

BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST
bwd



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Left: For the magazine's inception, newly minted publishers Bill and Elsa Thompson made a celebratory snow duck.

Below: Bill Thompson III hawk watching at Hawk Mountain.



BWD & Me

BY SCOTT WEIDENSAUL

To all of us who have been connected down through the years with *Bird Watcher's Digest*, this resurrection of the magazine you hold in your hands seems like nothing short of a miracle. Each of us—the staff, the columnists and contributors, and I suspect a great many of the subscribers—have built a deep and personal bond with this publication, and for each of us, its abrupt end last year was a penetrating wound.

But at the risk of being a little forward, I'd like to think my delight at this turn of events has an even richer hue than for many others. My roots with *BWD* go back further than anyone else now associated with the magazine, at least at the production level—right back to the very beginning. What's more, *BWD's* genesis also coincided with mine as a writer. We grew up together.

In the late 1970s, I was a very young man trying to make a labored living as a wildlife artist, and not doing very well at it. I had dropped out of college in my junior year, having tried to meld my passionate interest in natural history with a degree in fine art. The result? I frustrated both myself and my art-department advisor, who couldn't seem to understand why, for example, I preferred to take a biology course like mammalian anatomy rather than an art school requirement like non-loom weaving or jewelry-making. (To me, and likely to you, the reason seemed pretty obvious.)

So I dropped out, with no clear plan on what came next, making a little money doing magazine illustrations and some private commissions. But through some happy-accident luck, I soon fell into what proved to be one of those life-altering opportunities. One day, while griping to a family friend who was a sports

reporter about how our local newspaper in eastern Pennsylvania didn't have a nature column, he said, "Don't complain; get in the car." Doyle drove me straight up to the newspaper, where he'd once worked before moving up the food chain to a larger metro paper, rousting out the editor—a pugnacious bulldog of a man whose staff had just won the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, and introduced us.

Mr. Costello, the editor, must have been deeply unimpressed; I was 19 and profoundly wet behind the ears. What's more, I had no particular interest in writing, and other than a freshman comp course, I'd had no training. But I did love talking about all things nature, birds especially, and I guess that enthusiasm came through—plus I pitched the idea of supplying not just a weekly column but some original ink line art to go along with it. After submitting a few samples that showed I could string sentences together in reasonably coherent form, "From the Ground Up" became a regular feature in the Saturday weekend section of the paper.

What I didn't know, of course, is that around the same time in 1978, a new publication was being launched in Marietta, Ohio, by two people with almost as little publishing experience as I had. Bill Thompson Jr. and his wife Elsa, having convened a family meeting of their kids around the dining room table, decided to put their retirement savings into launching what they dubbed *Bird Watcher's Digest*, consciously patterned on *Reader's Digest*—not only the small "digest-sized" format, but the fact that initially their content (like much in *Reader's Digest*) had been previously published elsewhere.

The Thompsons employed a clipping service to gather articles and photos about birds from around the country, which is how I ended up in their sights. The clip service had forwarded them a column I'd written about cavity-nesting birds, and I received a neatly typed letter offering a token sum for permission to reprint the article in one of their early issues. It was, as they say in publishing, new money for old rope, and I was happy for both the small bit of additional income as well as the exposure. Some months later, a complimentary copy of the magazine arrived, my line art of an eastern bluebird, hairy woodpecker, and wood duck cleanly reproduced inside.

That was the start of my now nearly 45-year association with *BWD*. I did a lot of features for them back in the 1980s, working with the inimitable Mary Beacom Bowers as editor, and less frequently (as my career moved in different directions) once Bill Jr. and Elsa's sons Bill III and Andy took over as co-publishers (and BT3 later as sole publisher). But the Thompson clan and I crossed paths in many ways. Bill Jr. and later Andy served on the board of directors at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, close to my home in those days in Pennsylvania, and because of my lifelong involvement with the sanctuary, I saw them there often.

I was a guest at Bill and Elsa's house in Marietta back in the early 1990s, invited for a powwow to discuss the feasibility of creating a nonprofit professional organization for nature writers, photographers, and artists, in large part to share the burden of health insurance. That was the first time I met Julie Zickefoose, and the sparks between Zick and BT3 were pretty clear. The organization never materialized, but that relationship did, and the Thompson-Zick family kept growing with the arrivals of Phoebe and Liam.

I loved the fact that whenever I called the *BWD* office, it was invariably Elsa's voice that I heard on the other end of the line. I roped Julie and Bill into helping me launch a new weeklong program at Audubon's Hog Island camp in Maine, called "Joy of Birding"; never were two people more perfectly suited for a session by that name. (They also helped launch one called "Art and Birding," for exactly the same reason—birds, music, art, and writing, all bound up in two great people.)

In 2015, BT3 called me with an offer. Kenn Kaufman was ending his long-running "After the Spark" column (which had, in turn, filled the enormous shoes left by Roger Tory Peterson, who started writing his "All Things Reconsidered" column for *BWD* in 1984, helping cement the fledgling magazine's street cred). Would I be interested in taking on that slot in the magazine? Bill asked. At first I hesitated; I write mostly about the science of birds and conservation, and *BWD* had those topics covered very well by columnists like Mark Garland, David Bird, and Paul Baicich.

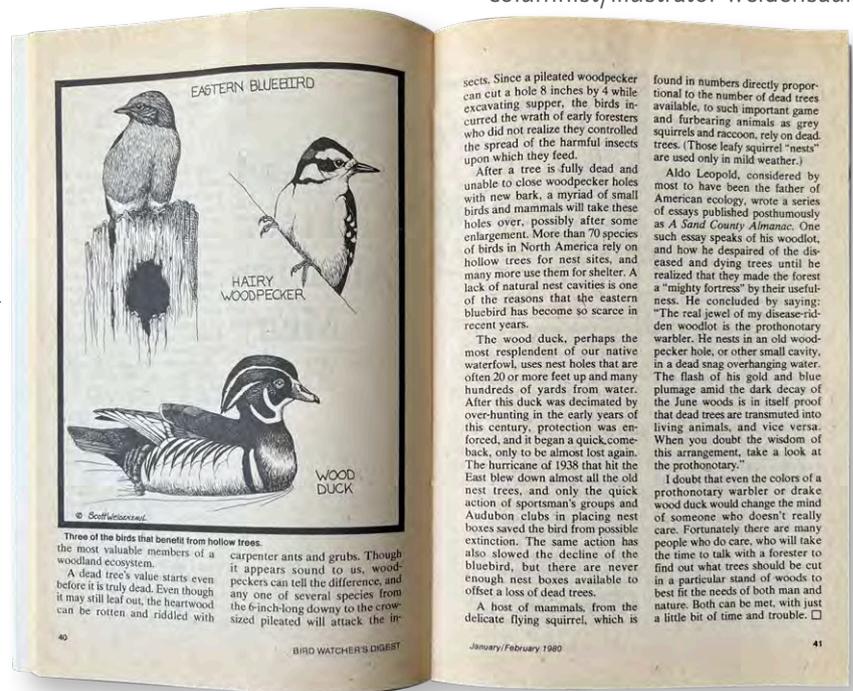
“I just want you to tell stories,” Bill said. Well, that I can do, and for the past six and half years, have tried my best to do so, with the gentle assistance of editor Dawn Hewitt, who was a joy to work with.

It hasn't always been easy. The publishing world has been upended repeatedly in the past two decades, and it's been the rare hard-copy magazine that's been able to survive. Even though we knew *BWD* was facing strong financial headwinds, those of us who have been with the magazine for the long haul kept plugging away. That was all the harder with the stream of loss and tragedy for the Thompsons: Bill III's swift passing from pancreatic cancer in March 2019, Elsa's death in a home fire just two months later, Andy's unexpected death in May 2020. When the magazine, by then no longer a Thompson family venture, suddenly shuttered last December with no warning to staff, subscribers, or contributors, it seemed like the final death.

And yet, here we are, with a newly reborn *BWD* with a new look, but with many of the same folks at its heart and soul. The stories will continue—the story will continue.

And speaking of stories, here's one more recollection, if you'll indulge me just a little more nostalgia. The first time BT3 and Julie came to Hog Island, we took our group of adult campers over to one of my favorite birding locations, the small mainland village of Medomak. “Village” is too formal a term for Medomak; it's a scattering of houses set among grassy fields, oak and spruce forests, tidal river, marsh, and thickets, with a big beaver pond and wetland in the heart of it. The route we take, literally through the front yards of big waterfront houses and behind more modest places with stacks of lobster traps, was laid in the camp's first year, 1936, by a young hotshot named Roger Peterson. The folks in Medomak are welcoming; some of them are former Hog Island campers who fell in love with Maine's Midcoast and settled there.

We herded our gaggle of birders at an overlook above the beaver pond, everyone



sects. Since a pileated woodpecker can cut a hole 8 inches by 4 while excavating supper, the birds incurred the wrath of early foresters who did not realize they controlled the spread of the harmful insects upon which they feed.

After a tree is fully dead and unable to close woodpecker holes with new bark, a myriad of small birds and mammals will take these holes over, possibly after some enlargement. More than 70 species of birds in North America rely on hollow trees for nest sites, and many more use them for shelter. A lack of natural nest cavities is one of the reasons that the eastern bluebird has become so scarce in recent years.

The wood duck, perhaps the most resplendent of our native waterfowl, uses nest holes that are often 20 or more feet up and many hundreds of yards from water. After this duck was decimated by over-hunting in the early years of this century, protection was enforced, and it began a quick comeback, only to be almost lost again.

The hurricane of 1938 that hit the East blew down almost all the old nest trees, and only the quick action of sportsman's groups and Audubon clubs in placing nest boxes saved the bird from possible extinction. The same action has also slowed the decline of the bluebird, but there are never enough nest boxes available to offset a loss of dead trees.

