

# peak beak

A NEOPHYTE BIRDER SINGS THE PRAISES OF BECOMING ATTUNED TO AVIAN LIFE. BUT HAS HE FOUND HIS CALLING EVEN AS BIRDS SLIDE INTO DECLINE?  
**BY TYEE BRIDGE**

Winter is cold. We retreat, hibernate. Snow piles up. The bleak daily commute from one side of the city to the other and back again—grey, rutted, exhaust-stained—becomes a life metaphor. You wait for it to be over, binge-watching TV series.

Or you don't. Some people definitely don't. Instead, they get out: not just to the grocery store or to a restaurant, but *out*. To the woods, the rivers, the fields, the mountains. And if you're one of those whose suspicion or outright dislike of rosy-cheeked, wintertime keeners has given way to guarded admiration, there's good news: you're welcome to join them.

I mean a certain kind of getting out, namely birding.<sup>1</sup> As winter adventure goes, this is admittedly on the mild side of the activity spectrum. It's more aerobic than, say, ice fishing—and less dangerous, given the latter's trademark ice-covered lakes, beer and portable heaters—but considerably less of a cardio burn than cross-country skiing. Which is not to say you can't cross-country ski with your bird-book, binoculars and a 600mm telephoto camera—you can. (And if you do, on the activity spectrum you can place your birding experiences right next to biathlon, since telephoto/tripod setups outweigh Olympic-class .22 rifles.)

The Friends of Fish Creek and Nature Calgary are two local groups that lead daily and weekly trips to wild areas inside and outside the city limits. Carburn Park, Glenmore, Fish Creek, or Nose Hill could be where you (or your children, your spouse, or anyone else you can bundle out the door) will get a first sighting—a “lifer,” in bird-speak—of a snow bunting, a saw-whet owl, a red crossbill.

“It's not just birds,” said John Thompson. I was sitting with him and his friend Phil Cram at a Tim Hortons in mid-November, following a birding trip to Carburn Park. “You'll see white-tailed deer, snowshoe hares, long-tailed weasels... and then you start making lists of those, too. Birding





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just opens your eyes to everything that's out there." It's true: in late October a birding group saw a juvenile female moose at the west end of Griffith Woods Park. Head out to Weaselhead and you might see one of the bobcats spotted there in the past few weeks.

Thompson is a former principal violist for the Calgary Philharmonic, and has been birding since 1976, when a friend took him on an "eye-opening" trip to Beaverhill Lake east of Edmonton. Cram worked in the oil industry and has been recording a life-list of birds since he retired 16 years ago. His path was confirmed when he went on a Carburn Park bird count with legendary Calgary naturalist Gus Yaki in 2000—and Yaki pointed out a saw-whet owl perched in the poplars at head-level.

"I've seen only probably half a dozen saw-whets in my life, and that was the first," said Cram. "It was a pivotal moment in a pivotal year. After that I started making birding a principal activity." Now he travels in order to spot species: in 2012 Cram and three friends undertook what he calls "Fur and Feathers 500," a trip criss-crossing Canada to see 500 species of animals. Pack ice in Nunavut's Repulse Bay kept them from bagging a narwhal sighting, but they did see a polar bear. By year's end they reached a total of 507 species, 431 of them birds, including a "very rare" rustic bunting in Haida Gwaii.

Among other things Cram is the compiler of the Christmas Bird Count, a holiday tradition among Calgarians since 1952. (For details on joining the venerable "CBC," see sidebar on page 28.) When I first heard about the Christmas count, something clicked. Many of us roast and consume *Meleagris gallopavo* around the holidays but that's about as far as our appreciation for birds goes.

