Birding Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park

Introduction to Midway Atoll

20 Best Birds in Britain

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Pelagic Directory

Travel Tips & Techniques

American Birding Association

Birder’s Guide to TRAVEL

MARCH 2017 • VOL. 29 • NO. 1
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August 19-September 5, 2018
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August 9-13, 2017
August 16-20, 2018
with Geoff Lockwood

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Ngorongoro Crater & Beyond
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DAVE IRONS

On the cover: The resourceful Gray Jay has also been called “whiskey jack”, “camp robber”, and “Canada Jay”. The last name is now all the more appropriate, as in late 2016, the species was named Canada’s national bird by Canadian Geographic magazine. Gray Jays are easy to find within Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park, which is featured in this issue. Photo © Greg Schneider
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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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From the President

The American Birding Association has, since its inception, provided the birding community with useful, reliable information about travel—where and when to go, how to make best use of your time in the field, even how to avoid pitfalls that visitors might encounter. This was true of our earliest publications, including the famous bird-finding inserts that once graced Birding magazine, through to the Lane Guide series, and onto our various online pages and presences today.

Birder’s Guide to Travel is proudly part of that tradition. Though you can do a lot of great birding without traveling much at all, many of us find the excitement and challenge of novel vistas and avifaunas to be a key part of what makes birding, and life, meaningful. And when you’re far away from home, it’s often very useful and comforting to have a direct line to someone who lives near your destination or at least knows it intimately. That’s exactly the kind of help and guidance we strive to give you in the Birder’s Guides.

I’d like to invite you to consider joining the ABA on one of our birding travel adventures. On the roster for 2017–18 are trips to Delaware Bay, Honduras, Tanzania, southern Florida, and Hawaii. You can find out more about all these at events.aba.org or by calling us at (800) 850-2473. By traveling with the ABA, you support our Conservation and Community programs as well as conservation projects in the areas we visit. With all that, you get the benefit of the ABAs decades of travel experience, expert leadership, and wonderful traveling companions.

Wherever your travels take you, good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon
President, American Birding Association

From the Editor

Travel means different things to different birders. For some, it’s a leisurely weekend drive from Ottawa or Toronto to look for Gray Jays at Algonquin Provincial Park. Others enjoy going on pelagic trips. Some like to spend a week visiting exciting locations such as Puerto Rico. And there are a few adventurous souls among us who volunteer a month of their lives to help count albatrosses on Midway Atoll.

However you travel, Birder’s Guide wants to help you find your joy. I hope that 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, as well, so that we can be sure to include similar content in next year’s Birder’s Guide to Travel. 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 and via discussions linked to at aba.org/birdersguide.

Happy travels!

Michael L. P. Retter
Editor, Birder’s Guide
Join us in this nearby birding paradise! We’ve worked with our friends in Honduras to arrange a weeklong tour designed to visit the key birding sites at a relaxed but productive pace. We will seek the endemic Honduran Emerald in addition to a great assortment of neotropical birds on the grounds of our two lodges as well as on our day trips.

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December 1-7, 2017
Brandon Breen is a writer and conservation biologist who lives in Ashland, Oregon. Brandon has worked on numerous avian research projects throughout the U.S. and abroad, focusing on such species as the California Condor, Andean Condor, Turkey Vulture, and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. He completed a bachelor of arts degree at Bates College and a master of science degree at the University of Minnesota. Brandon is currently writing his first children’s novel and working on the Mindful Birding Project, which aims to increase awareness of ethical birding guidelines as well as the conservation impacts of America’s bird watchers.

Rachel Coombes has been a keen birder since childhood. A former research ecologist for the British Trust of Ornithology, she is currently a freelance marine and field ornithologist and ecologist. She lives on the Suffolk coast, in eastern England, with her partner Robin, who is the site manager at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds’s Minsmere nature reserve. Together, they have a passion for wildlife and traveling that leads them to spend their vacations birding in Africa and Asia. They are hoping to visit North America very soon!

Jason A. Crotty is a lawyer from Portland, Oregon. In Puerto Rico, he added nearly 30 lifers and had a fabulous time when not birding. He wrote about volunteering in national wildlife refuges in the July 2016 issue of Birder’s Guide and the U.S. Endangered Species Act in the August 2016 issue of Birding.

Dave Irons started birding at age six and was fully hooked by age 17, when he first met other birders near his own age. An early passion for listing fueled Dave’s curiosity about vagrancy, biogeography, and the finer points of field ID. He has served several terms on Oregon’s Bird Records Committee, to which he was first elected in 1981, and he has been a regional editor for North American Birds since 2003. Dave and his wife, Shawneen Finnegan, regularly lead trips and teach classes for a variety of organizations in their home state, and for the past six years, they have been leaders at the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. They are Oregon’s statewide eBird coordinators and serve as the local eBird reviewers for their home county.

Laura Kammermeier is a writer, website producer, traveler, birder, and travel consultant. She is the creator and managing editor of NatureTravelNetwork.com, which is a compendium of global nature travel resources to link travelers with great birding and nature hotspots, ecolodges, and qualified tour operators. She is also the sole proprietor of My Digital Nature, a web development and digital communications company specializing in nature and tourism clients. Laura is a past president of the Rochester Birding Association, is a co-founder of the Ohio Ornithological Society, and formerly led the Project FeederWatch program. She lives in Rochester, New York, with her husband and two children.

Doug Tozer was raised just outside Algonquin Provincial Park in central Ontario, Canada. He was a seasonal naturalist in the park for five years and did his Ph.D. research on sapsuckers there but now works as Ontario program scientist at Bird Studies Canada in southern Ontario. Doug has published numerous peer-reviewed articles on bird ecology and conservation and currently coordinates Bird Studies Canada’s Great Lakes Marsh Monitoring Program and Canadian Lakes Loon Survey.

Ron Tozer was park naturalist in Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park for 25 years before retiring in 1996. He continues to compile the park’s bird records as a volunteer, and his much-acclaimed Birds of Algonquin Park was published in 2012. Ron was a member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee for 15 years, including five years as its chair; a co-editor of the Ontario Field Ornithologists’ (OFO) journal, Ontario Birds, for 16 years; and the recipient of OFO’s Distinguished Ornithologist Award in 2009.

Steve Tucker is a wildlife biologist who resides in Albany, California. He has had the opportunity and privilege to work with birds everywhere from the Aleutian Islands to eastern Mexico to Midway Atoll. He birds the Bay Area vigorously and is known by many as the lead author of “Bourbon, Bastards, and Birds”, a polarizing blog that covers everything from the horror of gull identification to the bloody politics of bird records committees. Steve made the questionable decision to begin birding when he was 12 years old, and it has been a happy fixture in his life ever since.
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When I was asked to write an article about Britain’s birds, my first reaction was slight panic. How could my home country compete with the likes of Ecuador, Australia, and Asia, with their league of endemics and highly colorful, beautiful species? In contrast, Great Britain has only one endemic bird, many of its bird species are not exactly dazzling, and, whilst the current British list is just over 600 species (and slowly rising), a high percentage are rare vagrants and migrants.

So why would a birder considering a trip to Europe visit the U.K. rather than, say, Spain? Britain is certainly not without its birding spectacles, and I hope my list of the 20 Best Birds in Britain will help convince you that a trip here will be worthwhile.

Great Britain is a rather small island with a mix of rich and varied habitats. I am lucky to live in East Anglia on the east coast of England. Within 30 minutes of my home, I can walk through huge reedbeds, farmlands, wetlands, grasslands, lowland heathlands, deciduous forests, and coniferous woodlands, and along shingle and sandy beaches, river estuaries, and low sandy coastal cliffs. With this wide variety of habitat comes wildlife diversity, and on a spring day with a bit of luck a list of over 100 species is possible.

In other parts of the country within a couple of hours, you can pass through wild open moorlands and along river valleys to stunning coastal cliffs. One of the best things about birding in Great Britain is the accessibility, with an amazing network of people-friendly nature reserves and national parks. All but a couple of birds on my list can be seen fairly easily and by seeking only a small amount of information.
Bramfield, Suffolk, United Kingdom
rcoombesecology@gmail.com
Rachel Coombes
How did I select my top 20 British birds? Species such as Red-backed Shrike, Barn Owl, European Bee-eater, and Hoopoe would almost certainly make my top 20 favorite birds seen in Britain, but I restricted the list to summer breeding birds or winter migrants, trying to avoid species that are circumpolar in distribution, or rare breeders or scarce migrants. I focused on species which I think a visiting birder would like to see and has a good chance of ticking. Having said that, a few snuck in just because they are favorites and couldn’t be left out!

#1 • European Robin
*Erithacus rubecula*
One of the most common birds in Britain. It will not take long to find one of our red-breasted friends hopping around a garden, park, woodland, or any bit of scrub. Amazingly showy at times, it is often found waiting patiently for a tasty grub as a gardener turns over the ground. The robin sings throughout most of the year, and along with the European Blackbird (a thrush rather like the American Robin), it is one of the first birds to chirp up during the dawn chorus. Robins adorn British Christmas cards in the festive season and really are the quintessential British bird. So popular is the robin that it was recently voted the nation’s favorite bird and crowned our national bird in recognition. This, the original robin, is (along with wheatears) in the Old World flycatcher family and is the species after which the American Robin, a thrush, is named.

#2 • Firecrest
*Regulus ignicapilla*
This colorful and stripy little jewel is without doubt my favorite British passerine. It is also joint holder of the crown “smallest British bird”, along with the Goldcrest; both...
are European species of what are called kinglets in North America. The Firecrest's breeding population has been expanding in southeastern Great Britain in recent years, and its numbers increase during winter and the spring and autumn migrations. Finding a Firecrest in the thickets as you search for rare vagrants is always a bonus to any day's birding. This small bird is constantly moving, and it frequently hovers as it searches for insects.

**#3 • Atlantic Puffin**
*Fratercula arctica*

No spring trip to the U.K. is complete without a trip to a seabird colony. Taking in the sights, sounds, and smells (!) of a colony in full swing is an amazing experience. I have loved seabirds from an early age, and pictures of puffins covered my room as a child. I was very fortunate my conservation career started on England’s most famous seabird islands—the Farnes, where I lived and worked surrounded by thousands of seabirds. It was an experience I will never forget. The puffins kept me constantly entertained, landing next to my watch point with beaks filled with sand eels, waiting to go back to their burrows. One afternoon I found a soot-covered puffin sitting on my bedroom pillow after it had fallen down the chimney. A few days later, a young “puffling” was sitting in the toilet bowl, having become lost on its way to the sea whilst taking its maiden trip into the world. The great thing about British seabird colonies is their accessibility. Seabird islands like the Farnes have daily boat trips during the breeding season, and there are numerous colonies around the mainland.

**#4 • Common Kingfisher**
*Alcedo atthis*

This is a widespread species of Europe, Asia, and northern Africa, but being such a stunning little bird, it had to be included. The most colorful resident bird in the U.K., a kingfisher is often seen as a bolt of blue and orange as it speeds up or down the river giving its distinctive high-pitched call. If you find a feeding perch, you may be lucky enough to watch this technicolor creature diving for fish and bashing its prey on the stick before swallowing it whole.

**#5 • Western Yellow Wagtail**
*Motacilla flava*

A bird of arable farmland and rough grassland, this handsome wagtail is one of my favorites. The subspecies *Motacilla flava flavissima*, with its bright yellow rather than gray/blue head, is a U.K. breeding endemic. Sadly, like many of the U.K.’s farmland birds, it is a species in decline.
Research suggests that changes in agricultural practices are driving these declines, but for this long-distance migrant, factors overseas could also be playing a role. Spending three summers intensively studying this species, I found them to be real characters and very inquisitive, announcing their presence with a short, sharp psit. A Yellow Wagtail is likely to brighten any birder’s day.

#6 • Common Nightingale
*Luscinia megarhynchos*

A summer migrant to southern England, the nightingale is a hard-to-see, sulking, and nondescript brown bird with a reddish tail. Rather unremarkable, until it sings! During the breeding season, a male sings its famous song for hours each night, and older males can have a repertoire of more than 200 different phrases. Urban noise can force nightingales to sing as loudly as 95 decibels—as loud as a chainsaw one meter away, which is enough to violate European sound pollution regulations! I included the species in my top 20 after one amazing starlit night last spring, when I stood in awe listening to the incredible sound of seven close nightingales all trying to out-compete each other. We once had a male singing outside our bedroom window, and, although fantastic to hear, it was not necessarily conducive to sleep! Nightingales are in the same genus as the Bluethroat, which breeds in Alaska.

#7 • Pink-footed Goose
*Anser brachyrhynchus*

Almost the entire Greenland/Iceland Pink-footed Goose breeding population winters in Britain. Even so, a single pinkfoot probably wouldn’t make my list; in a huge flock, though, this species is one of the U.K.’s winter wonders. The north Norfolk coast is one of the best places to
watch this impressive sight, and I love this eastern coastline in winter. The long, open, sandy beaches and salt marshes, and the thousands of birds, make it a very special place. It is fantastic to see, on a cold, sunny, winter's morning, huge skeins of geese adorn the skies as they leave their nighttime roost and head to the fields to feed. Norfolk also attracts thousands of wintering waders, and it is possible to watch the swirling mass of gray and golden shorebirds while the geese wink wink wink overhead.

