Birding North Carolina’s High Country
Learn about the fascinating birds that can be found in North Carolina’s High Country over the seasons
Welcome to the second issue of The Fledgling. We appreciate your continued support. This issue, we are thrilled to bring you an amazing selection of articles by young birders. From tales of birding in Europe to a look at the birds of the Appalachians by season to two great book reviews, this issue offers something for everyone.

This year has been a particularly interesting spring for me. Having just moved back to the US after spending the last several years living abroad, this was the first time in four years that I was able to spend the entirety of spring migration in North America. As anyone who has birded in Europe knows, we are truly lucky to have such an amazing array of colorful and unique warblers every spring. As spring migration has drawn to a close, however, the main thing I’ve taken away this year is not that it is infinitely more fun to watch Cape May and Hooded Warblers than struggling to identify Phylloscopus warblers. Instead, unexpectedly, the thing I’ve taken away from this spring is how lucky we are as birders to have such an amazing and supportive community.

After two years of almost entirely solo birding (moving to a new country right before a pandemic isn’t the best way to meet people!), this wasn’t something that I even realized I missed. I had come to favor the tranquility of birding alone, just me and the birds. While I still enjoy the opportunity to relax with a great morning birding alone, it is a pleasure to spend a morning out with a group of birders, chatting about birds and learning from each other. Perhaps even more valuable than a planned outing with friends is the sense of camaraderie among those who have never met. This spring I have been fortunate to speak briefly with dozens of birders, all of whom were happy to stop and discuss the local birdlife or point me in the direction of a particular bird. This came in especially handy when the second county record of Kirtland’s Warbler was found near me. I certainly never would have found the bird without the help of four separate birders who all stopped to make sure I knew it had been seen and give me directions.

On this note, why not further your involvement in the birding community? If you are a young birder, please consider writing an article or contributing photos or artwork to The Fledgling. We are always looking for more content, and we would love to include some of your work. If you’re interested in contributing, please send us an email at thefledglingmag@gmail.com.

Hannes Leonard
Editor
Hannes Leonard, Editor

Hannes Leonard is a 16-year-old birder, photographer, and sailor from Texas. An avid traveler, he spent seven years living and traveling on a sailboat including fifteen months in the Caribbean. He loves to combine birding with other activities, and he especially enjoys birding sites off the beaten path. He just finished two and a half years living in the UK, and he currently lives near Tampa, Florida.

Weston Barker, Field Editor

Weston Barker is a 16-year-old birder from Sagadahoc County, Maine with a strong interest in bird photography and illustration. He enjoys exploring complex subjects such as avian anatomy, topography, molt, and fine scale identification and has written for several local birding publications (including Birder magazine) and placed second in the Illustration category of the 2019 Young Birder of the Year contest.

Chelsea Mosteller, Content and Layout

Chelsea Mosteller is a 17-year-old birder from Columbia, Missouri. She’s been birding since she was very young, and started taking birdwatching at age 10. Her hobbies include watching NASCAR, college football, hunting and fishing. Her favorite bird is the Golden-cheeked Warbler.

Ronan Nicholson, News and Notes

17-year-old Ronan Nicholson is a bird illustrator and photographer. When not birding, he enjoys hiking, swimming, and traveling to, well, birds. He has visited over twenty states in the past three years, and as of last fall, he is based near Ashville, North Carolina. Ronan was the Young Birder of the Year in 2021!

Anita Siegel

Anna Siegel (she/her) is a young birder, climate justice activist, and high school student in Portland, Maine. She was a keynote speaker for the 2021 Acadia Birders Festival and member of the Maine Young Birders Club. Her scientific interest in birds is centered around phenology, evolution, and conservation ornithology. She is a founding member of the Maine Youth for Climate Justice coalition and Campaigns Coordinator of Maine Youth Action.

Lily Yllescas

Lily Yllescas is a 19-year-old birder from Pasadena, California. She’s an artist, scuba diver, 10-year volunteer at the Aquarium of the Pacific, and advocate for protecting our planet and its inhabitants. She loves all kinds of birds, including urban birds, Lily is austic and grateful for the strength her brain wiring gives her. She encourages others to presume competence and intelligence in people affected by autism.

Max Ramey

Max Ramey is a 16-year-old birder living in Watauga County, North Carolina. He first started birding when he was in 4th grade and has been obsessed ever since. He enjoys birding everywhere but has a particular love for the southern Appalachians. His favorite bird is the Red Crossbill, and his favorite type of habitat to bird is in bogs. Besides birding he is also very interested in insects, reptiles and amphibians, plants, and photography.