A host of mammals, from the delicate flying squirrel, which is

found in numbers directly proportional to the number of dead trees available, to such important game and furbearing animals as grey squirrels and raccoon, rely on dead trees. (Those leafy squirrel "nests" are used only in mild weather.)

Aldo Leopold, considered by most to have been the father of American ecology, wrote a series of essays published posthumously as *A Sand County Almanac*. One such essay speaks of his woodlot, and how he despaired of the diseased and dying trees until he realized that they made the forest a "mighty fortress" by their usefulness. He concluded by saying: "The real jewel of my disease-ridden woodlot is the prothonotary warbler. He nests in an old woodpecker hole, or other small cavity, in a dead snag overhanging water. The flash of his gold and blue plumage amid the dark decay of the June woods is in itself proof that dead trees are transmuted into living animals, and vice versa. When you doubt the wisdom of this arrangement, take a look at the prothonotary."

I doubt that even the colors of a prothonotary warbler or drake wood duck would change the mind of someone who doesn't really care. Fortunately there are many people who do care, who will take the time to talk with a forester to find out what trees should be cut in a particular stand of woods to best fit the needs of both man and nature. Both can be met, with just a little bit of time and trouble. □

looking in a different direction—northern parulas singing overhead, yellowthroats in the brush, a yellow-bellied sapsucker drumming its absent-minded, staccato rhythm. Wood ducks and hooded mergansers were on the pond, moving in and out of the fringe of cattails, while a swamp sparrow sang from the stunted tamaracks growing from the boggy margin.

“There has to be an American bittern in there,” Bill said excitedly. “A bittern?” people started asking, only hearing part of his comment. “Is there a bittern?” I started to tell everyone that yes, it looked like good habitat, but in all my years I'd never seen or heard one—when, as if on cue, an honest-to-God bittern started thunder-pumping that booming *onga-CHUNK! onga-CHUNK! onga-CHUNK!* call. Moments later, Julie had it in a scope. People were thrilled.

Magic? Maybe—and no less so than the fact that *BWD* is back. Here's to another 45 years. **W**

Scott Weidensaul is the author, most recently, of the New York Times bestseller *A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds*.





HENSLOW'S *Sparrow*

Rich chestnut-suffused back and wings, and an olive-tinted head distinguish a Henslow's sparrow.

Centronyx henslowii: The Tiny Icon of Disappearing Prairies

BY STEPHAN LORENZ

I picked my way carefully through a swath of dense, tall grasses, my feet sinking into the wet ground below.

A sedge wren chattered close by, but the bird remained hidden within a thick clump of grass, while a common yellowthroat was bolder, hitching toward the top of a stalk and letting go of a volley of songs. The terrain underfoot lost its viscosity as I followed a gentle slope toward higher ground. Here, the grass was shorter and grew in bunches, allowing my feet to swing forward effortlessly. Swales of restored grassland stretched in front of me, but the prairie fragment was small, and I could see where it suddenly stopped against a tree-lined stream on one side and a highway on the other. I paused and listened, straining to hear one of the simplest vocals of any North American songbird, the song of the Henslow's sparrow (*Centronyx henslowii*). Named by John James Audubon in 1829 to honor John Stevens Henslow, a prominent botanist and geologist of his time, this small sparrow occurs throughout the eastern United States in widely separated locales.

I wasn't even sure if there were any Henslow's sparrows in the southwestern corner of Iowa, but the range map technically included the entire state and there were a few scattered sightings on eBird in the greater area, although none of them recently. Having already come up empty-handed in a few promising fields and prairies, I started to doubt whether Henslow's sparrows persisted in Montgomery County, a rectangular outline that fits well with the other cookie-cutter counties in Iowa. At the moment, I had my hopes pinned on a few acres of prairie in the Anderson Wildlife Area, a postage-stamp patch of public land among extensive farms growing corn and soy, interspersed with cattle pastures. This early June morning the temperature rose quickly as the rising sun burnt off the dew, but at least the lack of a breeze made it easier to listen.

The song of the Henslow's sparrow has been described as a weak hiccup and transcribed as a short *tsi-lick*. My mind conjured up the hoped-for call on several occasions, leading to a few false alarms. First, I caught the tail end of a distant dickcissel song and then a note or two of an annoyed sedge wren, but neither fit the succinct refrain of a Henslow's sparrow. I walked a bit farther, into an area where a handful of low eastern red cedars stood and the grass thinned,

revealing a thick herbaceous layer. Suddenly, I heard a sharp *tsi-lick*, louder and clearer than I had expected, and no doubt the vocalization of a territorial Henslow's sparrow. Another song followed after a brief pause, and I got a rough bearing on the bird. I started to scan carefully; although the call was clear, I couldn't judge exactly where it was coming from.

Fortunately, I was very familiar with the appearance of Henslow's sparrows, having observed this small, but intricately marked bird

numerous times on its wintering grounds in Texas. The first Henslow's sparrow I ever encountered came as a big surprise. During graduate school, I was researching wintering grassland birds in northeast Texas and while conducting an initial survey of my study site, I flushed a sparrow that appeared small and dark overall. The bird landed in an open bush about a foot off the ground and froze in place. I immediately noticed a short, thin tail and bulky head with a relatively heavy bill, giving the bird an overall disproportionate look. The bill in particular ruled out the more proportionately shaped but similarly sized savannah sparrow. The breast sported fine streaks that drifted down to the flanks, and the striped back and wings were rusty brown in color. The fine streaks on the breast ruled out the widespread grasshopper sparrow, in which adult birds lack any clear marks on the breast. Finally, I could see an olive tinge to the face and nape. In addition, black lines on the crown, behind the eye, and either side of a paler throat, stood out sharply as if penciled on. The olive-green tinge to the head and rusty wings alone clinched it: It was a Henslow's sparrow.

Remnant prairie and hardwoods at the Anderson Conservation Area, Montgomery County, Iowa.



An orbweaver is no match for the powerful, oversized bill of a Henslow's hen.

My first views of a Henslow's sparrow were pretty lucky, since the species is secretive on its wintering grounds, reluctantly flies, and if flushed generally drops back into cover quickly, leaving the observer with the impression of a very small, weak flying sparrow with a short tail. The majority of Henslow's sparrows scurry away rodent-like, leaving birders completely unaware of their presence. I know how well Henslow's sparrows can slip away unseen, since for several winters I banded grassland sparrows in northeast Texas. I systematically walked through fields that had been parceled into study plots and guided LeConte's, savannah, song, and swamp sparrows towards a row of mist nets as the birds flushed ahead of me. On several occasions, I found a Henslow's sparrow in the lowest pocket of the net, yet the bird had never revealed itself by flushing.

During the two years that I intensively surveyed my study site, I located about a dozen Henslow's sparrows that wintered in grasslands and weedy fields of the post oak savannah that dominates parts of northeast Texas. I was able to find the birds by walking circular survey routes at a specified radius through grassland habitats.



While I found many sparrow species in flocks or small groups, Henslow's sparrows usually occurred as single birds, either in small patches of suitable habitat or within larger stretches of prairie where they mixed with other sparrows, particularly LeConte's. Once an individual Henslow's sparrow settled in for the winter, it remained within a small area and was reliably found in the same spot, enabling me to show these tricky birds to several birding friends.

Fast forward several years to my search in southwest Iowa, where I moved a few paces and

What to Look and Listen For

Henslow's sparrows are one of the smallest sparrows in North America, weighing less than half an ounce. If seen well, the combination of chestnut wings and the olive-green head are diagnostic. The oversized bill and fine streaking on breast and flanks are also useful identification features. During the nesting season, the song is frequently heard and, although simple, it is unmistakable if heard at close quarters, but beware of song snippets of other grassland birds.

During the winter months, identification becomes more challenging, since the species is often first noticed in flight after a bird flushes. A helpful clue is that Henslow's sparrows tend to flush only when an observer is very close, sometimes almost underfoot. The birds flutter weakly before dropping back into cover, appearing rusty-brown and short-tailed in flight, and are overall darker than similar grassland sparrows. The larger swamp and Lincoln's sparrows also look dark and sometimes exhibit short, fluttery flights, so care must be taken, but both species show comparatively broader and longer tails. Once a Henslow's sparrow has dropped out of sight, it is sometimes impossible to find again, which is another good clue. Some caution is warranted since sedge wrens can also appear dark and short-tailed with a weak flight, but sedge wrens usually call. If a Henslow's sparrow flushes to a perch, it can often be studied at length as it freezes in place. I once had a Henslow's sparrow fly to the stout limb of a post oak about 20 feet off the ground where it sat still and could be studied from all angles at leisure.

When and Where to Look

The preferred nesting habitats of Henslow's sparrows are tallgrass prairie and marshes, but in the absence of these native habitats they will utilize overgrown fields, hay fields, and other grasslands. The species prefers dense grasses with scattered forbs and standing dead

vegetation, which is often used as song perches. During the winter, Henslow's sparrows select longleaf pine savanna and bog habitats, but can be found in a wide variety of grasslands and fields.

Henslow's sparrows have a broad breeding range, swinging in a wide swath from northeast Oklahoma across to North Carolina. The northern extent reaches North Dakota, Minnesota, southern Ontario, and the New England area, but the Midwest supports the most significant breeding populations. The best time to look for nesting Henslow's sparrows is from mid-May through July. Reliable places to search for the species on their nesting grounds include the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in northern Oklahoma, prairies of central and northern Missouri, the Valley of Eden Bird Sanctuary in northern Illinois, the Kankakee Sands Nature Preserve and nearby sites in northwest Illinois, and Sandy Ridge Road in central Pennsylvania. These sites represent only a few examples, and a quick check on eBird should turn up many locations throughout its wide range. The species is a short-distance migrant and has been recorded widely between its breeding and wintering grounds with the potential to turn up anywhere in between. Stragglers have reached New Mexico and Colorado to the west, and there are records from northern Ontario.

