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Birding the Deep South

20 Best Birds in the ABA Area

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The American Birding Association, Inc., seeks to encourage and represent the North American birding community and to provide resources through publications, meetings, partnerships, and birder networks. The ABA’s education programs develop birding skills, an understanding of birds, and the will to conserve. The ABA’s conservation programs offer birders unique ways to protect birds and their habitats.

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A lot of good comes from birding travel, as you know. Good times, memories, friendships, and good economic and conservation impacts. Travel has always been deep in the American Birding Association’s DNA since its founding 50 years ago, and it’s something we’ve always strived to help our members get the most from. But did you know how much good your birding travel can and does do for the ABA and its mission?

While the ABA is not—and doesn’t aspire to be—a birding tour company, we do offer a small selection of carefully selected ABA travel opportunities each year, and they are a major source of support for our programs in service of our mission to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds. These trips, along with membership dues and donations and bequests, make up nearly all our funding. So traveling with the ABA not only does you good, it does good for birding.

Each year, there’s typically a single large-scale trip we call the ABA Safari. Since our first one in October of 2014, a memorable trip to South Africa, these epic birding events have been offered in partnership with Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures, which has always done an incredible job of taking excellent care of our groups. In July of 2019, our 50th Anniversary ABA Safari will be to the most bird-rich country on Earth, Colombia. And in November of 2020, the ABA and Rockjumper will head to the continent with the fewest bird species, Antarctica. Don’t let the relatively shorter bird list put you off, though, as Antarctica is easily one of the top birding trips anywhere, as you’ll see in Noah Strycker’s article on page 20.

We also offer two or three Birding Rallies each year. In 2019, we’re going to Thailand in February with Tropical Birding for one of their Birding with a Camera events, and then it’s to Hawaii once again in September with Hawaii Forest and Trail. We’re also partnering with our friends at Opossum Creek Retreat in West Virginia for a much-requested Birding Camp for adults, to be held over Memorial Day weekend for a cornucopia of breeding warblers and other showy songbirds.

For more information on these and other ABA travels, go to aba.org/events or call Liz Gordon at 800-850-2473.

We hope you will join us on one of these events soon. You’ll do good for your life list, for your mental health, and for the future of birding. We also hope that whatever sort of travel your birding involves, you’ll find much of interest in this and every issue of Birder’s Guide.

Safe travels, and good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon | President, American Birding Association

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Travel means different things to different birders. For some, it’s a leisurely Sunday drive along Ontario’s South Coast Birding Trail. Others save up for years to go on a high-seas adventure to Antarctica. Some like to spend a relaxing week sunbathing in Cabo. And some rejuvenate their souls by taking an hour to wander around their local park in Beaumont, Texas.

However you travel, Birder’s Guide wants to help you find your joy. I hope there is something of use and interest to you in this issue. If there’s not, please let us know what you’d like to see next time. Be sure to tell us what you liked here, as well, so that we can be sure to include similar content in next year’s Birder’s Guide to Travel. And as always, we love to hear from folks who want to offer their own advice in the form of an article. We depend on members’ contributions to make future issues a reality. You can reach me at mretter@aba.org.

Happy travels!

Michael L. P. Retter | Editor, Birder’s Guide
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About the Authors

**Alison Beringer** is Associate Professor of Classics and Humanities at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She birds widely in Europe and the Americas, most often with her husband, Rick Wright. Her upcoming birds and art tours with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours in Europe include Provence, Burgundy, and Salzburg.

Birds have been central to **Josh Engel**’s life for as long as he can remember. At age 11, he learned there was something called “birding” and pursued it with abandon. His life since has followed birds and animals to all corners of the globe—guiding birding tours and conducting research on birds—as he’s transformed his longtime passion into a career. He’s lived in Ecuador and South Africa, conducted research from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Australia, guided birding trips from Bhutan to Panama, and birded at many points in between. All this has led to his current endeavor, organizing and leading birding tours throughout Illinois, across the U.S., and around the world for his company, Red Hill Birding. Josh lives in Chicago, a short walk from the famed Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary.

**Shawneen Finnegan** began birding in her 20s in California’s Bay Area. In addition to birding around the globe, Shawneen has lived in birding meccas, with long stints in Cape May and Tucson. She led and later managed tours for WINGS, was *Birding* magazine’s Photo Editor for several years, and has served on four state bird records committees (California, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington). A talented artist, her illustrations have adorned bird festival T-shirts, and her art, photos, and writing have been featured in identification articles, field guides, and state and regional monographs. In 2007, she moved to Portland, Oregon. She and husband Dave Irons are the statewide eBird Review Coordinators for Oregon, making their home in Beaverton.

**Ted Floyd** is Editor of *Birding* magazine and the author of many articles and bird books, including the forthcoming *How to Know the Birds* (National Geographic, 2019). Ted is especially interested in analyzing bird vocalizations, in interpreting birds and nature for children and beginners, and in applying new media and emerging technologies toward the appreciation of nature.

**Frank Izaguirre** is a doctoral student in English literature at West Virginia University. He loves reading any bird book he can find, from the exploration narratives of early naturalists to Big Year adventure stories. He has published several articles in birding magazines, including *Birding* and *Bird Watcher’s Digest*, and currently serves as Editorial Intern at *Birding*.

**Jenn Smith Nelson** is an award-winning freelance travel writer and photographer based out of the Canadian prairies. She contributes to a number of publications, including the *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Canadian Geographic*. When she is not chasing birds, you can find her collecting stories and memories by hanging out with wolves, swimming with belugas, or adventuring with her kids. Jenn is also the editor/owner of travelandhappiness.com.

**Noah Strycker** is Associate Editor of *Birding* magazine, Copy Editor of *Birder’s Guide*, the author of four books about birds, and a regular contributor of photography and articles to bird magazines and other media. Noah set a world Big Year record in 2015, and his 2017 book, *Birding Without Borders*, relates the experience. His other books are *Among Penguins*, *The Thing with Feathers*, and *Birds of the Photo Ark*. Noah has studied birds on six continents with field seasons in Panama, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Australia, Antarctica, the Galapagos Islands, and the Farallon Islands. He also works as a naturalist guide on expedition cruises to Antarctica and Norway’s Svalbard archipelago, literally spreading the inspiration of birds from pole to pole. He is based in Oregon, where his backyard has hosted more than 100 species of birds. Visit his website at noahstrycker.com.

**Rick Wright** leads birding and birds and art tours in western Europe and Central America for Victor Emanuel Nature Tours. The Book Review Editor at *Birding* and a former Editor of the ABA’s *Winging It*, Rick is the author of five books, including the new *Peterson Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America*. He lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their chocolate lab, Gellert.
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Photo: Tuffed Coquette by Mukesh Ramdass.
20 Best Birds

#1

Photo © Akshath Pai
ow that the American Birding Association (ABA) Area includes Hawaii, how does one select a mere 20 “best” species from the 1,100+ on the list? The ABA Area is vast, with highly diverse geographical features that range from tropical to Arctic and desert to rainforest. These habitats and all their associated climates make choosing only 20 best birds a daunting task, and even if you live in the ABA Area, you will certainly need to travel afar to see just half of them.

Each of us has different criteria, unique experiences, and spark birds that influence our choices. Ask someone to list their top 20 favorite birds, and their slate would probably be far different from mine. I’ve had the good fortune of having lived in premier birding locales across the country. My travels have taken me to all the states except Iowa, and I have birded all the southerly Canadian provinces. Despite having lived in Cape May, New Jersey, for a number of years, I am a California native, so the species I love the most are largely western.

In order to winnow down the options, I included species most easily found in the ABA Area and restricted to the Western Hemisphere, with some exceptions. Excluding vagrants and species like Red-legged Kittiwake, which require a substantial expenditure to see, pares the choices down even further. My fondness for skulking, hard-to-see birds is mixed with those that are blatant eye candy. My apologies to all the species dear to my heart that didn’t make the cut. My list would otherwise run into the hundreds!
**WHAT IS THE ABA AREA?**

Essentially, you can think of it as the portion of North America found north of the U.S.–Mexico border. The 50 United States, Canada, and St.-Pierre-et-Miquelon (a small French territory off the coast of Newfoundland) comprise the ABA Area. Also included is adjacent ocean up to 200 miles from shore, unless there's another country within 200 miles, in which case the “border” is halfway to that country. It’s the area whose birdlife is covered by the American Birding Association Checklist. Until November 2016, when the ABA membership voted overwhelmingly to add the 50th state to the ABA Area, Hawaii had been excluded.

---

1 **Kirtland’s Warbler**  
*Setophaga kirtlandii*

Of all our breeding warblers, the rare Kirtland’s might best be dubbed “the comeback kid”.

Human fire suppression led to dramatic decreases in the post-fire stands of young Jack pines that serve as the Kirtland’s primary breeding habitat. Over the past 50 years, intense habitat and cowbird management have fostered a recovery of this species, which bottomed out at an estimated 167 singing males. The current population of roughly 4,500 individuals is far beyond the original recovery goal. Most exciting is that geolocators placed on breeding birds over the past few years have allowed ornithologists to finally identify their equally critical Bahamian wintering grounds.

2 **Wood Duck**  
*Aix sponsa*

Male Wood Ducks are just downright gaudy with their fancy white stripes and colors. They look like something a fashion designer would create for a military dress uniform. Separate out the different sections and they all have beautiful aspects: iridescent colors, brilliant red eyes, a green helmet, and that delicately spotted reddish brown breast. Who isn’t impressed by a gorgeous male Wood Duck? Females are more subtle, but beautiful nonetheless.

Then there are the plunge-diving ducklings who launch themselves from their cavity nests, some as high as 60 feet, only to bounce off the ground unscathed before tottering off after their mother toward water.

3 **Black Rail**  
*Laterallus jamaicensis*

In the hard-to-see category, our smallest rail is a standout. No bigger than a sparrow, the Black Rail runs along trails like a mouse in marshes that are largely inaccessible. Detections are typically “heard-only” birds, and their growly *kee kee krrrr* vocalizations are mostly nocturnal. Given how tiny they are, it is no surprise that they keep hidden. During winter high tides, groups of us would gather at Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve to look for Black Rails when they were forced into the open by rising water. We always hoped to spot them before lurking hungry herons and egrets snatched them up and gulped them down.

