phrase "powerful amateur" has been written about, however the writer Michael Pollan speaks it in the 2019 film *Fantastic Fungi* to describe deeply passionate, self-taught/learning-as-they-go mycologists who had no formal academic training. I'm borrowing the phrase to be more broadly about science-adjacent folks who similarly have no formal academic training yet are passionate, motivated, and self taught or learning via their community, or, as artist Claire Pentecost says, those who "want to operate equally from their gut and their brain" (Pentecost, *The Public Amateur*, 2009).

educated through citizen science endeavors, Lofty Hopes, took in as many of those hatted pigeons as they could, and took their hats off. After a few other copy-cat pigeon-hat experiences, Lofty Hopes has started a new effort for respecting pigeons. The group has begun working with political activists to write pigeons into animal protection and anti-animal abuse laws. This double take is one that comes from long looks and deep care.

In scholar Mel Chen's book on animacy, they propose affectivity as a way to connect subjects and objects, or simply *me* and *the other*.⁵⁵ In Chen's concepts, emotions are not containable within a single body, since most emotions refer to or reflect another being/thing, and therefore emotions connect bodies.⁵⁶ While birdwatching, the emotions may be anywhere between or outside of wonder, joy, and disappointment, connecting bodies like humans, birds, corporations, and soils. Caring so much, however, can become exhausting. With climate anxiety and trauma on the rise, birdwatching to someone unfamiliar may seem like a chore.⁵⁷ Aretha Franklin says, in her famous song, that she is *tired*, either from having no respect or perhaps trying to give too much. The extreme of *not caring* is often expected and/or accepted, and thankfully the double take challenges that. However, attempting to give your all (all of your respect and care, that is) opens up the possibility to some totalizing empathy, a utopian idea where one could spread their care and respect across everything.

Totalizing empathy is one person's fight against the world, trying to look at everything, really see it, and feel for it to help and save it. But, like artist John Malpede said, "if all that

⁵⁵ Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 12.

⁵⁶ Chen, 11.

⁵⁷ Samantha Harrington, "How climate change affects mental health," *Yale Climate Connections*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/02/how-climate-change-affects-mental-health/>.

motivates you is saving the world, you're sure to burn out," and battles need to be picked.⁵⁸

Since about 2007, the term "eco anxiety" has been used in news coverage on climate change to say that the state of things, ecologically, are so bad it's causing general anxiety for many.

Anxiety is one end of burn out, where moving forward seems impossible and one's actions are limited or ceased entirely. The buzzing idea of totalizing empathy being pushed around so that one could be a *good enough conservationist/eco-activist/naturalist* leads to eco-anxiety, to burnout. Aretha Franklin sings for black women during the height of the civil rights movement, asking to be respected even when tired of doing her best respecting. I'm dodging eco-anxiety and I pick birds, spending all my double takes on them, and letting their tangents take me slowly to the rest of the eco-web.

⁵⁸ Lydia Matthews, "Mapping the Terrain: The New Public Art - a Conference," *Artweek*, December 19, 1991.

Duck Enough



Mallard ducks crossing the street together – video still.

I recently came across this video of a group of eight ducks crossing the street wherein they all wait for the light to turn green before making their way.⁵⁹ They stay in the crosswalk the whole time without getting distracted. I watched it eagerly, fully amazed, and then quickly shared it with someone dear to me. Getting back to me, he commented that it

was a good use of CGI. Looking closer, I was bitter that these

ducks were indeed not of feathers but of frames. I really wanted the ducks to be real. Real as in I could go meet them, real as in they make their own decisions, real as in existing off screen. This definition of real, however, is exclusionary, as in who am I to deny frames and codes a sense of reality since they were made by and reference a living species? If it walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, isn't it a duck?