The species winters mainly in the southeastern United States from eastern Texas to the Florida peninsula with high concentrations in Louisiana, southern Arkansas, and coastal Georgia. Some places to look for this species during winter include the Big Thicket National Preserve in east Texas, the Kisatchie National Forest, Bodcau Wildlife Management Area and Lake Ramsey Savannah Wildlife Management Area in Louisiana, and the Warren Prairie Natural Area in Arkansas. In the Florida Panhandle try your luck in the Apalachicola National Forest or various parks and refuges around Gainesville in central Florida. Numbers of wintering Henslow's sparrows vary between years, but the aforementioned sites always hold a few birds.

Due to its secretive nature, the species is easily overlooked and probably occurs widely in the right habitat.

Behavior

Henslow's sparrows feed mainly on or near the ground and are thus easily overlooked. During the summer, their diet is mainly composed of invertebrates, including grasshoppers, beetles, and caterpillars. During the winter months, Henslow's sparrows switch to seed and occasionally berries. While males sing vigorously on their nesting grounds, Henslow's are silent on their wintering grounds, where they skulk in dense vegetation, flushing reluctantly. Despite their secretive nature, perched birds are approachable. The species is a short-distance migrant and likely migrates at night similar to other sparrows. It does not have a penchant for vagrancy; there are no records of the species in California, for example.

Courtship and Nesting Behavior

Henslow's sparrows tend to nest in small, loosely associated colonies that can shift location from year to year. The individual territories are small, about one acre, and do not appear to overlap. Occasionally, males will sit on exposed perches, but more often call from just below the vegetation level, uttering their simple songs with almost metronomic repetition. Once paired, a male leads a female to a potential nest site, while sometimes carrying nesting material in his bill. Yet, the female completes the majority of nest construction, which takes between four to five days. The nest is a grassy cup lined with finer material and is built at the base of a clump of grass or in a depression on the ground with overhanging grass blades aiding concealment. On average, Henslow's sparrows lay three to five eggs, which are cream colored with fine, brown speckles. The female incubates the eggs for 11 days, and the young remain in the nest for a further 9 days, with the majority of the nestling's diet consisting of grasshopper and butterfly larvae. Henslow's sparrows attempt to raise

two broods during a breeding season, leading to another spike in singing by males during midsummer and extending nesting activity until August.

Conservation Concerns and Taxonomy

Henslow's sparrow populations declined steeply over several decades, drastically in some parts of its range, and the species has been declared endangered or threatened in several states. Populations now appear to be stable or on the upswing with range expansions in the southwestern and northwestern corners of its distribution. Yet, continued conversion of prairie habitats for agriculture and development will lead to further losses of this small sparrow. For example, a localized and highly disjunct breeding population in the Houston area of Texas disappeared after the habitat was destroyed by development in the 1980s. As grasslands are further fragmented, higher rates of nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds and increased predation will have negative impacts on nesting success. On its wintering grounds, loss of habitat continues to be problematic, but fire suppression also plays a big role in pine forest savanna, where encroachment of woody vegetation reduces suitable habitat. Fortunately, with improved habitat management strategies like the Conservation Reserve Program, negative population trends can be halted and possibly be reversed.

Two subspecies of Henslow's sparrow are recognized, the western *henslowii* and eastern *susurrans*, although the latter is not universally considered valid and might have disappeared already. Formerly, Henslow's sparrows were classified within the genus *Ammodramus*, which included eight other species of small grassland sparrows. A reshuffling of sparrow genera led to the assignment of a new genus, *Centronyx*, with the only congeneric species being the Baird's sparrow.



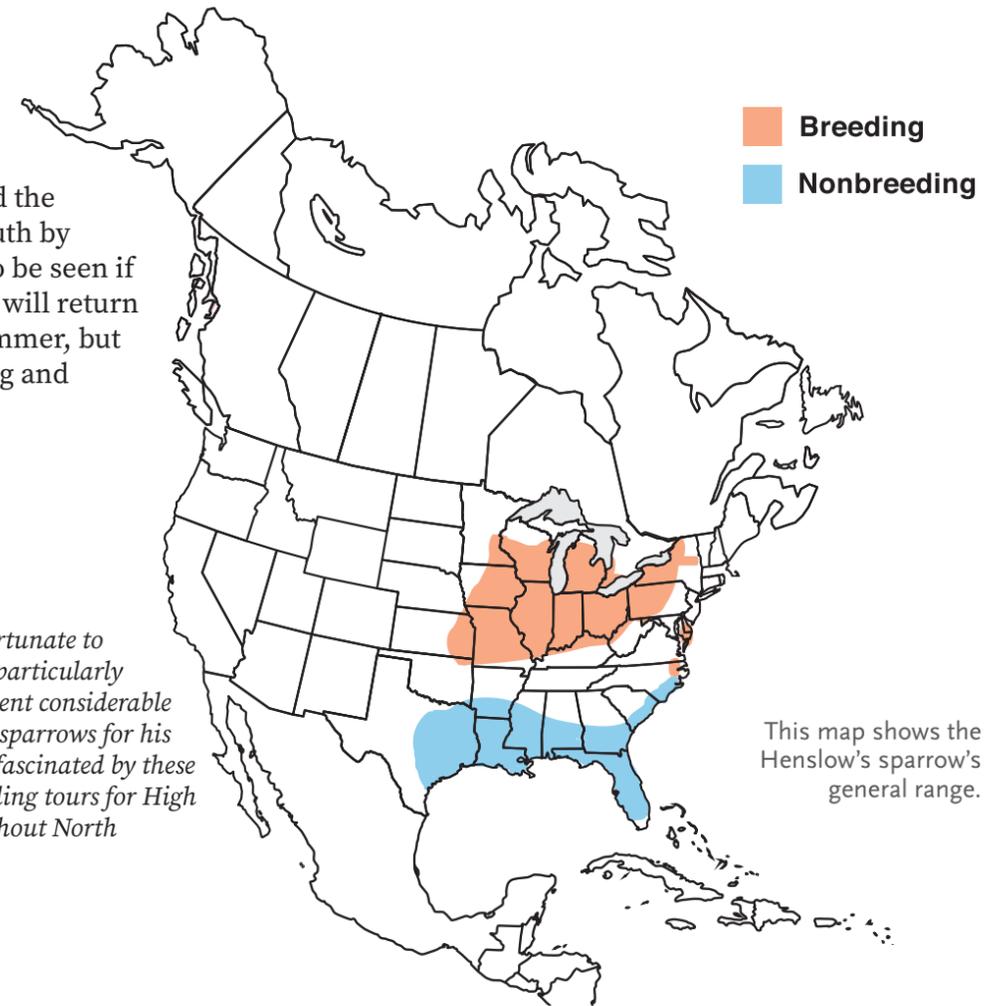
Almost comically flat-headed and large-billed, this Henslow's sparrow is undeniably acrobatic as it clammers through Queen Anne's lace.

scanned again. This was the first time I was within the Henslow's sparrow's nesting range during the right time of the year. On their breeding grounds, Henslow's sparrows drop their guard and singing males readily sit in the open. The males prefer stalks of dead vegetation or low bushes as song perches. My binoculars finally came to rest on a clump of a bird that sat two or three feet off the ground, perched in a fork of dried twigs. The bird was facing away, but its head snapped back with each song. The bird's performance looked gymnastic, its legs splayed at an obtuse angle, balancing on the branchlets and its entire body rocking with each vocalization. I was hoping it would receive a score of ten from a judging female sparrow. Treading carefully, I swung wide in order to get a better angle to study the bird.

I could see the neat marks on the breast and olive head, unmistakable, and the bird called away unperturbed by my presence. Behind me, I could hear a second bird singing and a quick scan revealed this male settled fairly exposed near the top of a red cedar. In total, I found four singing Henslow's sparrows, all within earshot, in the remnant prairie. Further exploration of the greater area revealed the patchy distribution of Henslow's sparrows, and surveys of several patches of prairie and grassland resulted in just one more locale. I located a single Henslow's sparrow in the prairie covering the 157 acres of the Erickson Wildlife Area. After discovering the sparrows during the beginning of June, I sporadically heard males sing during the following weeks with lots of activity on a

cloudy morning in late July, possibly the start of a second brood. By August all was quiet, and the birds likely migrated south by September. It remains to be seen if any Henslow's sparrows will return during the following summer, but it is always worth looking and especially listening. 🎧

Stephan Lorenz has been fortunate to bird on every continent and particularly enjoys skulky antbirds. He spent considerable time chasing after grassland sparrows for his graduate work and remains fascinated by these birds. He currently leads birding tours for High Lonesome Bird Tours throughout North and South America.



This map shows the Henslow's sparrow's general range.

Over 270 species in St. Landry Parish

How many will you spot?