Mary Gustafson

Mary Gustafson reviews records for eBird, supports WhatsApp chats for birders in southern Texas, organizes leaders and field trips for the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival and the Spring Chirp Birding Festival, and participates in pelagic and other as often as possible. Work is usually limited to mentoring biologists and monitoring wildlife, though she gets sucked into so much more. Bat Falcon was her ABA classic number 800. Her great regret is not getting out and birding more.

Hannah Floyd, Copyeditor

Hannah Floyd is a 17-year-old naturalist from Boulder, Colorado, interested primarily in marine and polar climate science and environmental justice advocacy. Hannah has been published in the ABA’s Birding magazine and has recently collaborated with Savannah’s schila on the front cover of their latest magazine! Hannah has given presentations and led workshops across the U.S. for Western Field Ornithologists, the San Diego Bird Festival, and The Nature Conservancy. She is also a regular leader for her city’s monthly bird walks.

Tony Belejack, Assistant Editor

Tony Belejack is a 14-year-old bird-watcher from Connecticut. He began birdwatching at age 10. His hobbies include watching NASCAR, college football, hunting and fishing. His favorite bird is the Golden-cheeked Warbler.

Western Barker is a 16-year-old birder from Sagadahoc County, Maine with a strong interest in bird photography and illustration. He enjoys exploring complex subjects such as avian anatomy, topography, molt, and fine scale identification and has written for several local birding publications (including Birder magazine) and placed second in the Illustration category of the 2019 Young Birder of the Year contest.

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Gracie McMahon, Tailfeathers Column

Gracie McMahon is a 15-year-old birder from Rockford, Illinois. She was named the American Birding Association’s Young Birder of the Year in 2020. Gracie is heavily involved in her local banding station, Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, collecting over 200 volunteer hours a year there. She has also been featured in The Daily Herald and the Washington Post.

Katie Warner, Content and Layout

Katie Warner is a 14-year-old birder and photographer from Vancouver Washington. Her passion for birds started in 2017 when she saw a California Scrub-Jay at her feeder in southern California. She loves how birding takes people outside and helps them to explore new places. Katie was named the Young Birder of the Year in 2021!

Max Ramey

Max Ramey is a 16-year-old birder living in Watauga County, North Carolina. He first started birding when he was in 4th grade and has been obsessed ever since. He enjoys birding everywhere but has a particular love for the southern Appalachians. His favorite bird is the Red Crossbill, and his favorite type of habitat to bird is in bogs. Besides birding he is also very interested in insects, reptiles and amphibians, plants, and photography.

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Zita Robertson

Zita Robertson is a 22-year-old birder, photographer, writer, and all-around nature lover based out of San Antonio, Texas. She is an advisor to the San Antonio Young Birders Club and second-place winner of the ABA Young Birders Writing Category in 2018. In her free time she enjoys horning and chasing Texas rattles (of the feathered and scaled varieties).
Young Birder Achievements

We were in Peru in December 2021, and we went on a tour of Manu National Park. Our guide took us to the lek of the Andean Cock-of-the-rock. To get there, we had to cross a river by a wooden cart attached to a zip-line. When we got to the lek we saw 4 male Cock-of-the-rocks!! Unfortunately, we did not see any females. I was so excited that I got to see the Cock-of-the-rock for the first time!

-Arjun Jenigiri, 8

On February 16, 2022, I visited a local lake. What made the trip special, though, was chasing a Long-tailed Duck. I saw the bird with my scope as a smudge a half-mile away on the opposite shore of the lake, which only allowed private access. The duck wasn’t only my first lifer of the year, but seeing it on my birthday made it more special.

-Ronan Nicholson, 17

On January 22, 2022, while birding at San Luis Pass in Galveston County, Texas, I was very surprised and excited to find my 750th lifer, a Glaucous Gull. On a cold and otherwise fairly quiet day, it was special to see this amazing bird just before I left.

-Hannes Leonard, 18

Editor’s Note

Young birders and their mentors are more than welcome to contribute their milestones, celebrations, and achievements. Please send submissions to Ronan at birderronan@gmail.com

ABA Checklist updates:

The following are recent ABA Checklist updates. In other words, these birds have been either newly confirmed as a first ABA record from a sighting in recent years, are newly established exotics in the ABA area, or from other changes that adds or removes a species.