For me, birding is new, and birding after October is very new. I started tracking birds, loosely and infrequently, about a year and a half ago. I bought an affordable pair of Bushnell binoculars and a little guidebook, and now the flashes of feathers and chirps that used to be pure background catch my interest. My small life-list includes some gems from a trip to Antarctica (wandering albatross, skuas, gentoo penguins)—and, because we live not far from a famous bird sanctuary (Reifel), also northern pintails, northern shovelers and giant red-headed sandhill cranes.<sup>2</sup>

The chance to go winter birding in Calgary was particularly appealing, because since last year I've felt a hole in the season—a nagging sense that I wanted winter and the whole Christmas build-up to connect me and my family to magic. Not only the magic of spiritual remembrance, but also nature and wilderness (which, depending on your point of view, can be the same thing). In any case, that was the feeling: we needed a new family ritual.

Thankfully, with winter birding—which simply means looking and listening while you're outside, and is as much about ice-banked rivers, snowy forests, weasels and everything else as much as it is about birds—I think I've found it.

Coming from temperate Vancouver, I didn't know what to expect from the frozen banks of the Bow River. I assumed that birding prospects amid the snowy poplars would be lean. But in an hour and 20 minutes we encountered 19 bird species, including Barrow's goldeneye, common merganser, American wigeon (rare in winter) and—the capper, for me, just at the end of the walk—a great horned owl. (Not to mention the yuletide sight I'm determined to orchestrate for my son over the coming years: a white-tailed buck in the snow, complete with antlers.)

"Unusual we didn't see any bald eagles," said Thompson at one point, who like Cram is in a position to know what should be around this time of year. "And I would have hoped to see a bohemian waxwing."

I was a little disappointed in the absence of bohemians myself, as among all the birds I've spotted here in B.C., my favourite is its cousin, the cedar waxwing. Waxwings are to avian plumage as a vintage Lamborghini Miura is to auto design: they're so damned perfect and delightful they appear to have been created by a crack team of avian esthetes.<sup>3</sup> But "disappointment" is not the word to sum up our walk. For a short, city-based jaunt that put us in full view of traffic on the Deerfoot, it was an exalted and exhilarating 80 minutes—and that is the real takeaway for the cabin-feverish. You can

## calgary birds in trouble

In Calgary and elsewhere many bird species are in trouble. Local naturalist Gus Yaki—winner of the 2014 Alberta Wilderness Association's Wilderness Defenders Award—has been observing the problems first hand and has a few ideas about solutions.

"Shortly after arriving in Calgary in 1993, I started monthly walks along the Elbow River, from Stanley Park to the Glenmore Reservoir. Since then, at least 14 species of birds that were relatively regular breeders, including belted kingfisher, eastern kingbird, western wood-peewee, ruby-crowned kinglet, and Baltimore orioles, have disappeared along that route."

Here are five ways Gus recommends that Calgarians can be good hosts to our precious population of wild birds.

**1 CONTROL YOUR DOG** Dogs in natural parks need to be leashed as they will kill ground-nesting birds and nestlings, as well as meadow voles—food needed by other wildlife, such as hawks and owls. There are approximately 78 million dogs in the United States and Canada, so the damage dog owners inflict by not leashing their dogs in natural areas is vast.



**2 KEEP YOUR CAT INDOORS** A recent study in *Nature Communications* reported that "outdoor cats are the greatest source of human-caused mortality for birds and mammals in the U.S." It is estimated that cats kill between 1.4 billion and 3.7 billion birds in the U.S. and Canada every year.



**3 HELP STOP WINDOW STRIKES** Hundreds of millions of birds die every year after flying into windows. You can minimize this by hanging light-admitting curtains or blinds, so the birds see that there is a solid barrier before colliding with it. If you work in an office building where they keep the lights on at night—advocate to have them turned off.



**4 STOP USING PESTICIDES** The "cide" suffix in insecticide, herbicide, pesticide and homicide means "to kill." Birds and bats control harmful insects, but die when eating ones that have been poisoned by pesticides.

**5 GET RID OF INVASIVE PLANTS** Many non-native species—top offenders like caragana, cotoneaster, Chinese lilac, mountain ash, European buckthorn, and many others—do not host any insects. Baby birds need insects in order to grow and survive.



## christmas bird count

The 63rd annual Calgary Christmas Bird Count takes place Sunday, Dec. 14. The count breaks the city into quadrants, each one orchestrated by a route co-ordinator. The hour is late for registration, but if you want to inquire about joining, go to [www.naturecalgary.com/birding](http://www.naturecalgary.com/birding).