4 **Yellow-breasted Chat**  
*Icteria virens*

Yellow-breasted Chat is a great description for this big, quirky bird. In spring, males perch in the open, puffing out their throats while emitting a discordant series of whistles, trills, and ratchety notes even during the night. They continue to sing during their enthusiastic, bouncy display flights. Finding them when they aren’t singing is tough, as they remain buried in their brushy habitat. Despite being twice the size and possessing a bill more like a tanager, the chat was formerly considered a wood-
warbler, which never made sense. The chat’s flight displays and vocalizations are unlike any other Parulid. This bird has recently been reclassified and placed in its own family in between sparrows and blackbirds.

5 Whooping Crane
Grus americana

Only when seen standing next to a Sandhill Crane does one realize just how tall these statuesque cranes are. Their recovery story alone makes them an ideal candidate for this list. Most people see them at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, where they winter. We came perilously close to losing this magnificent creature forever. Between hunting and habitat loss, only 15 were left by the early 1940s. Thanks to dedicated conservation efforts, there are now over 600, with 400 migrating to central Canada to breed. These cranes remain vulnerable to disease, catastrophic weather events, and ongoing climate change. According to a recent blog by the National Wildlife Federation, Whooping Cranes are migrating to Canada as much as three weeks earlier than they used to and returning up to three weeks later.

6 Lewis’s Woodpecker
Melanerpes lewis

With 21 species to choose from, it’s hard to imagine this list without at least one woodpecker. I love and chose Lewis’s because it is so dissimilar from the rest of its tribe. In his journals, Meriwether Lewis described Lewis’s Woodpecker as flying like a crow and foraging like a flycatcher. Indeed, Lewis’s perch atop trees, wires, and other high spots hunting for flying insects. They flash their rich pink belly as they swoop on their
Best Birds in the ABA Area

prey. Clad with a bright red face, shiny green upperparts, gray collar, and those pink undersides, they are unique. In addition to a *churr* call, their high, squeaky chatter doesn’t sound anything like other woodpeckers.

7  LeConte’s Sparrow  *Ammospiza leconteii*

Catching a glimpse of this ground-hugging weasel of a bird is tough, whether on its wintering or breeding grounds. LeConte’s is typically described as difficult to see, secretive, or skulking for good reason. Its lifestyle resembles that of a mouse, flushing only when almost stepped on before diving back into dense cover. Patience is rewarded when one is finally seen. There are few truly orange sparrows—most notably LeConte’s and Nelson’s. Its song—a raspy staccato trill—is reminiscent of a Savannah Sparrow, or maybe a bug of some sort. It is yet another example of a beautiful bird that is an underwhelming songster, versus a drab bird with a great set of pipes.

8  Buff-breasted Sandpiper  *Calidris subruficollis*

Imagine it is a breezy day on the dry Arctic tundra at the top of our continent. A male Buff-breasted Sandpiper lifts one wing high over his back, almost tilting over before switching to the other wing, showing off his white wing linings to prospective mates. After waving one wing, he then lifts both in a wing-up display that looks like an embrace. That these birds do so in loose leks is unique among North American shorebirds. Appearances can be deceiving as this doe-eyed, fragile-looking, dainty bird travels vast distances between the seasons, wintering as far south as Argentina.

9  Varied Thrush  *Ixoreus naevius*

Stunning in its orange and slaty-blue plumage, a male Varied Thrush provides a welcome splash of color to the damp, heavily-shaded forest floors of the Pacific Northwest. His single-pitched song is a burry, metallic trill that sets him apart from the rest of our vocally talented thrushes. Females come in more subtle shades of browns and olives, offset by a paler orange in the same pattern. Taxonomists formerly classified this thrush with the Asian group of *Zoothera* thrushes. Varied Thrush is now in its own genus, *Ixoreus*, which references mistletoe, one of the many fruits they feed on during the winter. Interestingly, some aberrant individuals lack the orange in their plumage.

10 Sharp-tailed Grouse  *Tympanuchus phasianellus*

It is spring and the steppe, grassland, and shrub habitats of Sharp-tailed Grouse are alive with their enthusiastic dancing. With head lowered, bowed-
down wings, tails pointed skyward, lekking male Sharp-tailed Grouse stamp their feet madly while showing off their orange brows and inflated purple air sacs. Emitting bubbling sounds, clicks, and low throaty cooing, each hopes its dance is the sexiest. Most of the grouse have awesome displays, but Sharp-tails is so impressive that Native Americans imitate the display in their own dances.

11 **Black Swift**  
*Cypseloides niger*

Flying silently high overhead, these elegant and mythical swifts are notoriously difficult to find in migration and on their breeding range. Their young must be very hardy, as they are often reared behind waterfalls. Although relatively safe from predators, life must be oh-so-damp for a newly hatched chick. Adults spend all day foraging on flying ants, only returning at dusk, leaving their offspring alone all day. No wonder they are so hard to see! At some locations, such as Año Nuevo State Park in coastal central California, caves are used for nesting. Until recently, it was not known where Black Swifts wintered. There is so much we have yet to learn about these mysterious swifts.
Northern Pygmy-Owl  
*Glaucidium californicum*

False eyes on the back of its head, a long tail, and a diurnal lifestyle distinguish this small owl from our other owls. Irritated passerines commonly mob this fierce-looking little predator, as small birds and mammals are their main prey. This largely sedentary owl can be found from lowlands to high elevations. Nonetheless, it is highly sought-after by birders who have difficulty locating them.

With more study, the southerly “Mountain Pygmy-Owl” that calls with a double toot instead of a single one may prove to be separate species, what I like to refer to as being “in escrow”.

Saltmarsh Sparrow  
*Ammospiza caudacuta*

Saltmarsh Sparrow wins the award for the most precarious lifestyle. Once considered conspecific with the inland Nelson’s Sparrow, Saltmarsh Sparrow has an extremely narrow breeding range by comparison, nesting only in the Atlantic salt marshes from Maine to Virginia. Raising a brood of chicks between high tides leaves no room for error. It takes up to 26 days for eggs to hatch and
for the young to become independent enough to escape rising tides on their own. Incredibly, Saltmarsh Sparrow eggs can survive being submerged 90 minutes, just so long as they don’t float away. Between human alterations of water flow and rising sea levels and their associated high tides, it’s hard to imagine a bright future for this species. Many worry that Saltmarsh Sparrow will be the first of our birds to go extinct due to higher sea levels.

14 Yellow-billed Magpie
Pica nuttalli
Perched on trees or fence lines, or roaming about the ground in groups along the sides of the road, Yellow-billed Magpies were a familiar sight as my family drove back and forth across the Central Valley to the Sierras. Their iridescent black feathers gleamed, in stark contrast to the brilliant white sections. The yellow bill and skin about the eyes adds some more color to this flashy corvid. Unfortunately, they are not as common as they once were. Like many corvids, Yellow-billed Magpies were hit hard by the West Nile virus. As West Nile is as prevalent as ever in the region, the population of this California endemic may struggle to fully recover.

15 Canyon Wren
Catherpes mexicanus
The liquid descending song of a Canyon Wren echoing off sheer rock walls brings shivers of joy to my soul. Perched on a rock, these birds may bounce up and down like a dipper. As their name implies, Canyon Wrens live in rocky terrain, often near water, all over the West. They pluck insects and spiders from amongst cracks and crevices. Wrens, in general, have spunky personalities accompanied by a wide variety of vocalizations, with Rock and Carolina wrens coming in close seconds. But Canyon, with its dapper, rich, rust coloring offset by a white throat and upper breast, cheers me like no other wren.

16 Wood Thrush
Hylocichla mustelina
The fluting melodious song of a Wood Thrush emanates from temperate woodlands of the East. It is a quintessential song that many, including myself, feel is one of the best birdsongs of the region. This is a gorgeous thrush with huge black eyes, brilliant rufous upperparts, and white coloring with massive black spots below, all supported by bubble-gum pink legs. The Wood Thrush is one of many woodland birds in decline due to habitat loss and fragmentation and cowbird parasitism, but it’s hard to imagine the Eastern hardwood forests without this bird’s ethereal song.
17 **Painted Bunting**
*Passerina ciris*

With a blue head, red eye ring, and fire-engine-red body accented by an almost fluorescent chartreuse back, the colors of a male Painted Bunting seem more appropriate for a tropical tanager. This bunting is pure eye candy. Female buntings are far more subdued in color, but still a rich, grassy green. When Painted Buntings arrive in spring, scrubby habitats come alive with color and intricately warbled songs. There are two populations, the largest inhabiting the south-central part of the U.S. and a much smaller group breeding along the Atlantic Coast. Not surprisingly and unfortunately, they are popular caged birds in Mexico.

18 **Wrentit**
*Chamaea fasciata*

Its bubbling, bouncing, descending song ringing from dense coastal or chaparral vegetation alerts one to a Wrentit’s presence. It is one of those birds that is easier to hear than see, particularly when you are trying to show someone their first. This jaunty little brown bird has a big head, pale eyes, and a long tail that it cocks over its back like a wren. It is the only New World member of the Old World warbler family, *Sylviidae*. A testament to its weak flying ability is that the four-mile width at the mouth of the Columbia River forms a barrier that is just too far for the Wrentit to cross. Despite being abundant all along the California and Oregon coasts, this bird has never made it to Washington.

19 ‘Akiapōlā‘au
*Hemignathus wilsoni*

With the addition of Hawaii to the ABA Area, it is appropriate to include one of the 50th state’s endemic species. Of Hawaii’s extant native species, the one with the most unusual lifestyle is ‘Akiapōlā‘au, which is found only on the Big Island. The population of this endangered Hawaiian “honeycreeper” has dwindled to about 1,000 individuals. It is olive above and yellow below, with a thin, black, decurved upper mandible.
It exploits the niche of a woodpecker by extracting its prey from koa tree bark. How it does this is quite different from woodpeckers. Its long, decurved upper mandible is used to hook prey while the short, straight lower mandible acts like an awl. Though difficult to do, it creates sap wells, like a sapsucker, from which it feeds. Happily, conservation efforts are helping protect the ‘Aki, as it is affectionately known to local birders.

