

# Having Fun Helping Birds

**I** probably shouldn't begin by declaring outright that Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, straddling the border between Brooklyn and Queens, is the best place I've ever gone birding.

But I feel comfortable with the following: Jamaica Bay is *more fun* than anywhere else I've been. It's basically impossible to circumnavigate Jamaica Bay's West Pond without bumping into a "character"—a wide-eyed tourist or an all-knowing local, a high-strung lister or a laid-back watcher, a cocky kid or a patrician elder. On a warm autumn weekend, you are likely to encounter dozens of characters. In the dead of winter, you'll cross paths with a few. Even—especially?—during the nighttime hours, you're bound to make the acquaintance of a certified character.

The sociologist would have a field day here. Is Jamaica Bay a "melting pot" of suffused cultural traditions or a "salad bowl" of preserved cultural identities? What are local attitudes toward, say, "traditional" vs. "progressive" lifestyles? And what about matters of life-and-death significance: Mets vs. Yankees?

*What is it* that attracts visitors to Jamaica Bay? What do we have in common?

Birds, of course: the promise of clangorous Redwings in the cattails and twittering Tree Swallows in the skies above; the chance for a vagrant Dickcissel from the Midwest or a stray Gyrfalcon from the Arctic; the not-quite-impossible dream of a Broad-billed Sandpiper or Spotted Redshank.

Now it doesn't take rocket science—or a degree in sociology—to ascertain that all sorts of wildly different people go to Jamaica Bay for the shared purpose of having fun watching birds. There's something else going on here, though, and it might require some small amount of sociological discernment to see the Big Picture. Let's enlist the services of our hypothetical sociologist and ask

her to share with us some of the write-in comments from her refuge user survey:

- *I see more Red-winged Blackbirds now than when I was a kid.*
- *Tree Swallow numbers are way down from last week.*
- *Are there more vagrant Dickcissels along the coast than inland?*
- *How many Gyrfalcons have strayed to Long Island this year?*
- *I wonder if Broad-billed Sandpiper numbers are declining worldwide.*
- *I'm interested in determining the global population of Spotted Redshanks.*

I think I'm starting to see a theme here. Birders love to count things, to assay, to inventory. Our wide-eyed tourist can't help but draw comparisons between Red-winged Blackbird populations at West Pond in 2004 vs. West Virginy in 1972; our all-knowing local can tell you that Tree Swallow numbers are down from last week's high of 12,600. The high-strung lister "needs" to know how many Dickcissels he has seen in Kings County; and even the laid-back watcher admits to some interest in the status of Gyrfalcon on Long Island. The cocky kid lands a summer internship censusing Broad-billed Sandpipers by helicopter; the patrician elder cautiously interprets the results of the latest scientific papers on Spotted Redshank populations.



Let's recap the results thus far from our sociological study of Jamaica Bay: (1) All sorts of people are to be found here; (2) They are drawn here by their mutual passion for observing wild birds; (3) They are further united by their shared interest in monitoring bird populations. Taken one at a time and viewed with hindsight, the survey results are unsurprising and uncontroversial. Taking a broader view, though, we might regard Jamaica Bay as a microcosm of a larger ornitho-cultural

phenomenon that is, I would argue, somewhat surprising and potentially controversial.

Let's proceed with our analysis by recalling that we birders espouse a variety of viewpoints on all sorts of matters. That's healthy, and it's a sure sign of the transcendent and transcultural appeal of birding. It implies that birders differ in their attitudes toward conservation and the environment, and it means that birders don't always agree on whether to agitate, to get active, to get involved. And it would be naive of me to imagine that there is unanimity about a conservation agenda for the American Birding Association.

Or would it?

In the simple act of counting birds—"I&M", or "Inventory and Monitoring", as the professionals call it—we are advancing the conservation agenda. Every Wood Thrush on a Breeding Bird Survey, every Western Bluebird on a Christmas Bird Count, gets analyzed by a small army of agency biologists and university researchers. And the results of the analyses get translated into specific management actions.

So it is with many of the trademark programs and initiatives of the American Birding Association. By reporting our data to *North American Birds* regional editors, for example, we are contributing to a journal that just happens to be one of the more valuable tools for managers and planners working on the ground to help save bird populations. And by donating used binoculars, telescopes, and laptops to Birders' Exchange, we are providing direct assistance to researchers who monitor bird populations in the tropics.

But it's "just for fun", you say. If pressed to give a "reason" for doing your Breeding Bird Survey route in early June of every year, you might recount the pleasure of recognizing the carillon proclamations of a Wood Thrush on a muggy morning in the foothills of the Appalachians. If asked "why" you *still* do the same Christmas Bird Count after all these years, you might cite the prospect of chancing upon a flock of Western Bluebirds attacking a cluster of blood-red sumac berries. Perhaps you contribute to *North American Birds* for no other reason than the fun of seeing your name in print, and perhaps you have donated equipment to Birders' Exchange, well, for the fun of it.

That's all well and good. Call it fun. Call it activism or

environmentalism, if you wish. Or avoid such terms like the plague, if you prefer to do so. But let's not sell ourselves short: In so much of what we do, we are contributing importantly to the cause of bird conservation. It is we birders who generate the raw material—in the form of baseline data—from which real-world management plans are extracted.



Don't get me wrong: I go to Jamaica Bay to have fun. To tally warblers in the South Garden treetops. To census diving ducks roosting in West Pond. To survey the channels beyond for grebes and mergansers. To talk shop with the locals: "When did the Red Knots get in?" "How many do you think are out on that mudflat?" "To whom should I report my data?"

I have heard it remarked that bird identification and bird conservation are mutually exclusive enterprises, some sort of zero-sum game. But at Jamaica Bay—and at dozens of



Bird monitoring at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Brooklyn, New York. © Arthur Morris / Birds As Art.

other places where birders gather together to have fun watching birds—I am reminded of the folly of that notion. Far from being a zero-sum game, going birding is, in my view, a win-win proposition. We can have our cake and eat it, too. The more fun we have, the more good we do.

— TED FLOYD