When I go birdwatching beyond my screen, amongst living trees and breathing birds, I try to stay mindful of the layers around me: I am me and I am dependent on the ground, the grass and the microcosms that supports said grass, I'm dependent on the branch that holds the bird I'm watching, on the tree the branch is part of, dependent on and thankful for the air and wind and sun and so on. Another layer of birdwatching can look like you, reader, watching me, birdwatcher, watch birds and birdwatchers. Most of my birdwatching happens in Chicago, where I live, which may not be traditionally thought of as a bird hotspot; tall, glass covered buildings

⁵⁹ The Denmarkian, "Ducks crossing the street in Germany," posted May 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMCzoKCQ_JU.

and bright lights throughout the night are nightmares for birds. However, I and many other young people are clearly compelled to do our birdwatching in big cities.⁶⁰ Another thing I make sure to hold onto is how I got to my spot, or why I went after a specific bird. More often than not, the cause of both of those affairs is rooted in the internet. Since using the internet to help me determine a place for birdwatching, or a bird to look for, a rise in online bird content began sneaking into my other internet usage: bird nest livestream videos, bird count databases, birdwatching discussion forums, bird memes, backyard videos of “unbelievable” urban birdspots, and other ways to *see* birds online compelled me to crane my neck up and away from my screen, to look up into the trees.

In expanding an idea of birdwatching so that it can contain simulated wildlife and online birds, I turn to contemporary philosopher Timothy Morton. In his 2010 book *The Ecological Thought*, he posits an idea of the *mesh* which stands for “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things.”⁶¹ The word *mesh* has synonyms that relate to the internet: network, web, screen, matrix, nexus. Morton even noted that he paid careful attention in picking the right word for his take on grander ecological inner workings and connections so as not to be too internet-referential.⁶² I’m not offended by the ways *mesh* can become synonymous with the internet. The word references visuals that nicely mirror parts of the internet, making it complementary to material ecology. Understanding a *mesh* of interconnectivity should frame ecological thinking to include the digital and online systems (ecologies) that support the outdoor, offline, living ecologies (systems). I am suggesting, then, that to be a birdwatcher, one must simply watch

⁶⁰ Matt Mendenhall, “The new faces of birding: Young, urban, more diverse,” *BirdWatching*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/news/birdwatching/new-faces-birding-young-urban-more-diverse/>.

⁶¹ Morton, 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*

birds, so it doesn't matter if the bird is hopping along in front of your binoculars or riding a Tech Deck on an influencer's Twitter account.

After seeing the ducks cross the street, self-organized and on the appropriate light, every duck had that potential, even if fantastical and unrealistic. Thinking through to that potential means yet another moment of human-bird exchange, birdwatching with the capacity for care. Actively acknowledging as much interconnectivity as I can, I'll receive Ms. Stiletto and know that I'm going 🦋 nature.⁶³

⁶³ "Going 🦋," since 2018, has become synonymous with "going to," used on social media and in text messages to askew the journey's geographical necessity, or rather to joke about any distance. The trend started after an Apple update that would try to automatically replace the word "to" if following "going" with that emoji. However, it is also a layered play on how many older folks assume younger people cannot spell or type correctly at all due to their constant use of phones, a creative solution to prove a point. So, to this point, I'm going 🦋 birdwatch on instagram, brb.

The Case of the Kākāpos

Considering the importance of looking for respect, the internet and its massive collection of images has so much potential to make anyone seen. Of course, not every thing is constantly highlighted or viral, but when one is magnified, its effects can be tremendous and exciting.

While the internet gets knocked a lot for cutting sight short (as a screen physically cuts off the distance the eyes have to scan, but also as the internet collects data and skews available viewing options), it can still be a useful tool for alternate modes of viewing. Consider the case of the kakapo bird, a species of bird currently resides only in New Zealand and is nocturnal, flightless,



Sirocco the Kākāpō atop the human zoologist's head, starting the kākāpō mating act, caught on BBC cameras. (alternative caption: Sirocco the Kākāpō's 15 minutes of fame.)

and defenseless against the cats and ferrets that colonial settlers introduced. Ultimately, these birds would have been an ecological lost cause, extinct before most people ever knew it existed. Yet, one viral video⁶⁴ brought the kakapo into

global consciousness, just as the kakapo population was reaching its lowest recorded point ever.