- Atchafalaya Basin
- Bayou Teche
- Sherburne Wildlife Management Area
- Thistlethwaite Wildlife Management Area
- Wood Stork & Wading Event



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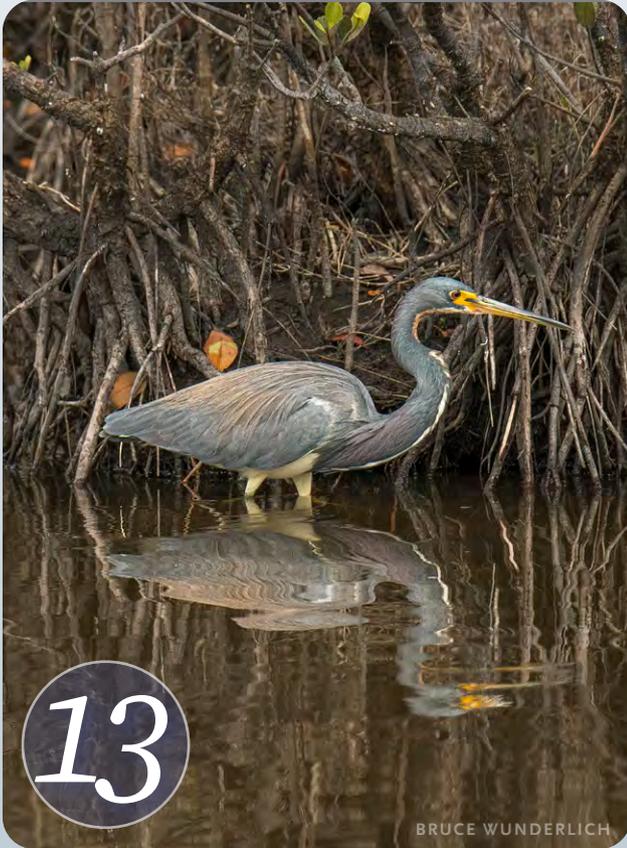


ARNAUDVILLE | CANKTON | EUNICE | GRAND COTEAU | KROTZ SPRINGS | LEONVILLE
MELVILLE | OPELOUSAS | PALMETTO | PORT BARRE | SUNSET | WASHINGTON

BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST
bwvd



September/October 2022

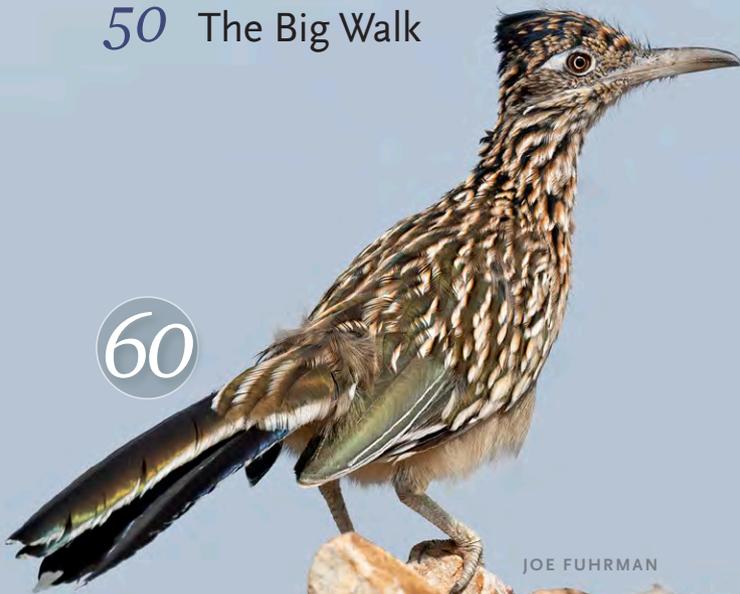


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Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to call, email, send a handwritten note, or post on social media so many kind and encouraging comments on the publication of the inaugural issue of *BWD*. We wish we had space to publish every single one! We are grateful to the literally hundreds of you we have heard from since we announced our relaunch—and to all our subscribers for supporting *BWD*.

SURPRISE!

Christmas in July! That's what I felt like when *BWD* magazine showed up unexpectedly in my mail! Thank you for resurrecting the idea of Bird Watcher's Digest. *BWD* has such a nice format. I was thrilled to see some of the same writers, too. The only problem I encountered was wondering how I would make this great magazine last until the September issue comes out!

Mary Beth Cote

Melissa Wales

It is absolutely beautiful cover to cover. *BWD*, You should be SO proud! I read it all in one sitting. And cried at the end from all the beauty, excellent bird info, resiliency and heart that is in that issue - and my gratitude that it's back and better than ever! Thank you! XO



LONGTIME SUBSCRIBER LOVE

I have had a subscription to *Bird Watcher's Digest* for the last 25 years. It has always been a wonderful publication, but the new format is such an improvement. The larger size allows for greater appreciation of the vivid detail in the pictures. I may be mistaken but there also seems to be a significantly greater amount of information than in the previous format. Please keep up the good work!

David Erlenmeyer

I've been anxiously waiting for this wonderful old friend that I've enjoyed reading for many years. Of course, all of us were very sad when we learned about the events that brought this

about but were glad for all the years of wonder that the Thompson family gave us. What a joy it was to learn the *BWD* legacy wasn't ending and that a new group of bird lovers were stepping up to help. I haven't made it through the first five pages but can tell I'm already thrilled to again have it in hand to read. From all of us who consider this publication an important part of our reading and learning enjoyment, I can only say, thank you ever so much.

Leslie Pernas-Giz, Melbourne, FL

As a longtime subscriber of *Bird Watcher's Digest* and an avid "watcher of birds," both backyard and "far afield," I was delighted to receive a copy of *BWD* with Julie's beautiful cover (and articles). Bill Thompson III was a guide on a trip I took many years ago to Blennerhassett Island in the Ohio River. We were looking for orioles! We have had a subscription for many years and enjoyed each issue, passing them on to others or giving gift subs. Tips for seeing birds have influenced our vacation choices, like South Padre Island, Texas, and Belize.

All the Best Wishes, Cynthia Kelley

MORE WESTERN BIRDS, PLEASE

Thank you for resurrecting *BWD*. I have enjoyed it for many years. I wasn't sure about the larger format, but I have realized that you also enlarged the font and that makes it much easier for me to read. Thank you, and a special thanks for including some of my favorite contributors: Julie Zickefoose, Scott Weidensaul, and Bruce Wunderlich! Even though I live on the West Coast and most of your articles pertain to eastern birds and places, I enjoy armchair traveling with *BWD* and especially Wunderlich's photos. Best wishes for your continued success!

Barbara Iyer

Editor's note: We are striving to cover a more even balance of western birds moving forward!

Susan Warthman Nash

Bravo on a wonderful publication!! 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟
I just received mine today and could not be happier. Thank you ALL for saving and even improving a great magazine.



HAPPY AS A MOTHER

I just wanted to thank you for including this article in the new *BWD*. I am a mother of two young children and came to bird watching as a mother, not prior. It was so great to read about other serious birding mothers and see the acknowledgment.

Kristen Johansen



So thrilled that *BWD* will live on! I enjoyed the wonderful article "Bird Like a Mother"—it brought back memories of when I had my young daughter in a Snuggly in 1984—trying to quietly bird! I look forward to my next issue of *BWD*!

Susan Bartels, Riverside, CT

Linda Most

It is absolutely gorgeous! I love the large format and the quality of the paper. Thank you to everyone involved in resurrecting and rebirthing the new version of *BWD*.



SO MUCH TO LOVE

This is the first time I've ever written to the publishers and editors of a magazine. But I am so impressed with and love the first issue that I have to say THANK YOU! You have put out an exceptional magazine for us bird lovers. I love everything about the new *BWD*—the larger format, the clear easy-to-read font and page colors (my older eyes thank you!), the articles, the photography, the artwork, and even the advertising is so well done it's a pleasure to look at.

I have been a fan of Julie's paintings and writing for quite a few years so this issue with her cover, sparrows, and articles is a joy. I am very happy that you have been able to include some of my favorite writers (such as Scott Weidensaul and Pete Dunne) as well as some I was not familiar with. (Sneed Collard's article was fun to read and I will look into more of his work.)

Now I have a problem. I used to pass my back issues of *Bird Watcher's Digest* to my local library (Maybe it would catch someone's eye and they would become a birder?) I don't think I can give up this issue. But I did come up with a solution—I'll give a gift subscription to the library.

Also, my interaction with Shanna via email when I had a question about my subscription was answered quickly and politely which I appreciated very much. I've been trying to think of any suggestions for improvement and I have not been able to come up with any. You did a GREAT job, so I'll just say thank you again!

Nancy VanCott

I was very pleased to receive my new copy of *BWD*. I heard the sad news and was hoping for everything to turn out well. The new format is easier to handle even though it is larger. The beautiful photography and artwork continue, and the articles are, as usual, most intriguing. I'm so glad you are staying with an actual magazine I can hold in my hands!

Norma Holzbach, Warren, OH

I just wanted to say that I love what you did with this magazine! I'm thoroughly enjoying the first issue. I'm just passively interested in bird watching as a hobby, but this magazine is really getting me excited. Thank you! Please keep up the great work.

Richard Lardi

Thank heavens you're ok! I'd been really missing all of your wonderful content as I gradually learn more about our feathered friends.

Jenny Mullis, Waynesboro, VA

I received my copy of the new *BWD* recently and would like to let you know I am really pleased to see it. I knew that maintaining the old *BWD* was a challenge and that the publication was vulnerable. I am grateful to you for picking up the challenge and producing a new magazine in a different format. It is a pleasure to see high-quality images and text presented in the larger format. I wish you the best going forward. You can count on my subscription and support.

Bruce McCammon





BY ALEX WARNICK TRICOLORED Heron

My first tricolored heron was literally a blur. While driving across Florida's Merritt Island on a family road trip, I leaned my head against the car window, focusing my eyes on a distant point as hazy forms of waders floated past. I was more interested in a package of Fig Newtons than the fauna outside. Most ten-year-olds would be. Just a few months later, birding suddenly blossomed into a lifetime obsession, but that obsession and our Merritt Island trip were two ships passing in the night.

As the eccentric youngest of seven, I dragged a whole crowd to our local bird patch. My family kindly catered to my fascination, but they had one rule: We will not stop for sparrows. Waders were another matter. At the sighting of any green or great blue heron, we took turns passing around a creaky pair of binoculars.

At home, I pulled out my life list, eager to check off any new additions. Scanning the ranks, I passed tricolored heron. My pencil hovered. I screwed my face up in concentration, willing one of the Merritt Island blurs to have three colors... Phooey.

Lithe and athletic, a tricolored heron nabs fish with balletic flair.