Hooded Crane - Delta Junction, AK September 2020
Northern Giant-Petrel - Pacific Co, OR December 2019
Mitred Parakeet - Populations in California and Florida
Small-billed Elaenia - Lake Co, IL December 2021

The ABA Checklist now comprises 1128 species.
As the road climbed higher and higher up the mountain, the fog set in thicker with each passing minute. After what seemed like forever, we had reached our destination, a small parking lot at the base of Grandfather Mountain. As I got out of the car, the cool and humid air hit me, not the most pleasant feeling, but not unexpected at this elevation. The temperature up here can get down into the forties at night, even in late June.

As we stepped onto the trail, it was still completely dark but slowly the sky got brighter, and the birds began to sing. The first bird to announce itself was a Canada Warbler, its jumbled and excited song ringing out of the shadowy tangle of rhododendrons encased in mist. Following the Canada Warbler’s lead, a Black-throated Blue Warbler chimed in, then a Veery, and soon the whole forest was alive with song.

By now, it was light enough to see without a flashlight, but the fog had decided not to recede with the coming of the sun. If anything, it had become thicker. This, however, did not hamper the bird activity. Although it was nearly impossible to see any birds, they were kindly letting me know of their presence through their songs and calls. As we hiked further and higher up the mountain, the forest began to change. A few Red Spruce began to appear out of the mist mixed among the...
I followed the song closer to the bird, through the misty dark forest and over the slick and treacherous rocks, I finally caught a glimpse of the bird. To and behold, it had a mouthful of food! A wonderful breeding confirmation for the North Carolina Bird Atlas! As I hiked back down the trail, I reflected on how amazing the hike was and how great it was that I lived less than an hour from this trailhead!

**Summer -** This story is just a small glimpse into what it is like birthing the northwestern mountains of North Carolina during the breeding season. Contrary to what some may think, there is a lot of variability in habitat and breeding birds in the North Carolina mountains and that variability mostly depends on one very important factor – elevation. Wherever you go during the summer in the northern mountains, whether it be a high rocky ridge or a low river valley, you will be greeted by a wide variety of unique species. Spruce-fir forests are often found in areas 5,000 feet above sea level and are a treat to enjoy. This type of habitat holds what most regard as the gems of the North Carolina mountains. High elevation specialists like Red Crossbills, Pine Siskins, Northern Saw-whet Owls, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Hermit Thrushes, and Mag-nolia Warblers are all typical suspects at this elevation. Some of these high mountains also have grassy balds and stunted deciduous trees on the top instead of coniferous forest. Species like the sought-after Golden-winged Warbler and Vesper Sparrow call these places home for the summer. Moving down the mountain you get into predominantly northern type hardwood and mixed-hardwood forests, which often include White Pines, Hemlocks, Hickories, Magnolias and a thick understory of Rhodo-dendron. Swainson’s Warblers, Black-throated Green Warblers, Hooded Warblers, Brown Creepers, Ruffed Grouse, and Blue-headed Vireos are all possibilities as you walk paths surrounded by an impenetrable tangle of Rhododendrons. As you move even further down in elevation you get into the foothills of the mountains. Here, surrounded by mixed pine-oak forest with a thick understory of Mountain Laurel, you can find birds such as Worm-eating Warblers, Kentucky Warblers, Acadian Flycatchers, and occasionally a Whip-poor-will or two. Chestnut-sided Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Least Flycatcher, and Dark-eyed Junco are good examples of species that may be found in all of these elevation zones but are still restricted to the mountains.

**Spring Migration -** During spring migration the mountains are alive with song, both from resident birds claiming their territory and birds practicing their songs on their long journey north. Almost all the eastern warblers can be found in the mountains during spring, some of these high mountains also have grassy balds and stunted deciduous trees on the top instead of coniferous forest. Species like the sought-after Golden-winged Warbler and Vesper Sparrow call these places home for the summer. Moving down the mountain you get into predominantly northern type hardwood and mixed-hardwood forests, which often include White Pines, Hemlocks, Hickories, Magnolias and a thick understory of Rhodo-dendron. Swainson’s Warblers, Black-throated Green Warblers, Hooded Warblers, Brown Creepers, Ruffed Grouse, and Blue-headed Vireos are all possibilities as you walk paths surrounded by an impenetrable tangle of Rhododendrons. As you move even further down in elevation you get into the foothills of the mountains. Here, surrounded by mixed pine-oak forest with a thick understory of Mountain Laurel, you can find birds such as Worm-eating Warblers, Kentucky Warblers, Acadian Flycatchers, and occasionally a Whip-poor-will or two. Chestnut-sided Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Least Flycatcher, and Dark-eyed Junco are good examples of species that may be found in all of these elevation zones but are still restricted to the mountains.