In this video, one of the approximately only 80 kakapos is being observed when he jumps onto the zoologist and begins a mating ritual upon his shoulders. Without this unusual and comedic moment, the kakapo video probably would have ended up in the slew of other BBC-

⁶⁴ BBC, "Shagged by a rare parrot | Last Chance To See - BBC," posted September 29, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T1vfsHYiKY>.

produced nature videos. The clip did not just end up popular amongst BBC and bird fans, but also got posted and reposted in various non-bird-related social media forums. All this seeing must have led to some fascination, as the kakapo research and aid groups of New Zealand received a significant increase in donations and volunteers that following year.⁶⁵ Correlation is not causation, of course, but the kakapo population rose significantly in the following mating seasons, and this year the kakapo new offspring count was the highest it's been since the birds began being monitored in the 1950s.⁶⁶

While many people will never have the chance to see a kakapo in the feathers, they have this chance to make kin with them via the internet. Whether the Māori name entered someone's consciousness via the viral BBC video, a New Zealandian children's picture book, or a late night wikipedia surf leading to the "birds of New Zealand" page, the internet builds a *mesh* that connects kakapos to unexpected spaces and beings. This visibility, although randomized and happenstance, provides the kakapos new chances to make kin with humans.



A kākāpō parent and new chick at the beginning of the 2019 kākāpō baby boom.

⁶⁵ Sourced from the folks at the Kakapo Recovery group, spoken with via Facebook.

⁶⁶ Alison Ballance, "Kakapo Population Hits New High of 213 Birds," *Radio New Zealand*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/kakapo-files/story/2018713837/kakapo-population-hits-new-high-of-213-birds>.

Do The Evil Seagull Laugh

“Don’t believe what your eyes are telling you. All they show is limitation. Look with your understanding. Find out what you already know and you will see the way to fly.”

— *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Richard Bach, 1970, p. 48

I’m going ✈ nature with just my eyes and fingertips, making kin and making kind when I scrub through an “animals laughing compilation” video on YouTube. I’m birdwatching. One specific seagull now, dubbed the “evil laugh” seagull. Maybe you know the one?⁶⁷



I go to the beach with my kid sister – she’s in kindergarten – and she asks me if all seagulls can “do the evil seagull laugh.” I hope so, I tell her. I never showed her the video, but someone must have. *Interconnectivity, of course. The web and the bigger web, duh.* She asks if we can play the video to the birds, hoping to coax them into mimicry of one of their digitally captured kind. Is this where I begin to teach my kid sister about bird call recording use ethics? Do I tell her that pre-recorded bird sounds can confuse young birds?⁶⁸ About how every step humans take in fresh air impacts birds, usually to their disadvantage? About the damage of negative stereotypes towards seagulls? She’s six, absorbent, so I take the lesson to her. She nods, the beach area provides my phone with no internet service, and we two humans cackle at the now silent seagulls.

⁶⁷ Kremel, “Evil seagull laugh,” posted September 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuyS4Q1ArXc>.

⁶⁸ David Sibley, *How to Use Birdcall Apps*, Audubon, April 7, 2011, <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-use-birdcall-apps>.

The Birdwatchers Are Nodes Who Will Map The Birds

eBird and *iNaturalist*, two global species-mapping data services, are popularly visited nodes that connect outdoor birdwatching and the internet. The platforms are part citizen science data collection and part social media forum, and are used to map what birds and where a birdwatcher has seen outdoors.⁶⁹ *eBird* is managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, offering links to science and news from the Lab for the birders who want a little more bird content after the viewing. *iNaturalist* can aid in species identification through a photo recognition software. Both offer opportunities for users to comment on “trips” or “spots.” Participants voluntarily log their sightings which in turn track things like migration patterns and rare and endangered birds that the small number of trained ornithologists would have trouble doing on their own. For example, in the past year scientists in California’s Central Valley are using birdwatchers’ *eBird* and *iNaturalist* data on migrating birds to aid farmers with how, where, and when to plant crops and use pesticides. With the recent increasing changes in climate, migration patterns have begun varying more than usual, and so the data that *eBird* and *iNaturalist* provide help to reduce harm towards the birds yet get the most help from migrating birds (who will eat their pests and fertilize their crops).⁷⁰