**#8 • Scottish Crossbill**  
*Loxia scotica*  
Visiting the Caledonian pine forests of central Scotland should be on all visiting birders’ to-do lists. The region’s forests, mountain ranges, and open moorlands are not only visually stunning but also home to several of the U.K.’s more difficult and range-restricted species, including Capercallie (a large grouse), Black Grouse, Golden Eagle, Eurasian Dotterel, and Crested Tit. Why, of all this region’s special birds, did I pick something incredibly difficult to identify with contentious genetics? Well, until genetic study proves otherwise, the Scottish Crossbill remains the U.K.’s only wholly endemic bird. With a bill slightly larger than a Common Crossbill and slightly smaller than a Parrot Crossbill (both occur in the area), it is a tricky bird to tick with confidence. It is most positively identified by its call. Perhaps not the most exciting bird on my top 20 list, but the small population, restricted range, and stunning landscapes which it inhabits make up for its lack of wow factor.

**#9 • Common Cuckoo**  
*Cuculus canorus*  
There are 54 species of Old World cuckoo, but only the Common Cuckoo has the famous onomatopoeic cuckoo-clock song. For me, it is the sound of spring. In fact, it was once a British tradition to write to the Times newspaper upon hearing the first cuckoo of the year. This bird is not only famous for its song but also for its interesting breeding habits. Like the Brown-headed Cowbird, it is a brood parasite, laying its egg in other birds’ nests. The chick is then brought up by foster parents, which are often much smaller than the chick itself. Sadly, the cuckoo population is declining in the U.K., and the exact reason is unknown, although recent geotagging of cuckoos by the British Trust for Ornithology has gathered fascinating data of the birds as they travel between the U.K. and African wintering grounds.

**#10 • Northern Gannet**  
*Morus bassanus*  
The Northern Gannet is an endemic bird of the North Atlantic, and 60–70% of the world population breeds in Britain, mostly on Scottish offshore islands. During my time as a seabird surveyor, I witnessed as many as 2,000 gannets whirling around the vessel, becoming a blur of white, yellow, and black as they circled the boat and
then spectacularly dived for fish. I appreciate that not everyone has the chance to go to sea, but during the summer months, it is possible to visit the swirling mass of gannets at a breeding colony—an experience not to be missed!

#11 • Black Grouse

*Tetrao tetrix*

One of my best British birding moments involves this charismatic species. Walking in the Scottish uplands, we came across a Black Grouse lek with a group of males dancing, ruffling feathers, and “bubbling” loudly to a lone female in a tree. We moved to watch the continued display at what we thought was a safe distance when suddenly another male popped up next to us and performed his own private show and dance.

The sights and sounds of a Black Grouse lek in full swing is one I won’t forget. Black Grouse are highly protected, but there are places in the uplands where you can watch without causing disturbance and experience this amazing display.

#12 • Bearded Tit

*Panurus biarmicus*

Despite its name, this bird is neither bearded nor a tit! The facial pattern of the male is more of a moustache than a beard. Until recently, this species was considered a member of the parrotbill family but now is thought to be more closely related to larks. To avoid all confusion, it also is known as Bearded Reedling.

Bearded Tits live in reedbeds throughout the year with populations currently increasing due to warmer winters and habitat creation. I am lucky here on the Suffolk coast to be surrounded by vast areas of reedbeds. I often hear the distinctive ping call as family parties fly through the reeds.

#13 • Northern Lapwing

*Vanellus vanellus*

Naming the top shorebird (or “wader” as we Brits call them) was a difficult decision between two plovers: the resident lapwing and the summer-visiting Eurasian Dotterel. But while dotterels are hard to see, lapwings can be found almost anywhere. Large flocks can be impressive with their iridescent green-and-purple plumage shimmering in the sunlight. Their crest and round-winged shape make them instantly recognizable. Lapwings perform dramatic aerobatic courtship displays with twists, turns, and somersaults, accompanied by loud peewit calls and the swishing of wings. That distinctive call also gives rise to its alternative name, “peewit”.

#14 • Great Skua

*Stercorarius skua*

My favorite family of seabirds is the jaegers (or, to us Brits, the skuas). The Great Skua is an aggressive and impressive bird, harassing other seabirds as large as gannets for a free meal. Within the U.K., the Great Skua breeds exclusively in Scotland, with the Shetland Islands north of Scotland being one of the best places to see them. Don’t get too close to their nest. If you do, you will probably get a whack on the head, which I can confirm does hurt! The native Shetland term for Great Skua is “bonxie”, a name that has been adopted and is now commonly used by many U.K. birders.
The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a nation consisting of four constituent “countries”—really more equivalent to U.S. states or Canadian provinces in terms of their sovereignty. England, Wales, and Scotland together make up the island of Great Britain. To the west of Great Britain is the island of Ireland, the northeast corner of which constitutes Northern Ireland. The remainder of the island makes up the Republic of Ireland, a separate nation. Together, the islands of Great Britain (often referred to as just “Britain”) and Ireland make up the British Isles.

#15 • Common Redstart
*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
Redstarts are among our most stunning summer breeding migrants, with bright orange-red tails, which they often quiver. Males in breeding plumage look very smart with their black faces and wings, orange rump and chest, and gray upper parts. These birds are mainly distributed in oak woodlands, in hedgerows, and along streams of the north and west, with the greatest numbers in Wales. For me, on the east coast, this is one of the most common migrants, often found in coastal scrub, thickets, and woodland. Redstarts are in an Old World family that also includes the European Robin and the wheatears. “Start” means tail, and the American Redstart, which also has orange-red in the tail, was named after this bird.

#16 • Long-tailed Tit
*Aegithalos caudatus*
Like the Bearded Tit, the Long-tailed Tit isn’t really a tit; instead, it is in the same family as the Bushtit of North America. “Lotties” are frequently found in family parties of eight to twenty, announcing their presence with their distinctive and bubbly *prr-t-prrt* call. Easily identified by its patterned, soft, pink-and-black plumage, small size, and long tail, this fluffy little garden bird is one of the nation’s favorites. Long-tailed Tits have amazing, enclosed, oval-shaped nests constructed from moss, hair, and cobwebs, and lined with hundreds of feathers. It is not unusual for family members to help feed and rear chicks in the breeding season, and in the winter, they huddle together at night to stay warm.

#17 • Eurasian Bullfinch
*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
Shy and secretive birds, bullfinches are more often heard than seen. The song is a rather mournful soft piping note that carries surprisingly far. The male is unmistakable: a burst of color with its stunning pinkish-red breast and cheeks, gray back, black cap, and bright white rump. A pair of bullfinches forms a strong and lasting bond; it is usual to see birds in pairs throughout the year. The name “bullfinch” comes from the bird’s front-heavy, bull-headed appearance. Its short, stubby beak is adapted for feeding on fruit tree buds, which puts it at odds with fruit farmers. In some parts of Europe, it is the bullfinch and not the robin which appears on Christmas cards.
#18 • Tawny Owl

Strix aluco

The Tawny Owl is our most familiar and widespread owl. It is strictly nocturnal and, unless located at roost or disturbed, rarely seen during the day. The famous *twit twoo* call is not actually made by one owl, but is a combination of the female’s contact call (*ke-wick*) with the male answering (*hoo-hoo-hoo*). It is thought that *twit twoo* may have derived from Shakespeare trying to make the overlapping calls fit into a verse in his play *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Tawny Owl vocalizations are often used as a spooky sound effect in film and on television.

#19 • White-throated Dipper

Cinclus cinclus

My last two species have been included as much for their habitat preferences as for the birds themselves. While exploring some of the beautiful riverine valleys of western and northern Britain, there is always a chance of finding the charismatic dipper bobbing on a stone or rock along a fast-flowing river or stream. Far more striking than its American relative, this dipper has a distinctive white throat and breast, and red-brown belly. Dippers feed underwater and have specialized white eyelids to protect the eyes whilst submerged; rather than swim, they walk along the river bottom in search of their insect prey.

#20 • Red-billed Chough

Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax

In the U.K., choughs (pronounced *chuffs*) are restricted to the west coast of Britain and Northern Ireland and inhabit some of our most spectacular coastal cliffs. I always enjoy walking the rugged coastlines of Cornwall, in southwest England, or Wales searching for this characterful bird with its onomatopoeic call—and watching as it gracefully flies along the cliff faces. Like the similarly aerodynamic ravens, choughs are members of the corvid family. Although a chough is featured on the Cornish coat of arms, it had become extirpated in Cornwall until changes in land management led to natural recolonization in 2001. Legend has it that King Arthur turned into a chough on his death and that, when the chough returns to breed in Cornwall, Arthur will rise again. After 15 years, I don’t believe there have been any reported sightings of Arthur yet!

What do you think? What would be on your list of the top 20 birds in Britain? Join the discussion online.
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Coffee that sings
Algonquin Provincial Park has just about everything. Quite simply, it’s “one-stop shopping” year-round for birders. This world-class expanse of wild country is located in central Ontario, Canada, a mere 2.5-hour drive from international airports in Toronto or Ottawa.
Here, birders will find all of the following attractive features: northern specialties such as Spruce Grouse and Boreal Chickadee; excellent accommodations, including campgrounds and lodges; breathtaking views of pristine lakes and mature forests; a globally renowned visitor center with inspiring dioramas of local birds and their habitats; 19 widespread eastern wood-warbler species; 14 well-marked interpretive walking trails, traversing about 35 miles (about 60 km) collectively, each with its own trail guide booklet describing various aspects of the park’s ecology; up to nine species of finches, including crossbills, grosbeaks, and redpolls; wilderness outfitters offering canoe and backcountry camping rentals; eight species of nesting flycatchers, including Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided flycatchers; summertime bird walks led by knowledgeable park staff; rewarding views of irruptive owl species in some winters, including Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls; a ten-mile-long (16-km-long) Old Railway Bike Trail; and ample opportunity to view vivid fall leaf colors, moose, beavers, otters, wildflowers, dragonflies, butterflies, and mushrooms.

Like we said, Algonquin has just about everything. With so much to offer, one might think that Algonquin is so busy that it would be unattractive to birders seeking peace and quiet. But nothing is further from the truth. Even during the high season in the most well-traveled parts of Algonquin, there are many easily accessible locations to get off the beaten path and enjoy the diverse birdlife.
When we think of birding Algonquin, we envision walking over thick mats of balsam and pine needles, breathing in crisp clean northern air, and glancing up to meet eye-to-eye with an inquisitive pair of Gray Jays. We think of working through flocks of Black-capped Chickadees, nuthatches, and kinglets, busily feeding along lichen-draped spruce and tamarack branches, and the excitement of hearing the nasally calls of an elusive Boreal Chickadee lurking within. We recall strolling across soft, damp sphagnum moss, picking our way amongst tea-colored bog pools, and halting upon hearing the distant drumming of a Black-backed Woodpecker.

In particular, we think of searching through thick conifers and suddenly encountering a male Spruce Grouse in full display, red eye combs fully engorged, tail spread wide and swishing. All the while, we are frequently alone in this treasured avian “gold mine”, yet we are able to quickly and easily retreat to comfort at the end of each gratifying day of birding.

Successful trips to most places by birders require careful preparation and planning. While this can be enjoyable, with Algonquin one is pleasantly relieved of these duties. Algonquin is relatively large as parks go, at about 2,950 square miles (about 7,635 square km), larger than the state of Delaware or the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island.

Yet all of the luxuries mentioned above are found along a single, easily accessible, 40-mile (65-km) stretch of highway that leads through the park. Navigation could hardly be simpler. Additionally, there are markers placed every kilometer along the highway, starting at the west gate and ending at the east gate, which makes it very easy to find and estimate the distance to specific birding locations. Lastly, there is an unusually rich amount of information available on Algonquin’s birds, and when and where to find them (see Further Information for more details).

Algonquin is especially good for observing northern specialties, eastern warblers, and finches, partly because of its geographic location and elevation. Algonquin is in an area where the coniferous evergreen forests of the north mix with the deciduous broadleaf forests of the south. Also, the northern forests are accentuated by the park lying on top of a broad “dome” that rises 650 feet (200 m) higher than the surrounding area, putting parts of Algonquin at an elevation of 1,900 feet (585 m) and an associated cooler and more northerly climate. This yields an attractive mix of northern and southern habitats.

For birders, this means seeing Spruce Grouse, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, or Black-backed Woodpecker as well as eastern warblers such as Ovenbird, Black-throated Blue, and American Redstart. It also means seeing conifer seed-eating finches such as crossbills, as well as deciduous seed-eating finches like redpolls.

As we said, Algonquin is one-stop shopping. Many of the best locations to observe the sought-after northern specialties, warblers, and finches are described in detail in the resources listed in Further Information. Rather than try to distill the excellent detail given in these resources, we aim to describe,
in our opinion, the best techniques and locations along Provincial Highway 60 for finding and observing certain of these sought-after species groups.

**Northern Specialties**

During our collective 85 years of birding Algonquin, we have had the most consistent luck observing northern species at three locations along Highway 60: Wolf Howl Pond through to West Rose Lake on the Mizzy Lake Trail (km 15.4 on Highway 60), known locally as the “Golden Mile”; the entire length of Spruce Bog Boardwalk Trail (km 42.5), although between the first and second boardwalks tends to be best for Spruce Grouse; and Opeongo Road (km 46.3), particularly the northern portion.

To access the Golden Mile of the Mizzy Lake
Trail, one can walk the entire seven-mile (11-km) loop, although one can make the trip much shorter by travelling 3 miles (4.8 km) up Arowhon Road from the trail entrance, then turning right on the Old Railway and going 0.4 mile (0.6 km) to a locked chain gate, parking here without blocking the gate, and walking another 0.9 mile (1.5 km) to Wolf Howl Pond and a further 0.3 mile (0.5 km) to West Rose Lake.

Spruce Bog Boardwalk Trail is a one-mile (1.5-km) loop, the entire length of which is wheelchair-accessible. Opeongo Road is 3.7 miles (6.2 km) long, with the best portion for northern species beyond the Cameron Lake Road turnoff about 1.5 miles (2.5 km) north of Highway 60.