**Fall Migration -** As northern birds make the long journey back to their wintering grounds, it is the best time of the year to find rare songbirds here. Warblers pass through in often ludicrous numbers, with nearly twenty species a day not being unheard of. The sheer number of individuals is also impressive, with the most common warbler for most of the fall being Tennessee, which sometimes can number to nearly a hundred in a day - especially if counting flyovers. Cape May, Bay-breasted, and Yellow-rumped Warblers can all be surprisingly common as well. Another somewhat abundant visitor in the fall, at least some years, are Lincoln’s Sparrows. Fall-time birding can also yield the occasional Sedge Wren or Nashville Warbler, and sometimes, something truly special will show up like the Kirtland’s Warblers since these mountains are right under their migration.
Birders can even be occasionally treated with extremely rare and unexpected birds for the region like Nelson’s Sparrow, LeConte’s Sparrow, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, or Connecticut Warbler. Fall hawk migration is also enjoyable, since you can be on the top of the ridgeline for optimal viewing. Broad-winged Hawks can be found soaring high over the mountains, and counts into the hundreds are not uncommon. All three falcons, both accipiters, and Bald Eagles are also expected finds for the dedicated hawk watcher. Occasionally one will get lucky and see a Golden Eagle or Mississippi Kite on a really good day.

Winter - The winter is undoubtedly the dullest time of the year in the North Carolina mountains, especially at higher elevations. Some birds such as ravens and juncos will loyally stick around all year as will many common “backyard” species, but diversity is often lacking, and the weather is often brutal. However, winters during finch irruption years, such as the one experienced in the winter of 2020-2021, are an entirely different story! During such years, huge numbers of Red Crossbills, Pine Siskins, and Purple Finches move through, as well as small numbers of Evening Grosbeaks and an even smaller number of Common Redpolls. Unfortunately, though, most winters are not that exciting and many who live here find themselves longing for spring by January.

No matter what time of year it is in the northern North Carolina mountains, there really is an interesting array of species. From the cool misty coniferous forests to the low river valleys, there are exciting birds to be found and new places to be explored. I love living here, and it is undoubtedly my favorite place I have ever birded, both because of the excellent birds that reside here and the wonderful community of birders that call the “High Country” home.

**Carolina Junco (Junco hyemalis carolinensis)**

**Description:** The Carolina Junco is a fun and fascinating junco subspecies that a surprising number of people are not aware of, possibly due to the fact that eBird lumps it into the “slate-colored” group. Carolina Juncos are slightly larger, much lighter gray, and have a more purplish bill compared to their northern cousins.

**Range:** Carolina Juncos are restricted to the Appalachians, where they range north to around Maryland and south to extreme northern Georgia and South Carolina, with the heart of their range being in North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee.

**Habitat and Behavior:** Carolina Juncos are extremely abundant in many parts of their range, often being the most concentrated at higher elevations, although they have been known to breed well below 3,000 feet. Anywhere with open areas surrounded by some type of coniferous/mixed woodland is fair game for them. They are essentially non-migratory, yet populations found very high in the mountains will often move to slightly lower elevations in the winter.
Birding and Observing Angels Knoll By Lily Yllescas

For several reasons, I just love exploring urban areas, and I have gotten into birding downtown Los Angeles, which is not too far from where I live in Pasadena, California. I have found so much enjoyment spotting birds that settle in metropolitan L.A. parks and greenspaces which, so importantly, provide habitat in such a developed area. These greenspaces are especially attractive to migrants and may perhaps seem like urban oases to them as they make their way through Southern California. Simply, urban parks and greenspaces are necessary for birds and many other forms of nature. They are also great for people, contributing to our emotional and physical well-being, sense of community and, hopefully, opening our eyes to many benefits that come from the enjoyment of nature. One of my hopes is that more people could grow to know this and want to encourage the protection and development of parks, take notice of the birds, and want to protect them, too.