Counts in eight surrounding areas, including High River, Banff/Canmore, Fish Creek and the Snakes Head Natural Area, go from Dec. 16 to Jan. 3. For detailed contact information see page 3 of the Nature Calgary newsletter at [www.tiny.cc/2014BirdCount](http://www.tiny.cc/2014BirdCount).

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### photographer credits:

1. Greater scaup, Tim J. Hopwood
2. Common redpoll, Tim J. Hopwood
3. Rufous hummingbird, Rob English
4. Bald eagle, Shirley Otway
5. Mountain bluebird, George Best
6. Great gray owl, Anne Elliott
7. Black-capped chickadee, George Best
8. Snowy owl, Duane Starr
9. Canada geese at Frank Lake, Pam Hawkes
10. Migrant tree swallows, Trevor Churchill
11. Tree swallow, Matthew Sim
12. Oregon dark-eyed junco, Tim J. Hopwood
13. White-tailed ptarmigan, Daniel Arndt
14. Pileated woodpecker, Tim J. Hopwood
15. Snowy owl, Tim J. Hopwood
16. Common redpoll, Anne Elliott
17. Western tanager, Shirley Otway
18. Snowy owl, Pam Hawkes
19. Ravens, Duane Starr
20. Northern goshawk, Rob English
21. Red crossbill, Tim J. Hopwood
22. Tree swallow, Trevor Churchill
23. Red-breasted nuthatch, Tim J. Hopwood
24. Northern flicker, Pam Hawkes
25. American tree sparrow, Daniel Arndt

(and probably should, occasionally) drive out to Kananaskis in winter to get a dose of wild beauty, but you don't have to. Magic is nearby.

Accompanying Cram and Thompson was inspiring as well because it was my first time getting help from seasoned birders—meaning people who don't need to spend half their time flipping through a guidebook to make an identification. For me, seeing a picture of the bird I've just spotted in my binoculars on a printed page has its own satisfaction, but Cram and Thompson had shown me the significant benefits of being a joiner: you see more. Lots more.

Similarly, start taking an interest in things with feathers and you learn stuff. Take waxwings: they survive mainly on fruits and berries, a diet that in hot summers—when overripe berries and fruits turn to alcohol—can get them drunk, or dead. They need up to five days to build a nest, which takes about 2,500 separate trips. This is impressive for one little bird: it's more than a fleet of tradesmen need to build a new house in Cranston or Coventry Hills.

All of which is to say that birds, like other species, make going outside interesting. Birds tie into just about everything, from agriculture and seed distribution to unsettling climate change impacts<sup>4</sup> and now-global diseases like West Nile. If you get a new one in your lens and follow a trail of informational crumbs to learn more about it, you become, yes, a richer and more satisfied human being. (Given the stereotype of birders, beginners and otherwise, as occasionally stultifying, socially inept know-it-alls, whether you yourself become more interesting is another question.)<sup>5</sup>

So there it is. Ritual or no ritual, Christmas participation or simply a way to obliterate the winter blahs: no more excuses. Learn the birds, the plants. Know where you live. Get out there.

**1. Note the verb.** Among birders, calling it "birdwatching," which sounds rather stationary and excludes the rather outrageous skill of listening for and identifying bird calls, is like sitting at a Flames game and calling it "ice hockey."

**2. Sandhills are native to North America** but look like something from the African veldt. Conservationist and birder Aldo Leopold made them famous in his 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*, noting that he occasionally heard their chirruping calls but never saw them, because at that time they were just pushing back from the brink of extinction. The story of their recovery since the 1930s is an important one—and unlike that of the passenger pigeon—relatively cheerful.

**3. Waxwings have a swept-back crest,** as if from a screaming dive out of the stratosphere. The neck, grey to brown, is creamy but ethereal, and the tips of its tail-feathers are dipped in bright yellow. Their name comes from the mysterious bits of bright red that exude from the ends of its wings, as if it flew onto a 17th-century noblewoman's desk and took too much interest in a blob of wet sealing wax.