Eventually, my identical twin sister, Shae, joined me on my birding journey. In college, when the alarm went off, we'd rub the dust from our eyes, spy sunshine through the blinds, and decide to go birding. "What about class?" you might ask. That's what our parents said. With time, we gained the muscles of responsible birders, restricting bird watching to weekends, walks to campus, and lulls in class lectures. Finally, we joined the ranks of other college kids and planned a spring break trip to Florida—but, unlike the others, we wouldn't spend one minute sitting on a beach towel.

Audubon's painting of a tricolored heron portrays the bird in a tangled bayou so misty and humid you can almost hear the buzz of mosquitos and the growl of the alligators. It's a glimpse into the wild southern states that served as an incubator for American ornithology as the shared destination of the continent's most intrepid bird explorers—Mark Catesby,

Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon. These artists linked arms with science and brought America's birds to the masses, revealing what was hidden in the hinterlands.

Audubon affectionately called the tricolored heron "Lady of the Waters." A former genus name was *Hydranassa*, or "water queen." For centuries viewers have been impressed by the bird's elegance. I was no exception. On Merritt Island—first stop on our spring break tour—I raised my binoculars at a distant wader and brought a ten-year blur into focus. The tricolored I saw was willowy even for a heron. Weighing a mere fourteen ounces with a three-foot wingspan, I imagined that giving one a toss would feel like throwing a paper airplane. Audubon wrote, "Its measured steps are so light that they leave no impression on the sand."

I watched as the bird hunted for killifish some distance from a flock of roseate spoonbills. Its actions seemed familiar. A moment's reflection pegged it: Growing up we were amused by my brother McKay, who ran everywhere, even a distance of

ten feet from the couch to the refrigerator. Tricolored herons are the McKays of the bird world. While most heron species stealthily stalk their prey, the tricolored heron dashes and dances to its next meal, its energy exceeded only by the reddish egret. Years later I would see them again at the Oviedo Lagoon in the Dominican Republic, where their charisma would outshine even a flock of flamingos.

Tricolored herons were a constant as Shae and I ping-ponged around Florida's coast. Since their maverick nature compels them to ride the edge of mixed feeding groups, we spotted them easily. They're also an abundant bird, even historically, as their population was never a target of the millinery trade. Despite their plumes lacking the drama of their larger cousins, the small heron wears them well. I photographed a preening male in a rare moment of stillness, twisting his head, stretching his wings and raising every feather like porcupine quills. His white crown plumes waved like little banners. The bird was close enough that his usually muddled colors were clearly defined—milky white, blue, violet, and peach.

Mark Catesby somehow missed the species during his 18th-century southern tour. It took half a century longer for specimens to find their way to Europe and into the Count de Buffon's book *The Natural History of Birds*. Shortly after, Philipp Müller dubbed it *Ardea tricolor* based on the illustration Buffon included. Alexander Wilson, not recognizing the living bird as the same described by Buffon, thought he had discovered a new species and named it the Louisiana heron. This common name stuck for 150 years only to be replaced by Müller's original scientific moniker tricolor in 1982.

What three colors does the bird's name refer to? In the course of a year, the adult sports up to four colors as well as a cerulean face and magenta legs. Traveling through Florida in April, Shae and I encountered many scrappy juveniles whose hues truly were limited to three—blue, rusty orange, and white. We had just missed the birds' courtship displays when adult plumes and colors are advertised to best advantage in a choreography of bows and stretches.

Our trip to Florida looked very different from Wilson's or Audubon's more than two centuries



COURTESY OF THE JOHN JAMES AUDUBON CENTER AT MILL GROVE, MONTGOMERY COUNTY AUDUBON COLLECTION, AND ZEBRA PUBLISHING.



MARK HOYLE

High breeding hormones lend a blush to the legs and shocking blue to this tricolored heron's nares and mandible.

ago. For Shae and me, the Miami skyline rose behind flocks of ruddy turnstones, and refuge boardwalks were filled with speed-walking retirees. A friendly eccentric even popped out his dentures for us as we searched for aningas. Most nights we parked at gas stations to sleep, since there weren't enough hours to warrant a hotel before we wanted to be off again.

Like those early bird explorers, my travels compelled me to express my experiences in paint. A steady parade of oystercatchers, wood storks, and Florida scrub-jays came and went on my easel. But the tricolored heron was my longest undertaking. When I finally had the

What to Look and Listen For

Tricolored herons are especially lanky with proportionately longer legs and bill than other herons. Their small stature, combined with a dark back and white belly, is diagnostic, as the only other heron to share the same combination is the much larger great blue heron. Tricoloreds have a gray-blue body with mauve patches on the head, base of the neck, and back. A white stripe running down the front of the neck connects to a white belly and underwings. Adults have white head plumes that extend from the crown like little flags. Juveniles are the same gray-blue with white undersides, but their neck and shoulders are tinted with rusty brown, and they lack the white head plumes. During the breeding season, adults' dull-colored legs turn bright pink, and the yellow skin at the base of their bill is replaced by blue. They gain long peach-colored plumes at the base of their back, forming a pale patch that is visible even from a distance. When flying, they tuck their necks into the shape of an "S" while their legs trail behind.

The tricolored is usually silent except when disturbed or during nesting activities. Its call is typically scratchy and nasal, but it can issue a guttural croak when flushed or alarmed. Both males and females rattle their bills during courtship displays.

Where and When to Look

Tricolored herons can be found in shallow coastal marshes, swamps, lagoons, rivers, mudflats, salt marshes, tidal creeks, mangrove swamps, and open shallow bays. They are coastal birds closely tied to salt water, but they will visit freshwater marshes and swamps found near coasts. They tend to prefer natural habitats and frequent manmade bodies of water less often than other herons. On the Atlantic Coast, their range extends from northern Maine, hugging the Gulf of Mexico and Central America, to the mouth of the Amazon in northern Brazil. On the Pacific Coast, their range extends from northern Mexico to Lima, Peru, as well as the Baja Peninsula and southern California during the nonbreeding season. They're also found inland throughout Florida and the Caribbean Islands. While they can be seen as far north as

New Jersey during the winter, the majority of tricolored herons winter south of the United States. After the breeding season, vagrants have been known to wander as far north and inland as Colorado, Ohio, and Oregon.

Feeding Behavior

Preferring to change its hunting strategy rather than settle for second class prey, the tricolored heron displays a greater variety of feeding behaviors than most other herons. The most common behavior is a "walk-quickly-run-open-wing" sequence that consists of quick sprints and pirouette turns with wings outstretched. It can also be seen stalking, standing, running, crouching, and hopping. It will employ underwing feeding, reaching its head beneath its arched wings in order to hunt for fish in the shade. It utilizes foot stirring, foot raking, foot dipping, and foot dragging in order to attract and stir up prey, and will wade up to its belly in search of fish, deeper than any other medium-sized heron.

Its diet consists mostly of fish, especially minnows and killifish. It will also eat amphibians, crustaceans, gastropods, leeches, insects, spiders, and worms.

It defends its feeding territories and prefers to dine alone. If an abundance of food attracts a large flock of waders, the tricolored heron will often keep its distance from the group.

Courtship and Nesting Behavior

In eastern North America, the tricolored heron typically nests between March and June. It prefers to build its nests on islands within marshes, swamps, and lagoons, typically within ten feet of the ground in thick vegetation such as trees, bushes, mangroves, willows, or low reeds. While it is solitary for most of its life, tricoloreds nest in colonies—frequently mixed colonies—usually claiming the perimeter for their nesting platforms.

While both males and females acquire breeding plumage, the colors of the male are brighter. At the commencement of the nesting season, a male will claim a territory as large as 30 feet in diameter. After building a nesting platform to

function as his main stage, he goes about impressing females with courtship displays designed to highlight his newly acquired plumes. He stretches his wings, pointing them downward, and bows his head with plumes erect. Then he quickly raises his head to the sky while snapping his beak to draw attention to his brightly colored eyes, lores, and bill.

Initially he's very aggressive and will chase away any encroaching males as well as females. After a period of time, females can enter his territory without being challenged. Eventually, a female is able to approach the platform where copulation will occur.

As the neighborhood gets more crowded, the male's territory will often shrink to the size of a single bush. Both males and females work together in building the nest, with the male gathering the sticks and the female arranging their final layout. Tricolored herons typically lay three to four pale blue eggs in a clutch. Both males and females participate in incubation, which lasts between 21 and 24 days. Chicks hatch in the order in which the eggs were laid, often leading to a survival disadvantage for the youngest. Chicks can fly after five weeks, but their parents will continue to feed them until they are three or four months old. —AW