#20  American Woodcock  
*Scolopax minor*  
Rarely seen during the day, the best opportunity to observe woodcocks is at dusk when they begin to *peent* before beginning to perform their aerial displays. As enjoyable as it is to behold its display, watching a woodcock walk is guaranteed to seal your affection for this unique bird. Rocking and bobbing, they probe for earthworms and other morsels on the forest floor. Their gait reminds me of a chameleon inching along a branch. Along with their cryptic coloration, this odd gait may aid in their camouflage, or perhaps help them locate worms as some suspect, similar to the foot padding of plovers. One of my favorite birding experiences was seeing a newly hatched brood of chicks walking along a road shoulder just like their mother.

Photo © Nicholas Kanakis

Photo © Bradley Hacker

Photo © Josh Clark
ow good is the birding on a voyage to Antarctica?
So good that even passengers who embark without realizing penguins are birds often disembark as birding converts.

I like to ask people, in Antarctica, what on Earth possessed them to visit Antarctica. Responses are all over the map. Some say it’s the wildlife, some are in it for the history, and some just want to get away from it all. Others are acutely committed to polar scenery—a woman once protested, as I pointed out an accommodating Adélie Penguin, “I don’t care about animals, I just want to see ice!” Then there are the frequent fliers, the country listers and territory listers aiming to touch every piece of this planet’s crust; about one in three Antarctic visitors celebrates their seventh continent. Some journey with friends or loved ones, but a surprising number come alone. People propose marriage and scatter ashes, go windsurfing and video-blogging, do yoga and write frosty poetry.

As a blank slate, Antarctica attracts all kinds of vagabonds and adventurers. So it’s no surprise that The Ice—as many lovingly call the deep, deep south—draws birders.
Birding the Very Deep South

Cape Petrels, also known as Pintado (“painted”) Petrels because of their splotchy appearance, are constant companions on an Antarctic excursion. Photo © Dušan Brinkhuizen/www.rockjumperbirding.com
Antarctica’s birdlife is special, and birds can be found everywhere down south. Aside from the odd whale or seal, birds are virtually the only sign of life animating this otherwise-desolate landscape of rock, ice, sky, and sea. Antarctic birds are even willing to come to you; they might waddle up to untie your shoelaces. Austere surroundings amplify their antics, with the curious effect of inspiring even the most apathetic onlooker to get totally stoked on birds. People go south with all kinds of motivations, but Antarctica quietly mints new birdwatchers in a way that few places could ever hope to.

Maybe I’m biased. As an onboard ornithologist for expedition cruises to Antarctica, it’s my job to focus on the birdlife. But Antarctica is an absolutely dazzling place for birders, newbies and experts alike. Here, it’s less about ticking things off a list, as species diversity is rather low. Strictly speaking, Antarctica is the only continent with no mainland endemics; even the reclusive Emperor Penguin has strayed farther north. Instead, Antarctica appeals to our visceral sense of awe. Just imagine if Neil Armstrong had stepped on the moon and encountered penguins—it wasn’t long ago that polar explorers experienced something like that on Earth, and we are now the first generation to walk in their boots with the luxury of fresh tropical fruit for breakfast. Traveling in Antarctica is raw and exhilarating, and a little addictive. I’ve taken about 25 trips so far, and each one just gets better.

I can already hear the resigned sighs, so let’s get this out of the way: Yes, most voyages cross the infamous Drake Pas-
Voyages typically depart from Ushuaia, Argentina, and cross the sometimes-stormy Drake Passage to reach the Antarctic Peninsula. Map © John Allendorf

Snowy Sheathbills, like white pigeons, scavenge penguin guano and other tasty snacks. Photo © Noah Strycker
remains calm most of the time. Ironically, the travelers who get seasick are often those who don’t take medication because they think they can handle it—or the ones who get bored looking at the sea.

Birders at least don’t have that last issue, because for us the crossing is a highlight. The Furious Fifties and Screaming Sixties, as the most consistently windy latitudes on Earth, are the realm of birds that live an almost unimaginable existence. Wandering Albatross, with their 11-foot wingspan, glide for hours without a single flap. To watch one soar effortlessly into a gale, easily outpacing any ship, is humbling, especially when you consider that it may be old enough to collect Social Security. By the most conservative estimate, an adult Wanderer covers several million miles during its lifetime, enough to make a dozen moon landings, yet it is one of the gentlest species in the avian kingdom.

Other albatrosses in these latitudes include the Black-browed, with its subtle mascara and lipstick marks, and the Gray-headed, sporting neat yellow trim lines above and below its beak. Sharp birders may pick out a Royal Albatross, like a Wanderer lightly dusted in powdered sugar, which has circled halfway around the globe from New Zealand. Most graceful is the Light-mantled, the Siamese cat of seabirds; it sometimes follows ships for hundreds of miles, hoping for scraps, on impossibly slender wings, peering through portholes with the googly eyes of a sock puppet.

People can fly to Antarctica—chartered planes land on King George Island, leapfrogging the entire Drake Passage. A kind of cormorant, Antarctic Shag is common throughout the region. Photo © Noah Strycker

King Penguins of all ages form huge colonies on South Georgia Island. Photo © Rich Lindie/www.rockjumperbirding.com
Passage before joining a ship—but take a small ship instead. If you fly, you’ll miss all the albatrosses, not to mention a dozen other seabirds (shearwaters, fulmars, petrels, storm-petrels, prions, diving-petrels) which bulk up an Antarctic trip list. Weather conditions can also delay flights; going by sea is actually more reliable.

The sea around the Antarctic continent itself is usually flat, sheltered by islands and bays and ice. I remember vividly my first tabular iceberg, drifting on a placid afternoon in the Southern Ocean. It was far from land, but as our ship gradually drew closer I could make out a scatter of dots on the berg’s mile-wide flank, which
resolved into resting Chinstrap Penguins when we eventually slid past. Even then the penguins looked as dainty as ants. Perspective is incredibly difficult to judge without familiar references: On land, I once confidently identified a Gentoo Penguin from a great distance, only to discover that my “penguin” was a tiny scrap of plastic in the snow 20 feet away.

Nothing can quite prepare you for that first glimpse of the continent. Whether it’s a gleaming trace of white on the horizon or a brooding, glaciated slope materializing through soupy fog, Antarctica suddenly gets real when it comes into view. The discovery can feel momentous. Mainland Antarctica was probably not seen by human eyes until 1820, less than 200 years ago, and it retains a timeless sense of minimalist beauty. Even today, nobody owns it. By international treaty, the whole continent is a wilderness dedicated to science and conservation, with no military exercises or extractive activities permitted. A few nations maintain research stations—you could even visit one, depending on the trip—but for the most part, this place still looks like it did when the first explorers saw it.

Perhaps you’ll drop anchor near one of the South Shetland Islands for an excursion—these islands are as Antarctic as Manhattan Island is North American. With relatively accessible terrain and close proximity to rich marine feeding grounds, this is a good area to introduce yourself to Antarctica’s most famous and charming inhabitants.

Everybody loves penguins. Early sailors thought penguins might be fish, or a strange type of reptile, and I’m still asked with alarming frequency whether penguins are classified as mammals. But these birds need no formal introduction. They’re already dressed like stars at a gala, with the celebrity demeanor to match.

With penguins, it can be hard to tell exactly who’s watching who. According to the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators, which sets guidelines for tourist visits to Antarctica, people may not approach within five meters of a penguin to avoid unnecessary disturbance—a buffer that is sternly enforced by expedition guides, should your enthusiasm carry too far. The curious birds don’t know these rules, though, and if you stand quietly they will often meander over for a closer look. I’ve had penguins lean against the toe of my boot, lovingly preen the cuff of my ski pants, probe the straps of my backpack, and fall asleep between my feet. As long as they set the tempo, the birds have no fear; but take one step in their direction and they are apt to freak out. Pushing the limits does no good for anyone—in this case, it’s defi-
nitely best to let the birds come to you.

The Antarctic peninsula is home to all three “brush-tailed” penguins, each one clearly identified by its head markings: The Adélie has a dark head and white eyes, while the Chinstrap shows its namesake throat line and the Gen- too wears white earmuffs with a reddish beak. All have similar habits, and even though they often nest together in mixed colonies, hybrids are practically unknown. Each species also has its own peculiarities, and nobody can agree on which is most alluring. I have a soft spot for the Adélie, which oozes charm as it gets into all kinds of mischief; catch one’s gaze and it may literally roll its eyes at you before stealthily stealing a rock from its neighbor’s nest.

A couple of other penguin species are possible, though not guaranteed. Each year, a few individual Macaroni Penguins turn up in Chinstrap colonies on the peninsula, having wandered away from their usual haunts on Subantarctic islands. And the ultimate prize, an Emperor Penguin, is especially elusive on Antarctic voyages. Because Emperors
nest on thick sea ice, their colonies are located away from navigable waters; to reach them you’ll have to book a dedicated early season expedition, ideally involving a nuclear-powered icebreaker with helicopters. Dispersing Emperors are occasionally sighted on regular trips, most often on flat ice—so if you see something that resembles a teenager with bad posture slouching on an ice floe, take a second look!

Exactly which sites you visit in Antarctica depends on the trip, but most voyages spend several days along the northwest edge of the Antarctic Penin-
sula where landmarks like the Lemaire Channel, Gerlache Strait, Wilhelmina Bay, Paradise Harbor, Neko Harbor, and Deception Island are clustered. Longer tours may push south of the Antarctic Circle, east to the Antarctic Sound and north to Elephant Island, depending on the itinerary. Dozens of other sites have equal potential for wildlife and scenery, so don’t be surprised if destinations change en route—flexibility is key when operating in unpredictable conditions.

Besides penguins, the other Antarctic birds are widespread and easy to learn. Snowy Sheathbills, like white pigeons, skitter underfoot as they scavenge penguin guano and other delectable snacks. The wonderfully named Antarctic Shag, a cormorant relative, is common throughout the region, as are Cape Petrels, Southern Fulmars, and Wilson’s Storm-Petrels. Brown and South Polar skuas patrol most sites, with a hybrid zone that seems designed to mystify birders, and Southern Giant-Petrels lumber around the beaches with an occasional white morph thrown in. Lucky observers might spot an Antarctic Petrel, and the achingly pure Snow Petrel—the so-called “Angel of the Antarctic”—manifests like a polar spirit around large bergs and pack ice.

Antarctica hosts other animals, too: humpback and minke whales; leopard, crabeater, Weddell, and elephant seals; Antarctic fur seals; and furtive pods of orcas. Zodiac excursions target all of these along with the birds, with good chances for close encounters by land and sea. You might also be able to go kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, camping, snowshoeing, and polar plunging—and attend an outdoor barbecue.