Each of these locations has extensive black spruce and mixed coniferous forests preferred by the northern species, where each of them can be found year-round. Below we describe our favorite techniques for finding these species at these locations.

**Black-backed Woodpecker.** Listen for these woodpeckers drumming or tapping while they feed, or giving blackbird-like chuck calls. Flaked bark on the ground or snow below dead spruce or tamarack is an excellent sign of individuals pursuing wood-boring beetle larvae. They often excavate nesting cavities starting in April in trees at Wolf Howl Pond or West Rose Lake, in utility poles along Opeongo Road, or anywhere that has poles next to their preferred boggy habitat. Like many woodpeckers, the young
beg for food almost constantly from within the cavity, another excellent cue that can be heard until July.

- **Spruce Grouse.** Individuals of this species can be extremely easy to find one minute but impossible the next. Keep your patience handy. One of the best strategies is to look for them on the ground along trails or roads adjacent to their preferred black spruce habitat just after first light in the morning when they like to ingest small stones and pebbles to aid digestion in their

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**Further Information**

We recommend the Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park, with bar graphs showing extreme and average arrival and departure dates; Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park, a 40-page, picture-filled overview of the park’s bird ecology; and Birds of Algonquin Park, an impressively detailed 474-page species-by-species account of the historical and current status, population trend, and behavior of each of the park’s 278 bird species. We also like The Explorer’s Guide to Algonquin Park, a 223-page detailed breakdown of where to go and how to get there, including tips for the best birding.

These resources are available for purchase at the park Visitor Centre and Logging Museum and through The Friends of Algonquin Park at www.algonquinpark.on.ca. For information on birds throughout Ontario and beyond, we recommend visiting Bird Studies Canada at www.birdscanada.org.
gizzards. Otherwise, search treed sections of bogs dominated by black spruce by walking systematically and slowly with frequent stops. Stopping may cause the birds to move because they sense they have been detected, giving you a cue to their presence. Constantly scan for movement by the birds from the ground up into the trees. They seem to perch most frequently below about 20 feet (7 m). They can be found year-round, but from April to May and September to October seem to be best.

**Boreal Chickadee.** These birds are much more elusive than Black-capped Chickadees, with which they often travel during winter. They normally stay hidden in dense spruce and rarely vocalize, even when other nearby birds are out in the open. Listen carefully for their distinctive nasally chick-a-day-day calls, and become familiar with their little-known song-like call. They are most vocal from February to April. These birds are not typically found at feeders. However, they have been regular visitors to a suet feeder maintained by park staff near the entrance of Spruce Bog Boardwalk Trail in recent winters.

**Gray Jay.** Unlike the secretive northern specialties, individuals of this inquisitive species are apt to find you before you find them. These birds are attracted to people because they often get fed along Highway 60, a practice that has been shown experimentally to boost their reproductive success. If they disappear with food, just wait a few minutes, as they will return and find you for more after they have cached the food. Remarkably, they will likely recall and successfully retrieve the stored food months later. Long-term research on color-banded Gray Jays in the Highway 60 corridor has shown that numbers of this species have declined by more than 50% in the park during the past 35 years, apparently due to climate warming causing their stored food to spoil during winter warm spells. The species is holding out more in black spruce habitats compared to mixed forests, most likely due to chemicals in the trees contributing to better cached food preservation, so concentrate your efforts in black spruce if the jays haven’t managed to find you yet. Despite the decline, there are still at least about 25 active territories between Wolf Howl Pond and West Rose Lake on Mizzy Lake Trail and along Highway 60 east of km 30. They are easiest to find from September to April, sometimes being very inconspicuous in summer.

**Warblers**

As many as 19 species of breeding warblers can readily be found along Highway 60 by visiting coniferous forests (Nashville, Magnolia, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Northern Parula), mixed forests (Yellow-rumped, Black-and-white, Canada), broadleaf forests (Ovenbird, Black-throated Blue, American Redstart), hemlock stands (Blackburnian, Black-throated Green), white pine stands (Pine), open or disturbed areas (Chesnut-sided, Mourning, Yellow), wooded swamps (Northern Waterthrush), and open bogs (Common Yellowthroat). Bat Lake Trail (km 30.0 on Highway 60) visits nearly all of these habitats, so it may produce most of the species. The locations described above for northern specialties are good for coniferous forest, mixed forest, and open bog species; Hemlock Bluff Trail (km 27.2) for hemlock stand species; Lake Of Two Rivers (km 31.8) and Fog Lake (km 36.9) campgrounds for Pine Warbler; Hardwood Lookout

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Trail (km 13.8) and northern sections of the Track and Tower Trail (km 25.0) for broadleaf forest species; and the Visitor Centre parking lot (km 43.0) and the trail-er sanitation station (km 35.6) for open or disturbed area species.

Finches
Success with finding members of this group depends on the extent and composition of tree seed crops, which fluctuate wildly from year to year and dictate the presence and abundance of each species. Some species visit only during winter (Pine Grosbeak, Common and Hoary redpoll); the rest are present in summer or winter (Red and White-winged crossbill, Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, American Goldfinch, Evening Grosbeak). All species may be present in some winters. Finches often gather on Highway 60 during winter to eat road sand and salt, allowing for excellent viewing. Some of the species can also be seen well at feeders at the Visitor Centre. Consult Ron Pittaway’s winter finch forecast, compiled each fall, to find out which species are to be expected. It is available through Ontario Field Ornithologists at www.ofo.ca.

Final Considerations
As we’ve suggested, Algonquin is ideal for birding. Highway 60 even offers the added bonus of no poison ivy, no poisonous snakes, and no disease-carrying ticks (at least not yet). There is, however, one very important consideration in planning a trip to Algonquin. The park is well known for its black flies and mosquitoes in season. These sometimes-abundant biting insects are typically the worst from mid- to late May through mid- to late June. If you visit during this time, it is best to come prepared with a bug jacket, repellent, and a very potent dose of patience.

A more positive consideration is the long list of easily found bird species of interest to many birders that we haven’t even mentioned yet. These include American Black, Wood, and Ring-necked duck; Common and Hooded merger; Common Loon; American Bittern; Broad-winged Hawk; Merlin; Wilson’s Snipe; American Woodcock; Northern Saw-whet and Barred owl; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Hairy, Downy, and Pileated woodpecker; Northern Flicker; Eastern Wood-Pewee; Least, Alder, and Great Crested flycatcher; Eastern Phoebe; Blue-headed and Red-eyed vireo; Hermit and Swainson’s thrush; Veery; Common Raven; Brown Creeper; Winter Wren; Golden and Ruby-crowned kinglet; Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Scarlet Tanager; White-throated, Song, and Lincoln’s sparrow; and Dark-eyed Junco.

Within and around Algonquin, there are many services for travelers. For the best information in one place, we suggest thoroughly reading the excellent and remarkably comprehensive website maintained by The Friends of Algonquin Park at www.algonquinpark.on.ca. Here, you can also learn about even more attractions, including those located away from Highway 60—for example, 20 backcountry access points leading to hundreds of canoe and backpacking campsites, and additional interpretive walking trails, including one that goes along the rim of a 330-foot-high (100-m-high) canyon (Barron Canyon Trail) and another that visits a meteorite impact crater (Brent Crater Trail)—all, of course, with excellent birding.

Algonquin is a very special place with exceptional opportunities for birders. We hope we have encouraged you to pay a visit and enjoy the place as much as we do.
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Seabirds have long had a special draw for birders. They are well adapted to spending most of their lives far offshore, living at the mercy of storms, currents, and food sources that are constantly on the move. Their variety and propensity for wandering is cause for much celebration, their way of life both mystifying and awe-inspiring.

Picking distant seabirds out from a blustery, windswept point, or through salt spray on the bow of a rocking boat, is a skill many aspire to. The difficulty and expense involved in seeing these species only adds to their allure. For birders content to stay continental, scanning the oceans off the mainland can fill a lifetime of birding… but the U.S. (and now the ABA Area!) has other lands, and other seas, where a whole new suite of striking and captivating species can be found in droves.

The Hawaiian Islands lie far to the west of the North American continent. Besides being an iconic tourist destination, they are famous to birders for their endemic and increasingly rare forest birds, and almost equally so for their mind-boggling ensemble of introduced species. But despite common perceptions, Hawaii is not all crowded beaches, lava rock, and rainforest. In fact, the Hawaiian chain extends hundreds of miles to the northwest of the populated main islands, in a long string of small islands and atolls. These are the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the older counterparts to Hawaii’s main islands that lie within Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Near the end of the island chain sits Midway Atoll, which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a national wildlife refuge. Midway is best known to Ameri-
cans as the site of the pivotal Pacific WWII battle that turned the tide of the war. Far fewer know that it features one of the world’s most stunning seabird colonies. It is here that one may meet seabirds, often face to face, that can be difficult or impossible to find off the continental U.S. The atoll boasts 21 species of breeding seabirds, numbering about three million individuals.

Laysan and Black-footed albatrosses, Bonin Petrels, and Sooty Terns are not only some of the species you can find—they are the commonest birds! As I spent several months there volunteering for USFWS a few years ago, I would describe it as a Shangri-La for birders and seabird enthusiasts. With the recent expansion of the ABA Area, Midway will
likely become even more prized as a birding destination. It’s not the quantity of species you will get to see, though; it’s the quality!

Midway is a low-lying atoll, comprised of three islands and a large circular coral reef. Sand Island is the heavily vegetated island where Midway’s small human population resides, with nearby Eastern Island and tiny Spit Island seemingly desolate by comparison. Midway is considered an unincorporated, unorganized territory of the U.S. and does not actually fall under the jurisdiction of the state of Hawaii, though islands both to the east and west do. Midway typically has several dozen permanent residents at any given time, and offers many amenities, despite its remote location. The residents of Midway generally include an eclectic mix of USFWS staff, contractors (including many Thai nationals) who help run the “town” and airport, and a handful of researchers.

A birder’s first visit to Midway is something to remember forever. The arrival itself is a very disorienting experience. During much of the year, all civilian flights to the atoll arrive at night, in order to avoid collisions with diurnal seabirds. When you begin your descent through the darkness, you can see nothing but a single strip of lights suspended in a black abyss, glowing through the cockpit window.

After landing and taxiing down the tarmac, the plane pulls up in front of a massive, dilapidated hangar, lit up in floodlights. You disembark and are quickly herded into a waiting golf cart (there are few cars on the island). You take in the warm, wet air that has a faint sweetness to it. As you find your bearings, you become aware of swift, black-and-white birds flying in and out of the overhead
lights, like giant moths.

Finally, you start listening. Once you cut through the excited human chatter around you, you realize there is a wall of sound in the background. These are the albatrosses, and their constant honks, moos, whinnies, titters, groans, and quacks will not abate until you depart the island. On your ride to “town”, you can make out the forms of thousands of Laysan Albatrosses lining the roadways, and your driver swerves to avoid any albatrosses or Bonin Petrels that wander into the road, which is what you saw in the lights at the hangar. The experience is surreal, even intoxicating.

It is difficult to sleep that first night, between the unbelievable din of the petrels and albatrosses, and wondering what your first day will hold. As a birder, it is not unlike being a child trying to fall asleep on Christmas Eve.

When morning arrives, you step out the door and into the world’s largest Laysan Albatross nesting colony. Laysan Albatrosses and their nests seemingly occupy every piece of ground in sight, and in between many nests are burrows dug by Bonin Petrels. Simply walking down the road to the dining hall will produce curious White Terns and the more businesslike Black Noddies swooping overhead. Pacific Golden-Plovers and Ruddy Turnstones meekly make room for you as you pass, reminiscent of blackbirds in a parking lot. Wisdom, the world’s oldest-known Laysan Albatross and oldest living wild bird (she is over 65!), is readily found every year nesting next to the barracks that you pass by.

Grab a bicycle, take a short trip to the harbor, and find Black-footed Albatrosses nesting near the beaches, Great Frigatebirds relaxing in the ironwood trees, and Bristle-thighed Curlews poking in the duff for grubs or mice to munch on. Red-tailed Tropicbirds loudly perform their elaborate flight displays over the shoreline or peacefully sit on nests at the base of trees. Keep an eye to the sky around “developed” parts of Sand Island for one of the few White-tailed Tropicbirds that nest there. Brown Noddies are numerous and may attempt a peck at your head if you are too close to a nest. Green sea turtles and Hawaiian monk seals haul out on Turtle Beach, and in the harbor, you may see an incredible diversity of reef fish, sharks, manta rays, and spotted eagle rays, all from dry land.
(plenty of snorkeling opportunities exist as well).

At night, a different avian shift takes over on Sand Island, with Bonin Petrels and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters emerging from burrows and returning from foraging offshore. The comically ghostly and bizarre calls of the shearwaters have raised goose bumps on many birders and non-birders alike over the years. Lucky birders may come across a Bulwer's Petrel or Tristram's Storm-Petrel near the old chapel. The extremely rare and little-known Bryan's Shearwater, described as a full species only a few years ago, was first discovered on Midway and may potentially occur again.

The ensemble of birdlife to be found on the atoll is not only amazing but also fairly tame. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, most of which were never permanently settled by Polynesians or Europeans, have (until recently) been largely devoid of avian and mammalian predators for countless millennia. Midway's seabirds have, for the most part, not evolved with predators and are astonishingly approachable. Indeed, these islands have often been called America's Galápagos. Approaching within feet of albatrosses, Bonin Petrels, and White Terns is a routine occurrence.