In early 2018, I created my own challenge. I wanted to bird every greenspace in downtown L.A. I made a list, drew my own map, created a plan, and with my parents’ help (because I don’t drive), I spent the next eleven months making my way to parks—big and small—and commercial building greenspaces. (The City of Los Angeles has some requirements for newer developments which involves native plant gardens, and I wanted to explore those—new and existing ones, too.) One of the places I discovered was Angels Knoll—a fenced off area that looked like a closed down park. It has multiple large trees and shrubs, grass that looks occasionally moved, and run-down park benches. The knoll is situated on a hill, right next to historic Angels Flight Railway and below the patio decks of California Plaza One and Two, a commercial high-rise property. I observed that Angels Knoll is a place for migrant and resident birds alike. It serves as a mini-migrant trap in the middle of a densely urban area where I spotted warblers, tanagers, kinglets, flycatchers, vireos, and orioles. It is a place where I saw Mourning Doves nesting, and, just a couple hundred feet from them, a Cassin’s Kingbird nest in the plaza fixtures.

The neighboring plaza has many planted trees and shrubs, lunch tables, and a small amphitheater lawn in its center. I also found it to be a good host to birds, some of which move back and forth between the plaza and knoll. More than any of the other places I had birded on my list, Angels Knoll in Bunker Hill—that particular area of Los Angeles—grabbed my attention, and I began doing research. I found out that, until the 1960s, Bunker Hill was a neighborhood filled with houses, apartment buildings, and hotels, until the hill was cleared and leveled for redevelopment. That was the beginning of many years of skyscraper and other building development that would be built on the hill. That’s where California Plaza comes in. It was originally planned to have three skyscrapers, but only two were built. The project was done in phases; its first building was completed in 1985, and the second was completed in 1992. The plan for the third skyscraper—which was planned to be positioned where the knoll is—fell through due to the 1990s recession, a financial slump at the time. Even though the zoning designation was never changed, the grassy hillside was made into a public park and given its name. When its management agency was dissolved in 2013, the park was closed and fenced off. Currently, there are plans to build two skyscrapers on the site of Angels Knoll. It will likely begin in 2022 or 2023, and it’s expected to take four years to complete. According to the plans, the skyscrapers will house hotels, apartments, condos, shops, and restaurants, and there will be a plaza with greeneries. I was disappointed to learn that such a nature-filled greenspace will be developed upon, and I can’t believe there aren’t many more people who feel the same way. At this point, I have birded there at least two dozen times, and each time, I see people sitting in front of the contrasting green, and I hear bird song and chatter in the background. At first, all I could think of was to advocate for the existing knoll by writing to the city, hoping it might be possible to stop the sale of the knoll and the project and work toward preserving the knoll. But after further research, I learned that the site had already been sold long ago, and the city had approved the development. The upcoming construction is definite. I thought of another way that I could take initiative, and I decided for my Girl Scout Journey Take Action Project, I would write letters to each of the partnering developers and provide them with information and encouragement toward using California native plants in their greeneries and making their buildings bird-friendly. I finished my letters and prepared attachments and then mailed and emailed them in early October, 2021 with a lot of hope that the developers would consider my suggestions and learn that these changes wouldn’t just benefit birds, but the people who will reside and work in their buildings and that these changes could make a long-term impact, too. I didn’t hear from any of the three executives to whom I wrote, but I still have hope that my letters will make a difference in their final design and in the minds of any of the people who may have read them. Maybe they’ll start to really see birds or decide to contribute to helping birds.

I will continue to bird and observe Angels Knoll from the top of the plaza until the project breaks ground. The knoll, like the other parks and greenspaces in Downtown L.A., is most birdy during fall, winter, and spring—particularly during spring migration, so I may have some time. I’ll be watching and waiting to see if the greeneries included in the new project, named Angels Landing, becomes a place for birds like the existing knoll. I hope there is a chance for everyone. Angels Knoll is, and always will be, a favorite birding spot for me.
Jonathan Slaght’s Owls Of The Eastern Ice is more than just another conservation story. It is the saga of one man’s devotion to the world’s largest owl in one of the most remote corners of the globe. Comprising anecdotal stories that leave you grinning with delight and on occasion, laughing out loud, as well as solid scientific research backed by literally thousands of hours in the field, Jonathan Slaght’s record of his four seasons of fieldwork in the forests of Primorye are not your average collection of field notes. They transport you into the beautiful and unforgiving world of the Blakiston’s Fish Owl, a place where Amur Tigers hunt at night, and dedicated researchers face sub-zero temperatures and a host of woodland characters, both man and beast. These brave men face radioactive hot springs, frozen meals of meats not fit for even their rodent roommates, and, worst of all, hangovers after ethanol-fueled nights of drinking. They meet locals who judge a man by his ability to survive a banya (a Russian sauna), hunters who often view them with derision, and likely the only man in the world with the dubious honor of having lost one of his family jewels to a beleaguered fish owl, all for the chance to hear the far-off begging of a young owlet or the interwoven hoots of a mated duet, one of less than a thousand or so of these pairs left in existence. Readers won’t want to step away from the images brought to life through Slaght’s words, and it is evident from the first page how much of his passion and dedication he has put into the book, making it a must-read for all.