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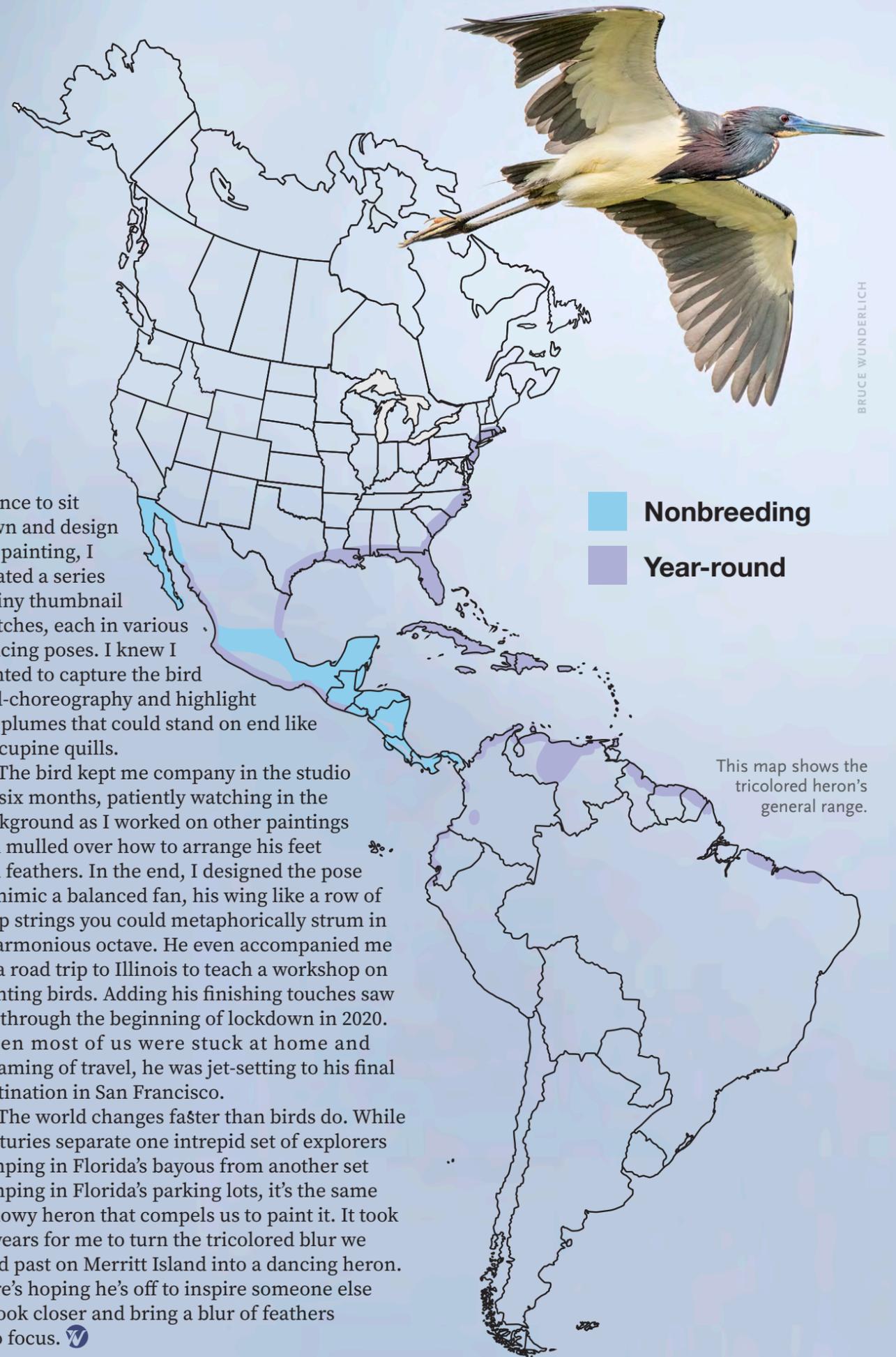


A juvenile tricolored heron shuffles its blue-gray, rusty brown, and white feathers; molting into adult plumage will occur over the course of its first winter.

chance to sit down and design the painting, I created a series of tiny thumbnail sketches, each in various dancing poses. I knew I wanted to capture the bird mid-choreography and highlight the plumes that could stand on end like porcupine quills.

The bird kept me company in the studio for six months, patiently watching in the background as I worked on other paintings and mulled over how to arrange his feet and feathers. In the end, I designed the pose to mimic a balanced fan, his wing like a row of harp strings you could metaphorically strum in a harmonious octave. He even accompanied me on a road trip to Illinois to teach a workshop on painting birds. Adding his finishing touches saw me through the beginning of lockdown in 2020. When most of us were stuck at home and dreaming of travel, he was jet-setting to his final destination in San Francisco.

The world changes faster than birds do. While centuries separate one intrepid set of explorers camping in Florida's bays from another set camping in Florida's parking lots, it's the same willowy heron that compels us to paint it. It took 20 years for me to turn the tricolored blur we sped past on Merritt Island into a dancing heron. Here's hoping he's off to inspire someone else to look closer and bring a blur of feathers into focus. 



BRUCE WUNDERLICH

 Nonbreeding
 Year-round

This map shows the tricolored heron's general range.



*Chipmunks and squirrels
and rabbits, oh my!*

RETHINKING SUMMER FEEDING

STORY & PHOTOS BY JULIE ZICKEFOOSE

As the insect chorus swells to a crescendo, and cicadas sing the warm season to its close, I'm reflecting on my summer. For several years, I've been gathering information in a slow, measured way, parsing out the pros and cons of summer bird feeding.

The pros are obvious. We like having our avian neighbors nearby. We enjoy seeing them bring their young to our feeders. Birds add life, color, and song to our yards. What would summer be, after all, without the endless pipping of baby northern cardinals, still begging at 65 days of age? If we didn't feed all summer long, we'd surely miss the incessant calls of begging baby house finches—the only birds with the temerity to actually say *Tweet?* Or *TWEET TWEET TWEET TWEET TWEET TWEET TWEET TWEET!!* What would summer bird feeding be without that, or the odor of moldy thistle seed?

By my clever use of foreshadowing, you will infer that I've been rethinking summer feeding. I love watching fledgling birds learn the ropes. But there's so very much I don't love about it. I'd like to share some of the dots I've connected over decades of summer bird feeding. (I'm a slow learner).

Notch was a battle-scarred rabbit who vaulted up into tall planters to destroy the author's flowers. He also provided pruning services for trailing plants.



I like a rodent as much as the next person, which is to say I don't like them very much. I appreciate their place in an ecosystem, but birds in general make far superior neighbors. What I've noticed is that when you put a great deal of seed into a backyard environment, birds aren't the only ones who enjoy it. Chipmunks, squirrels, mice, rats, and lagomorphs (rabbits) also eagerly vacuum it up. As many a homeowner's association has ruled, bird feeding also attracts rodents. And we know how skilled mammals are at multiplying, given an abundant food source. Does it make sense to fortify rodents and rabbits, which could in most yards stand to be scarcer, with unlimited food through their breeding season?

In 2016 and 2017, I blithely fed birds all summer, even scattering cracked corn, sunflower, and millet on a big plexi sheet on the ground. I wanted to serve ground-feeding birds clean, dry seed, and keep it from getting wet and moldy in the heat. I really enjoyed seeing blue jays and eastern towhees bounce in to partake of the offerings. But rabbits also gathered to vacuum up the seed, and the gray squirrel population skyrocketed, until I had nine in the yard at any one time. I bought black oil sunflower by the 50-pound bag, but most of it went into the furry paunches of squirrels and the cheek pouches of eastern chipmunks.

Chipmunks are primarily diggers, with a bizarre predilection for burrowing under and uprooting newly established plants, as if to chastise a gardener for trying to plant anything in their territory. There's nothing like seeing all the flowers you planted the day before lying

James the Bobcat came to the yard for a week to see if he could help with the rodent and rabbit overburden. He pauses to stare the author down, August 15, 2016.

Above: A chipmunk does not pause to consider for whom the peanuts were intended. He helps himself, carterbagging them away to his burrow.



roots-up in the hot sun! Oh, chipmunks are such charmers.

Gray squirrels are chewers, and in my yard their favorite targets are geraniums and hibiscus. Oddly, those happen to be my favorite ornamental plants of all. It is possible to keep a chipmunk away from plants by putting them in hanging baskets, or on pedestals or tables. They can climb, but they aren't built for leaping.

Gray squirrels, by contrast, cannot be kept off anything; they may as well have wings. One squirrel can reduce a spectacular hibiscus bush, grown for years, down to bare sticks in minutes, biting off every bud and leaf, stripping the bark. Repeated attacks leave a glorious geranium in tatters.

Rabbits contribute by efficiently snipping ornamental flowers to bits, reducing beautiful bush-sized plants to lifeless rubble overnight. They'll stand on their hind legs to trim any vining plants, then leap up into large planters to finish off the rest. They don't seem to eat them; they just like to break them into their component parts: leaves and bits of stem. It doesn't take long for a gardener to feel besieged and despondent, with a buck-toothed wrecking crew working full-time to dismantle her every effort.

If I have one good thing to say about having nine squirrels, six chipmunks, and as many cottontails scurrying around the premises, it's that a lucky person in the right setting might, one fine day, look out the window to see a bobcat hunkered in the yard, looking to reduce the overage. I had two different bobcats show up repeatedly: a young male (James) in August 2016 and a female (Cindy) in August 2017. Having bobcats in my yard is probably among the top ten thrills of my life, and I saw Cindy catch both a squirrel and a chipmunk. On balance, though, I'll choose to enjoy my bobcats by chance encounter—darting across the driveway or padding through a winter meadow—and on the trail cameras going forward.



Balance, then, is the word. By now, it should have been clear to me that I'd invited the rodent overburden, but it took a while for it to sink in why such high concentrations of mammals were frequenting my yard. Why, it was the seed and corn I'd distributed right amidst my gardens. Humans can be slow to see such connections, especially when they're having fun.

The fun balance was tipping, however. One squirrel in the summer of 2021, an old warrior with notched ears and a broken tail tip, would wait for me to drive away, perhaps a biweekly event. He'd then leap up into the hanging baskets that grace my front porch and destroy everything in them. Walking up the sidewalk, my arms laden with groceries, I'd find plants in smithereens all over the stoop. ENOUGH. Too much! One diabolical animal had me on my knees.

In the spring of 2022, after years of such palm-to-forehead moments, I decided to stop spreading rodent attractants in my yard during growing season. When the long, cold spring finally resolved in the third week of May, I tapered off my feeding program, letting the feeders stand empty for a day or more at a time, gently giving the birds the message that this food source would be neither abundant nor reliable going forward. And—surprise!—the squirrels got the message, too. Six dwindled to three, to one, and the notch-eared warrior made only occasional forays into the yard, to be met by me or my dog, Curtis, whenever we spotted him.