Certain wetlands on Sand Island have shorebirds and waterfowl much of the year. The large water catchment basin near the runway is a big draw for migrants and a good place to check for unusual ducks and gulls. It also happens to be the only place in the world where Least and Little terns nest side by side. This is also the best spot to find unusual shorebirds; a good
number of Old World shorebird species have been recorded here over the years. Laysan Ducks are present year-round.

Laysan Duck is Midway’s specialty waterfowl, and this is one of only three places in the world to see the critically endangered bird. Formerly found throughout the Hawaiian chain, the species’ range has shrunk to the point of persisting only on Laysan Island, which is several hundred miles east of Midway. The USFWS brought them to Midway, and later to Kure Atoll, to establish a refugia population in case a storm, invasive species, or disease were to wipe out the Laysan birds. The ducks are wary but intensely curious; small flocks flying by may actually go out of their way to land next to you and check you out.

In travelling around Sand Island, you will undoubtedly notice Common Mynas and Island Canaries. These are the only passerines you are likely to see, descendants of birds brought over a hundred years ago by workers for the Commercial Pacific Cable Company. Aside from the occasional Peregrine Falcon or Short-eared Owl, no other landbirds occur at Midway with regularity.

Because it is so far from any significant land mass, Midway does not attract numbers of continental migrants but does get its share of vagrants. Red Phalarope, Pomarine Jaeger, Grey-tailed Tattler, “Siberian” Whimbrel, and Lesser Frigatebird were recorded while I was there. There are
Also nesting on Eastern are the avian celebrities of Midway Atoll, the pair of Short-tailed Albatrosses that successfully fledged their first chick in June 2011. Despite the dazzling array of birds that call Midway their home, this is one species that is especially sought-after by practically every birder. Aside from hopping on a boat and trawling the seas along Alaska’s Aleutian Islands, Midway is one of the only places in U.S. waters to find one. For the past several years, several individual Short-tails have made Midway their home. The breeding pair reside on Eastern Island in the middle of a small “flock” of Short-tailed Albatross decoys (they seem to have worked!).

For years, the pair could be seen dancing together and preening one another, but the female was too young to breed. In 2011, the pair finally lived up to enormous expectations and produced a chick, which was raised with not a small amount of drama. High storm waters washed over the island twice, washing away most of the other albatross nests in the area. It is estimated that the second storm surge (actually part of a tsunami) killed 2,000 adult and 110,000 Laysan and Black-footed albatross chicks, a grim reminder of how vulnerable Midway’s nesting birds are to foul-weather events and rising seas.

After both surges, the Short-tailed chick was found alive but washed away from its nest bowl, and had to be returned. Despite all the island drama, the dutiful parents continued coming to feed it, and the chick went on to fledge.

Sadly, the future of Midway’s wildlife depends largely on human activity, both on and off the islands. The atoll presents a paradox—at once a conservation success story and an environmental catastrophe. Many thousands of Laysan Albatross chicks are thought to have died from ingesting lead paint chips that flake off many of the aging structures. Non-native plants, notably ironwood trees and flowering Verbesina, can grow in such a way as to eliminate large swaths of habitat for ground- and burrow-nesting seabirds. Rising sea levels threaten to swallow the islands whole. Albatrosses, famously clumsy on land, have not evolved with much tall vegetation and regularly have deadly en-
tangles with Midway’s tall ironwood trees. It is a gruesome reminder of the havoc introduced species can cause.

Midway Atoll’s most widely known problem is marine debris, which litters every beach and is scattered all over the islands. Tons of marine debris—plastic, glass, metal, and commercial fishing gear—wash ashore every year by the North Pacific Gyre, which collects and distributes debris from the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch. One study estimated that several tons of plastic are brought by albatrosses alone to the atoll, every year.

Albatrosses are opportunistic feeders and will ingest everything from live squid to action figures and Bic lighters. They have a neat trick of regurgitating anything they eat that they cannot digest (think giant owl pellets), thus spreading plastic everywhere on the atoll. But chicks do not have this ability, and no one knows how many albatross chicks die every year from filling up on plastic that their parents feed them by accident. Most of us who have been there are under the impression it is a great and disturbing number, and you never have to go very far without finding an old albatross carcass with a disconcertingly large pile of undigested plastic where the stomach used to be.

The highly endangered Hawaiian monk seals, green sea turtles, and all seabirds are at risk of entanglement with marine debris, which can maim or drown wildlife. Old fishing nets (“ghost nets”) are particularly troublesome; while drifting at sea, they are capable of catching anything from fish to spinner dolphins and can damage coral when snagged on the reef.

At least one species of bird has gone extinct on Midway: the Laysan Rail, formerly endemic to Laysan Island. Thanks to introduced rabbits, they were in imminent danger of extinction on Laysan from habitat loss, and as a rescue attempt, several were brought to Midway in the early 20th century, where they appeared to do well. The rails on Laysan did indeed blink out of existence, and rats brought to Midway by WWII shipping eventually wiped out the last survivors on Midway, too.

The rails are not the only birds that took a hit from the rats. All ground-nesting birds were badly affected. People observed rats jumping on the backs of albatrosses and eating them alive. It must have been a hellish time for Midway’s birdlife. Brown Boobies, the commonest booby of the atoll, ceased nesting there by the 1970s (Red-footed is now the most abundant booby). Tristram’s Storm-Petrels and Bulwer’s Petrels were completely extirpated from the islands.

Nonetheless, Midway is far from being all doom and gloom. Midway was not an ideal place for wildlife when it was a massive military base, but as its strategic significance and human population declined, birds began to take back abandoned parts of the islands.

When the base was fully decommissioned in the 1990s, the U.S. Navy went to great lengths to eradicate rats as part of its cleanup operation. The campaign
was a success, and today the atoll is free of rats. Midway’s Bonin Petrel population has exploded to astronomical heights since the rats left, Tristram’s Storm-Petrels are breeding on Sand Island again, and Bulwer’s Petrels may be breeding again as well. Brown Boobies are again nesting on Eastern Island.

USFWS staff are busy removing ironwood trees and _Verbesina_, cultivating and planting native grasses, and cleaning up soil contaminated with lead. Large parts of Sand and Eastern islands are now covered with nesting albatrosses, where dense patches of _Verbesina_ had excluded them only a few years ago.

Until recently, birders could readily visit Midway through organized tours. Unfortunately, that has changed. Federal budget cuts to the USFWS have made it impossible for tour groups to visit Midway; birders can only hope that funding for the Midway’s visitor program will be restored in the near future. If you have the opportunity, go! Though you can see some of the same specialty birds on the main Hawaiian Islands, visiting Midway is an experience you’ll treasure for the rest of your life.

Despite the obstacles they face, Midway’s seabirds and other wild residents are resilient. They have dealt with war, rats, tsunamis, an onslaught of invasive plants—you name it. Through our awareness of the human-caused problems there and a willingness to take action, many species have been able to hang on and come back.

Birds of **Midway Atoll**

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_Bristle-thighed Curlew._ Photo © Steve Tucker

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Birders represent an important part of the tourism sector in many countries and a growing tourism segment worldwide. Nature Travel Network, a website devoted to birding travel, surveyed birders to find out about their traveling habits and preferences.
eventy-five birders from 16 countries responded to our Nature Travel Network survey on travel. This article offers tips and techniques for the traveling birder, drawing on the results of the survey, and is interspersed with comments and opinions from some of the respondents (modified only for clarity).

Who participated in the survey? Most of those surveyed travel just for fun, though a few respondents were professional bird guides. Most of the respondents like to travel independently (with a partner or friend) or on group tours, and a small percentage enjoy traveling solo. Most of the travelers surveyed travel within the United States and Canada, and about a third of them travel internationally.

How much do birders spend on travel every year? “I try not to think about that!” joked a respondent from Vienna, Austria. The survey uncovered a range of spending from as little as a few hundred dollars to more than $75,000 per year—all to satisfy intense cravings for time spent with birds in nature. Astoundingly, this small sample of birders collectively pumps a half a million dollars into the world’s birding travel economy every year!

We asked individuals how they deal with some of the most stressful decisions in travel: How do you decide on a tour company? How do you pack and manage all your gear? What goes in your carry-on? We also asked respondents to give advice for people who want to travel for birds but don’t have a partner. Finally, we wrap up with ideas for how to travel sustainably.

How to Choose a Group Tour Company

Participants who book group tours are very selective. They weigh an array of factors in choosing both the company and the specific trip, but three of these factors stand out as most important: (1) birding targets and endemic species that will be seen on the tour, (2) cost, and (3) tour dates. The size of the group tour, the field guides/trip leaders, and the guide’s experience with the destination are also considered.

How do you judge the quality of a tour company? Survey respondents offered these recommendations:
- Word of mouth usually is the best way to evaluate a tour company or operator. Read trip reports, and talk to birders in person and online. People are candid...
Travel Tips

about their own experiences and are happy to share the good and the bad. I wish I knew how important that information was before I agreed to accompany my friend on our last trip! —D. from Cherry Hill, NJ

■ Talk with other birders. It’s personal. Some may prioritize a relaxed schedule while you prioritize pounding for endemics, but the information and impressions they share can be helpful. —Jude from Bayside, CA

■ Experience. We prefer guides who are local to the area. We want to make sure we’re contributing to that country’s economy—not to someone who swoops in, profits, and leaves. —Lisa from Austin, TX

■ Every destination has a particular price range; some companies are known to be expensive due to the quality of services or reputation. Do not be tempted by a really cheap tour price. This usually means the company is “cutting corners” somewhere. It could be uncovered meals, small, tight vehicles, or unworthy accommodations. —Jonathan from Tel Aviv, Israel

■ We ask lots of specific questions about issues that are important to us—how much time will be devoted to observing other wildlife, how flexible is the schedule, are changes to the itinerary made by a group decision, etc. —Debbie from Philadelphia, PA

■ When we’re on a birding tour, we don’t like to waste too much time on non-birding activities, so plans for shopping excursions, city tours, or “free time” count as negatives for us. We also prefer for all meals and tips to be covered so that there is no confusion and chaos when it’s time to pay the dinner bill. The best predictor for future tour success is past tour success, so once we’ve found a birding company and a guide that we’re happy with, we stick with them. —David and Judy, Durham, NC

■ Details in the lists added to eBird are a good way to assess the guides and schedule. —Fabio from São Paulo, Brazil

Hard-and-Fast Rules When it Comes to Packing for Adventure Travel

■ Less is always more. Pack what you think you’ll need, then remove one third of it. You can live without the rest.

■ Carry all your optics and valuables on the plane with you. Also carry on anything you’d miss for two days if your luggage gets held up. Use the handy packing list at naturetravelnetwork.com/packing-list.

■ Try to fit all your belongings into two carry-ons: one carry-on and one large personal item. Checking a bag takes longer, costs more, and increases the chance that the airline will lose your belongings. Chris from Nashville said he and his wife managed a 17-day trip to Papua New Guinea with this combo. They are travel rock stars!

■ Buy travel insurance. Insurance can save you money in case of trip cancellation, flight changes, or medical evacuations. Medical evacs are infrequent, but they do occur; without insurance, they will cost you tens of thousands of dollars.

Advice for First-Time Solo Travelers

■ Just do it! It’s wonderful, you meet so many more people when you travel solo. —Elsa from Miami, FL

■ Just go. I began traveling alone after my husband died. I’ve had some marvelous adventures and met some wonderful people. —Linda from Corrales, NM

■ Go on group tours, or hire bird guides by the day wherever you go. —Elaine from Grafton, WI

■ Some tour companies will pair you up with another solo traveler. —Michael from Trenton, NJ

■ Join a birding organization. ABA tours are flawless! —Susan from Cascade, CO

Travel Sustainably

The key to sustainable travel is to leave a place better than you found it, whether through money or good deeds. Remember that you are a guest in a foreign land that owes you nothing, so be giving rather than demanding. Your tourism dollars have the potential to show communities how valuable their natural resources are, so try to support sustainable travel practices and operators in all its forms.

Here are some ways to travel sustainably:

■ Travel with companies that support, through donations or volunteer hours, a local conservation organization. Many

Continued on page 46

■ Make sure to check rates with your wireless provider before using your phone abroad. —Trenton, NJ

Worried you’ll forget something important? Use the handy packing list at naturetravelnetwork.com/packing-list. Photo © Tara O’Leary
“The world is a book
and those who do not travel read only one page.” - St. Augustine

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tour companies include a donation as a portion of their trip costs. If your favorite tour company doesn’t, you might challenge them to adopt the practice.

■ Buy local, hire local. Keep as much money on the ground as possible. Does your lodge hire local labor or import English speakers from other countries? Does your tour operator hire local guides in the destination or go it alone?

■ Don’t tolerate aggressive guides or participants. The animals should always come first. Speak up if someone is harassing a bird with playback or with a camera, or by getting too close, especially if that bird is nesting. Frequent visits to a nesting site can attract the attention of natural and human predators in search of eggs or nestlings.

■ Don’t encourage your guides to visit habitats that have a low carrying capacity for humans just so you can bag a bird. Sometimes you have to let a bird go.

■ Tip well, and leave something behind for your guide, driver, and other service providers.

■ Have your trip count for something. Enter your global sightings into eBird. Consult your guide first if there are at-risk species whose locations should be protected.

Pro Tips

■ Pack a collapsible empty bag for dirty laundry, gifts, and other stuff. If you’re traveling to countries such as Chile, Spain, or South Africa, you might want to bring a hard case for wine!

■ If traveling with a spouse or friend, considering packing half your belongings in the other person’s case and vice versa, in case one of you loses a bag.

■ Take clothes you can launder yourself. Quick-dry fabric works best. Consider packing a small clothesline and clothes pins.