More than any species or adventure option, Antarctica is ultimately about
embracing an overall experience. In a kaleidoscope of weather, seasons, scenery, wildlife, history, epic moments, instant memories, and shared stories, no two days are alike. Polar voyagers tend to have a lot in common even if they’re not birders; they are curious, respectful, resourceful, willing to learn. And after going to the end of the Earth, they return home inspired, often becoming lifelong ambassadors for the natural wonders of Antarctica.

The ABA is Going to Antarctica!

For ABA members and friends, the ABA—partnered with Rockjumper Birding Adventures—has chartered a special 19-day “Classic Antarctica” voyage October 31–November 19, 2020 aboard the Russian vessel Akademik Ioffe. This trip offers passengers close encounters with Antarctic wildlife, including penguins, skuas, petrels, sheathbills, seals, and whales—all backdropped by scenes of stark beauty—while supporting the ABA and traveling with a fun group of friends. The lead guide will be George Armistead, chief network officer at Rockjumper Birding Tours, who has a long history of connecting people with nature through the ABA. This early season voyage is well timed to show off pelagic birds in fine feather, and the route is designed to feature the Falkland Islands and rugged South Georgia Island in addition to the Antarctic Peninsula, with the chance to see Emperor Penguins. Departing from Ushuaia, Argentina, the voyage costs $14,300–$23,500 per person. For details, see aba.org/aba-antarctica-charter

LEFT: The achingly white Snow Petrel, known as the “Angel of the Antarctic”, haunts large icebergs and pack ice. Photo © Noah Strycker

BELOW: Unlike their more colorful parents, young King Penguins are disguised by woolly brown down. Photo © Rich Lindie/www.rockjumperbirding.com
If You Go

WHAT TO EXPECT
In summer, the Antarctic Peninsula can be warmer than wintry North America, rarely dropping below 25°F with hot days spiking above 40°F. Usually, temperatures are right around freezing.

Expedition ships carry between 50 and 400 passengers. Some sites allow only 100 people on shore, which means larger groups must split landings (half in Zodiacs, half on land, then switch). You can expect about two excursions per day, requiring basic physical agility and balance. The ships are comfortable, with amenities like saunas and fine dining on larger vessels. Parkas and boots may be provided. Interpretive staff might include naturalists (including an ornithologist), historians, photographers, and other lecturers. An expedition leader works with the captain throughout the voyage to plot a course and plan landings.

Antarctica is not cheap, but it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Short trips might be booked for $6,000 on sale, or berths could start at $20,000 for long voyages. Peak season is January/February (when penguins have small chicks), but early summer (November/December) is beautifully snowy and late trips (March) chalk up more whales and seals. Most birds can be seen on every trip.

Mainstream operators include: Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures, Quark Expeditions, One Ocean Expeditions, Oceanwide Expeditions, G Adventures, Antarctica21, Hurtigruten, Lindblad Expeditions (National Geographic), Abercrombie and Kent, and Seabourn Cruise Line. Specialized birding tours typically reserve enough spaces with one of these operators to bring their own hosts on board, guaranteeing likeminded company and additional expertise. And the ABA is chartering its own trip to Antarctica (see sidebar on previous page).

GO FARTHER
Most itineraries last 8–12 days roundtrip from Ushuaia to the Antarctic Peninsula. Some trips extend a day or two across the Antarctic Circle, a neat detour with extra scenery. If possible, consider adding the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island—the ultimate voyage for wildlife enthusiasts, usually 18–22 days. South Georgia is particularly mind-blowing (and included in the ABA excursion), often voted more spectacular than Antarctica! South American landmarks Torres del Paine National Park and Iguazu Falls are popular add-ons. Once you get ice in your veins, you can also look at the more remote Ross Sea—or go north to places like Svalbard, Greenland, and the Northwest Passage.

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Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, Mpumalanga, South Africa. 
Photo courtesy of © SabiSabi.com
Jesse and I step behind a row of acacias and allow the hippopotamus to pass. “Allow” isn’t really right. The hippo, fleet of foot and surprisingly fast, would have proceeded with or without our assent. Our close encounter with *Hippopotamus amphibius* has been exhilarating. I’ll never forget it. But it wasn’t entirely surprising. It was in some sense preordained.

Seeing a hippo at Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve in the Mpumalanga province of northeastern South Africa isn’t unusual. Go to Sabi Sabi, and you’ll likely espy a hippo or three—along with warthogs and wildebeest, plus birds like hornbills and hoopoes and Hamerkops. Jesse and I saw all those things, and a great deal more, in the course of a leisurely pre-breakfast amble around the reserve. So when I say the hippo was preordained, I mean it was destined for me long before I’d ever dreamt of setting foot on Sabi Sabi. Because I’m a birder. Because birders, sooner or later, find themselves in places like the bushveld of southern Africa.

In this regard, I’m reminded of a funny conversation from my late teen years, more than three decades ago. I wasn’t one of the interlocutors in the dialogue. I wasn’t even there. But it was related to me, with equal parts amazement and exasperation, as a sort of cautionary tale for the propensity of birders to find themselves in one problematic scenario after another.

“Yes, officer, that matches the description of my car.”

“No, sir, he didn’t tell me where he was going.”

“Correct. My son. Yes, with my permission. Him and a friend.”

“They’re volunteers for something called the bird atlas. It’s scientific. I believe they have proper authorization.”

“A Superfund site? No, officer, I didn’t know that.”

A friend and I had borrowed my mother’s car for the purpose of “blockbusting” for the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas. There were no hippos, there were no Hamerkops, in the coal country and second-growth woodlots of the upper Ohio River valley. But there might as well have been. A rare Henslow’s Sparrow, teed up in a wet swale, sang its strange song. Nearby, a small pond, its water orange–gray with aluminum leachate, bore witness to the scourge of acid mine drainage. In the distance: a monstrous dragline excavator. Those are the sorts of things ordinary city kids would never normally lay eyes on—unless they were out birding.

It was only a matter of time before I would be in the company of hippos and Hamerkops.

Less than 48 hours after that morning ramble around Sabi Sabi, I was on a boat heading straight south from the coastal hamlet of Kleinbaii, in South Africa’s Western Cape province. This wasn’t an organized pelagic trip. It was impromptu, a plan hatched by Christoff, a birder I met the day before. The idea was to get as far south as we could, to where immense trawlers ply the fish-filled waters off the Agulhas bank. It was, if you’re of an objective mind, an odd thing to do on a short getaway to a fabled, faraway land: Honestly, the ocean looks much the same off the coast of California or New York; and the birds, distant and dark and fluttering, closely resemble their northern hemisphere counterparts.

But you’re not of an altogether objective mind. You’re a birder, and that makes all the difference in the world. Whether or not you’ve been to South Africa, you know that boat trips out of Kleinbaii and nearby ports are the stuff of legend. You will see more albatrosses in ten seconds there than in a century of birding off New York or New Jersey.

It was cloudy and cool that day asea, in the dead of the austral winter. The seas were rough, and I wasn’t feeling well. The boat was small, the head was clogged, and one of the engines was busted. No matter. It was one of the greatest days of my life, an experience I’ll never forget. At one point, the four of us on the boat—Christoff and I and two old Afrikaner mariners—got to talking about why the heck anybody would do the things we do.

Once again, my thoughts turned to a conversation involving my longsuffering mother.

“Yes, he and two pals got the car stuck in the snow. A good Samaritan had to winch them out.”
lieve they said—a Northern Shrike and some Short-eared Owls."

"I don’t know if they’ll make it home tonight. But, you know, I look at things on the bright side. If he weren’t chasing after birds and getting cars stuck, he’d be following the Grateful Dead."

Um, no. My proclivities run more in the direction of the young J. S. Bach, who at the exact same age I was at the time, walked more than 250 miles to hear Dieterich Buxtehude play the organ. I quibble. Deadheads and Bach aficionados are cut of the same cloth. And my mother, not one to diss the Dead, would agree. That said, I differ on another point, and it’s a biggie, in my mother’s interpretation. I don’t think I would have followed the Grateful Dead if it weren’t for birding; I don’t think I would have followed any other pursuit or passion at all; I wonder if I’d instead have set up shop in her basement. I’m wary, to say the least, of the view that we’re born birders—or Deadheads, or Buxtehude pursuers. Instead, I think we more or less stumble upon those things, through a combination of happenstance and privilege.

In this view, we’re birders not so much because of something within ourselves, but, rather because of the actions and influences of other people. I get that bird study can be practiced in solitude; I appreciate that insight and introspection are the twin touchstones of the birding experience; and I acknowledge that birders are often said to draw from the ranks of the introverted. That’s all well and good. And that’s got nothing to do with the fact that birding is, at its core, a profoundly humanistic enterprise.

Which reminds me of one more anecdote from my visit to South Africa.

Hadeda Ibises (upper) and Blacksmith Lapwing (lower), O. R. Tambo International Airport, Gauteng, South Africa. Photo © Ted Floyd

White-chinned Petrels and Black-browed Albatross, off Kleinbaai, Western Cape South Africa. Photo © Ted Floyd

I had just arrived at the airport hotel in Johannesburg, mid-morning local time, around two in the morning New York time. I get sick on boats, as you already know, and I don’t sleep on airplanes. The bed in my hotel room was big and soft and
warm and comfy, and I was exhausted, so I went birding.

First things first. Where to go? I inquired of Patricia, a local and a non-birder. Long story short: For reasons of personal safety, but also of propriety and decorum, it wouldn't be feasible to leave the hotel grounds, small and mostly paved over, adjacent to the roaring R21, the regional equivalent of I-95. My assessment of the situation was understandably glum. But Patricia had advised me that looks can be deceiving. “Cheer up!” was her kindly exhortation to me—she assured me that she sees interesting if innominate birds around the hotel every day.

She had no idea.

Right away, I got two life orders. In the same tree, a date palm. Let that sink in for a moment. A Gray Go-away-bird, order Musophagiformes, and a pair of Speckled Mousebirds, order Coliiformes. Those are the only two avian orders endemic to Africa. I still remember the time I saw two life species in the same sugar maple (February 12, 1982), but this was ridiculous. Also in and around that hotel parking lot: Blacksmith Lapwings and Haded Ibises and Southern Fiscals, a Dark-capped Bulbul and a Karoo Thrush, and a passel of birds with “Cape” in their name (white-eye, robin-chat, wagtail, sparrow).