**4. The short version is that birds are in trouble.** In 2014 two "important and alarming" reports (to use Nature Calgary's phrase) were released about the present and future of North American birds. One was the Audubon Society's Birds and Climate Change report, which finds that nearly half of all birds on the continent will be "imperilled" by climate change in the next 80 years, due to shifting of habitat; and the other, State of the Birds 2014 (by a coalition of 21 groups, including the Smithsonian, Environment Canada, Ducks Unlimited and the American Bird Conservancy) which shows that birds in "aridlands" and grasslands—which encompasses most of southern Alberta, Calgary included—have declined by 40 per cent in the past four decades. Both reports are free and available online.

**5. For one of the world's great portrayals** of an overbearing naturalist, see the Malham Cove limestone geology scene in the Steve Coogan film *The Trip*.

# a gift list for the beginning birder

## ZOOMING IN: AFFORDABLE BINOCULARS AND POINT-AND-SHOOT CAMERAS

Your best investment as a birder is a decent pair of binoculars and/or a camera with a zoom lens. Here are some options in the 8x category that fall roughly in the under-\$300 zone. One note about magnification: 7x or 8x binoculars tend to be brighter and provide a wider view than higher-magnification 10x binoculars, which are better at zeroing in on plumage. If you're buying under \$300, stick with the lower 7x or 8x models, as higher magnifications can be shaky (lightweight models that prevent this tend to be more expensive). These are some picks from experts, but generally any 8x42 in the \$150-300 range will do nicely. For other, higher-priced recommendations, see Wayne Mones' 2014 Audubon roundup online—Google his full name and the word "binoculars." In Calgary, these brands can be found (variously) at Bass Pro Shops in CrossIron Mills, Robinson's Camera, MEC and Vistek. Call ahead or order online.

- Celestron Nature DX 8x42
- Nikon All-Terrain Monarch 3 8x42
- Atlas Optics Sky King 8x42
- Bushnell 198042 Legend Ultra HD 8x42
- Eagle Optics Denali PC 8x42

Alternatively, some birders are going with small point-and-shoot cameras with power-



- Canon Powershot SX700HS (under \$350)
- Fujifilm Finepix HS50EXR (under \$450)

## FIELD GUIDES: *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 6th Ed.*

Classic guide, updated 2011 and illustrated by 21 painters in opaque watercolours. Includes everything from the ubiquitous house sparrow to wagtails, bananaquits and fringilline finches.

### *The Sibley Guide to Birds, 2nd Ed.*

This is the updated 2014

version of the birding guide

first published in 2000 by

the reigning rock star of bird

identification and illustration,

David Allen Sibley. As the *Wall*

*Street Journal* put it, "a book

so ubiquitous that birders

have turned his last name into

a noun, as in: 'What's that bird?'

'I

don't know, check your Sibley.'



## WINTER TRACTION:

Icer's studded crampons

The choice of postal workers and everyone who won't let icy paths and sidewalks ruin their day. Available at Lee Valley for \$45.



## OTHER STUFF:

*Bird Watcher's Bible*,  
by Jonathan Alderfer

To quote the book's own description, "A lighthearted and broadly cultural and visual approach to learning everything there is

to know about birds, bird-watching, birds in history and the arts, and life on the wing."

*Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America*  
If you want a more compact method of bird identification, there's an app for that. Available for iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry.

*eBird*: Want to contribute to science while tracking your birds? *eBird* is a project of the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, and is a free service. As of last year, 140 million observations had been submitted by 150,000 birders.

Join the party by entering your location, date/time and mode of birding, then fill out your checklist of birds. Voila: your information becomes part of a massive mapping and species tracking project

that you can also access to find recent sightings anywhere in the world.

# a few species of calgary birders

## MELANIE SENEVIRATNE,

TELECOM MARKETING MANAGER

Seneviratne was born and raised in Calgary. She started birding in Toronto in 2009, after a visit from her mother, a dedicated birder. Seneviratne moved back to Calgary in 2010 and has been at it ever since.

