

Bird Lists, Bird Walks, and Birding in Iraq by Philip Krajewski

The bird glided past me as I reached the end of the stationary and greeting cards section, and winged down the pet food aisle. Quickly, I wheeled the cart towards the dog, cat, and bird (?) food. Just as I was about to turn in, the bird appeared from the household cleaning items and revealed enough of itself for me to make a positive identification. True to its name, the house sparrow became number three on my



Mansfield Wal-Mart indoor life list. The previous summer, I was mesmerized by a barn swallow dipping and soaring above the men's and woman's clothing section, after being startled a few weeks earlier by a ruby-throated hummingbird stopping and closely observing a bright red box next to the tropical fish tanks.

Bird lists are compiled under the strangest as well as the most normal circumstances. Sergeant First Class Jonathan Trouern-Trend of the Connecticut National Guard documented 122 species of birds during his tour of duty in Iraq. His book *Birding in Babylon* is a poignant documentation of the theme, life goes on all around us. The only antidote to the Iraq conflict is immediate cessation through dialogue, but *Birding in Babylon* is a bright light in the darkness and counteracts war's two most dismal manifestations; self-importance and total abuse of the environment. Whereas for human beings it is most difficult, other life forms find it impossible to adjust quickly to flying metal and instantaneous conflagration.

Birding in Babylon is a testament to Mr. Trouern-Trend's resilience and temperament, and to the avian ability to *be birds* in a very disrupted environment. Ornithological journalistic excellence of historic proportions led this soldier, while making a defensive perimeter around a humvee with a flat tire, to say, "I'm lying on the ground with my eye on some guy racing around in a pick up truck, wondering if he's going to take a pot shot at us (which would have been suicidal), while a pair of crested larks were not even ten feet from me, the male displaying and dancing around". He also observed old-world warblers at the laundry pond, kestrels at the dump, and owls at the cement bunkers, while at the Anaconda Base in the Sunni Triangle.

Birds can roll with the punch, but real adaptation is a process that moves extremely slow. One would think that ground nesters hunker down, rather than fly the coop, when confronted with the loud sounds of clanging tank treads. Whatever the avian reasoning, let's have three cheers for the strength of nurturing parents holding their ground in the face of human folly, and, a moment of silence for those birds, people, and other parts of the environment inanelly blasted to smithereens.

Most birds nest in comfortable niches in familiar territory, while some seem like wayfaring strangers in odd places. Birds nesting next to airport runways, atop tall buildings, or in bridge structures are now common occurrences. I can still see that killdeer flying off of its nest in the last moment as my friend drove, wheels on either side

of the eggs, down his dirt driveway. My killdeer list in *people spots* increased to five with this sighting. And, while the blue jay that just alighted in the red maple outside my window is an old visitor, my list of birds seen on this tree as I type onto the computer screen is fourteen.

My 2007 Tioga County bird list reached 65 species on April 5, with the sighting of my first chipping sparrow of the season. Momentarily confused, I saw the black eye stripe and bill with the chestnut cap, thereby separating it from the American tree sparrow and confirmed it as a 'chipper'. Earlier in the day a white-throated sparrow and a red-bellied woodpecker were welcome additions since, as winter residents, they had gone unobserved since January 1.

I find these lone bird walks fun and exciting, but group affairs add a communal quality similar to a variety of species gagging at a backyard feeder. A number of local walks for the appreciation of birds and the satisfaction of the obsessive list maker are available for any level of birder.

On Saturdays from now until the end of May, Audrey Fox at Hills Creek Lake has organized a bird walk for campers and members of the surrounding communities. Interested parties should meet at the park office at 8:30AM in April and 7:00AM starting on May 5. This is a wonderful opportunity for beginners to gain knowledge and for more advanced birders to add to their yearly lists. And, because the exception can arise at any time, it may be that a rare bird can be added to a life list.

The first walk on March 31 had good water bird sightings at the lake and Tauscher Pond. Hooded mergansers, ring-necked ducks, pied-billed grebes, wood ducks, scaup (sp.), Canada geese, and ring-billed gulls along with four bald eagles were part of a list of 23 species documented. A northern harrier sitting on a fence post just outside the park distracted me enough that I could put my new dictum into action: pull to the side of the road when watching birds.

The Tiadaghton Audubon Society, while helping with the Hills Creek endeavor, is also conducting bird walks at different locations in the county over the next five months. Ives Run and the Darling Run access to Pine Creek were the first two locations with an osprey, and ruby and golden-crowned kinglets highlighting the sightings. Please visit www.tiaudubon.org for information on future walks.

Group bird walks are a sharing of individual knowledge that seem to also produce greater results with many eyes and ears scanning an area with intensity. They also are a friendly way for birders to stay active and involved, in order to keep their skills sharp. Please consider joining one of the organized local bird walks and open yourself to a colorful, song filled, relaxing experience full of exercise and good will. You will not be disappointed.

And, keep your eyes open in your favorite department store or supermarket for that bird looking for the same thing we all cherish...freedom.

Birdwatch appears the second Wednesday of each month in the Outdoors section of the *Wellsboro Gazette*. The Tiadaghton Audubon Society meets the third Wednesday of each month at 7:30PM at the Gmeiner Cultural Center, Wellsboro, Pa. Please visit www.tiaudubon.org for more information.