I bumped into Patricia that evening in the hotel restaurant, thanked her for the birding intel, promised to email her my digital checklist, and reflected on something: This world of ours is peopled by the most kindly and compelling sorts: Jesse and Christoff, the Afrikaner mariners and Patricia, my childhood birding chums, my mother the enabler, and so many more.

I’m glad and grateful that I’ve devoted most of my life to bird study. Because I’m a birder, I encounter hippos; I seek out trawlers and strip mines; I discover unimagined beauty in hotel parking lots. That’s a felicitous thought. But there’s a sobering converse to the preceding: I don’t think it was necessarily meant to be. Being a birder isn’t a reflection of who we are. It’s the promise of who we are to become.
One of the great thrills of ABA Area birding is how it drives us to seek out birds in dramatically different habitats: the deserts of the west, the great forests of the north, the swamps of the southeast, even ecological areas more representative of Mexico than the U.S. or Canada. Yet we’re also drawn to places where different avifauna meet, where in the same day we can tick birds other birders might only see within several years of each other. Beaumont, Texas, perhaps more than anywhere else in the ABA Area, is a fascinating confluence of birds from the north, south, east, and west.

Plainly put, Beaumont is birdy. Really birdy, and at all times of year. As birders already know, that’s just Texas, but because of a variety of geographic and ecological overlaps, Beaumont is unique even within Texas. For beginning birders, it’s a fantastic place to practice IDing wading birds and ducks. For advanced birders, this eastern Texas coastal region presents a number of unique and intriguing ID challenges due to range overlaps not present elsewhere. For Texas birders, there are various local specialties more emblematic of states to the east, making it a valuable destination for state listing. And for photographers, Beaumont is as good as it gets. Below is a site list designed to help any birder enjoy and maximize a trip to Beaumont.

Cattail Marsh and Tyrrell Park
Located within the municipal park known as Tyrrell Park right in Beaumont and close to several hotels, Cattail Marsh is loaded with birds. The marsh has eight miles of gravel trails that wind around the various water holding cells and pass through different habitats: One
Sunrise at Bolivar Flats.

Photo © Jim Stevens
cell might be filled with dabbling ducks while the one beside it may have diving ducks. The trails also skirt around grassy areas with meadowlarks and sparrows as well as forests that can host wintering or migrating passerines. Raptors frequently fly overhead, from Bald Eagles to Northern Harriers and even Crested Caracaras, which have recently expanded into the area. A pair of Bald Eagles nested within view of the trails this past year.

These trails can provide a rigorous day of birding and yield a large checklist, especially in winter or spring migration, but alternatively one can set up at the gazebo at the end of the boardwalk after a leisurely stroll and be surrounded by multitudes of birds for hours. This is a wonderful place to listen to duck songs in early spring as wintering birds begin practicing before leaving for their northern breeding territories. Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, and Northern Shoveler winter in numbers, and others like Gadwall should be around in smaller cohorts. Diving ducks like Lesser Scaup can also be present, but the duck species composition is dynamic, which of course adds to the excitement. Both Black-bellied and Fulvous whistling-ducks can be found, although summer is better for Fulvous.

Particularly thrilling is the strong possibility of Cinnamon Teal, which has recently become more regular, representing an extreme eastern range occurrence for this species. Another more recent and regular species is Least Grebe, just about the northernmost location for this species. The superb possibilities for photographing wading birds and ducks cannot be understated. The views of Roseate Spoonbills, Black-necked Stilts, and American Avocets can’t be beat. For advanced birders, there are a number of ID challenges that occur in few other places in the ABA Area. American and Fish crows overlap here, as do Double-crested and Neotropic cormorants, sometimes perching right alongside each other, providing a good opportunity to note the difference in size and tail length. Glossy and White-faced ibises are both present, with the White-faced occurring in greater numbers. Boat-tailed and Great-tailed grackles, not to forget Common Grackle, are yet another group that coincide at Cattail Marsh. For the grackles, eye color is a distinguishing factor as well as voice. A number of other small black passerines also pass through here in numbers, like Brown-headed Cowbird and Red-winged Blackbird. In the evening, once the light is too dim for photography, it can be an engaging challenge to try to ID the hundreds of birds that pass through in flight as they rush past the boardwalk in the fading light.

The swallow diversity of this site creates yet another fun ID exercise. In July in particular, it’s possible to get seven species of swallow (Northern Rough-winged, Cave, Cliff, Tree, Bank, Barn, and Purple Martin) within as little as half an hour. You can master practically all your ABA

Prothonotary Warblers breed at Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center east of Beaumont. Photo © Skip Russell
Area swallow species right here.

For the truly intrepid, keep your eyes open for the white-shielded subspecies of American Coot, Fulica americana caribaea, which can occasionally be picked out among the dozens of F. a. alai: Look for the more extensive white shield on its forehead. After a day or afternoon filled with exciting sightings, listen for the possibility of a calling Great Horned Owl as you make your way back to the parking lot.

**Sabine Woods**

Sabine Woods, a property privately owned and managed by local Audubon chapters, is a migrant trap that stacks up with the best of them. Passerine migration is phenomenal, owing largely to its beachside location along two migratory flyways, but also because of the special habitat found here, known as “chenier” from the French word for oak. Chenier is a raised area, usually a few feet higher than adjacent land, that live oaks can grow on, which warblers and other migrants find irresistible.

Both kinglets can be found in winter along with a handful of warblers like Black-and-white, Orange-crowned, and Yellow-rumped. Hermit Thrush also winters here, and a few dozen Greater White-fronted Geese and a few hundred or even over a thousand Snow Geese can be found in adjacent wetlands during the colder months.

In early spring, Sedge Wrens can sometimes be heard singing in the marsh across the road. As the heart of migration approaches in April, 25+ warbler days are a possibility, along with the regular cast of other Neotropical migrants. It’s a notably good place for Swainson’s Warbler. Indeed, with the exception of a handful of birds wintering strictly in the Caribbean—Kirtland’s Warbler and Bicknell’s Thrush, for instance—virtually every Neotropical passerine migrant that breeds in eastern North America passes through here in numbers, and western passerines like Black-throated Gray Warbler are occasionally discovered as exciting rarities.

A drip, created and maintained by local birders, might yield your best-ever shots of Kentucky or Blackburnian warbler. Don’t be surprised if you find yourself wondering how many different Setophaga species you can get in a single frame.

Amid all the great birds you stand a good chance for at Sabine Woods, you also see the dedicated group of local birders put down their bins for a moment to fill armadillo holes, tend the trails, and manage the fire ants, so that they and visitors alike can enjoy this special place. In Sabine Woods, seeing dozens of spectacular Neotropical migrants streaming through is easy, and it’s just as easy to see the hard work, care, and devotion that the local birding community invests in this wonderful place.

**Sea Rim State Park**

Easily combined with Sabine Woods as a full-day or even half-day excursion, Sea Rim provides excellent access to salt marsh and sand dune habitat. A nicely constructed boardwalk winds its way through the salt marsh, where Marsh Wren and Clapper Rail can be found. Reddish Egret is uncommon but possible. Ducks like Blue-winged Teal winter, and migrants are a possibility during the appropriate times.

The shoreline is a good place to search for shorebirds and gulls. Willet, Sanderling, and Black-bellied Plover should be present in numbers during the winter, and Wilson’s Plover becomes a possibility in summer. Rare gulls are sometimes discovered, like a California Gull this past winter. Continuing with the theme of ID challenge,
Beaumont

es, be sure to check carefully through the flocks of Laughing Gulls in spring and fall migration for any stray Franklin’s Gulls.

Up to eight tern species are possible (Least, Gull-billed, Caspian, Black, Common, Forster’s, Royal, and Sandwich), with August and September potentially yielding all eight in the same day. One or two Long-billed Curlews may be present in winter, and the spring sandpiper influx brings the chance for species like Stilt, White-rumped, and even Baird’s.

White-tailed Kites sometimes hunt over the dunes near the shore. After combing through the plovers and pipers along the beach, you may look behind you to find a kite hovering in the sea wind or perched atop a fencepost, watching you with its blood-red eyes.

**Big Thicket National Preserve**

There is a soul-grounding essence to pine forests that one can only understand through firsthand experience. Big Thicket National Preserve, a patchwork of protected areas a short way north of Beaumont, is a convergence of ecosystems ranging from longleaf pine forests to rivers to cypress-rimmed bayous. Big Thicket has some of the highest concentrations of biological diversity north of the tropics, with exceptional numbers of plant species in particular.

For birders, this is an excellent place to practice and appreciate the joys and rigors of birding by ear. Big Thicket is a good destination for warblers more or less associated with the Southeast like Swainson’s, Hooded, and Pine. Pine is present all year, while Worm-eating and a few others are possible in migration. Big Thicket is one of the easternmost sites where Greater Roadrunner occurs, but it has become scarce and you’d be lucky to find one. If you work hard in the right habitat, wintering Henslow’s Sparrows, a good bird for Texas in particular, is gettable although difficult.

Canoeing or paddling through the park’s many waterways is also an option, presenting birders with the opportunity to apply tips from Benjamin Hack’s recent “Tools of the Trade” column in the August issue of *Birding*. Before venturing forth, stop by the visitor center and ask for intel on what trails are currently most accessible and birdiest.

Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge

Just as loaded with wading birds and ducks as Cattail Marsh, Anahuac is also famous as a one-stop-shop for rails. Typically, every April the refuge holds at least one special rail walk designed to yield Yellow in particular. Although closer to the Houston area than other sites mentioned here, Anahuac and its convenient car loop still make a great day trip from Beaumont.

In winter, there’s potential for picking out some good sparrows—Swamp, White-crowned, maybe even a Lincoln’s—and in summer it’s a good place for Purple Gallinule as well as the sometimes-tricky Least Bittern. Seaside Sparrow is possible all year long.

The ID challenge of various black passerines is present here as well, but add in a small number of wintering Brewer’s Blackbirds, which can be carefully told apart by structure and eye color. Bronzed Cowbird represents yet another possibility at this location.

Anahuac has some intriguing raptor potential, too. It’s great
for White-tailed Kite, especially perched along the roadways. In the last few years, White-tailed Hawks and Crested Caracaras have begun showing up here with greater frequency, and another possibility, particularly during migration in April. The visitor center is staffed with helpful, knowledgeable, and generous volunteers.

**Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary**

Although farther away from Beaumont, Bolivar Flats has many of the same birds as Sea Rim State Park, but in even higher concentrations. Piping Plover, a critically endangered species, counts can be in the dozens, and Long-billed Curlew is more likely here, along with throngs of other peeps, plovers, and terns. In early spring, if you listen carefully while watching the swarms of shorebirds, some just recently arrived after crossing the gulf, scurrying in concert with the crashing waves, you may hear wintering Horned Larks beginning to sing in the dunes behind you.

**Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center**

Located to the east of Beaumont and abutting the Louisiana border, over a dozen heron species breed at Shangri La, as does Prothonotary Warbler. The garden is a good trap for migrating passerines. Swallow-tailed Kite is just about at the western extent of its range.

This is all without even mentioning the Beaumont area’s astounding botanical diversity, excellent potential for wetland herping and seashore shelling, and the serene beauty of the region’s distinct but always calming landscapes. They are as resilient, admirable, and wonderful as the people who call this place home.
Birding Baja’s Playground

Estero San José

Baja California’s party capital, famous for its rocks and beaches and notorious for its spring break debauch, holds one great appeal to those of us whose college days are long past: non-stop flights from U.S. airports. With a rare couple of weeks clear on the calendar and frequent-flyer miles burning holes in our pockets, we spent the early part of the year in San José del Cabo, exchanging New Jersey snow and slush for warm sun and blue skies—and, of course, birds.
For the most part, we find that “target birding” ranks with sunbathing and barhopping high on the list of vacation pastimes we’d rather avoid, but we could not go to Baja California Sur without seeing the colorful and rare Baird’s Junco in the rugged Sierra de la Laguna. Thanks to the expert guidance of Gerardo Marrón, that decades-long dream came true in spades, leaving us plenty of time for more relaxing excursions into the countryside—and for easy walks around San José’s best, and best-known, birding hotspot, the “estero”, the broad mouth of a massive arroyo that leads from the mountains to the beach, where it widens into a flat marshy lagoon dammed by the low dunes of the Sea of Cortez.

We were prepared to be disappointed. Nearly two decades ago, in his still-unsurpassed Bird-Finding Guide to Mexico, Steve N. G. Howell lamented the devastation of the estuary, its vegetation, and its birdlife by developers, and little that had been published on the web meanwhile inspired any more hope: hotel construction and hurricanes, we read, had reduced the Estero San José to a pitiful shadow of its once-thriving self.

Not true—or at least not obviously true to birders from out of town with no rosy, you-should-have-been-here-15-years-ago memories of the place. We found the estero pleasant and productive on every one of our walks, easily tallying up to 70 species in a leisurely morning, and neither the grossness of the surrounding “resort” hotels nor the inaccessibility of some spots affected by past storms can change the fact that this remains a very rewarding site for repeated visits.

Dire warnings to the contrary, the cattail and rush thickets fringing the estero still shelter gratifying numbers of Belding’s

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The famous sea arch near Cabo San Lucas is just a short drive west from San José del Cabo. The wild beauty of southern Baja California is best appreciated anytime other than mid-March, when the area is swarmed by spring breakers.

Photo © Michael L. Retter
Yellowthroats, a colorful, long-billed warbler introduced to science 135 years ago on the basis of specimens collected right here at San José. We found this attractive bird throughout the area, and enjoyed especially good views, almost on command, by sitting patiently on a bench strategically located on the water’s edge just outside the low fence keeping hoi polloi off the bluegrass lawn of the Holiday Inn. Common Gallinules, Soras, Tricolored Herons, Ruddy Ducks, and even the odd Groove-billed Ani kept us company as we waited, and soon enough the yellowthroats would emerge from their dense fastnesses to pick at the water or rummage through the thick wrack. On our January visit, there were often just as many or more Common Yellowthroats, at first a source of frustration (“No, it’s another blasted common!”) but soon enough a great opportunity to compare the species nearly side by side.

Two other species-level Baja endemics were more challenging. Xantus’s Hummingbirds were common and conspicuous outside of San José, on low slopes and in flowery villages and small towns, but they were unexpectedly scarce at the estero, far less frequently encountered in early January than Costa’s Hummingbirds. The Gray Thrasher, second on our list of must-sees after the junco, was similarly hard to find at the estero. A single male eventually proved reliable on the brushy margins of the corrals at the northeast corner of the area, where messy low mesquites, palms, and hackberries provide prominent song perches.

Had no one told us, we might never have known that the estero was so badly degraded. What we did notice, though, was that access to the various spots around the estuary was different—and probably worse—than presented in print and online. The Holiday Inn at the east end of Paseo Malecón is every bit as sprawling and unwelcoming as we’d heard, and was still a-building in January 2017. The public path to the beach end of the estero—and to the yellowthroat bench—narrows almost to nonexistence next to one of the hotel’s storm-damaged outbuildings, but the entrance is still marked by two yellow posts; after a few yards, the trail opens up to follow the edge of the Holiday Inn’s sun-bathing lawn toward the beach.

But the visiting birder should be in no hurry. North of the hotel, next to the small riding stable, storms and flooding have destroyed the path and left what was once obviously a picnic ground under two or three feet of slightly noisome water. The water
laps against the very edge of a small dis-
used parking lot, just the place to linger for
an hour in the early morning. Cinnamon
and Blue-winged teal, Northern Pintails,
Redheads, and Lesser Scaup float among
the submerged palapas while White-faced
Ibis, Green and Tricolored herons, Long-
billed Dowitchers, and Spotted Sandpip-
ers hunt the edges. Ruddy Ground-Doves,
relatively new colonizers in the region, are
easy to see in the shady stalls, feeding at
the feet of the horses.

The palms and other small trees around
the parking lot and stables were very at-
tractive to passerines in January, both
residents and winter visitors. For reluc-
tant Easterners like us, the abundance of
Audubon’s and Orange-crowned warblers
and Hooded Orioles was a welcome balm,
although a single “Western” Palm Warbler
was far “better” by local standards. Tropi-
cal Kingbirds and Black Phoebes plucked
insects from the surface, and the shallow
edges were always good for Spotted Sand-
pipers and Long-billed Dowitchers. Shady
and relatively peaceful, outfitted with a
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Turning back towards the sea, it is a short
walk past the Holiday Inn and the yel-
lowthroat bench to the beach. Our Janu-
ary visit found the sand and surf not es-
specially birdy, but the estuary itself widens
here to form a substantial marshy pool,
overlooked by an observation platform
with wooden benches. Even with an early
morning start, the shade provided by the
platform was more than welcome, and the
additional height helps in finding some
more reclusive species. The only Soras
to give good looks were here, and Black-
crowned and Yellow-crowned night-her-
ons proved considerably more common
than we’d at first thought from the view on
the ground. Many of the wintering water-
fowl also tended to hug the edges, perhaps
made nervous by the twisting unpredict-
ability of the Magnificent Frigatebirds
hunting low over the water all day long.
They certainly had more to fear from the
adult Peregrine Falcon that spent most of
one morning resting on the beach after a
leisurely breakfast of coot.

The beach path continues to the nar-
row marina inlet, where ambitious bird-
ers can turn left (west) and walk through
a small stand of palms to reach the back
gate to Wirikuta Botanical Cactus Garden,
a cactus nursery and exhibition ground for
some weirdly striking outdoor sculptures.
The irrigated lawns here are good for Ver-
milion Flycatchers and Killdeer, while the
dusty, scrubby edges held Ash-throated
Flycatchers and Common Ground-Doves.
Wirikuta can also be entered more for-
mally from Camino Cabo Este; the admis-

Xantus’s Hummingbirds are common at flowers
in villages and on farmsteads. A visit to San José
del Cabo is the chance to really get to know this
lovely hummer. Photo © Michael L. Retter

Photo © Michael L. Retter

Estero San José is a perfect
place to enjoy the sun while you
wait for birds such as the endemic
Belding’s Yellowthroat to chance by.

Photo © Michael L. Retter
A $8 (U.S.) is unjustifiably steep, but appears not to apply to those entering from the beach.

It is a long and not especially pleasant walk back to town on busy Cabo Este. Instead, we retraced our steps to the beach and back past the Holiday Inn to the abandoned parking lot where we started. It was once possible to walk through the now-flooded picnic area to reach the westerly portions of the estero, and one morning we watched a young man do just that, the water up to his waist; we declined to follow his example. It’s more comfortable (and more hygienic, given the source of some of that water) to drive or walk around the corner and north about 250 yards on Calle Boulevard Antonio Mijares, watching for a wide dirt road that goes through the fence to the right. There is parking just inside the fence, at the foot of an inscrutably placed observation platform, or it is possible to drive another 100 yards to the edge of the estuary.

The dense scrub between Calle Boulevard Antonio Mijares and the estuary is well worth birding carefully. Our January mornings there turned up nothing rare or unexpected, but these thickets were often crawling with wintering passerines, among them good numbers of Wilson’s Warblers. Spectacular and well-named igneus Northern Cardinals, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Cactus and House wrens, and Western Tanagers added sound and color while Ospreys, Magnificent Frigatebirds, and White-faced Ibis flashed past overhead on their way to the estero.

With so many birds to see, it can easily take an hour to work your way out to the sunny sidewalk leading north along the water. For the most part, the views into the estuary—very narrow at this point—are clear, but every few yards a clump of cattails or rushes emerges; with patience, these can be very good spots to see Belding’s and Common yellowthroats, and they provide shelter for Green Herons, both wintering birds from the north and resident individuals of the still poorly known subspecies frazari.

At the north end of the sidewalk is a small complex of dusty corrals with an arena. It was here that we found singing Gray Thrashers, and a shifting constellation of Common Ground-Doves, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and Cattle Egrets fed at the horses’ feet. This area, apparently unaffected by the floods that have destroyed the southern stretch of sidewalk once leading to the submerged picnic grounds,

Continued on page 48
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remains popular with dog walkers, morning joggers, and bicyclists, most of whom will stop to ask what you’re seeing.