Without seed to vacuum up, the squirrels kept busy foraging naturally, and had no reason to

No geranium, whether on a high deck or in a hanging basket, was safe from this particularly diabolical gray squirrel, who learned to wait until the author left the premises to do his worst.

hang around wreaking havoc. The tweeting gobs of house finches flew off, taking their outside voices and their *Mycoplasma* germs with them. (Disease, which proliferates in summer, is a whole 'nother compelling topic, with much less appealing photos.) My yard became a more peaceful place, with the trickling WarblerFall beneath my window still drawing in forest birds for a cool drink and a bath. I could plant flowers without witnessing their immediate demise. Things felt right. Balanced.

I will confess to putting out small handfuls of Zick Dough in a cup hanging high from my kitchen eave as an intermittent treat for bluebirds, titmice, Carolina chickadees, and chipping sparrows. The hummingbird feeder stayed. And for a few fun-filled weeks in June and July, I spontaneously put up a single, baffle-protected mesh peanut feeder, but only when the downy, hairy, and red-bellied woodpeckers fledged and trailed their parents into the yard. My beloved blue jays and cardinals enthusiastically partook.

One doesn't have to give up all the fun. But I'd submit it's time we all take a look at what we're doing when we offer unlimited quantities of seed all summer, and ask if the avian clientele we enjoy in the warm months is really worth the exasperation that's dealt by rodents—those furry guests we never meant to invite. 

Julie Zickefoose is a writer and artist who lives on an 80-acre nature sanctuary in Whipple, Ohio. After writing and illustrating five books, she has transitioned to magazine work, but may have a couple books in her yet.



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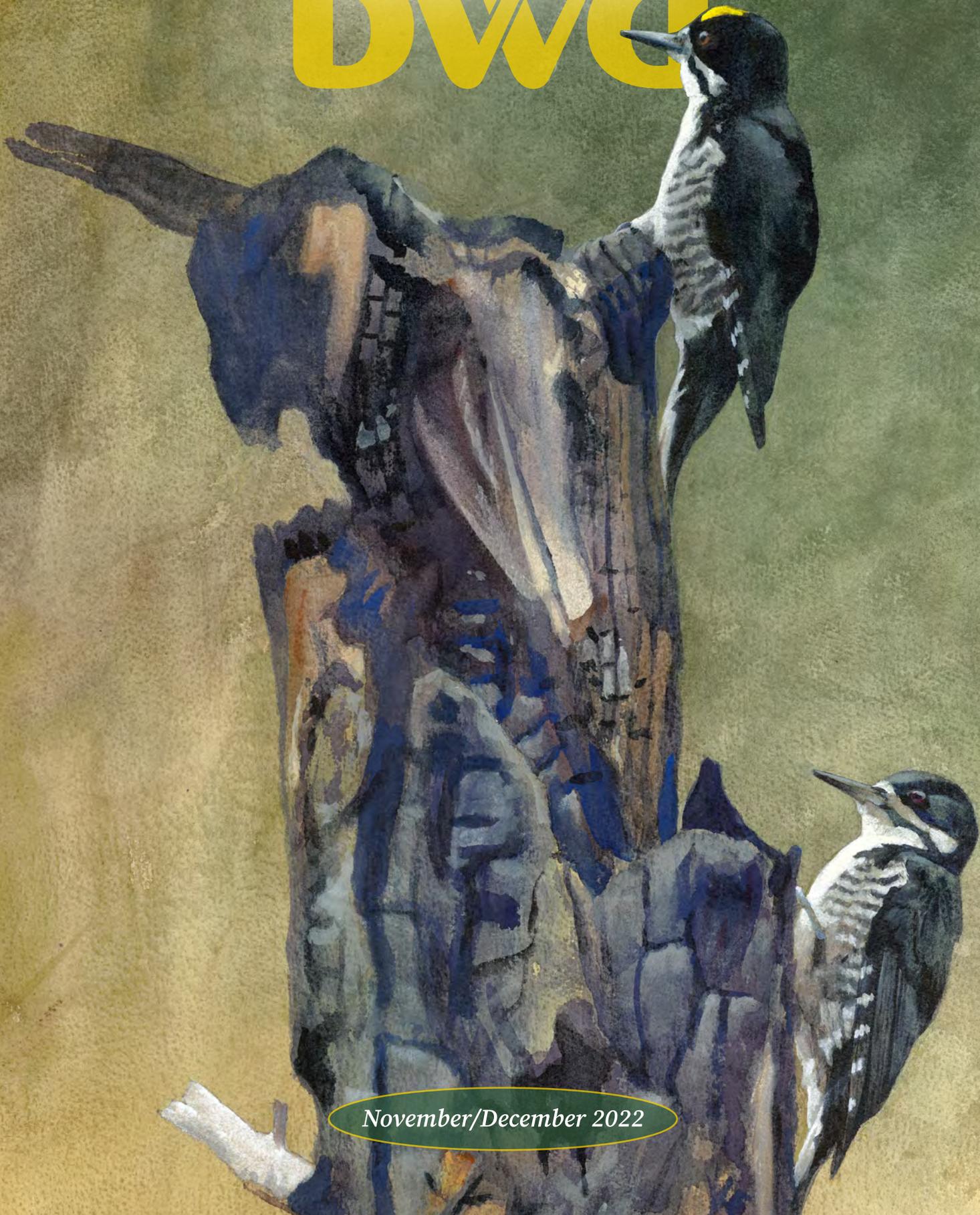
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BY SCOTT WEIDENSAUL

ON STAND

A snowy daybreak in rural Pennsylvania. Right: Like the author, a great horned owl is also on the hunt.

It was still nearly an hour before first light, cold enough that my breath hung silver in the light of a waning moon soon to set. I moved with slow deliberation as I climbed the ridge; even though I wore just two light layers, I didn't want to work up a sweat.

Off in the distance, a female great horned owl fired off a stream of hoots, answered moments later by the somewhat deeper voice of her mate. It was the end of November, and their hormones were stirring. But for now, in the murky dawn, they were hunting.

So was I.

It was the opening morning of Pennsylvania's rifle deer season, "buck season," in normal parlance. To say it's a seasonal rite in rural Pennsylvania is a serious understatement; in many parts of the commonwealth, schools, including the ones I attended, closed on that traditional Monday-following-Thanksgiving date. No sense holding classes when half the students

and faculty would be "out sick" that day. (The season opener has since shifted to a Saturday, but you get the idea.)

I've been a hunter as long as I've been a birder, and the two have always been intertwined. Nor am I alone in this; there are a lot of hunter-birders out there, including my fellow *BWD* columnist Pete Dunne.

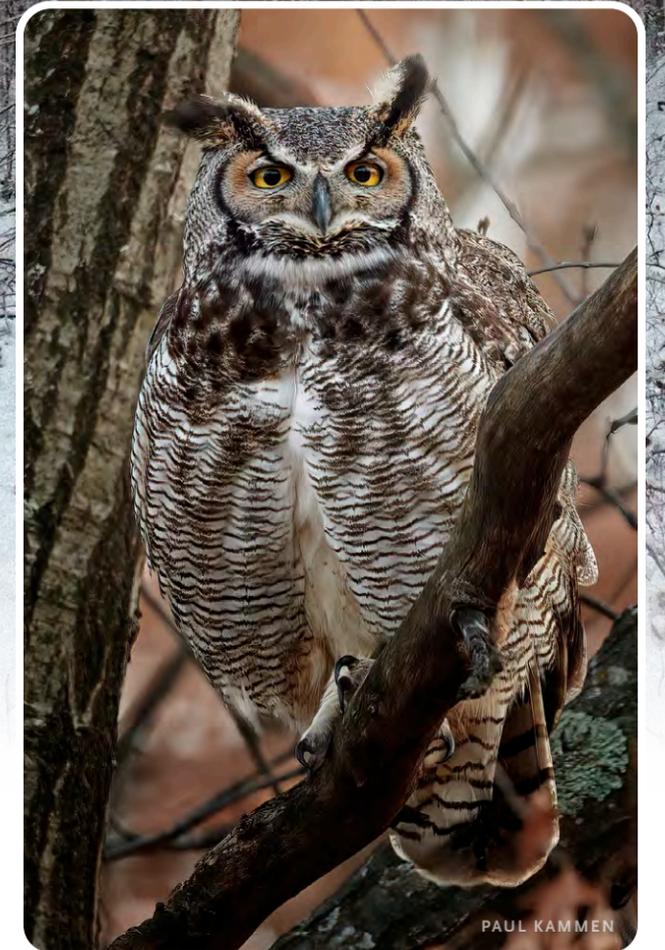
Even before I reached the age of 12, which in that state (and at that time) was the youngest one could qualify for a hunting license, I tagged along with my father or one of my uncles, helping to kick a hidden cottontail out a brush pile, or scampering to retrieve a downed ring-necked pheasant, back in the days when they were common in the weedy, brushy-edged cornfields. (So were vesper sparrows, meadowlarks, and other grassland species that thrived before the age of vast, highly mechanized, chemically soaked monoculture fields.) Who needs a dog when you have a

10-year-old, even if you sometimes have to redirect his attention away from the big pileated woodpecker that just flew past?

I grew up with a wooded ridge literally at the edge of the backyard, where gray squirrels and ruffed grouse were my earliest quarry. Later, as a young adult, I took a rather obsessive dive into waterfowl hunting for a number of years.

But deer hunting was always a constant, whether it was using a bow when I was in high school, carrying a Winchester .30-30 lever-action I bought when I got out of college, or some years later in Pennsylvania's unique, after-Christmas flintlock season, watching the snowy woods with a hand-built replica of a 1750 long rifle—as slim and elegant as a whitetail's leg—cradled in the crook of my arm, and a shot pouch and powder horn over one shoulder.

In all those years, I'd missed only a handful of openers, and only under great duress. Once, it was because I had fallen the day before while



PAUL KAMMEN

hauling all our gear down from a remote hawk-trapping station on top of the Kittatinny Ridge. Pro tip: When you slip on rain-slicked Appalachian Trail boulders with 50 pounds of banding equipment on your back, don't try to break your fall by holding out your arm. I spent that opening day in an operating room, as doctors pieced my wrist bones back together and held everything in place with a cumbersome external fixator.