### *What's appealing about birding in the winter?*

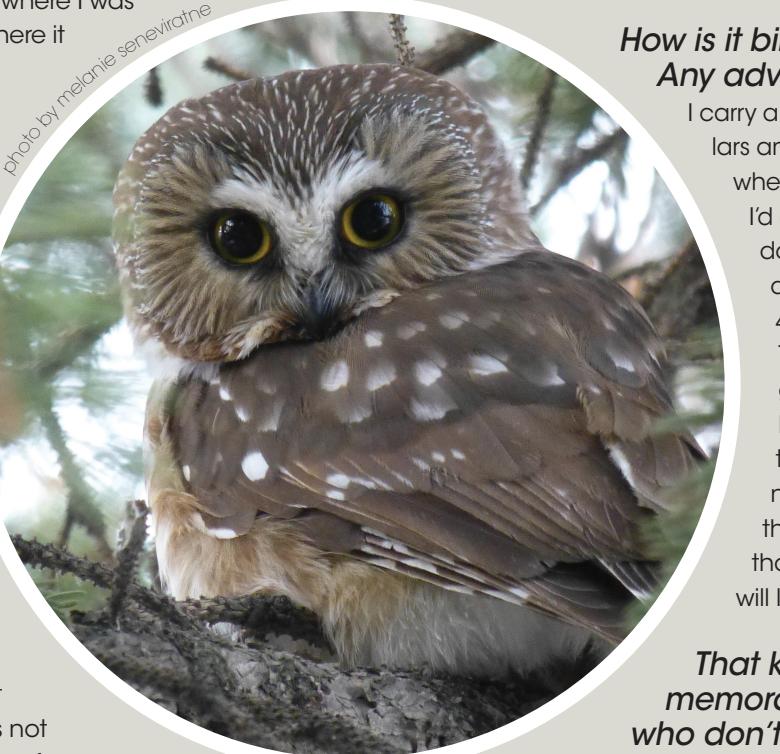
Winter I enjoy honestly because of the owls. There are 13 different species of owls in Alberta—minus the barn owl, which is endangered, that's a dozen. Of those, there are only three I haven't seen. They're beautiful, majestic birds, and certain of them, like the snowy owl from the Arctic, "winter" here. Last winter I saw a great gray owl, a long-eared, a snowy, a northern hawk owl, short-eared owl, great horned owl and a northern saw-whet. I'm kind of owl-obsessed. Last summer I took a three-hour trip to the Lethbridge-Medicine Hat area to a spot where I was told I could find a burrowing owl—and there it was, at the exact GPS co-ordinates.

### *Advice for new birders?*

Patience. You need patience, especially in winter. And dress as warm as you can. I'm always frozen, and you just have to deal with it. And get a decent pair of binoculars. I have a pair of Eagle Optics 8x42s that are fantastic. And record your birds. I use an Excel sheet that has pretty much every place I've been to. Recently a friend asked me when we saw that great gray owl—I could look it up and say "Feb. 25."

### *Where do you bird?*

I live in New Brighton in the far southeast near Mackenzie Towne, so Priddis area is not even 40 minutes from my house. I'll also go further out to Kananaskis Turner Valley area, or southeast to the Frank Lake area. I've seen moose out in Water Valley, west of Cochrane, and just past Priddis. Both Priddis and Bragg Creek have huge populations of great grey owls.



## GARY MALCOLM, U OF C FACULTY OF EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR (AND WATER POLO COACH)

A "stay-at-home dad" with three children, Malcolm grew up next to Fish Creek Park and has been spotting hawks, owls and hummingbirds since he was a boy. He's been taking his kids on outdoor trips since his first son was born 13 years ago.

### *Do your kids enjoy the birding, or just the outdoors part?*

My kids love being outside. They'll play in the snow and climb trees, and identifying birds is part of the whole thing. We live in Silver Springs in northwest Calgary, on the edge of Bowmont Park, so we just walk out the door and head on down. But they are starting to get into the formality of it, the identification. My sons can tell the differences, for example, between a downy and a hairy woodpecker, and a three-toed and black-backed woodpecker.