The sidewalk continues north to Camino Cabo Este, a busy road unwelcoming and probably unsafe for pedestrians. Shortly before the road, the estuary broadens slightly where treated water from a small sewage plant flows into it. On one of our morning visits, we found that sludge had backed up onto the sidewalk through a manhole; we thought it the better part of valor to walk around it. Probably not coincidentally, the mud here was the most productive shorebird spot during our stay in San José, with the nice surprise of a fine Marbled Godwit towering above the Least and Western sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitchers. At certain times of day, probably correlated with releases of water from the sewage plant, Snowy Egrets and White-faced Ibises swarm the shallows here, feeding frantically just a few yards off the sidewalk.

It is a short and easy walk back to Calle Boulevard Antonio Mijares, but once again it is worth spending time in the wooded areas, where, at least in winter, a difference of an hour or two can mean a startling change in the birds present as flocks move on to be replaced by others.

Travel, Lodging, Food

San José del Cabo is served by a relatively new international airport; nonstop flights are available from several large U.S. airports. The major rental companies have cars available at the airport. For those not planning on leaving San José to bird the mountains, it is possible to take a taxi to town from the airport and then walk or take a taxi to the estero.

There is an abundance of lodging in the Cabo area, including the huge Holiday Inn resort right next to the estero. We stayed at the Hampton Inn next to the hospital, less expensive and an easy five-minute drive; the quality of the rooms, breakfast, and other services was equivalent to other hotels in the same chain in the U.S.

We did not find San José a particularly rewarding destination for food. Without a genuine culinary tradition of its own, the city has a few acceptable restaurants specializing in food from other regions of Mexico, and other options, including fast food, Italian, and seafood, are easily found in town. A large grocery store, La Comer, less than a mile east of the estero at the intersection of Highway 1 and Paseo Malecón, offers a wide selection for picnics and other impromptu meals.
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Bluetroat in Alaska by guide Doug Gochfeld

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I used to be birds that brought us together. Lately, though, spending time with my growing son, Finn, has become difficult. At nearly 12, he isn’t as interested in watching birds with Mom as he is in playing with online friends on Fortnite, a game so addictive that the slow-natured pace of birding doesn’t stand a chance.

Somehow, however, I convinced him to join me on a birdwatching trip along Canada’s South Coast Birding Trail in Ontario. For four glorious days during the height of migration, we’d experience bird bliss in one of North America’s premier birding destinations. I took it as an opportunity to reconnect with my growing-up-too-fast-moody-technology-obsessed-pre-teen, who was once joined at my hip.

To start, I should explain that the South Coast Birding Trail isn’t an actual trail—rather, it’s a network of hotspots that can be explored in various ways. Visitors can celebrate the arrival of all the spring visitors to Canada by hiking, biking, walking, or driving.

A few airplane stops from the prairies land us in Windsor, a city of 217,000+ situated across the river from Detroit. We start at Ojibway Park, part of the Ojibway Prairie Complex. Spread out over 105 hectares (260 acres), the complex features diverse flora and fauna in natural areas that include wetlands, tallgrass savanna, prairie, and oak woodlands. An orchestra of sound hits us as we step out of the car and head toward the Nature Centre.

Once inside, we beeline to the floor-to-ceiling windows, where a variety of feeders hang on the opposite side of the glass. Attracting flashes of bright red, yellow, and orange, we are in awe as a Baltimore Oriole, several House Finches and goldfinches, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and a Red-headed Woodpecker fly in to eat. A Downy Woodpecker, unafraid, eyeballs me through the glass only inches away.

Tom Preney, a naturalist at the Nature Centre who has been guiding at Ojibway for 15 years, greets us with a small Midland painted turtle in his hand. Finn is pretty excited by this, and others are excited by the turtles, too. The park is home to several turtle species, including endangered...
Sunset at Point Pelee National Park beach.
Photo © Roxana Gonzalez
Ontario’s Birding Trail

Blanding’s, snapping, and Midland.

A Gray Catbird ducking in and out of the twigs of a fallen tree is the first bird I see as we start out on the Prairie Glade Trail, one of the park’s four trails.

“This trail will bring you through a mature Pinoche woodland”, Tom says. “Some of the trees are 150- to 200-year-old, old-growth oak trees.”

The smell of fresh rain fills the forest.

“What’s that noise?” Finn asks.

“That’s a Blue Jay squawking”, Tom answers.

The park is stunning with everything in full bloom. Mayapple plants that mimic little palm trees litter the forest floor alongside white-flowered woodland anemones.

Interested and curious, Finn asks all sorts of questions and Tom happily responds. Patient and passionate, between noting bird calls, Preney shares fun facts with Finn. Near a bridge, he points out a Blackburnian Warbler hanging out in the fork of a cottonwood tree. The warbler is followed by a Tufted Titmouse.

“That bird has a mohawk!” Finn says.

Preney scatters some seed, inviting the action to our level. Soon, two Red-bellied Woodpeckers, a White-breasted Nuthatch, and a Black-capped Chickadee swoop down. As they gobble the seed, we all hear a splash. Bumping against the side of the bridge, I have just sent our binoculars into the water. We recover them quickly, but day one has claimed its first victim.

Carrying on, birdsong competes with the high-pitched trills of American toads and croaks of western chorus frogs, making for a melodic musical backdrop.

“I hear a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher,” says Preney, who calls it in with a “bshhh bssh bssh bssh”.

The gnatcatcher calls back as the zee zee zu zi zee song of a Black-throated Green Warbler nabs our attention.

I’m in heaven, but Finn has slowed down. Tired from the day, he complains his legs hurt, likely from recurring growing pains. A herd of white-tailed deer runs ahead of us as we finish up the rich nature experience at a pond where we find red-eared sliders, another turtle species.

Arriving at our accommodations for the night, the Holiday Beach Conservation Area, Finn sees his first Northern Cardinal.

“It’s so red!” he exclaims.
A Wild Turkey, some Canada Geese, a scurry of eastern gray squirrels, and a fox also welcome us.

At the footsteps of the idyllic beach rental, which comes chock full of modern-day conveniences, is Lake Erie. Lured by the sight of waves through the window, I explore while Finn unwinds watching TV. Secluded with pockets of water and boardwalks, there are several great spots to look for birds, so I’m truly sad to leave the lovely area early the next morning.

As we pull away, light glows off the lake while drops drizzle down. Prepared, we’ve suited up for today’s destination, Pelee Island. Part of a peninsula, it’s a 90-minute ferry ride from the mainland. The island is a significant hotspot, thanks to its location at the crossroads of two major migration routes, and one of the first points of landing for spring migrants.

Looking at Finn, I can’t help but grin at his new rain boots. They are enormous with nearly more boot than boy. Spinning wind turbines and solar panels dot entire fields as we weave along country roads. When we near the ferry crossing, we receive sad news that the ferry to Pelee Island has been canceled due to wind gusts.

It’s time to eat and regroup. Stopping in the town of Leamington, we devour a hearty breakfast at a bakery that doubles as a restaurant. Before I can even Google a new idea, Finn has acquired the Wifi code and is engrossed in a Fortnite recap on YouTube. I let it slide as his mood, which was a bit sour from the early start, seems to be improving.

We decide on nearby Hillman Marsh. Adjacent to Lake Erie, the area features three miles of trails over 35 hectares (87 acres) of pristine marshland/shorebird habitat. There are several vantage points from within the brush and trees to open water and boardwalk. Making our way to the water’s edge, Finn is pleased to spot a second cardinal singing happily from within the safe confines of a pine. A sense of
pride that comes with the positive identification of what is quickly becoming his new favorite bird shines through.

The wind is blowing tall reeds to and fro as we amble along the waterfront, where busy Barn Swallows skim bugs off the water. There’s a Killdeer a short distance away doing its best broken-wing impression. I explain to Finn how the act is a protective measure.

“He looks like a deformed pigeon!” Finn says, causing us to laugh loudly.

On a boardwalk over a small body of marshy water, Finn gets down on his belly trying to take a creative shot. His golden hair shines in the sun, matching the color of the cattails, and it warms me to see him embrace the moment.

We trek through a woody patch following flitting warblers. Though we haven’t been walking long, Finn begins to complain again, so I leave him at a bench to rest, and carry on. I pass a few Red-winged Blackbirds bathing in grassy puddles, and a pair of Yellow Warblers flash their sunshine sheens, swaying in harmony on branches. This time, they follow me from bush to bush. Immersed in trills, songs, and squawks, I feel happy and connected. However, it’s short lived.

“Mommmmmmm!” Finn shouts from the bench.

“Ten more minutes”, I respond, frustrated.

I see his hands go up in the air as I continue the other way. He stomps away in true pre-teen fashion as I trek on a bit farther before begrudgingly moseying back to the car.

A short city break is needed, so we head to Kingsville, a town full of charming Victorian homes and delightful bird references. While walking along a quaint Main Street, we spot some chocolate birds in a window. Once inside Dutch Boys, we find precisely sculpted dessert birds and meet the two creative spirits who own the shop. Inspired by the area, Cor Boon, an award-winning wood carver, greets us and shares the process he and sculptor Henry Noestheden employ to create the decadent sculptures.

“This is an amazing part of the country that we live in”, exclaims Cor.

En route to Point Pelee National Park, we stop for a quick bite at a double-decker “bustaurant” aptly named Birdie’s Perch. Point Pelee, which is Canada’s second-smallest national park, has been on my wish list for years. It is an Important Bird Area and is on the UNESCO list of Wetlands of International Importance. The first national park in Canada established for conservation, it offers more biodiversity than any other national park and sees around 390 migrating bird species each year. As the southernmost point of mainland Canada, it’s located at the same latitude as California (and Rome and Barcelona, too).

Spirits are high and the sun is shining as we enter the park. Finn beams when he sees the oTENTik—a raised-platform, tented A-frame structure that has everything we need to camp. Like he once did when he was small, Finn sets off exploring. Before turning in for the night, he insists on teaching me how to floss—no, not my
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teeth, rather the dance move made popular by...you guessed it, Fortnite. I comply and learn the dance, which garners hearty laughter. The good feels continue as we snuggle for the first time in ages.

I'm impressed when we get up early in the morning. It's day three and no words of complaint murmured. It's a tad chilly, but we are hoping for a day of good sightings. After a birder's breakfast, we meet up with a group of 20 who've united for a two-hour Parks Canada-led hike, as part of the Festival of Birds.

“You see this bird here at three o’clock?” asks Bruce Di Labio, kicking off the hike. “It’s a rare species here—a House Sparrow! There are a few pairs in the park.”

We learn quickly that Bruce, who has been birding here since 1974, is fond of bird jokes.

