



The Chicago Birder

Official Magazine of the Chicago Ornithological Society

Winter 2023/2024



2024

Year of the Peregrine



Chicago Ornithological Society

BARTEL GRASSLANDS, 9.16.23

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CALDWELL LILY POOL, 09.09.23

Dustin Weidner



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CALUMET PARK, 11.17.23

Walter Marcisz

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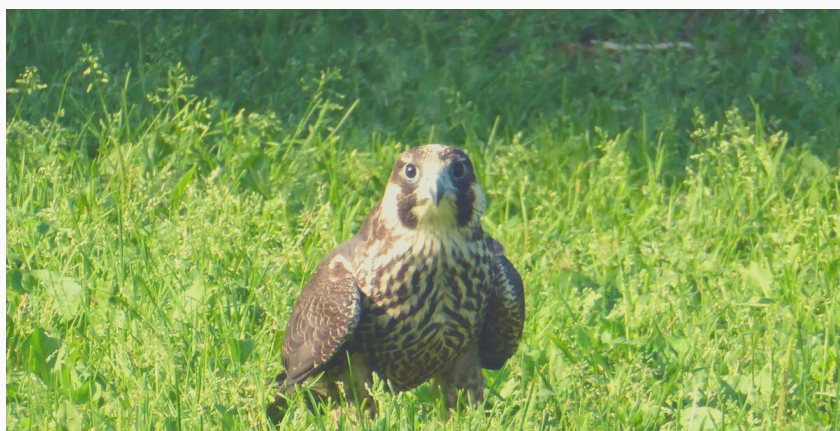
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Warblings

BY EDWARD WARDEN

The 90s were a fun time to discover birding as a kid in Chicago. Birds were on top of the collective urban mind like never before. With a newly elected mayor who proudly championed parks (sometimes infamously so) and specifically highlighted birds, Chicago saw high profile successes such as the creation of the Chicago Department of Environment, designation as and Urban Bird Treaty city, the launch of a pioneering lights out program, and an election to choose the official city bird, which saw over 40,000 ballots cast. And while that period also had its fair share of environmental battles and setbacks, it really felt like birding was breaking into the mainstream, and its mascot, with all votes tallied, was the Peregrine Falcon.



HUMBOLDT PARK, 7.27.19

Robyn Detterline

SKOKIE LAGOONS, 12.10.22

Dustin Weidner

THIS ISSUE:

Summer of Change at LaBagh
PAGE 6

The Comeback Kid
PAGE 10

Gifts, Gestures, and the Bird
Art of Wooing
PAGE 16

Book Review: Fen, Bog and
Swamp (Annie Proulx)
PAGE 21

Local Field Guide:
Dark-eyed Junco
PAGE 23

What better way to hold a young boy's imagination than with the fastest animal on the planet, whose bounce back from near extinction showed that humanity really could be a force for good? I thought about this a lot when, about twenty years later, another bird took Chicago by storm. Piping Plovers could have easily been the hot media story for a day and then forgotten as many bird stories tend to be in today's media cycle. But instead, a couple of photogenic, scrappy birds are still inspiring people years later with a story of persistence in the face of extinction, thanks to the help of people who are making a difference.



MONTROSE POINT, 7.21.23

Emily Tallo

It all felt very familiar. Maybe I'm drawing parallels where there aren't any to be made. But to quote longtime Chicago birding heavyweight Greg Neise, "Chicago's always been a birding town." I'm proud of the fact that our city seems to have a pattern of periodic bird obsessions.

Technically, the Peregrine Falcon only won the title of official city bird for four years, but for a variety of reasons, they never saw another contest and have retained the title. I wonder if we were to hold an election today if peregrines would emerge triumphant or face defeat at the hands of some other bird fan group. Regardless, I'd argue that Peregrine Falcons were then and still are a symbol we can be proud of. As we approach twenty-five years since that fateful election that crowned the peregrine, COS is marking this milestone by declaring 2024 the Year of the Peregrine. We hope that you'll join us on a variety of falcon themed trips and programs all year long as we take the opportunity to celebrate this incredible species and the mark it has forever left on our bird loving city.

"I'd argue that Peregrine Falcons were then and still are a symbol we can be proud of."