How to Know the Birds is cleverly written by the editor of Birding Magazine, Ted Floyd, and charmingly illustrated by N. John Schmitt. This publication contains 200 one-page vignettes that form an efficient birder crash course; yet this book is not just for beginner birders.

The lessons begin with a review of ID basics, a nice refresher for seasoned birders and essential for those unfamiliar with key concepts such as gestalt. However, the lessons soon soar into explorations of migration biology, the evolution of birding through the digital age, and more. Floyd does not hesitate to approach all the aspects of both birds and the birding community, however briefly. He guides the reader through a birder’s year with snappy, easily digestible prose. And along the way, the reader is introduced to 200 species of birds from across the ABA area that help teach the “art and adventure of birding.” I would recommend for every birder, regardless of experience, to keep this book on their nightstand as a valuable companion to the field journals and bird guides in their backpacks.
The ideal birding destination, for me, always has some sort of open water: a pond, or a lake, with a healthy and diverse “buffer zone” dense, semi-aquatic vegetation that grows in between the water and land; a meadow of some sort; an open area not used for agriculture; and finally, trees. An old-growth forest is usually the best, but at minimum, I like a few trees scattered among the hedges.

In the US, Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge and Nature Preserve in west-central Illinois is one of my favorite places to go. It has water, cattails, mudflats and other, drier open areas. Last year, I was fortunate enough to discover a new birding place with similar habitats, but it was nowhere near Emiquon. In fact, I traveled about 5,000 miles to find it. It is called “Sárrét,” which literally translates to “Mud meadow,” and it is in Hungary, a country in eastern Europe. I can hear the song fills the air from early spring all through the summer.

As we travel to birding destinations, whether by car here or bicycle in Hungary, I often catch a glimpse of raptors, too. In the US, the most common raptors in my area are Red-tailed Hawks. They can be seen year-round, sitting on fence posts and power line poles along highways and on the edges of woods bordering farmland. When they spot a mouse in the field, they circle once in the air, swoop down, then catch and eat their lunch. In Hungary, Common Buzzards, a species belonging to the same genus (Buteo), do the same thing. Other raptors, such as the American Kestrel in the US and the Eurasian Kestrel in Hungary, also look for mice, but they hover above their prey before catching it, and usually fly off with it instead of eating it on the ground.

Traveling by bicycle provides an advantage I came to appreciate in Hungary. I can hear the birds. One of my favorites is the Eurasian Skylark. Their song fills the air from early spring all through the summer months, and their performance is interesting to watch too. The male typically flies up so high, it is almost impossible to find him, even with binoculars. As he hovers above the females below, he sings a series of whistles, trills, rattles, arranged into a beautiful melody. In my experience, he sings a first phrase. This gets repeated two to seven times, with a slight modification each time. This first phrase is then followed by a large variety of other phrases performed the same way. When I was looking for more information about these birds online, I found an audio recording of a single bird hovering and singing for over three minutes. They are really trying to impress the ladies. Since the males are very high up and sing at the top of their lungs, their song carries surprisingly long distances, making them fairly easy to notice.
other from their “song posts” high up in the trees. From the bushes below, we could also hear Common Nightingales, whose song has inspired many poets and composers all over the world. I love how they usually end their performance on an upwards-inflected note, but there is so much more to what makes their song beautiful.

Once we arrived at the ponds in Hungary, we always locked up our bicycles and continued exploring the area on foot. One thing I loved about Sárrét was that I could get close to the water’s edge around and in between the different ponds, so I was able to find species that live (and hide) in the reeds. One time, I heard a loud call while walking on a long, narrow peninsula on the biggest lake. It was strange, a sort of barking, sort of laughing sound, a harsh, kek-kek-kek-kek. I didn’t hear it again for a while, but I didn’t see the reeds shake at all, so I thought the bird must still be there. It took some searching and persistence, but after a while, a Little Bittern flew out of the reeds a step ahead of me. I couldn’t see much else of it other than its yellow and black wings flapping vigorously. It flew with its neck bent, head above the shoulders, and its bright yellow legs trailing behind its stubby tail.

