

THE LINNAEAN
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LETTER

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WHAT IT'S LIKE

Laura Jacobs

I first visited Cape May, New Jersey, for the beaches. In 1991, my sister rented a house on Lincoln Avenue in Cape May Point – a quickie September shore vacation for her young family – and invited me and my boyfriend to come for a few days. The house was situated within a stone's throw of the beach to the south and the Cape May Lighthouse to the north, which stands at the entrance to the Cape May Point State Park. My sister and her family never again rented in Cape May, but my boyfriend and I returned the following year, having fallen hard for the place: the blue skies saturated with salt gray; the bats fluttering around street lights at dusk; the silent, nighttime search beam of the lighthouse.

We continued to rent the house on Lincoln, coming for a week in July and a week in September. July was hot, hazy, and pokey. September was busier, because people with binoculars were purposefully nosing around, paying special attention to the Eastern Red Cedars on corners and in yards. My boyfriend and I were dimly aware that these people were birdwatchers and that Cape May had a lot of them. We made the usual jokes, but were curious to know more and went on a walk offered by the Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO). We then dropped into the CMBO store to look at field guides and optics. We were slowly going native, seduced by a local

pastime – well, passion is the better word – that was happening right in front of us and yet was difficult for the untrained eye to see.

When we married in November of 1994 we took a week's honeymoon in that little house on the Point, driving down in a terrific rainstorm (which didn't keep me, at the wheel, from admiring the new ring on my fourth finger), and with two pairs of new binoculars in our suitcase. The very next day we saw a Wood Stork in the State Park, blown in by the storm, and our first American Bittern. A day later we watched a Northern Harrier hunting low over a field. For us, love and eternity, Cape May and birding, were inextricably linked. We rented in the Point for another fourteen years, three weeks every September, when fall migration was at its phenomenal peak. In 2010 we bought a small bungalow on the bay, a few miles north of the Point.

Located at the southern-most tip of the New Jersey shore, Cape May is a legendary hotspot for birds and birding. As Linnaean members surely know, Cape May and much of Cape May County lie on the Eastern flyway. During fall migration, when birds are flying south, they stop abruptly in Cape May, spooked by the twelve mile expanse of the Delaware Bay. Circling back to prepare themselves for the flight over the bay, they find a wide variety of habitats within a three mile

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radius: shoreline, dunes, salt marshes, mudflats, freshwater ponds, forests, meadows, fields, farms, and vineyards.

Because there is such diverse habitat in such a small space, learning to bird in Cape May is a very cozy business. Even on a bicycle it's a mere twenty minutes from the State Park's famous Hawk Watch platform to the equally famous South Cape May Meadows (you can walk the beach from one to the other in about the same amount of time). It is ten minutes from the Meadows to the farm fields of the Beanery, and another twenty from the Beanery to the woods and dunes of Higbee Beach. In a car, of course, we're talking even less time. Add in the banks of little Lake Lily, the rips off the jetty near St. Peter's-By-the-Sea, and the Concrete Ship at Sunset Beach and the student of birding has unlimited possibilities on an amazingly small campus. The late Tom Parsons, a retired biology professor and dedicated birder, familiar to all in his khaki pants and matching shirt, walked this campus every day, refusing the rides offered by fellow birders. In a car you might miss a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher along a field's edge.

"Student" is a word that captures the Cape May birding experience. No doubt there are other American locales that boast a concentration of world-class birders-in-residence, but I'm not sure any compare to Cape May County, where the eminent names – Crossley, Dunne, Garland, Karlson, O'Brien, Sutton, Zemaitis – are affiliated with CMBO, or are bylines on field guides, or lead bird trips both at home and far away. Every spring a new group of interns – academics pursuing careers in ornithology or environmental work – ships in. The CMBO corps of volunteer naturalists is a tight-knit bunch who do their best to get everyone on the bird. Chances are high that out on your own you'll eventually find yourself elbow to elbow with one or more of these many pros, most of whom feel that they, too, are still learning, still upping their game. With CMBO's full schedule of walks, workshops, and special weekends, the atmosphere is that of an open-air university of birding.

As in academia, there are a lot of big fishes in this small pond, which means there are behind-the-scenes skirmishes, old arguments and opposing views. Jack Connor's *Season at the Point: The Birds and Birders of Cape May* (1991, Atlantic Monthly Press) is an elegant blueprint of the place and the big personalities that have shaped it. In the field, however, the close proximity of all this talent does not play out as killer competitiveness; it simply sets the bar higher for everyone. After all, birds continue to molt weird or lurk in the shadows or refuse to sing or chip. It is humbling for all when a supposedly easy ID – Greater Yellowlegs or Lesser? – can't be 100 percent settled, even by the eminent. And on any given day you can come upon a group of young hotshots with scopes and bins trained on, say, a flock of terns, because one individual is an Arctic. These instant workshops pop up all the time, welcoming any birder who wanders over. The Hawk Watch, especially during the count months of September through November, can get so high-spirited it feels like a party. It is frequently a moving party for when a text comes in about a nearby rarity or vagrant it's off to the races. Mike Crewe's *View from the Cape*, a blog on the CMBO website, is a deeply knowledgeable, yet quite charming, diary of sightings, issues, and analysis.