“But really folks, the bulk of the singing you hear right now is American Robins”, he continues, as we set out on the half-mile loop of the Tilden Woods Trail. Dutchman’s breeches are in full bloom, their white petals reaching upward from the green forest floor along the trail sides.

Soon we hear more than robins.

The sweet sweet shredded wheat of a Yellow Warbler and whitchity whitchity trills of a Common Yellowthroat ring through the cedar savannah and mature swamp forest.

“Oh, there it is”, Bruce points to the yellowthroat.

Like a good tennis match, everyone turns their attention, all heads whipping upward in unison. Two French women attempting to get a look nearly knock over Finn, who is trying to photograph another cardinal.

Birding at this time of year, when the forest is near its densest, is best done by ear. So, it’s great that Bruce is masterful with identifying the overlapping myriad of bird calls and songs. As the well-trodden trail morphs into a boardwalk, he shares every time he hears a bird, helping our lists quickly grow.

A pair of Swamp Sparrows, a Brown-headed Cowbird, a Baltimore Oriole, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet all appear within seconds of each other. I attempt to get a shot of the kinglet, but the tiny speedster is too fast. The group flocks over the trail in a solid pack, all vying for glimpses. It’s a good mix of people of all ages and skill levels; nearly everyone has a giant lens, and many a competitive drive. Finn, however, is sticking close to Bruce, who is in front of the pack. Finn’s impatience with being part of the large group is something we share.

We hear the descending chink chink chink call of a Northern Waterthrush as our group arrives at a swampy yet serene scene where cobwebs sparkle on still water. I spot the province’s provincial flower, a white trillium, before we come upon another swampy area where a Swainson’s Thrush appears.

Growing tired of the slow pace and ambitious attitudes, Finn walks ahead of the group. I realize maybe it’s not my thing, either. Elbowing my way to the front is not my style, though I do appreciate the expertise of having such a knowledgeable leader. Feeling a bit claustrophobic, I trail behind for a bit. This, of course, results with me missing what would have been my first Blue-headed Vireo. I catch up just as a Scarlet Tanager is singing and posing for the bird paparazzi.

“It sounds like a robin with a sore throat”, jokes Bruce. Everyone chuckles. Suddenly, a wave of warblers takes center stage and the park lives up to its coined designation as the “warbler capital of North America”. First, a Yellow-rumped Warbler appears, followed by a Nashville, a Magnolia, and a magnificent Cerulean! All eyes are on the branches, and soon everyone is pointing and sharing sightings, leaving me more appreciative of the group effort.
The next day, we arrive at the last stop of the trip, Rondeau Provincial Park, for a small group hike. “We’ve seen over 125 species the past few days, and over 20 warblers, including a Hooded and Kentucky warbler”, shares Peter Simons, who is leading the hike.

Enjoying the hike’s pace and camaraderie, we strike it rich with warblers again, spotting Chestnut-sided, Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Prairie, and Orange-crowned warblers in the old-growth Carolinian forest. I finally get my Blue-headed Vireo, and a White-eyed Vireo, too.

While waiting for our flights home, I’m feeling grateful for the time spent reconnecting. Though it required a lot of give and take, I realize that, as much as my son enjoys spending time with me hiking and birdwatching, he wants it in smaller doses than I do. And because we are in an airport and not in a forest, I let it go and allow Fortnite to once again become his focus. Downtime comes in great varieties, after all.
Tips, Tricks & Trips
How to prepare for getting to the other side of the world

You are excited. Beyond excited. You’ve just put down your deposit for a birding trip to South Africa, your first to Africa. You sit down at your computer to find flights, your mind swirling with thoughts of sugarbirds and rockjumpers, lions and elephants. You know South Africa is far away, but seeing the travel times for the best routes—24 hours, 28 hours, or more, with at least one stop—still comes as a bit of a shock. Don’t fret: it’s worth it! And fortunately, there are ways to make that time pass quickly and relatively comfortably, even in economy class.

I embark on such long journeys multiple times a year as the owner of a birding tour company. Over the course of the past 10+ years, I’ve perfected a system that gets me through those journeys with ease. Of course, what works for me will not necessarily work for everybody, but I hope that by sharing my personal tips and tricks, others will feel a little less intimidated when planning their own trips. Besides what you read here about preparing for the flights, don’t forget to pack essentials in your carry-on bags, like binoculars and medicine, in case you show up at your destination but your luggage does not!

1 - Neck pillow, eye mask, and ear plugs. Nothing passes time faster on a long flight than sleeping, so anything you can do to facilitate sleep is a good thing. Even a little sleep helps with jet lag recovery once you arrive. A good neck pillow and comfortable eye mask and ear plugs are crucial for me. I use a memory foam neck pillow, but many types are available, including some that you can hook onto the outside of your carry-on bags.
Preparing for Your Trip

for easy access and to save space. As an added benefit, a neck pillow can double as a photography “bean bag” to stabilize your camera when you’re photographing from a vehicle—something you will no doubt be doing on an African birding safari.

2 • Entertainment. Bring something to do. A good book or two, magazines, a Kindle, a crossword puzzle book, an iPad, a laptop, or whatever you like to do. Staying busy helps pass time, and an airplane is an awfully good place to catch up on your backlog of magazines. A long flight is also a good time to cram for your trip, review the itinerary and trip checklist, study the field guide, and read up on the culture and history of your destination.

3 • Good headphones. Taking advantage of the entertainment options on the back of the seat in front of you also helps pass the time. These days, the selections of movies and TV programs on long-haul flights is enough to keep you entertained from take-off to landing. But because airplanes are so loud, you usually have to watch with your headphones on full volume, which is neither a fun experience nor ideal for sustaining a future of hearing Cedar Waxwings.

Good headphones can make a big difference. High-quality, noise-canceling headphones are the best choice, and absolutely worth the extra cost (I use Bose QuietComfort® 20). Noise-canceling headphones double as very effective ear plugs, which can help you get some sleep (but see #4).

4 • Charging cables for your electronics. You don’t want your device to run out of power and be stuck without it. And you don’t want your phone to run out of power if you need it when you land, for example, if your guide or driver is unexpectedly late. (You also don’t want your cords to get tangled; use cord wraps for that.) Many long-haul planes have USB outlets at the seats, so bring chargers. I also bring a portable charger, in case there’s no USB outlet at the seat (or it doesn’t work). Some of your layover airports will have USB outlets, too, but some won’t, so a portable charger keeps you from having to carry an electrical adapter in your carry-on bags. Also make sure everything is fully charged when you leave home!

5 • Water and snacks. A reusable water bottle is good to bring on an overseas birding trip, especially if the tap water is drinkable. Nowadays, most airports have water fountains specifically for filling water...
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Preparing for Your Trip

- A travel pillow doesn’t only serve to help you sleep on your flight: it doubles as a cushion to steady your camera if you are shooting from a vehicle. Photo © Josh Engel

bottles (and they all have shops where you can buy a bottle of water), so you can bring the empty bottle through security and fill it up in the terminal. Staying well hydrated on long flights is important and may speed your recovery from jet lag, so bringing a water bottle ensures that you will never be without water at your seat. If you take medicine at a set time each day with water and/or food, plan ahead so you can take it on the plane, and know what time to take it at your destination. You don’t want to go hungry, either, especially if you sleep through a meal or if the meal is inedible or if there is no meal at all, so carry some snacks. Take note of where you can get a drink or a snack on the plane during the flight—usually wherever the galley is.

8 • Comfortable clothes and a long-sleeve shirt or wrap. Wear something comfortable because you’ll be in your clothes for a long time. Keep in mind that your feet can swell during long flights. I like to kick off my shoes once I’m in the air, so comfortable socks are a must. And airplane seats don’t have personal thermostats, so bring a long-sleeve shirt in case it’s cold. For women, a pashmina-style wrap is a versatile, time-honored garment for air travel. The blanket provided on long-haul flights is generally inadequate for keeping you warm on a cold plane.

7 • Choose your seat. Airplane seats are not known for space and comfort, and most of us cannot afford business class. So pick your seat carefully. You can check seatguru.com to see the seating arrangement for your flight. I strongly prefer an aisle seat, so that I can access my backpack in the overhead bin whenever I want, get up, stretch, and walk around. Others prefer a window seat, to take in the beautiful views and to avoid people climbing over them to get to the bathroom. Many airlines now charge for choosing a seat—any seat—so you’ll have to decide if you want to pay the added cost. You can also purchase a seat with extra leg room, which may be worth it if you have long legs or just appreciate the space.

8 • Move your body. Sitting for the entire flight is hard on your body. Besides being generally stiff at the end of the flight, you could develop blood clots called deep vein thrombosis. It’s a good idea, at the very least, to stretch in your seat. Better yet, get up and walk up and down the aisle every so often, or go to the back of the plane to stand and stretch. And grab a drink of water and a snack while you’re up!

9 • Arrive a day or two early. If you have the time and inclination, arriving a day or two ahead of the start of your trip ensures that you are well-rested and ready to go when the trip starts. This strategy also relieves the stress of worrying that you might miss the start of the trip should a flight be delayed or canceled. You can take advantage of the extra time by visiting cultural or scenic sites that you won’t see on the birding trip, and by getting familiar with the common birds in the area. I’m always willing to make extra hotel reservations for my clients at no extra charge, so they can stay at the same hotel as the rest of the group on the first night of the tour.

10 • Remember your passport and flight information. Have a great trip and don’t overthink your preparations!
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Every two years, our tour leaders and office team gather at our home base in Austin to reconnect with colleagues, renew acquaintances, and discuss important issues that affect our business.

This year, in addition to our entire Austin-based office staff, our company meeting included two of our longtime business advisors and nineteen tour leaders representing six continents and seven countries. We hosted leaders from Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, South Africa, Spain, the United States, and Venezuela.

The meeting made abundantly clear what a terrific company we have, thanks to our intelligent, dedicated, and hard-working tour leaders and office team. Through the years, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours has evolved into a community, and not by accident. This evolution has occurred as a result of a covenant that exists between VENT’s management and its staff, in which the company does all it can to make it possible for our employees and their families to have good lives, and they in turn do all they can to make VENT successful.

As we gathered at this year’s meeting, I felt a great sense of pride for the company we have all worked so hard for so many years to create. As we embark on our 42nd year, the future of our company is bright, thanks to our wonderful employees and to you, the people who honor us by taking our tours.

- Victor Emanuel

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