### *How is it birding with children?*

#### *Any advice for parents?*

I carry a backpack with the binoculars and hand them out to the kids when I see something interesting. I'd also say start slow if your kids don't go outside much. Kids who aren't used to getting out, after 45 minutes they're exhausted. There are several places in Calgary where chickadees have habituated to humans and they'll land on your hands. It's neat to see a kid learn to have that calmness come over them, that kind of temperament, that will let a bird stay on their hand.

#### *That kind of thing must be memorable, especially for kids who don't get out much.*

Those moments stay with them. As kids learn to see what's around them, they get this sense of indigeneity—they start to know who they are when embedded in their natural environment. They feel part of that bigger energy. My kids know that when we see owls starting to nest in February, then when the magpies collect sticks and the ravens are making noises, those are all signs of spring... and it's the same with different cues for all the seasons.

## PETER HOYER, SEMI-RETired GEOLOGIST

Hoyer started birding casually on a geological field trip to Florida in 1972, and "got serious" 13 years ago, taking birding courses, going out with groups, and recording sightings.

### *What do you like about winter birding?*

It's about the only thing that gets me out from under the roof in the wintertime—I'd be sitting in a car or in the house otherwise. And in the winter we get birds we just don't see here the rest of the year: snowy owls, gyrfalcon... a lot of these smaller birds from the north like redpolls, grosbeaks and boreal chickadees. Northern birds think this is the tropics. I went out this morning and saw 26 species. And it's not just the birds. I saw a 12-point buck in Carburn Park and a couple of bobcats near the Weaselhead recently, and coyotes and a weasel in Fish Creek Provincial Park.

### *Advice for the beginning birder?*

Dress warm for the conditions, in layers. When it comes to personal body heat, everybody is different. Some people are freezing out there with two pairs of gloves on, while I'm sweating and have my coat open. I always have something to nibble on, and bring a water bottle or something hot to drink—tea, coffee or hot chocolate. The only other real change for winter is I'll wear crampon spikes and take a hiking pole if it's icy. The best crampons are called Icer's and Lee Valley sells them for under \$50.

### *Where do you bird?*

All over the city and within a two-hour drive of home. I like the west end of Bowness Park, but I think it's still closed from the floods. Bowmont Park Natural Area east of Bowness is good, too. Nose Hill Park can be miserable as hell up top, but you see snow buntings, partridge and other things you wouldn't expect in the city. Sometimes foxes and owls, especially in the winter. One place I haven't tried in the winter since it opened in August 2011 is Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park, between Calgary and Cochrane. I live in Silver Springs up in the northwest and it's only 10 miles outside my door. That's actually closer than most of the birding hotspots within city limits.

## SUE KONOPNICKI, RETIRED TEACHER

Konopnicki taught all ages for her 39-year career and was the principal of Vista Heights School. Inspired by her mother, a "backyard birder," Konopnicki started birding three years before she retired in 2012.

### *It's cold out there. Why do you bird in winter?*

It gets me out of the house! I cross-country ski, but birding is another activity that gets me outside. Birding in a group is really fun and you spot more birds. It's the camaraderie of it.

### *Any advice for new birders?*

Start recording what you see. I didn't start recording consistently in eBird (an online checklist) until this year and I wish I had done it sooner. It's citizen science... you become a scientist helping people use the info for research purposes. It also allows others to see what has been seen in many places around the world or in your own "backyard." Also I suggest a new birder buy a bird feeder and watch the birds who arrive at your feeder each day.

You start to care for them—they kind of become your own, and you want to see if there might be a new bird in the group. My daughter calls it Bird TV.

### *Coolest winter sighting?*

One of them was a tundra swan. Some birders saw it on a New Year's Day bird count in Fish Creek Provincial Park. When a group of us went to see it that afternoon, it was gone. The next morning I went by myself to the same spot and it was there, among the Canada geese in the early mist. I was glad I braved the cold. **S**



photo by anne elliot



photo by anne elliot