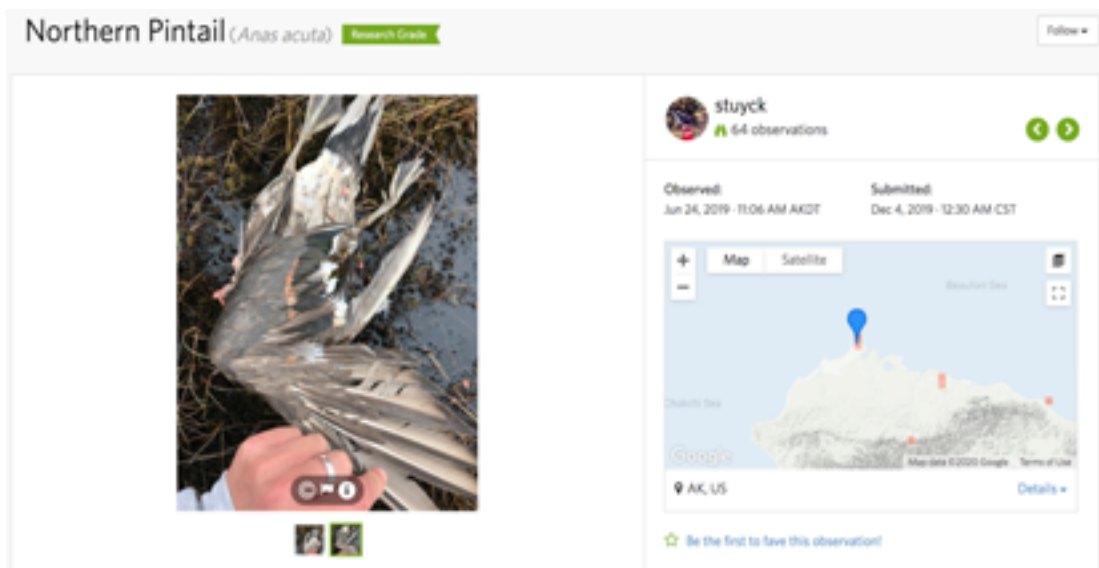
The platforms also gauge where birdwatchers that use the internet are viewing birds (since a lack of logged birds does not necessarily mean there are no birds there or that no one is

⁶⁹ *eBird* is specifically for logging birds while *iNaturalist* accepts logs of any species in any taxonomic kingdom except for humans. In my experience, birdwatchers who use exclusively *eBird* tend to be more interested in logging high numbers of bird spots and those who use both or mainly *iNaturalist* are, in varying degrees, also interested in learning about many species beyond just birds.

⁷⁰ Anders Gyllenhaal, “A New Effort to Save Birds Pinpoints in Amazing Detail Where They Fly,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/with-many-bird-species-in-decline-a-new-effort-to-save-them-pinpoints-in-amazing-detail-where-they-fly/2019/04/26/6413c850-5638-11e9-8ef3-fbd41a2ce4d5_story.html.

watching them). The maps generally show that areas in and surrounding major cities have lots of birds logged, which aren't the places where many typically think of as bird hotspots. However, the data are evidence of a level of investment on the part of urban birdwatchers who may not have the resources to make trips to more rural forests and parks with rare birds.

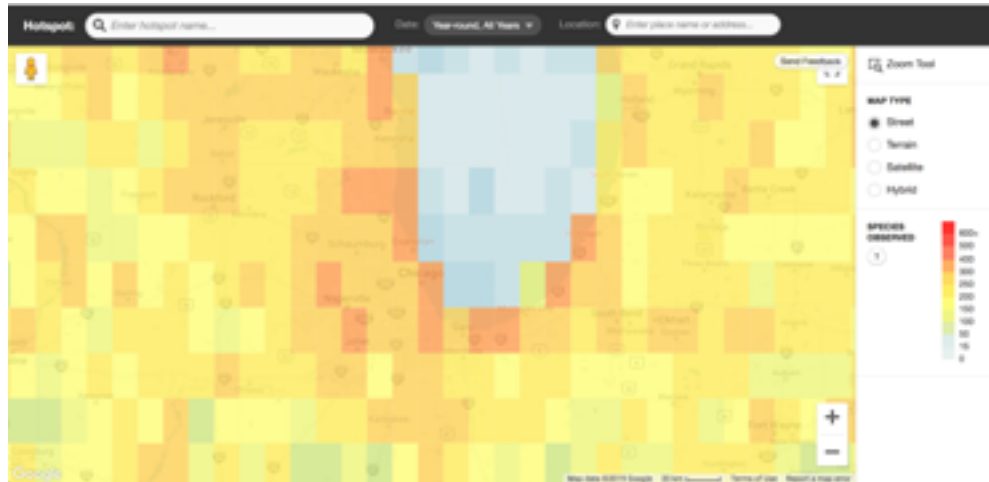
In the US, urban bird loggings tend to include pigeons, sparrows, geese, and seagulls in addition to the more charismatic, nonnative, and rare birds. Bird logging has become a form of curation with specific and aestheticized choices made on what gets mapped. There are some users who seem to be making perhaps creative moves on their profiles. I've come across an *iNaturalist* user who logs only pigeons and doves in the Chicagoland area, another who only logs dead birds seen on the sides of roads (mostly in the Pacific Northwest) (see below), and an *eBird* user who is dedicated to logging an exact number of and specific species of seagulls on every birdwatching outing (which is, let me tell you, *a lot of seagulls* on the coast of North Carolina).