■ Put your car keys in a safe place that you won’t forget. Being stuck in the parking lot of your home airport at midnight after a two-week trip is no way to end your adventure.

■ Call your credit card company before big trips. Numerous purchases from different or distant locations can trip your credit card company’s fraud-protection alerts.

■ Be sure you understand currency standards of your destination country. Remember that some countries are cash-only societies (such as Cuba), and others have very limited access to ATMs. In some remote areas, credit cards are of limited to no use.

■ Bring a roll of toilet paper, baggies, and hand sanitizer with you in the field. Put used paper in a sealed plastic bag.

■ Put your smartphone in a waterproof hard case, like an OtterBox, and close the flaps! I found this out the hard way on a Leica trip to Honduras. I tucked my phone into my cargo pants. After surviving a treacherous, slippery, seven-mile hike through the untamed jungle, we had to ford a raging stream at the base of a waterfall. I slipped on a rock and fell waist-deep into the drink. There went my iPhone…

■ Bring comfortable night clothes and shoes. After a long, sweaty day in the field, I change into a long skirt and sandals for dinner. This transforms me from roadkill into a proper dinner guest. Some of my gentlemen friends like to wear kilts.

Parting Thoughts

Our final tip comes from “GM” in Ontario, Canada: Get together with the group over beer each evening to compile lists of birds seen and locations visited. It builds friendships and solidifies the memories. Indeed, being in a new, strange land doing what you love to do (birding!) with other people who love birds as much as you is incredibly satisfying. The nightly checklist is part of that ritual. Safe travels wherever and whenever you go!

For more resources on birding travel, visit NatureTravelNetwork.com. NTN features a destination directory (“Destinations” on the menu), which has an information portal to birding hotspots around the world.

In a subsequent issue of Birder’s Guide, we’ll go into details about not just what to pack but what to pack it in. That’s right: We’re tackling the best luggage for birders next time.

We’d love to hear your thoughts on travel. What did you think about the advice given above? Care to share some of your own? Join the conversation online at birdersguide.aba.org
I sat down in the Jorge Newbery Airport terminal to wait for my boarding call. The chaotic streets of Buenos Aires receded from my mind, and in their place, the promise of Patagonia began to take shape: Lesser Rheas (cousins of the ostrich) running pell-mell through the grassy steppe, flamingos holding yogic poses in shallow waters, and the short-tailed silhouettes of buzzard-eagles wheeling around the sun. The boarding call came, and in a few hours, our plane would touch down in one of the most magnificently scenic landscapes on the planet.

Patagonia is a region within Chile and Argentina that occupies the southernmost portion of South America. Its borders run from the Colorado River in the north to Cape Horn in the south, and west to east from Pacific to Atlantic oceans. It’s the size of California, Nevada, and Arizona combined but with only a tiny fraction of the population. Here, the final section of the Andes Mountains—some 1,100 miles long and topping off at over 15,000 feet in elevation—stretches down Patagonia’s western side.

This was my second trip to Patagonia. I visited the Chilean side seven years earlier for a backpacking trip in Torres del Paine National Park. I was returning to Patagonia, this time on the Argentine side, because I had been be-
witched by the place, like so many others before me. Charles Darwin visited the wind-scoured Patagonian steppe as a 24-year-old man, and later in life, he tried to understand its lingering appeal. He came to no conclusion, but he wrote that the landscape’s allure “must be partly owing to the free scope given to the imagination”. For me, the spell of Patagonia comes from the primeval feel of the place. Civilization seems far away. There’s a sense that secrets will be revealed at any moment, perhaps in the form of an orange-breasted bird or a porcelain orchid.

Our plane touched down at the El Calafate airport
under a bright southern sky. The glacier-fed waters of Lago Argentino glowed eerily and beautifully nearby. After a cheap meal of empanadas, I explored the town. I quickly discovered that El Calafate was a place I could live. Tiny, brightly-painted homes with window flowerbeds lined quiet streets. When I started to notice signs featuring hand-painted flamingos that pointed the way to the Laguna Nimez Reserve, I followed them.

The Laguna Nimez Reserve, just a short walk from downtown El Calafate, is a peaceful site with excellent birding. Modest in size, the reserve contains two large ponds and a 1.5-mile-long walking trail. The reserve was awash in blooms. Tall grasses, featuring the first exhibitions from autumn’s palette, undulated in the wind. A group of ten Chilean Flamingos stood in the placid waters of the main pond.

As the sun headed for the horizon, the light in the reserve grew steadily richer. A pair of Coscoroba Swans with bright red bills circled the reserve and then landed on the pond, joining Crested Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, Chiloé Wigeon, and Red Shovelers. As I followed the trail through some tall shrubs, out popped a small, black bird with contrasting yellow beak and eye-rings: a Spectacled Tyrant. Next, a Chimango Caracara alighted on a fence post and stood on one leg.

The birds of Laguna Nimez showed little fear of people, much like the birds of the Galápagos, Mauritius, and other places where birds evolved without regular human contact. One of my best moments at Nimez involved an intrepid Plumbeous Rail. This plump, gray-and-brown marsh bird emerged from a clump of reeds and cocked his head a few times to better see me through merlot-red eyes. I sat down in the trail. The rail approached to within a few feet of me, lingered for a while, and then walked off in measured steps.

An impressive feature of Laguna Nimez was its handmade signs. One wooden sign featured the flamboyant outline of the Tufted Tit-Tyrant, a diminutive fly-catcher with two curved feather tufts on its crown and hence the nickname of “little bull”. A colorful mural of local
Birding Trip to Patagonia

The portion of southern Patagonia visited by the author. Map © Rad Smith

The portion of northern Patagonia visited by the author. Map © Rad Smith
birds added cheer to a viewing blind. Even the “no dogs” sign—a circle with a slash over the silhouette of a terrier—featured a meadowlark perched on the circle. These signs demonstrated the care, attention, and love of place necessary for nature conservation. The best message on a sign was straightforward: *dónde vives conserva la naturaleza* (conserve nature where you live).

The next morning, I teamed up with a young American woman I met in Buenos Aires and re-encountered in the streets of El Calafate. We followed a narrow earthen path that criss-crossed the Calafate Creek and led into the Andean foothills. We watched a flock of Black-chinned Siskins foraging greedily, and later an elegant raptor landed on a fencepost: a male American Kestrel but with a whiter belly and more subtle facial markings than kestrels in North America.

Canyon walls rose up on either side of us as we ventured farther. We came to a marshy area where Blue-and-white Swallows flew reconnaissance missions past us in sweeping arcs. Then, in a moment of mutual surprise, a handful of South American Snipe flushed before us. We continued through thorny scrub and were met by a male Rufous-tailed Plantcutter with orange-red undersides and crown, white wing spots, and impatient-looking red eyes. Next, a massive raptor with a tail so short it barely protruded beyond its wings—a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle—flew...
overhead, slowing down over us as if passing through a speed zone.

The Calafate Creek was visible as a bright green ribbon of well-watered vegetation amongst the tan, olive, and straw hues of the surrounding, treeless Patagonian steppe. A little farther on, we noticed a large, dark raptor hopping around the base of a cliff opposite us. I checked in my *Birds of Southern South America and Antarctica* field guide but could not find a match. How could such a large raptor defy identification? It seemed the mystery would remain, but then an adult buzzard-eagle clutching a mammal in its talons flew in and landed next to the dark raptor: meal delivery for its offspring.

It was nearing our dinner time, too. We started homeward toward the surreal, turquoise waters of Lago Argentino—their color the result of fine sediment created when rocks pulverize rocks under the unimaginable weight of glaciers.

The next day, I boarded a bus for an hour-long ride to Los Glaciares National Park to see the famous Perito Moreno Glacier. The great mountains rose to meet our transport as we hurtled toward them. The glacier viewing area in the park included a large indoor café and miles of boardwalk integrated unobtrusively within a peninsular tongue of southern beech forest that stopped just short of licking the glacier. Glancing up from the parking area, I noticed an Andean Condor high overhead, soaring

**LEFT:** Andean Condor Photo © João Quental

**BELOW:** Coscoroba Swans Photo © João Quental
sedately on plank-like wings in a world accessible to a privileged few.

I set out on the boardwalk and soon disappeared into the forest. The beech trees, which grew to only a modest height, possessed a wizened, welcoming appearance: moss-covered trunks, dainty leaves, and gently curving limbs that had never known haste. From within the forest came the soft, pleasing trills of Thorn-tailed Rayaditos: small, chickadee-like birds with large black-and-buffy heads and spiny tails. Up ahead, squatting idly on the boardwalk, was a medium-sized brown bird: a Chilean Flicker, looking professorial in its subdued wardrobe.

The boardwalk emerged from the forest at intervals to spectacular views of the glacier. Craggy ice peaks, glowing in pale shades of blue, jutted out of the glacier's frontal wall; below, ice chunks floated and bobbed in steely, stippled waters; and the glacier itself extended back in sweeping contours to inhospitable highlands. Then, an anomalous, tropical sound: the squeaky, screechy flight calls of...parrots? Soon a group of 10 or so Austral Parakeets—the most southerly occurring parrot species in the world—flew past at speed, their long, burnt-red-dish tails trailing behind green bodies.

The next day I undertook a more ambitious outing: a day hike to Laguna de los Tres to view the granite peaks of Fitz Roy, Poincenot, and Saint-Exupéry. In the morning, I hopped on a bus for a three-hour ride north to the small tourist town of El Chaltén; en route, we passed a few pairs of Lesser Rheas, a large Patagonian gray fox, a Red-backed Hawk, and several groups of llama-like guanacos. The bus dropped me off at 11 a.m. and my return bus departed at 5 p.m., giving me exactly six hours to complete the 15-mile round-trip hike with 2,500 feet of elevation gain. I started toward the trailhead on the opposite
Birding Trip to Patagonia
side of town at a brisk pace. The day was perfect: cloudless and 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

The trail climbed into a southern beech forest. Thorn-tailed Rayaditos, omnipresent and trilling soothingly, sounded in contrast to the doleful tones of the White-crested Elaenias that seemed to cry, “Me!... Me!... Me!” House Wrens, Rufous-collared Sparrows, and Patagonian Sierra-Finches were likewise common. I came to an overlook of the Río de las Vueltas (River of the Turns), a milky, glacier-fed river winding through a flat valley hemmed in by steep mountains. The trail skirted a hillside, and the mighty peaks came into view. The lowest of these, Saint-Exupéry, was named after a hero of mine, the French writer and pioneering aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, best known in the U.S. as the author of The Little Prince.

I continued through more forest to the shores and pellucid waters of Lake Capri. I lunched there briefly, again with a view of those awesome peaks, before continuing at my quickened pace. The trail was popular with trekkers but not so full as to be crowded. As the trail wound through scrubby vegetation, I glanced to my right and stopped abruptly. There was something, rounded and plump, in the shadow of the tree. I looked through my binoculars: it was an Austral Pygmy-Owl, and only several feet away! I admired this diurnal hunter and then had the pleasure of pointing it out to a mother-and-daughter duo who came up the trail behind me.

Up ahead, I came to a small red-rock stream with multiple short cascades and my most picturesque view yet of Mount Fitz Roy, Poincenot Spire, and Saint-Exupéry Spire. These repeated views re-
Birding Trip to Patagonia

minded me of the Japanese woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai and his famous 36 Views of Mount Fuji collection. I hiked on through marshy land. An American Kestrel hunted along a hillside, and an Austral Thrush appeared in a treetop at the edge of the forest. I made it up the final demanding section of switchbacks to my destination: a front-row seat to views of Mount Fitz Roy, Laguna de los Tres, and the saw-toothed ridges that bordered the enormous Southern Patagonian Ice Field.

My final adventure occurred in northern Patagonia’s Nahuel Huapi National Park. To arrive there, I took a 25-hour bus ride from El Calafate to San Carlos de Bariloche, and then a two-hour bus ride to the Pampa Linda park headquarters. I registered at the ranger station for a two-day hike with an overnight stay at the Otto Meiling Refuge.

The trail started through scrubby vegetation before delving into a forest. I crossed a swift, glacier-fed river on a wooden bridge, and thereafter the trail made lazy switchbacks through giant Patagonian cypresses. Then the silence was broken by what sounded like a very large woodpecker. I stopped and scanned for movement … there! High in a cypress, clinging to the main trunk was the black body and fiery-red head of a male Magellanic Woodpecker, a member of the Campephilus genus of grub-loving woodpeckers that includes the extinct Ivory-billed and Imperial woodpeckers.

Soon the black-and-white female appeared, too; she flew into a tree near me, providing a view of her outrageously long, black, floppy crest. A little later, an upright and jaunty little bird happened across my path—longish legs, orange breast, zebra-striped belly, and an up-cocked tail: a Chucao Tapaculo, a secretive understory bird, often heard but rarely seen. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote of the chucao’s mournful-sounding vocalization: Suddenly the voice of chucao as if nobody existed but that cry of all the solitude united.

Now I had come to the steepest section of the trail, which made tight switchbacks as it climbed out of the forest into the transition zone where stunted vegetation and far-reaching views predominated. I saw innumerable mountains, the Pampa Linda valley, and the Castaño Overo Glacier with its dozen waterfalls. It was here I started to see condors. First, a couple of juveniles flew past and then a subadult male with a nascent white collar. The condors made several passes, and then I looked
ABOVE: Laguna de los Tres with Mount Fitz Roy behind.

Photo © Brandon Breen

RIGHT: Ruddy Duck

Photo © Brandon Breen
toward Paso de los Nubes (Pass of the Clouds) and saw what appeared to be a swarm of gnats but in fact were faraway Andean Condors, about 30 of them circling together.

