

INTRODUCTION

The designation “armchair birder” signals no achievement and confers no distinction. I can’t claim to have driven 300 miles in the middle of the night to see the avocets at dawn on Delaware Bay. As for my “life list,” you could just about get the whole thing on a cocktail napkin.

What I do, mostly, is hang feeders and watch the birds that come to me. I listen to their songs and sometimes succeed in figuring out which bird is singing which tune. I observe what I can of their behavior. If a bird happens to wander in that I haven’t seen before, it’s a big day. I’m like, as Keats says, “some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken.”

Following family tradition, I’ve always hung a bird feeder or two, but my skies got bigger ten years ago when my wife and daughter and I moved from the suburbs to the country. I began seeing woodland birds I’d only seen pictures of—tanagers, indigo buntings, pileated woodpeckers, the shy and retiring yellow-billed cuckoo. The first spring we were here, I looked out the window and dropped my spoon into my cereal bowl. A rose-breasted grosbeak was sitting on the feeder. My goodness—Peterson’s cover bird, not twenty feet away.

Again, though, you don’t have to live in the woods to be an armchair birder. On the other hand, if your interest extends beyond the boundaries of your own property, you are permitted to get out of your chair—temporarily anyway. I confess to having seen swallow-tailed kites in the Florida panhandle, frigate birds circling around a high-rise hotel in Cancun, and black skimmers on the Georgia coast. At a bird sanctuary in Jamaica, the spectacular “doctor-bird” perched on my finger and sipped sugar water from a drip-bottle.

But the armchair birder doesn’t have to go anywhere. Because here’s the thing: Reading is encouraged. Birds, after all, are downright remarkable creatures, and there’s only so much I’m going to find out by watching the chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice that come to the feeder all year-round. So, establishing my armchair status, I have an ever-expanding bookshelf that includes, among other things,

some Audubon, some Forbush, and a dozen or so volumes of Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Life Histories* series. I skim through the publications of a couple of bird organizations I've given a few dollars to. Thanks to the folks at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, I can subscribe to *The Birds of North America Online*, an unbelievable resource.

The more I find out, of course, the more I want to know. There's no end to the mystery and wonder of bird behavior. Sure, part of me wants to be out in the field, on top of Kennesaw Mountain at the break of day watching the warbler migration or tromping through the swampy forests of southeast Arkansas to confirm the reappearance of the majestic ivory-billed woodpecker. But the professionals have done the legwork, and more power to them. As an armchair birder, I accept a humbler role: If I can't paint like Audubon, maybe I can put his pictures in new frames.

You understand, then, that this book is no field guide. The forty birds I've concentrated on here are widely familiar, and chances are good that you can already identify most if not all of them. But, if you're like me, identifying them is the beginning, not the end, of the journey. If you're like me, knowing what they look like just whets your appetite for knowing what they're up to. Sitting in my armchair, I've discovered some of that less familiar information.

Of course, I'm working on the assumption that you are like me: that you're fascinated by birds like I am; that your eyes are quick to follow any shadow flitting through the tree limbs; that on clear winter days your ears strain toward the high-up, far-off gabbling of sandhill cranes; and—not least important—that you're predisposed to find some pleasure in these pages.