A Northern Pintail duck being identified by its carcass in Northern Alaska via iNaturalist.

These endeavors can come across as campy, highly specific, and perhaps useless or too quotidian, yet these silly-seeming ventures are very valuable for scientists who are unlikely to

get funded to track seagulls, pigeons, or roadkill. Besides their helpfulness, these users (and others) seem to get a kick out of how excited their online followers are to see their next spot.



A selection of logged bird hotspots on the *eBird* platform. The area represented is the Chicagoland area, with the densest logging being around the more populated areas of the city.

The internet’s most popular general map source, Google Maps, is a large 3D modeled mesh, colored with human made continent divisions and topographical approximations. This simulation allows partial accessibility to global travel that many people may never have. The global birdwatching community has taken advantage of this, creating a formalized subset of digital birdwatching called “Google Street View Birding.” Based on a Facebook group of the same name, this activity is much like the traditional one: searching high and low for birds. The only difference is that the scale of the mesh that birds can be spotted within is much smaller. Google Street View birdwatchers are simultaneously *birdwatching* and *image watching*. The birds caught in the Street View are frozen in time and often years-old images. There’s a potential

that some of the species caught pixelated are already extinct, yet their nodal positioning is burned into the map, into the mesh.



Pigeon-people.

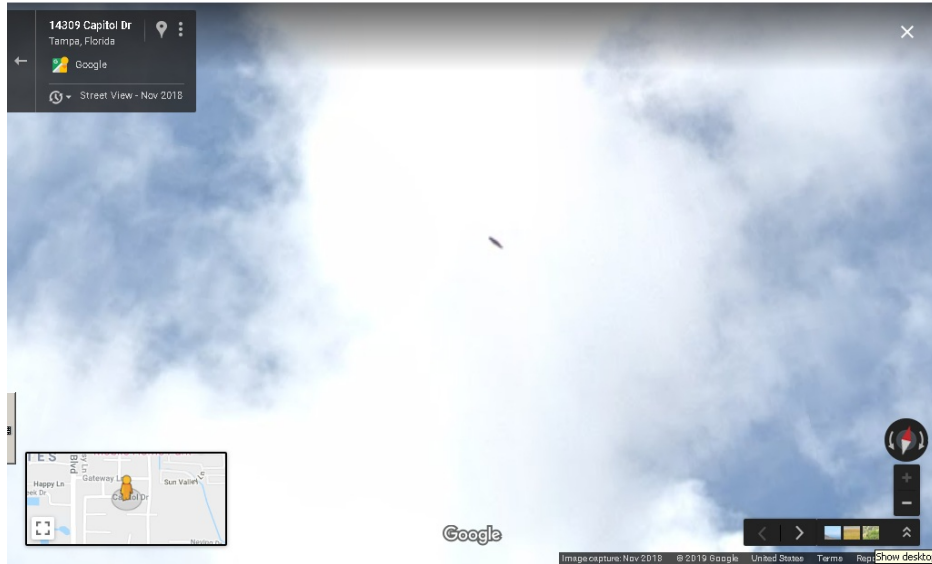
A 2013 session of imagery for Street View in Japan includes the capture of a special kind of pigeon.⁷¹ The pigeon-people add another layer to birdwatching: not only are the birds already digital but they are also people-birds. Perhaps they are not a bird spot in the traditional sense,⁷² but the blurring of natural and unnatural is perhaps more candidly honest or uncanny than mistaken bird spots, online or off.

I am most perplexed by a peculiar examination of a Google Street View sighting⁷³ that to me looks more like a camera smudge or a glitch than a bird. The dedicated birdwatchers of the group suggest what the spot might be: Greater sand-plover, Inca dove, Yellow-bellied flycatcher,

⁷¹ Latitude, Longitude: 35.7040744,139.5577317. Tokyo, Japan, via Google Maps.