I continued hiking to the refuge: a basic structure with a weatherworn charm. The second floor was one large bedroom where each night mattresses were laid side by side to accommodate however many travelers showed up. Mount Tronador (the "Thunderer"), an old volcano, loomed over the refuge, and a glacier came down the mountain on either side of the refuge. The refuge staff served goulash for dinner that night, and the atmosphere was warm and festive as people traded stories and freely poured each other’s wine.

Later, a few of us walked out into the cold, clear night. I had several times read about stars so close you could touch them, but this was my first night when the stars appeared within reach. There was Orion, the Southern Cross, and the Magellanic Clouds: two dwarf galaxies visible from the southern hemisphere. Despite the clear sky, there came the sound of thunder. But this was not the thunder of light and searing heat, it was the thunder of ice. The Alerce Glacier had calved, sending forth a resounding grumble that reached two communal gatherings: one of ragged human travelers in awe of Patagonia, the other a roost of Andean Condors to which the entire world was Patagonia.
The U.S. in the Caribbean

Birding Puerto Rico
If you want to see an Elfin-woods Warbler or a Yellow-shouldered Blackbird or a Green Mango, there's only one place in the world to go. Fortunately, it's not particularly far for most ABA members, and it's easy to get there.

Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory in the West Indies. It is the easternmost and smallest of the Greater Antilles but still has 17 endemic bird species and a number of Caribbean specialty species. Puerto Rico uses the U.S. dollar, no passport is required for U.S. citizens, English is widely spoken, and the island is well-served by flights from the mainland. The capital, San Juan, is a cultural and commercial hub of the Caribbean, with attractions, activities, and sights for birders and non-birders alike. Year-round temperatures average about 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and a number of tropical beaches make it a desirable winter getaway.

Puerto Rico Basics
Puerto Rico is about 35 miles wide and 110 miles long, and it has a population of about 3.5 million people, making it one of the most populous islands in the Caribbean. It consists of the main island of Puerto Rico and various
Puerto Rico has a rich history. Simplifying greatly, it was claimed for Spain by Christopher Columbus in 1493 and was a Spanish colony until 1898, when it became a U.S. territory after the Spanish-American War. Puerto Rico became a U.S. commonwealth in 1952; it is formally classified as an unincorporated, organized territory of the U.S. Puerto Ricans are natural-born U.S. citizens, though they cannot vote in presidential elections. Puerto Rico’s relationship to the U.S. has been a political issue for decades, as highlighted during its ongoing debt crisis.

Most Puerto Ricans live in the foothills and lowlands that run along the northern coast and parts of the southern and western coasts. The interior is dominated by a central range of mountains (La Cordillera Central) that primarily runs east–west. Northeast trade winds bring significant rain to the north, but the mountains create a rain shadow in the south. Thus, despite its modest size, Puerto Rico has a variety of habitats.

Puerto Rico had an agricultural econ-
omy for centuries, producing sugar, coffee, and other crops. Agricultural practices led to massive deforestation, leaving just a few remnants of pristine native forest. However, the island has become more urban and less agricultural over time and, as a result, is actually gaining second-growth forest.

**Birds of Puerto Rico**

Puerto Rico has a checklist of about 350 bird species, including 17 endemics. Approximately 130 of these species breed on the island, more than 200 are Neotropical migrants and accidentals, and the balance are exotics such as introduced species.

Tables 1 and 2 (pages 64, 65) list the endemics as well as some Caribbean specialties that are consistently found...
in Puerto Rico. These endemics include species that inhabit a variety of disparate habitats. Some are endangered, threatened, or simply difficult to locate, so it requires no small amount of skill and luck to see all of them on a single trip.

On the other hand, it would be difficult to avoid seeing Bananaquit, Gray Kingbird, Greater Antillean Grackle, Ze- naida Dove, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, and Red-legged Thrush. All are ubiquitous and conspicuous. And if one spends much time along a coastline, seeing a Magnificent Frigatebird is almost assured. Thus, these birds, as well as others that can be readily seen in the U.S., are not highlighted in the site descriptions within this article.

The endangered Puerto Rican Parrot (the only remaining native parrot in the U.S.) is the rarest and most famous of the endemics. Once widespread and abundant, by the time it was listed as endangered in 1967, there were fewer than 100 remaining in the wild, and that number eventually fell to 13. Cap-
tive breeding programs have increased the population, but it is still rare to see one in the wild. Puerto Rican Parrots have been released in three locations: El Yunque National Forest, Río Abajo Forest Preserve (the best location to see one), and Maricao State Forest. Other endemic birds listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act include the Elfin-woods Warbler, Puerto Rican Nightjar, and Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, as well as the Puerto Rican subspecies of Plain Pigeon, Broad-winged Hawk, and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

While seasons are not relevant to seeing the resident endemics, many birds are migrants that spend winters in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, or South America but breed elsewhere in North America. There are a few Caribbean species (such as Antillean Nighthawk and Caribbean Martin) that

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE 2 • Select Caribbean Specialties</th>
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<tr>
<td>West Indian Whistling-Duck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plain Pigeon</td>
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<td>Scaly-naped Pigeon</td>
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<tr>
<td>White-crowned Pigeon</td>
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<td>Zenaida Dove</td>
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<td>Antillean Crested Hummingbird</td>
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<td>Red-legged Thrush</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lesser Antillean Pewee</td>
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<td>Loggerhead Kingbird</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater Antillean Grackle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bananaquit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellow-faced Grassquit</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

LEFT TO RIGHT:
- Puerto Rican Spindalis  Photo © Gloria Archilla
- Green-throated Carib  Photo © Benny Diaz
- Yellow-shouldered Blackbird  Photo © Gloria Archilla
- Elfin-woods Warbler  Photo © Guillermo Plaza

BACKGROUND:
- Castillo San Felipe del Morro  Photo © Benny Diaz
breed in Puerto Rico but migrate farther south. Wintertime offers opportunities to see warblers (including Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Parula, and Prairie Warbler) and other birds commonly seen on the mainland only during summer or migration.

**Birding Locations**

*El Yunque National Forest* is the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest System and a popular attraction. Most tourists stop at just a few sites, and not many visitors venture out early in the morning or late in the afternoon. El Yunque is located in the northeast, an easy drive from San Juan. At about 28,000 acres, it is both the largest protected area in Puerto Rico and one of the smallest national forests. The most popular sites are along PR191, which climbs from the El Portal Visitor Center and dead-ends near a trailhead leading up to Mount Britton and its lookout tower. The visitor center is the first stop; its parking area and trails are a good place to start, particularly before they get crowded. It is a good location for Scaly-naped Pigeon, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Tody, Loggerhead Kingbird, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Tanager, Puerto Rican Spindalis, and Puerto Rican Oriole. The visitor center offers informative displays, maps, a store, and restrooms.

As one ascends PR191, a variety of trailheads and picnic areas provide a similar assortment of birds. Trails are well-maintained and many are paved, though they can be crowded at midday during the high season. Most trails lead to splendid waterfalls or other scenic views. Because showers are frequent, visitors should prepare for rain at any time. Parts of El Yunque receive more than 180 inches of rain a year.

The elusive Elfin-woods Warbler can sometimes be found in the high-elevation dwarf forest, which can be accessed via trails at the end of PR191, but the species is becoming rare in this location. Although El Yunque is one of the
locations where the Puerto Rican Parrot occurs, the odds of seeing one are vanishingly small.

**Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge** is in the southwest corner of Puerto Rico. The refuge is about 1,800 acres and has a visitor center, two observation towers, an observation platform, and 15 miles of trails. It includes salt flats, mangrove forest, and subtropical dry forest. Before the land became part of the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge System, it had been heavily grazed for centuries. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is conducting extensive restoration with native plants. Cabo Rojo is the headquarters for the Caribbean Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which manages nine refuges, primarily in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The various habitats at Cabo Rojo are good for Mangrove Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Antillean Mango, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Caribbean Elaenia, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Gray Kingbird, Adelaide’s Warbler, and Black-faced Grassquit. There is the possibility of seeing the endangered Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, as the refuge is critical habitat and recovery efforts are under way, including work to limit brood parasitism by the Shiny Cowbird. The refuge also hosts a wide variety of migrating and

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
- Puerto Rican Woodpecker
  Photo © Benny Díaz
- Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo
  Photo © Gloria Archilla
- Yellow-faced Grassquit
  Photo © Benny Díaz
wintering birds, including shorebirds. In fact, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the salt flats at Cabo Rojo NWR are considered the most important stopover for migratory birds in all of the Caribbean.

**Guánica State Forest (Bosque Estatal de Guánica)** in southwest Puerto Rico is a United Nations Biosphere Reserve and one of the largest and least-disturbed subtropical dry forests in the Caribbean.

Guánica has a number of trails, picnic areas, and some ruins. It is a good place to look for Key West Quail-Dove, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Puerto Rican Screech-Owl, Antillean Mango, Puerto Rican Emerald, Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Caribbean Elaenia, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Vireo, Adelaide’s Warbler, Black-faced Grassquit, and Puerto Rican Bullfinch. Early mornings and evenings at Guánica offer the best chance on the island to see or hear the endangered Puerto Rican Nightjar.

Researchers from the U.S. Forest Service, International Institute of Tropical Forestry, and the University of Missouri have been conducting long-term avian studies in Guánica for decades, and they published a comprehensive bird checklist and detailed description of the forest. Birders will find it an invaluable resource.

**Maricao State Forest (Bosque Estatal de Maricao)** in southwestern Puerto Rico is a good place to search for Scaly-naped Pigeon, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Screech-Owl, Green Mango, Puerto Rican Emerald, Puerto Rican Tody, Lesser Antillean Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird, Puerto Rican Vireo, Adelaide’s Warbler, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Tanager, Puerto Rican Spindalis, Puerto Rican Oriole, and Antillean Euphonia, among others. This is also one of the few locations for the Elfin-woods Warbler, which is limited to a small number of higher-elevation areas. Additionally, a group of captive-raised Puerto Rican Parrots was recently released in Maricao—now the third population on the island.

Other productive locations include Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge (West Indian Whistling-Duck, Masked Duck, White-cheeked Pintail), Reserva Natural de Humacao (Green-throated Carib, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, Black-faced Grassquit), and Bosque Estatal de Cambalache (Ruddy Quail-Dove, Mangrove Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Antillean Mango, Puerto Rican Vireo).

These locations are all on the island of Puerto Rico, but the islands of Vieques and Culebra also have good birding. Large parts of both islands were owned by the U.S. military but have been transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
Zika Virus
Like the rest of the Caribbean, a number of cases of Zika virus have been reported in Puerto Rico. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website (cdc.gov) has current and reliable information and advice for people traveling to affected areas.
Birding Puerto Rico

Resources
Several field guides are available for Puerto Rico, and some cover the entire West Indies: *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, Herbert A. Raffaele (1989); *Birds of the West Indies*, Herbert A. Raffaele et al. (2003); *Birds of the West Indies*, Norman Arlott (2010); and *Puerto Rico’s Birds in Photographs*, Mark W. Oberle (3rd ed. 2010). The Oberle book offers more detailed species information than the others and locations where species might be seen, and it includes a CD of audio recordings and additional photographs. It is also available as an iPhone app.

The BirdLife International profile of Puerto Rico is a fine introduction to its birds, geography, Important Bird Areas, and conservation status. Puerto Rico also has an established birding community. Many hotspots are covered well on eBird, where Puerto Rico has its own regional portal; eBird bar charts are an excellent resource.

A number of established local birding guides can provide the latest insider information, transportation, and help with the language, as Spanish is the main language of the island. Although driving is easy, and some English is spoken by many Puerto Ricans, birders who are apprehensive about those issues—or who have an aggressive target list or limited time—may want to consider a guide. Several major bird tour companies also offer multi-day tours in Puerto Rico. Both local guides and tour companies can be found online via any search engine.

Logistics
From the mainland, Puerto Rico is the most convenient destination in the Caribbean. No passport is required for U.S. citizens, so it is not necessary to pass customs. There are many direct flights, particularly from New York, Orlando, and Miami, but also from Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, and Houston. Puerto Rico’s largest airport—Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport (SJU)—is just outside San Juan and is the largest aerial transportation hub in the Caribbean. San Juan is also one of the busiest ports of call for cruise ships in the Caribbean, but most birders will want far more time on the island than afforded by a cruise.

Rental cars are readily available and driving is similar to the mainland, though signs are in Spanish. Roads, particularly main highways, are in good

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Cabo Rojo Salt Flats  Photo © U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region
condition, but in some areas (typically rural areas) they can be sharply winding and signage can be hit or miss.

Lodging is offered throughout Puerto Rico and particularly in San Juan, spanning the range from ultra-luxurious beach resorts to barebones motels to Airbnb. For mainland Americans, much will be familiar. For better or worse, Puerto Rico has its share of McDonald’s, Subway, Starbucks, and Walmart stores. As part of the U.S., Puerto Rico uses the U.S. dollar and the U.S. Postal Service. The major U.S. wireless carriers have service in Puerto Rico and do not charge roaming fees. With the typical travel precautions, crime is generally not a problem, and in case of emergencies, quality health care is available, particularly in San Juan.

Although both Spanish and English are official languages, outside of the tourist areas Spanish predominates and English is less common. A few Spanish phrases are helpful.

Puerto Rico has a tropical climate with minor seasonal changes. High temperatures average about 80 degrees Fahrenheit in the lowlands and a bit cooler at higher elevations. Rain varies according to location, and the rainy season runs from April to November. During hurricane season, from July to November, strong hurricanes are possible but fairly infrequent. Winter is the high season for travel, and prices drop in the off season.