I was able to get a much better look at the Least Bittern in the US. When birding here, we often take our inflatable kayaks, which, at Emiquon, can get me inside the cattails. A Least Bittern, very similar in appearance to the Little Bittern in Hungary, once flew over our kayak. It disappeared quickly, but we were able to slowly, quietly paddle around and find it again. This time, I was able to take pictures, too.

Another interesting bird I encountered while kayaking was the Common Gallinule. Unfortunately, I couldn’t actually see the bird, I just heard its call — every time we got close, it seemed like it was laughing at us for not being able to spot it. In Hungary, I had better luck with a similar species, the Eurasian Moorhen. One weekend, rain was in the forecast, but we didn’t want to skip an opportunity to bird, so we took a trip anyway. As the air pressure was changing before a storm, the other birds started seeking cover in the reeds. However, the moorhens came out to the open water in great numbers, catching the low-flying insects before it started pouring.

The weather was much more cooperative when I had a chance to observe a pair of Common Terns at Sárrét. One was sitting on a metal post in the center of the lake, about four feet above the water’s surface. It was calling continuously, and at first, I wasn’t sure why. Then I saw the other one. It was flying not far away, catching small fish, and bringing them over to the first one. Most of the time, the fish was successfully transferred from one to the other, but sometimes they dropped the food. In these cases, they both shrieked loudly and waited until the injured fish resurfaced. Then the male fed it again to the female, this time more carefully. I was excited to be able to watch them. In the US, I have only seen terns fly over.

Small fish were the victims of kingfishers at both locations. The Common Kingfisher in Hungary is bright blue on the back and has a rusty orange belly. The Belted Kingfishers in the US are much paler in comparison, and only the females have some of the orange-brown color. I thought their feeding behavior was a bit different, too. While our kingfishers usually fly back to the same branch after catching the fish, the Common Kingfishers often flew to a new perch, most of the time clear across the pond. It seemed to be a common pattern with the birds I observed: the same habitat is occupied by similar species, but neither their appearance, nor their behavior is quite the same. I noticed this with the gulls, Bu- teos, bitterns, the gallinule, the moorhen, and a whole list of other species not mentioned here.

Sometimes I was able to find the same species on the two continents, such as the Mallards, Mute Swans, the Bank Swallows, but even then, there were slight differences. I noticed, for example, that the Bank Swallows in Hungary shared their breeding grounds, the sand banks around ponds at Sárrét and elsewhere, with Rock Pigeons and European Bee-eaters. I have only seen the pigeons in cities in the US, and there are no bee-eaters here. There are so many exciting things to learn, even if I just try to compare two similar habitats! I can’t wait to go birding more, both here and there.
Mary Gustafson

I started birding at a young age and would go on outings with my grandfather or a parent. My mother rued the day that I discovered I could go looking for birds instead of waiting for them to come to my yard. Soon, I was of driving age, and I never looked back. I was always disappointed when family vacations didn’t go where the life birds were.

I was lucky to have all kinds of mentors growing up, who taught me everything from learning chip notes (“ignore those Myrtles, Mary”), to banding and plumages, to working with specimens, to scanning endlessly for gulls. I birded near home, chased rarities I could get to, and planned trips for ones I could not. Work was molts and plumages, editing banding data, and permit paperwork. Later, it became conservation oriented with more travel to lots of places.

And then it all changed.

I was diagnosed with cancer and my world became small again. Several rounds of chemo were ineffective, and current drugs are keeping the tumors from growing—but not shrinking them. Worst of all, I don’t have the stamina to walk very far without sitting down and taking a break.

But I still have my friends, the birds. I take great joy in watching them, as much as I ever did. Now, I revel in whatever birds I see, whether rare or common. I watch bird behavior again—there’s nothing quite like birds being silly, even common birds. And I work to level the playing field for birders.

When I first started birding, many of the bird clubs didn’t allow women, and the ones that did, required birders to be voted in as members. Voting members into a club (any club, not just bird clubs) allows for members to restrict admittance. I now run a rare bird alert on WhatsApp that’s limited to local birders, no matter their skill level.