⁷² A *bird spot* simply means a *bird sighting*, as in “I had a great *bird spot* this morning, catching the rare ivory-billed woodpecker high up in a tree!”

⁷³Latitude, Longitude: 28.0771056,-82.4650393. Tampa, Florida, USA, via Google Maps.



Bird spot?

Western kingbird, or maybe an alien. It is a spot in the sense of a noticed view, perhaps of a bird, and a spot such that it is almost a stain in the sky. This spot illustrates the multitudes of nodes on meshes that digital birdwatching brings up: it's a visual representation of digital code that creates nodes on digital maps, it has a latitude and longitude, it is a node between Street View photographer and all the microcosms of that location and all the Facebook users who look upon it, and so on. Beyond the digital-internet complexities, this spot is akin to a smudge or dirt particle on the lens of a pair of binoculars or a telescope. Outdoors, birdwatchers often find themselves seeing something flitting and flying about through their binoculars only to find out it was a physical blemish on or in the material of their binoculars. The binoculars, telescope, camera, and computer or phone screen between human and bird are all mediators equally prone to defects that impair clarity of sight. Any of the birdwatching mediating screens or lenses question the ease and naturality of a bird spot.

Upon meeting a birdwatcher for the first time, the way that I get asked if I have an *eBird* or *iNaturalist* account parallels new high schoolers asking each other if they're on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. There's intrigue to see one's accomplishments and style, to see who they know and where they've been, and the slight hint of a challenge. The birdwatching community and information on birds grows via these maps as birdwatchers interact online, building a web that goes offline, too. Sharing my profile on either of the platforms allows other birdwatchers a glimpse into who and how I document, where I've been, and a potential degree of my dedication. My contributions to *eBird* and *iNaturalist* appear as nodes confirming bird appearances, and, reflexively, confirming my locations. Nodes on a map refer to a single, identifiable point, usually defined by its latitude and longitude when applicable. Nodes on our ecological mesh are where you and I meet, physically or through action, you being the reader, or the keyboard I type on, or the ant that once crawled across this keyboard, or the birds that I'll see when I take a break from writing.

Bird Hot Spot (Spotters Spot Me)

On one of the earliest guided birdwatching walks that I attended, at Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary, the birdwatchers I was with must've smelled me to be a new birdwatcher. They stepped in nearly every five feet to tell me some fact about the area we were on, in, and around. *This particular sugar maple tree was brought from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The sand here was produced in a factory. Under that bush is a baby skunk. We used to go cruising here.* By holding and passing on these facts, the experienced birders were giving me reason to respect every bit of space here, and reminding me that all of it – the imported trees and factory sand, anthropomorphized skunks and human pleasure ritual – is nature. It can be overwhelming, to notice all the things I have yet to learn, but each new potential is a *node*, a pin to go back to and map out, flesh out the mesh. When I tried to birdwatch on my own before this guided walk, even if in denser woods further away from the city, I don't think I was nearly as connected with *nature*.

On that birdwalk, the ground became fake: imported, nonnative, governed. Then, the ground was real as I paid more attention to it, looking for birds but noticing mushrooms and bugs. Real again, the ground begs the question of how *natural* became synonymous with *real*. Simultaneously both, the ground was nature and unnatural, mixing worlds and ideas. I heard and saw real birds, and what I had thought were real birds turned out to be fake birds but real squirrels.

The Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary is known to be the Midwestern hot spot for migrating bird species, visiting from faraway places like Chile, Greenland, and Morocco, which made the year-round locals like robins and pigeons seem momentarily dismissible, either too natural (as in

normal) or completely unnatural (as in urban, industrial). All the shifting between states of naturalness and actuality had me invested in the existence of all the different species and things, had me making kin with them all. *Making kin* as a way of becoming in symbiosis (collaboration), bird sanctuaries help me define myself while I help them stay protected spaces.