Last year, because our Washington Heights apartment needed renovation, my husband and I spent the winter down in Jersey in our unheated bungalow (three space heaters going, faucets left dripping on freezing nights, it was actually a lot of fun). Thanks to the Internet our work pattern was much the same as in Manhattan, but with a profound difference. What a mysterious gift it was, walking to the bay for a morning break, to find a Black-headed Gull (life bird!) in a flock of Bonaparte's. Or to skip lunch and drive ten minutes to the Point to see a Townsend's Warbler (life bird!) that was happily wintering where it shouldn't. Or to end a day down at Lake Lily, scoping out the Greater White-fronted Goose (life bird!) that came and went on its own enigmatic schedule. A few years

ago Lesley Coley, a British birder who always spends September on the Point, took her lunch out on the deck and in the branch of a cedar spotted a Black-throated Gray Warbler. It took a second for her to believe her eyes and then the call went out. Local birders were there within minutes – just another day in Cape May.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### AUDUBON WATERCOLORS

The New-York Historical Society is in the midst of a three-year, three-part exhibition titled *Audubon's Aviary: The Complete Flock*, showing all 474 of the watercolors it owns which John James Audubon painted as models for the engravings by Robert Havell, Jr. that were hand-colored with aquatints reproducing Audubon's colors and that became the plates of Audubon's first book, *The Birds of North America*. The second installment of the exhibition, subtitled *Parts Unknown*, will open on March 21 and run through May 26. The museum says of it, "Most of the watercolors in *Parts Unknown* (studies for Havell plates 176-305) depict water birds, many of which are among Audubon's most spectacular and largest birds, with numerous studies begun during his southeastern explorations and on his Labrador Expedition."

Artist and author Julie Zickefoose, who will be the speaker at the Linnaean regular meeting on April 8, has persuaded her friend Roberta Olson, Curator of Drawings at the New-York Historical Society and curator of *Audubon's Aviary*, to invite Linnaean members to join the two of them on a tour of the exhibition. Dr. Olson will give starting at 10 am on April 8. Dr. Olson has waived her curator's fee, but the museum will charge a fee of \$22 per person, which includes admission to the museum. Linnaean members interested in going on this tour should mail a check payable to The New-York Historical Society

to Geoffrey Nulle, 535 West 113th St., Apt. 23, New York, NY 10025 by mid-March. Attendance is limited to twenty-five members.

### MARCH 11<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL MEETING AND DINNER SILENT AUCTION ITEMS

Artworks – by six of America's preeminent bird and nature artists, with minimum bids well below gallery prices. Descriptions of prizes and minimum bids below.

*Brown Pelican* by J.M. Kelley (18 x 13.5"), oil on roof slate, mounted on red barn siding. Donated by Art LeMoine. \$75.



*Ruby-throats in Cardinal Flower* by Alan Messer (15.25 x 11.5"), watercolor and gouache on Arches paper, framed under glass. Original illustration for cover of *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Donated by the artist. \$150.



*American Woodcock* by Pieter Prall (17 x 17"), lithograph from edition of 50, framed. Donated by the artist. \$85.





*Parauque* by Sophie Webb (4.6 x 6.7"), reproduction of egg tempera original, matted. Donated by the artist. \$25.



*Black-footed Albatross* by Sophie Webb (7.75 x 9.75"), reproduction of watercolor and gouache original, matted. Donated by the artist. \$40.



*Harlequin Ducks* by John Yrizarry (6.5 x 7.5"), casein on board. Donated by Shauna Leigh. \$75.



*Black-billed, Yellow-billed and Mangrove Cuckoos* by Julie Zickefoose (17.5 x 21.5"), watercolor, double-matted with archival board. Original illustration for the book *Identify Yourself*, Bill Thompson III editor and principal author (and Ms. Zickefoose's husband). Donated by the artist. A copy of the book comes with the watercolor. \$150.

Larger illustrations of the auction artworks can be found on the Society's website at: [http://linnaeannewyork.org/announce-email/2014annual\\_dinner\\_prizes.html](http://linnaeannewyork.org/announce-email/2014annual_dinner_prizes.html)

Book

*The Birds of South America* (2 vols.) by Robert S. Ridgely and Guy Tudor (1989, 1994). Excellent condition. Donated by Louise Fraza. \$60.

Field trips – two hours, date and time to be arranged by trip leader and auction winner

Bird photography class in Central Park for up to four people, by Deborah Allen, a professional photographer whose work has appeared in *North American Birds*, *National Geographic Explorer*, *Birder's World*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *Wild Bird*, *National Wildlife* and *Natural History*. Eight of her photographs appeared in National Audubon's 2013 calendar, and her Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is bird of the month for March in the 2015 calendar. \$125.

Spring or fall migration bird walk in Central Park for up to four people, focusing on warbler identification, led by Tom Stephenson, a professional guide of bird tours in the United States and Asia and co-author of *The Warbler Guide*, which has been acclaimed by reviewers as one of the best identification guides ever published. \$125.



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