And I still chase birds, but it’s different. I chase birds I can get to, and sometimes I take a young birder along. It’s my greatest joy to watch them in the field. I am so jealous of people just discovering the joys of birding now. It’s much easier to get bird ID or bird song info than it used to be. When I was five or so, my grandfather handed me an old Peterson guide to identify the birds at his feeders. Was I looking at a Pine Siskin or a (then) Myrtle Warbler? Ooops, it’s gone…. Now, many sites and apps have a huge selection of songs and calls available at the click of a button, and eBird data is available to all.

So please be kind to your elders—we did walk uphill for seven miles in the snow to that rarity and struggled with identifying even simple birds. Our eyes aren’t as sharp as they were, our legs will give out before yours, and as a generation we have been lousy stewards to the earth. We have lots of stories to share of the “olden days,” when multiple Cerulean Warblers would fall out into fields at a migration hotspot. Today, many species of birds have seriously declined in numbers.

We also have the capability to share opportunities with you. The Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival has guides of all ages, including many who love to mentor youth. I have the joy of selecting guides for the festival. My list of guides starts with those that spend time and share knowledge with joy. eBird allows birders under 18 to volunteer as editors—just like us seniors, same lousy salary. The current editors are often the ones that need to make the suggestion to bring on a young birder and mentor them as they learn. (Where will we get future bird records committee members otherwise? Believe me, reviewing records will change how you document others?) And before you take credit for something, think about who else deserves credit. Be generous in giving credit to others or sharing the limelight. It’s more fun, try it!

I’ll ask all the birders out there of all ages, sizes, and shapes—what can you do to expand opportunities for birders? Everyone can do something. If you lead a bird walk, get a co-leader. If you volunteer, mentor someone. If you are near a school, offer to do a talk. Most importantly, enjoy the birds you see.

It’s important while you are birding to ensure that the birds and habitats are also safe. To me, this means birding responsibly and respecting the birds and habitat by following the ABA Code of Ethics and any rules for accessing land imposed by the owners or managers. I am annoyed by loud pishing in the field, even (especially?) my own. I do pish quietly sometimes, in an attempt to elicit curiosity on the part of the bird. Be kind to the birds.

All of this gives me joy. Bird joyously, bird responsibly, bird generously. And repeat.
Welcome back to The Fledgling! Thank you so much for continuing to read our publication; we are all so grateful. I was thinking about what to write about for my column in this issue, and I kept coming back to something that is happening right here in my town of Rockford, Illinois: the destruction of Bell Bowl Prairie. If you are not already aware, the Chicago Rockford International Airport is expanding their site. They want to do this by building a new main road to the airport, cutting through a wonderful, unique stretch of prairie. Bell Bowl Prairie is classified as a Category 1 Illinois Natural Areas Inventory Site. This means that it has been inspected by biologists and deemed to be of very high ecological quality. The prairie is also home to several state and federally threatened and endangered species. Some of these species are the rusty patched bumblebee, Loggerhead Shrike, and Black-billed Cuckoo.

The plan to bulldoze the prairie is especially painful for me to watch because of the experiences I have had there in the past. This is where I got my lifer Blue Grosbeak. Every summer, a pair of these amazing birds would nest near the airport on the edge of the prairie. This had been a nemesis bird of mine for years. I will never forget going to look for it with my mom and finally seeing one. If the plans to destroy the prairie continue, this pair of birds will most likely never return because of the disturbance. This would take away the ability for future young people to have the wonderful experience I had.

Many Bell Bowl Prairie advocates have been attending protests, rallies, and have been writing letters to attempt to stop the bulldozers. Due to these actions, the process that began in 2018 has been delayed several times. As of now, the destruction has been delayed until June 1st of this year, but the airport still plans to follow through. No serious alternative design options have been considered by those leading the expansion. I cannot stress enough the devastating effect this will have on Rockford and the many birders (myself included) who love this area so much. If you would like to help put pressure on our local officials, please consider calling or writing a letter to the people listed below. Again, I would like to express my gratitude to you for reading our magazine. It truly means the world to us!

Gracie McMahon
2020 ABA Young Birder of the Year

Officials to contact:

- Governor JB Pritzker: call 312-814-2121, or 312-814-2122, and mail a letter to: Office of the Governor, 207 State House, Springfield, IL 62706
- Senator Dick Durbin: call 309-786-5173, 202-224-2152, 217-492-4062, and mail a letter to: 525 S. 8th Street, Springfield, IL
- Senator Tammy Duckworth: 309-606-7060, 202-224-2854, or 217-528-6124, and mail a letter to: 8 South Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, IL 62701