There is a wide range of education levels between the Chicago birdwatchers on bird activism, environmental studies, urban ecology, and just all things bird. Plenty of retired science professors putting their research to a practice amongst the fresh-air-fans who just deeply appreciate the aesthetics of birds, with a few anxious environmental activists and dragged-along kids sprinkled in. Regardless of a birdwatcher's initial bird background or interest, if they end up at one of the birdwatching hotspots, such as the Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary or Big Marsh Park, they're bound to end up conversing with a long-time and/or just excited birdwatcher. And the next stop on this web would be the phone that will inevitably come out; phone taken out at the birdwatching hotspot to show a photo, cite an article, or pull up a social media birdwatching-centric group. The two humans make kin about shared content, over and through the phone, and part ways in order to make more kin with gray catbirds and red-winged blackbirds.

Even if the parks, forests, and fields where birdwatchers gather are silent, the community is frequently chirping. Thankfully, social media has made a place for the discussions that doesn't need to disrupt the oft tranquil activity. Through local, national, and international groups and pages, birdwatchers can connect further and deeper with each other and their birds. Birdwatchers *connecting more* take various paths online, but it always includes sharing.⁷⁴ relaying hiking paths that highlight new nests, posting photos and videos of birds spotted, presenting bird memes, discussing bird activism and plans, getting bird spots identified, and so on. Of the buzz online,

⁷⁴ *Sharing* of the from-me-to-you spirit and *sharing* of digital posts, plus lots of *thanking*.

many socially and ecologically beneficial happenings have grown, from bird-friendly ordinances getting passed to regularly occurring, empowering, group birdwatching excursions.

I do put my phone on silent and try not to look at it while in a bird sanctuary. There's something about being present, and something about trying to see a bird I haven't yet seen, and also that it's hard to hold binoculars, my bird book, and a phone. The memes and iNaturalist posts and all can wait. In this space of recreated nature (or is it nature saved from the unnatural?), feminist thinking and notions of respect steer my watching. I'll see waxwings and grackles here in Chicago, and toucans and shoebills online later.



Bird's eye view of the Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary, somewhere between natural, real, virtual, and unnatural.

Image Credits

On Page 3:

Still from the Decorah Bald Eagles BirdCam Livestream, *The Raptor Resource Project*, <https://www.raptorresource.org/birdcams/decorah-eagles/>.

On Page 4:

Screenshot from the comments section of the Decorah Bald Eagle livestream on the Raptor Resource Project Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/RaptorResourceProject/>.

On Page 5:

Huginn and Muninn sit on Odin's shoulders in an illustration from an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript. Uploaded December 30, 2005. Huginn and Muninn Wikipedia page.

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On Page 13:

Ms. Stiletto remains enigmatic in terms of searchability. Searching “compermisa” will generate some version of her image, but they’re all variations. She exists in the “#pigeon” search of various social media platforms. Your best bet is to hope someone sends her to you.

On Page 15:

Unknown Author and Date. Variations of “birds with arms” easily searchable under that key phrase in various search engines. Photographs with digital edits. This image specifically also accessible via: Hauge, Matthew. “birds with arms.” *Medium*. November 1, 2018.

<https://medium.com/@mcarterh/birds-with-arms-2cfb3902018>.

On Page 26:

Screencap of the feed of *@pigeonsfans* via Instagram. Curated/hosted by Aleksandar Bogdanovski and Kris Gozhita.

On Page 27:

Screencap of the feed of *@pigeonsonline* via Instagram. Curated/hosted by Emma Unterseher. Christine Hauser, “Someone Is Putting Cowboy Hats On Pigeons In Las Vegas,” *New York Times*, December 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/us/pigeons-cowboy-hats-las-vegas.html>.

On Page 31:

Screencap from: The Denmarkian, “Ducks crossing the street in Germany,” posted May 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMCzoKCQ_JU.

On Page 34:

Screencap from: BBC, “Shagged by a rare parrot | Last Chance To See - BBC,” posted September 29, 2009,

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Screencap from: *iNaturalist* user stuyck's post on December 4, 2019 (observation made on June 24, 2019). *Northern Pintail*, Lat: 71.272646, Lon: -156.551892.

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Screencap of: Latitude, Longitude: 35.7040744,139.5577317. Tokyo, Japan, via Google Maps.

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On Page 41:

Screencap of: Latitude, Longitude: 28.0771056,-82.4650393. Tampa, Florida, USA, via Google

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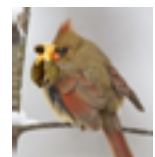
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