This year, though, as the great horneds hooted in the dark, would be my last Keystone State hunt, the end of a five-decade tradition. My wife had started a new job in New England a few months earlier, and once I had our old

house emptied and sold, I'd be moving to New Hampshire with her. So there was an even sharper edge than usual to the morning as I tried to drink it all in one last time.

As a kid, I was a restless hunter, always on the move. That worked well chasing grouse, where the more miles you put on your boots, the more flushes you'll have, but it took me a long time to realize it was the wrong approach for deer. Silence and stillness are the ticket, at least where I hunted; better to let the deer get bumped by someone more impatient than me while I waited quietly in a spot with a good view of the mountain slope.

I'm the same way when I'm birding; I'm far too twitchy under most circumstances to do a Big Sit, but that's basically what a day on a deer stand is, which is why I have so many rich birding memories from my time in the deer woods.

You'd think that, given the superb color vision most birds enjoy, somebody my size wearing a fluorescent orange hat and vest would be a huge "Steer Clear!" sign, but it all comes down to motion. Once, sitting in a tree stand 15 feet off the ground, I heard tiny claw-on-bark sounds above me on the trunk against which I leaned. I stayed still, then felt the slightest pressure on my head; a moment later, a white-breasted nuthatch leaned over my hat brim and peered, upside down, into my face, so close I couldn't really focus. It flitted a few feet to another tree, gave me a thorough once-over, and then continued to head-first it down that trunk, having decided I was odd but harmless.

The one group of birds that never ignores me are corvids. Once, a gang of crows mobbed a great horned owl near my stand. It had been a slow, rain-spitty day, and I was grateful for the distraction, but when the owl flew to a new perch closer to my position, two of the crows immediately spotted me sitting at the base of my usual big oak. Their vocalizations changed noticeably, and half a dozen others peeled off from the owl to sit with them in a half-circle

20 yards away from me. The smallest movement on my part brought a chorus of harsh caws, and they remained on guard, watching this potential rear-guard threat until the owl flew off deeper into the woods and they rejoined their fellows.

The oak woods of the central Appalachians aren't especially birdy in early winter, and my checklist for a day of deer hunting was usually pretty thin: chickadees (black-capped when I was younger, but now Carolina chickadees have replaced them in that area), tufted titmice, downy and hairy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, sometimes kinglets of both flavors, and usually a brown creeper or two—generally all in mixed flocks, moving like a feathered amoeba through the forest.

I never knew what flyovers I might get, up above the leafless canopy: croaking ravens or Canada geese passing from one valley to the next, or once, as I readied myself in the dark on a bitterly cold day with a grating north wind, the sound of tundra swans, a late flock heading south for the Chesapeake.

One memorable day I saw something big and gray moving through the mountain laurel toward me—clearly not a deer, but what? Out of the thicket and into my binocular view stepped a great blue heron, which spent the next two hours stalking, snatching, and gobbling half a dozen or more red-backed voles, whose population was at a cyclical high that autumn.

Some winters we have a decent irruption of northern birds, and the woods will be full of red-

breasted nuthatches and purple finches. Once, when the local white pines had a heavy cone crop, I was treated to the constant chips and fluttering activity of a small flock of red crossbills, which methodically mined the long, dangly cones all morning, paying even less attention to me in my tree stand than did most birds. I didn't get a deer that day, and suspect any number may have slipped past me while I was engrossed watching the crossbills.

I've had my share of raptor encounters on stand as well. It was always a notable miss if I didn't hear great horned owls in the predawn dark, and every once in a while I'd hear eastern screech-owls whinnying. Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks were the most frequent diurnal hunters, but on one or two occasions I saw goshawks, hulking gray-brown immatures slicing through the gray-brown trees.

There have been days when I heard or saw virtually nothing, mammal or bird; those are the ones where by nine o'clock I'm counting the hours to my lunch sandwich and thermos of tomato soup, just to break the monotony. But such times are rare—as any Big Sit birder knows, there's generally something, avian or not, to catch one's attention.

One morning, back when I was still in high school, a persistent shrew tried, again and again and again, to drag me away. At least that's how it seemed, for no matter how many times I shook it off, it came back, gripping the edge of my leather

Brown creeper, and (right) red crossbills in a pine.





JAMIE CUNNINGHAM



MARK HOYLE

boot's sole in its pointy, dark red teeth and pulling with all its might.

It took us many months, and dozens of house viewings with our long-suffering realtor, to find the place in New Hampshire we were looking for: secluded, birdy, with enough land that I could walk out the back door for my annual Big Sit deer hunt. That first autumn, I took the flintlock down off the wall for the state's muzzleloader season, which falls in late October. It was a short walk to my new stand, where I could stand on a knoll overlooking our sphagnum bog, set deep in the beech-hemlock forest, and around which a series of game trails ran. Maybe I'd see a moose, I thought, since one of the trail cameras had caught the rear end of one passing by a few weeks earlier.

The cast of characters has changed, compared with my old haunts; black-capped chickadees again, and red-breasted nuthatches every year, not just in irruptions. I have yet to hear a great horned owl, but barred owls hoot and caterwaul in the gloaming, and lingering hermit thrushes *chup, chup* in the shade of the hemlocks.

The last day of that first season had come and largely gone; only half an hour of light was left. The barred owls were carrying on in the distance, and I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, easing a growing stiffness. Movement; a thrush flew up to a low perch, lifted its tail, and slowly dropped it—but my eye went beyond the bird to a big buck slowly picking its way toward me. I raised the long, slender gun, cocked the hammer with its piece of sharpened flint in its jaws, and set the trigger. A deep breath, half released, and the gentlest touch on the hair trigger. A roar, a cloud of smoke.

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Scott Weidensaul is the author, most recently, of the New York Times *bestseller* *A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds*.

From top: Ring-necked pheasant, northern goshawk., whitetail buck.

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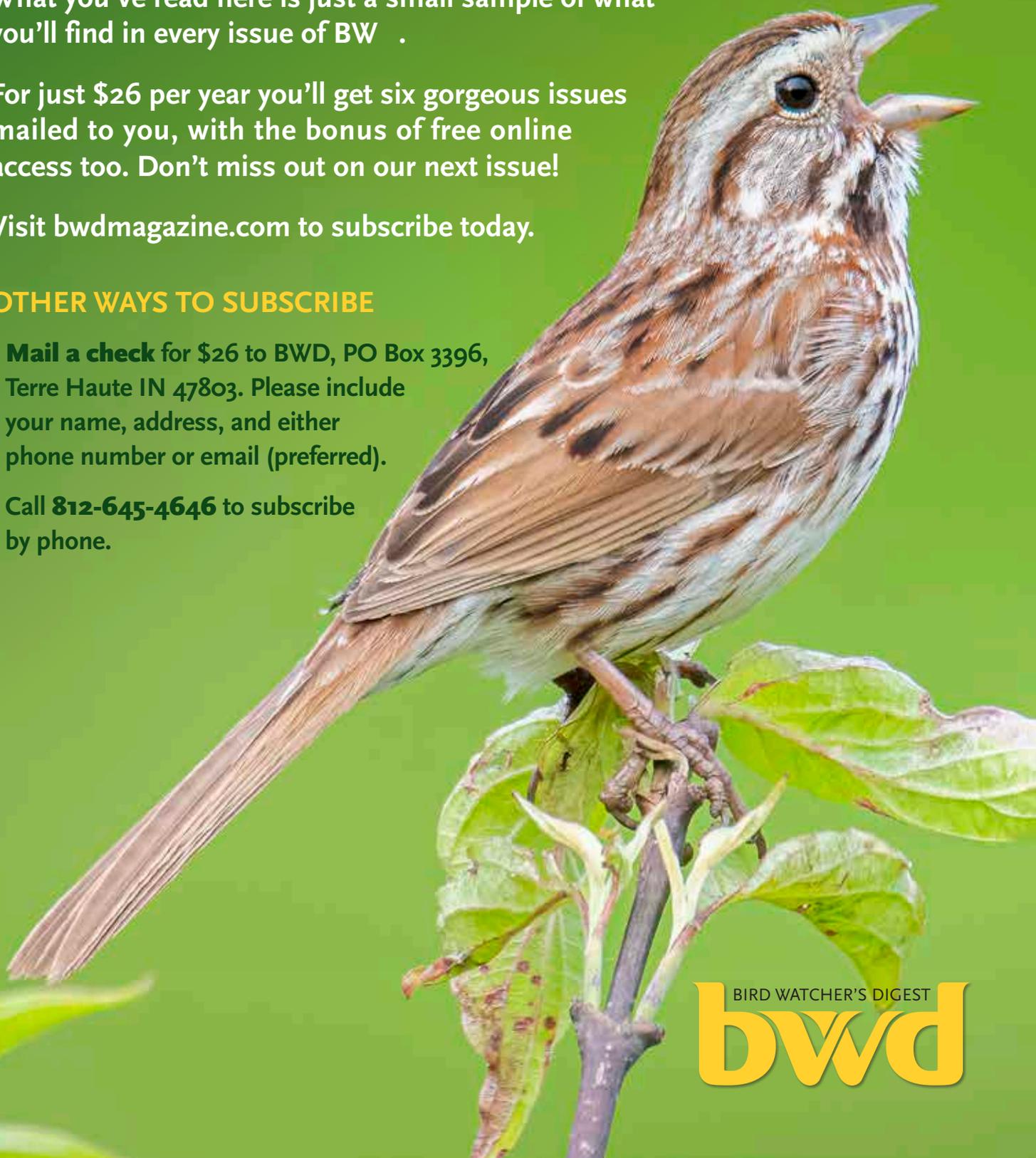
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