For general information about Puerto Rico travel, accommodations, and attractions, guidebooks are available from the usual sources, including Frommer’s, Fodor’s, Lonely Planet, and Moon.

Acknowledgments
Thanks to Julio Salgado Vélez for guiding in Puerto Rico and for information and suggestions for this article. I am grateful to Mark Oberle for helpful comments on a previous draft. 

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
- Red-legged Thrush  Photo © Gloria Archilla
- Puerto Rican Parrot  Photo © Guillermo Plaza
- A Bananaquit feeding from banana flowers.  Photo © Benny Díaz
PELAGIC DIRECTORY
March 2017 through February 2018

Trips are for 2017 unless otherwise noted. If you would like to participate in next year’s Pelagic Directory, contact Michael Retter no later than 30 November at meterangan@aba.org for instructions.

ATLANTIC OCEAN

New England

Port: Bar Harbor, Maine
Destination: Petit Manan, Duck Islands, Mount Desert Rock, and waters off Mount Desert Island
Dates: 3 Jun
Duration: 4 hours
Cost: $85
Target species: Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Common Murre, Roseate and Arctic terns, Wilson’s and Leach’s storm-petrels, Northern Fulmar, Great, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters, Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers, South Polar Skua.
Organizer: Acadia Birding Festival.
(207) 233-3694; acadiabirдинgfestivaI.com;
beckym@acadiabirdingfestival.com

Port: Hyannis, Massachusetts
Destination: Hydrographer, Veatch, & Atlantis canyons
Dates: 26-27 Aug; 23-24 Sep
Duration: 36 hours
Cost: $320
Target species: White-faced and 3 other storm-petrels, 5 species of shearwaters including Barolo, skuas, phalaropes, Long-tailed and Pomarine jaegers, Bridled Tern, tropicbirds, Black-capped Petrel.
Organizer: Brookline Bird Club. (781) 929-8772;
brooklinebirdclub.org; ida8@verizon.net

Mid-Atlantic

Port: Lewes, Delaware
Destination: Baltimore and Wilmington Canyons and waters off Delaware and Maryland
Dates: 2-3 Jun; 19-20 Aug
Duration: 18 hours
Cost: $225
Target species: Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, all three jaegers, South Polar Skua, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope.
Organizer: See Life Paulagics. (215) 234-6805;
paulagics.com; info@paulagics.com

Port: Cape May, New Jersey
Destination: Wilmington Canyons and waters off New Jersey and Delaware
Dates: 13-14 Aug
Duration: 18 hours
Cost: $215
Target species: Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, all three jaegers, South Polar Skua, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope.
Organizer: See Life Paulagics. (215) 234-6805;
paulagics.com; info@paulagics.com

Port: Brooklyn, New York
Destination: Hudson Canyon and waters off western Long Island
Dates: 4-5 Jun; 27-28 Aug
Duration: 22 hours overnight
Cost: $250
Target species: Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, all three jaegers, South Polar Skua, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope.
Organizer: See Life Paulagics. (215) 234-6805;
paulagics.com; info@paulagics.com

Port: Hatteras, North Carolina
Destination: Gulf Stream, continental shelf and slope waters aboard our own boat, Stormy Petrel II
Dates: 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 May; 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 23, 24 Jun; 7, 8, 21, 22, 28, 29 Jul; 4, 5, 11, 12, 25, 26, 27, Aug; 2, 3 Sep; TBA Oct.; Feb 2018 dates TBA in fall 2017; additional dates may be added throughout, and private charters are available year-round.
Duration: 10-12 hours
Cost: most trips $169; discount for multiple trips

Gulf of Mexico

Port: Port Aransas, Texas
Destination: 100+ miles offshore to 3,000’ depths, 500 Fathom Hump or other features, Gulf of Mexico
Dates: 22 Jul; 12 Aug; 16 Sep
Duration: 16 hours
Cost: $240 early bird fare if paid 3 months in advance, $260 regular fare.
Target species: UNCOMMON TO REGULAR SPECIES: Cory’s, Audubon’s, and Great shearwaters; Band-rumped and Leach’s storm-petrels (summer); Magnificent Frigatebird; Masked Booby; Bridled and Sooty terns; Pomarine jaeger. RARE SPECIES: Sooty and Manx shearwaters, Red-billed Tropicbird; Brown Booby; Parasitic and Long-tailed jaegers, Brown Noddy. OTHER MARINE LIFE: Risso’s, Bottlenosed, and Atlantic spotted dolphins; sperm, short-finned pilot, melon-headed, and beaked whales; whale shark.
Organizer: Texas Pelagics. (281) 684-5425; www.texaspelagics.com; garyhodne@gmail.com

Port: South Padre Island, Texas
Destination: 12-hour 50-60 miles offshore to 3,000’ depths, Gulf of Mexico. 16-hour trip goes 80+ miles to Camel’s Head
Dates: 26 Aug (16 hour); 30 Sep
Duration: 12 and 16 hours, see website for details
Cost: $180/$230 early bird fare paid 3 months in advance; $200/$250 regular fare.
Target species: UNCOMMON TO REGULAR SPECIES: Cory’s, Audubon’s, and Great shearwaters; Band-rumped and Leach’s Storm-Petrels (summer); Magnificent Frigatebird; Masked Booby; Bridled

Continued on page 76
PELAGICS IN THE PACIFIC

NEW VOYAGES 2017 AND BEYOND

Birding Russia’s Far East
30 May – 11 Jun 2017 starting at US$650 a day
Visit the spectacular Russian Far East along the Kuril island chain famous for Auklets, Puffins, Steller’s Sea Eagles with an occasional Sea Lion and Brown Bear in the mix for added excitement.

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13 Nov – 01 Dec 2017 starting at US$605 a day
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and Sooty terns; Pomarine jaeger. RARE SPECIES: Sooty and Manx shearwaters, Red-billed Tropicbird; Brown Booby; Parasitic and Long-tailed jaegers, Brown Noddy. OTHER MARINE LIFE: Rissos’s, Bottlenosed, and Atlantic spotted dolphins; sperm, short-finned pilot, melon-headed, and beaked whales; whale shark.

Organizer: Texas Pelagics. (281) 684-5425; www.texaspelagics.com; garyhodne@gmail.com

PACIFIC OCEAN

Alaska

Port: Adak, Alaska
Destination: Seguam Pass and Little Tanaga Pass
Dates: 4–8 Jun
Duration: 48–72 hours at sea plus land birding at Adak
Cost: $2750

Target species: Short-tailed, Laysan, and Black-footed albatrosses; Whiskered, Parakeet, Least, Whiskered, Crested, and Cassin’s auklets; Kittlitz’s, Marbled, and Ancient murrelets; Horned and Tufted puffins; Aleutian Tern; Fork-tailed and Leach’s storm-petrels; Red-faced Cormorant.

Organizer: Zugunruhe Birding Tours. (206) 664-1256; tinyurl.com/zpb3qe6; info@zbirdtours.com

Washington & Oregon

Port: Westport, Washington
Destination: Grays Canyon and Outer Slope (35–40 miles offshore)
Dates: 18 Mar; 22 Apr; 20 May; 24 Jun; 8, 22 Jul; 5, 13, 19, 26, 27, 30 Sep; 7, 14 Oct
Duration: 9–10 hours
Cost: $145–$150

Target species: EXPECTED: Black-footed Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Sooty Shearwater, Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, Red-necked and Red

Organizer: Zugunruhe Birding Tours. (206) 664-1256; tinyurl.com/zo5lz5c; info@zbirdtours.com
phalaropes, Pomarine Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger, Sabine’s Gull, Cassin’s Auklet, Rhinoceros Auklet.
SEASONAL: Flesh-footed Shearwater, South Polar Skua, Buller’s Shearwater, Short-tailed Shearwater, Leach’s Storm-Petrel, Long-tailed Jaeger, Arctic Tern. INFREQUENT: Laysan Albatross, Manx Shearwater, Xantus’s Murrelet, Ancient Murrelet. Also nearshore species and marine mammals including whales.

Organizer: Westport Seabirds. (360) 268-9141; pmand001@comcast.net; westportseabirds.com

Port: Newport, Oregon
Destination: varies
Dates: 20 May; 12, 26 Aug; 9, 16 Sep; 7, 28 Oct; 9 Dec
Duration: varies
Cost: varies
Target species: SUMMER & FALL: Black-footed Albatross, Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, and Flesh-footed shearwaters, Fork-tailed and Leach’s storm-petrels; South Polar Skua, all 3 jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Arctic Tern, phalaropes. WINTER: Laysan Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Short-tailed Shearwater, Ancient Murrelet.
Organizer: Oregon Pelagic Tours.
(971) 221-2534; oregonpelagictours.com; tim@oregonpelagictours.com

Central and Northern California

Port: Porto Bodega, Bodega Bay, California
Destination: Cordell Bank
Dates: 20 Aug
Duration: 9–10 hours
Cost: $80–$130
Target species: Cordell Bank can be an amazing spot, particularly so for storm-petrels, where we may find Ashy, Fork-tailed, Wilson’s, and Black in warmer water years. Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses are regular, and some amazing vagrant albatrosses have been seen here. As we look for unusual birds, Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, and perhaps Flesh-footed shearwaters might be seen. A good spot for Scripps’s Murrelet, along with more common species such as Rhinoceros Auklet, Cassin’s Auklet, and sometimes Tufted Puffin. All three jaegers likely, and we will look for South Polar Skua; both phalaropes, Sabine’s Gull, and Arctic Tern.
**Pelagic Directory**

**Organizer:** Alvaro’s Adventures.  
(650) 504-7779; alvarosadventures.com;  
info@alvarosadventures.com

**Port:** Sausalito, California  
**Destination:** Farallon National Wildlife Refuge  
(passing under the Golden Gate Bridge)  
**Dates:** 6, 13 Aug  
**Duration:** 8–10 hours  
**Cost:** $189  
**Target species:** Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses, Northern Fulmar, Pink-footed, Buller’s, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters, Wilson’s, Fork-tailed, Ashy, and Black storm-petrels, Brown Pelican, Brandt’s, Double-crested, and Pelagic cormorants, Red-necked and Red phalaropes, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Elegant and Arctic terns, Scripp’s Murrelet, Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets, Tufted Puffin. Great trip for nesting seabirds (100% success rate with Tufted Puffin on Aug. trips) and marine mammals. Landing is not permitted on the islands.  
**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys, Inc.  
(831) 637-8527; shearwaterjourneys.com;  
debi@shearwaterjourneys.com;  
shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

**Port:** Pillar Point Harbor,  
Half Moon Bay, California  
**Destination:** Monterey Submarine Canyon, Ascension Canyon, Carmel Canyon, Sequel Hole  
**Dates:** 7 May, 4, 25 Aug; 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 22, 23; 24; 30 Sep; 8 Oct  
**Duration:** 8 hours (9 Sep is 12 hours targeting warm-water species, including Scripp’s & Guadalupe murrelets)  
**Cost:** $168  
**Target species:** Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses, Northern Fulmar, Pink-footed, Flesh-footed, Buller’s, Sooty, Short-tailed (later), Black-vented, and Manx shearwaters, Wilson’s, Fork-tailed, Leach’s, Ashy, and Black storm-petrels, phalaropes, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Elegant and Arctic terns, Scripp’s, Guadalupe, Craveri’s, and Ancient murrelets, Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets, Horned and Tufted puffins. Whales and dolphins. Excellent opportunities for photographers.  
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**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys, Inc.  
(831) 637-8527; shearwaterjourneys.com;  
debi@shearwaterjourneys.com;  
shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

**Port:** Fisherman’s Wharf, Monterey, California  
**Destination:** Monterey Submarine Canyon  
**Dates:** 27 Aug; 23, 24 Sep  
**Duration:** 5–8 hours, 23 Sep half-day trip  
**Cost:** $80–$130  
**Target species:** Great numbers of birds from the first hour of birding, amazing abundance of Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters, Common Murre; great studies possible of all three

*Continued on page 80*
jaegers, South Polar Skua. Black-vented and Manx shearwaters more likely here than farther north. Great for good views and photography, Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets, Pigeon Guillemot, Buller’s Shearwaters, sometimes Flesh-footed Shearwater, Red and Red-necked phalaropes, Sabine’s gull, Black-footed Albatross, and nice potential for fall storm-petrel flocks. World-class spot for Humpback and Blue whales, Risso’s, Short-beaked Common, Pacific Whitesided, Northern Right Whale dolphins possible, and general abundance of sea life, Sea Otter common!

Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures. (650) 504-7779; www.alvarosadventures.com; info@alvarosadventures.com

Port: Monterey Fisherman’s Wharf, Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Canyon and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary
Dates: 11 Mar; 1 Apr; 6 Jun; 20 Aug; 5, 10, 11*, 17, 18*, 21, 25*, 26 Sep; 1, 2*, 15, 16* Oct
Duration: 8 hours ( * = 12 hours)
Cost: $125 ( * = $160)
Target species: Black-vented, Buller’s, Flesh-footed, Manx, Pink-footed, Short-tailed, & Sooty shearwaters; Black-footed & Laysan albatrosses, Long-tailed, Pomarine, & Parasitic jaegers; Tufted Puffin; Rhinoceros & Cassin’s auklets; Scripps’s, Ancient, & Marbled murrelets; Elegant & Arctic terns; phalaropes; Northern Fulmar; Leach’s, Black, Ashy, and Fork-tailed storm-petrels.
Organizer: Monterey Seabirds. (831) 375-4658; montereyseabirds.com; mbww@gowhales.com

Southern California

Port: Fishermans Landing, San Diego, California
Destination: Offshore deep water, from the extreme southwestern corner of the old ABA Area to Point Conception, including Rodriguez Dome, San Juan Seamount, and points past the continental shelf area, and around the Channel Islands
Dates: 4-8 Sep
Duration: 5 days
Cost: $1375
Target species: Black-footed Albatross; Northern Fulmar; Cook’s and Hawaiian petrels; Flesh-footed, Buller’s, Pink-Footed, Sooty, and Black-vented shearwaters; Least, Leach’s, Ashy, and Black storm-petrels; Red-billed Tropicbird; Red-necked and Red phalaropes; South Polar Skua; Pomarine, Parasitic, and Long-tailed jaegers; Sabine’s Gull; Arctic Tern; Guadalupe and Craveri’s murrelets; Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets.
Organizer: Searcher Natural History Tours. (619) 226-2403; bajawhale.com; searcher@bajawhale.com

Hawaii

Port: Kona, Hawaii
Destination: Tsunami buoy, ~30 miles offshore
Date: 23 Apr
Duration: 6-8 hours
Cost: $150
Target species: LIKELY: Wedge-tailed and Sooty shearwaters, Hawaiian and Bulwer’s petrels, Band-rumped Storm-petrel, tropicbirds, boobies, terns. POSSIBLE: Buller’s and Newell’s shearwaters, Cook’s, Black-winged, Mottled, and Juan Fernández petrels. Also a great opportunity to see cetaceans and do a little fishing.
Organizer: Alex Wang. (808) 937-7924; axwang@hawaii.edu

Keynote by Bill Schmoker
May 19-21, 2017
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Among longtime Oregon birders, Harney County is “The Big Country”. We lifted this handle from the romanticized narration of Steens Mountain: A Wildlife Western, a 1972 film produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation for its “The World About Us” series. Be they ranchers, birders, anglers, hunters, or rockhounds, all seem captivated by the broad landscape. It is big country, expansive and spacious on a scale that mostly resists the temptation to tame or alter it.

Though the imprint of humans is evident, change occurs here at a glacial rate compared to the perpetual refacing of urban places.

Situated at the northern edge of the Great Basin, Harney County has a footprint of more than 10,000 square miles, making it larger than nine U.S. states. Human inhabitants (about 7,100) number less than one person per square mile. Nearly two-thirds of the population reside in the conjoined Wetlands of Malheur NWR from Buena Vista Overlook  

Photo © Kathleen Kent
towns of Burns and Hines, leaving ample room for the Long-billed Curlews, Sage Thrashers, Brewer’s Sparrows, and various other wildlife. Forests are limited to the conifer-covered slopes in the foothills of the Blue and Strawberry mountain ranges north of Burns, scattered stands of western juniper, and quaking aspens on Steens Mountain. Unobstructed viewscapes make even the largest features on the landscape seem modest.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), created by Theodore Roosevelt’s executive order in 1908, is the centerpiece of birding in southeast Oregon and considered a “crown jewel” in the federal refuge
system. It’s also among the largest refuges, covering 188,000 acres. The Silvies and Blitzen rivers flow into the closed Harney Basin from the north and south, feeding a verdant wetland network at the heart of the refuge. Arid sagebrush steppe and upland flood basalt formations surround this oasis. Hundreds of thousands of migrating and breeding waterfowl and marsh birds use these wetlands; Malheur’s freshwater marshes are among the continent’s most productive. Roughly 130 bird species nest on the refuge.

It’s easy to get seduced by the allure of the refuge proper, but in doing so, one risks driving past some of the best birding in Harney County. Hotchkiss Lane just outside Burns is a great place to start exploring the birds of the Harney Basin. To reach Hotchkiss Lane, turn east off of U.S. Highway 20 onto Lottery Lane in Hines (near the U.S. Forest Service office) and then turn left, continuing east on Hotchkiss Lane towards Oregon Highway 205. Plan to spend up to an hour along the 2.8-mile stretch between Lottery Lane and Highway 205, as it is rife with avian distractions.

From March into June, mountain runoff floods the fields along Hotchkiss. During March and April, this area is carpeted with white geese. Ross’s Geese far outnumber Snows after the first of April. Flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese, newly arrived Sandhill Cranes, and wintering raptors are also easy to find. Around mid-April, the first waves of northbound Long-billed Curlews arrive. Before the onset of nesting activities, loose groups of 50–100 curlews may be seen in a single field. During May and June, a loop through Hotchkiss Lane affords intimate encounters with Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Long-billed Curlews, Willets, Cinnamon Teal, Wilson’s Phalaropes, Wilson’s Snipe, and Sandhill Cranes, plus several other species of waterfowl. Four-way flashers will get a workout, with every third fence post presenting another photo opportunity.

Though traffic is light, local ranch-
ers—often hauling livestock trailers and large farm equipment—pass by every few minutes. Please be considerate and pull as far off onto the shoulder of the road as you can. Upon reaching Highway 205, turn south (right) to continue towards the refuge. Although roadside fields and ditches are full of birds, stopping along heavily traveled Highway 205 is ill-advised. Greenhouse Lane, which takes off west from Highway 205 about three miles south of Hotchkiss Lane, offers a similar bounty of waterfowl and marsh birds.

On the horizon, a peninsula of flood basalt rimrock juts out across the basin. This is Wright’s Point. It’s well worth making a stop or two here, if for no other reason than to enjoy the stunning panorama. Ash-throated Flycatchers and Yellow-breasted Chats may be found in the patches of chokecherry near the top on the north-facing slope. At the crest of the hill, Steens Mountain comes into full view off to the south. On the south side, Black-throated Sparrows often nest upslope from the little pullout right before milepost 11, and the songs of Sage Thrashers and Western Meadowlarks fill the soundscape.

A few stops along the 14-mile stretch between Wright’s Point and the refuge turnoff at Sodhouse Lane are worthwhile. One or two pairs of Burrowing Owls typically nest in the vicinity of the 13- and 14-mile markers. Preferred
At milepost 17, look for a lone juniper just west of the highway. A pair of Ferruginous Hawks has nested in this tree for many years. Keep in mind that adults are either incubating eggs or feeding hungry chicks during the breeding season, so lengthy stops and exiting vehicles are discouraged, as this might push adults away from the nest for too long. If incubating adults flush off the nest, it’s time to move on.

Between Double O Road (milepost 21) and the refuge headquarters turn-off, Highway 205 crosses a long, raised causeway at The Narrows. This low-lying area has been completely dry during the protracted drought of recent years but is the connecting arm between Malheur and Harney lakes during periods of high water. In the early 1980s, the road level had to be raised due to annual spring flooding.

Turn east on Sodhouse Lane (at The Narrows RV Park and Store), and travel about five miles to reach Malheur NWR headquarters. As this article was being prepared, the headquarters compound remained closed to the public in the
wake of the January 2016 occupation by armed protesters. Modern security devices are being installed, and indications suggest that future access will be more restricted than it has been in the past, when the grounds were open to birders from sunup to sundown.

Amidst an almost treeless landscape, migrant songbirds gravitate to the tall trees that surround headquarters. Many vagrant warblers, vireos, and flycatchers have been found here over the years, including several first Oregon records. When open, the visitor center offers souvenirs and keeps a list of interesting bird and mammal sightings. The lawn at headquarters features a small city of resident Belding’s ground squirrels. Their considerable excavations may produce a broken ankle if you don’t watch your step. On cool spring and fall mornings, migrant warblers, sparrows, and buntings congregate on the brushy slopes on the south side of the headquarters grounds and then move into the trees as the temperatures warm.

Effectively birding headquarters can take a couple hours, with multiple loops around the perimeter to check all the trees and hedges. Just when you think...
you’ve seen all the birds, something new often pops up. Headquarters is best first thing in the morning and just before dusk. Midday birding tends to be slow.

There are two options for birding south through the Blitzen Valley. The all-gravel Center Patrol Road (CPR) runs north–south from headquarters to the P Ranch at the south end of the refuge. The northern sections of the CPR only occasionally pass through quality wetland, whereas returning to Highway 205 and traveling south on paved roads is the quickest way to reach better birding areas. The rimrock overlook at Buena Vista Station (milepost 38) offers an expansive view of the Blitzen Valley, while the ponds below are good for nesting ducks, herons, grebes, and White-faced Ibis.

Continue nine more miles and turn east at the poorly marked turnoff to Krumbo Reservoir (milepost 47). Look for a large mailbox and a wagon wheel. After 0.2 miles, Krumbo Road crosses the Blitzen River (channeled). Turn right onto the gravel CPR (unsigned) and follow it south along the east side of the canal. The next 10 miles pass through excellent wetland habitats, ending at the P Ranch.

A half-mile south of Krumbo Road, Benson Pond is on the left side of the CPR. Trumpeter Swans nest here, and in most years, a family group of Great Horned Owls occupies the row of large willows along the north side of the pond. The trees on the backside of Benson Pond have a long history of attracting vagrants.

The next several miles of the CPR are lined with dense willows. Yellow Warblers and Willow Flycatchers are ri-
diabolously abundant along this stretch. Over the last two to three miles, before
reaching the P Ranch, listen for and look
for male Bobolinks displaying over the
wet grassy patches on both sides of the
road.

The dike trail along the canal at P
Ranch is usually good for migrants,
various species of swallows, and more
Yellow Warblers and Willow Flycatchers.
Roosting Turkey Vultures dot the fire
lookout tower early and late in the day.
From the end of the CPR, turn right to
return to Highway 205 at the small com-
munity of Frenchglen, or drive east about
a mile or so to Page Springs Campground,
where large trees and streamside riparia
are again good for migrant passerines.

From Frenchglen, continue south
through the Catlow Valley and down
to the little ranching town of Fields (57
miles). Along the way, stop at Roaring
Springs Ranch and scan the rimrocks for
White-throated Swifts. Once in Fields,
check the oasis of trees across from
town. This is a magical vagrant trap. The
tiny café serves fantastic burgers and the
best milkshake you’ll get anywhere.

It’s a longer and slower trip to take the
road north along the east side of Steens Mountain through the Alvord Desert and then return to Burns via Oregon Highway 78, but the natural beauty of this route cannot be overstated. All told, the loop from Frenchglen to Fields and back to Burns is about 170 miles, covering some of the least-traveled and most-scenic roads in Oregon.

Popular destinations east of the Highway 205 corridor include the small settlement of Diamond (pop. 5), the nearby Diamond Craters, and the famous round barn designed by 19th-century cattle baron Pete French. The Double O Road (milepost 21 on Highway 205) runs west for about 18 miles along the dunes that border the north shore of Harney Lake, ending up at Double O Station, before turning north and eventually connecting with U.S. Highway 20 west of Burns. The former Double O Ranch property is now the westernmost outpost of the refuge. Wonderful cattail marshes surround Double O Station.

It’s impossible to present the full array of Harney County’s birding and sightseeing opportunities in a single article. While spring and summer are best for birding, a late-summer/early-fall visit affords the chance to drive all the way to the top of Steens Mountain. The potential for seeing Black Rosy-Finches, gorgeous wildflowers, and stunning glacial gorges are worth every inch of the teeth-rattling drive to the summit. Steens Mountain Loop Road is rutted and heavily washboarded, so good tires and substantial ground clearance are recommended. Plan to spend at least half a day driving up to the summit and back. The road to the summit is rarely open before July and not until August some years.

Harney County is inconveniently located. Boise and Portland are the most proximal airports, three and six hours away, respectively. Motels in Burns/Hines include several affiliated with national chains. The historic Frenchglen Hotel and the Hotel Diamond (in Diamond) offer quaint bed-and-breakfast-type experiences, plus to-order lunches and evening meals served family style. Call well in advance if you hope to get a May–September reservation. The Malheur Field Station—off Sodhouse Road between The Narrows and refuge

Continued on page 92
Maybe it’s time you switched to bird friendly coffee.

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headquarters—offers less expensive, no-frills dormitory accommodations near the north end of the refuge and can serve meals for larger groups.

Camping options are limited to Page Springs Campground (Bureau of Land Management), Steens Mountain Wilderness Resort (private) near the south end of the refuge, and The Narrows RV Park and Store (private) at the north end. Page Springs is primitive; the private sites have showers, flush toilets, and RV hookups. A few small trees provide only modest shade at The Narrows, but accommodations include a restaurant and bar, other amenities, and gas.

Speaking of gas... DON'T leave Burns/Hines without tanking up. Away from Burns/Hines, gas stations are few and prices are high. Gas availability has been traditionally spotty at Frenchglen but more reliable of late. Fields (120 miles south of Burns) has gas, but the price is typically at least 40–50 cents higher per gallon than in Burns, and the store closes at 6 p.m.

As with any travel, some preparation makes it more fun. This is particularly true in the remote high-desert country of southeast Oregon, where elevations range from 4,000 ft. (1,220 m) up to 9,700 ft. (2,960 m) at the summit of Steens Mountain. Daytime temperatures fluctuate from 60°F to 95°F between May and September but generally plummet after sundown and may drop to around 40°F (or colder) overnight. Sagebrush and cattails don't provide much shade, so bring sunscreen and a wide-brim hat. The humidity is next to zero most of the time. It's easy to get dehydrated even on cooler days, so pack plenty of water. Local tap water is quite hard.

As for food, stock up on snacks and meal supplies at the grocery stores in Burns/Hines. Convenience stores are scarce, and any convenience you find comes with inflated prices. Bug spray is a must in May–July, when mosquitoes are thick on the refuge. At other times of the year, there are no bug problems.

Anyone who has visited Malheur NWR, Steens Mountain, the Alvord Basin, and Harney County, Oregon, will tell you these are special places that will inhabit your memories, captivate your imagination, and make you long to return again and again. Come see for yourself.
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