PARK 566, 10.28.23

Dustin Weidner



LABAGH WOODS, 5.3.23

Kelly Ballantyne

Summer of Change at LaBagh

BY MARGIE GRIGGS

LaBagh Woods consists of wooded landscapes, wetlands, savannas, and sedge meadows with the North Branch River passing through, providing an ideal location for bird species. Growing up in North Mayfair, I have walked the trails of LaBagh hundreds of times and have watched the area slowly change. I have watched the train tracks slowly disappear, the North Branch Trail come to life, and the hard work of the LaBagh Wood North Branch Restoration Project create an inviting space for all species. The slough at LaBagh is an ideal spot for bird species, but this summer is when I

noticed one of the largest changes I had seen in the slough due to the drought that affected the Chicagoland area. The drought dried up the slough completely and turned it into a field of barnyard grass, which directly impacted the birds here.

Last winter, I remember walking over the ice of the slough while birding as I had done for many years. The slough had always had enough water left from summer and fall to freeze over each winter. You could spot tracks from deer, coyotes, raccoons, and other small critters across the snow and ice. When spring rolled around, the ice thawed, and the slough was filled with water. I would have to wear tall boots to walk through the trails in certain areas. The slough's water brought

many different bird species in the spring, including Wood Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Blue-winged Teals, Double-crested Cormorants, Spotted Sandpipers, Solitary Sandpipers, and Great Blue Herons. There were even carp in the water from the river flooding into the slough. During the months of April and May, I was almost guaranteed to see these birds in the slough each time I visited. It made me look forward to what I was going to see at the slough this summer.

By the time June came around, the slough's water level had begun to dwindle. It was not unusual for the water in the slough to rise and fall throughout the summer, so I did not give it much thought at the time. By mid-June, the slough had completely dried up. The month of June brought

2.36 inches of rain, which was 1.74 inches below normal for this time of year. The slough was barren and had become a large area of cracked mud. The birds I had observed before were nowhere to be found. One word came to mind...drought. I couldn't help but think how this was going to affect the birds this year.

I had the chance to speak with Dennis Marton, one of LaBagh's lead restoration volunteers, about the impact of the drought on the slough this past summer. Dennis, who has been visiting LaBagh since the 60s, had never seen anything like what happened this summer in all his years of visiting the slough. He had never seen the barnyard grass take over the slough like it had this year, and he noted that nothing is normal anymore when it comes to flooding and droughts. In the past ten years, there has been a large fluctuation of the levels of the slough, which has likely hurt some of the species who may have depended on it in the past. This summer, Dennis noticed the Wood Duck boxes had quite a few unhatched eggs on the inside. The Wood Ducks had moved to the river instead of the slough as there were likely more resources for them there. Towards the end of June, when we started to have heavy rain again, the slough began to fill with water, and frogs, carp, insects, and

birds began to return. Dennis referred to this as a "second spring" because of the frenzy that occurred after we received some rain in the slough. Unfortunately, the barnyard grass took over the slough area again after this second wave of spring and many species left the area. We desperately need a snowy and wet winter to help the slough, which will improve conditions next spring.

Over the months of June and July, the drought rapidly intensified. Fifty-eight percent of the Midwest was in a moderate to extreme drought as of June 23, 2023. Five weeks prior, that figure had only been eight percent. Long term droughts affect birds due to many factors, according to Roger Lederer, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at California State University, Chico. The lack of water, which is usually paired with warm temperatures, puts stress on birds. The lack of moisture and warm temperatures not only affect the birds but also the food they eat. Insects find shelter and fly less when there is a lack of precipitation, which means they are less accessible to birds. Trees and shrubs do not produce as many seeds or berries during this time either because they must save their resources to survive a drought. These factors typically mean less successful breeding for



LABAGH WOODS, SUMMER 2023

Margie Griggs

birds due to a weakened food supply. With less water also comes less cover for nesting birds, which impacts reproduction. We have yet to see the data on breeding for this year, but time will tell the impact this drought had on birds in the Midwest and at places such as LaBagh. Less water will also force species into smaller areas than before, which exposes them to more disease and predators. When there is less food and water available to birds, they must spend more time finding resources, which takes away time from building nests, courtship, and feeding young, while also exposing them to more predators as they put more energy into survival.

Impacts of the drought have resulted in more interactions between humans and wildlife. These birds must travel further to find resources and may travel to backyards or other areas throughout our city looking for food and water. This puts them at risk from cars, windows, and house cats. On the positive side, birds coming closer to people means we can step in to help. Our yards have become an important way of helping wildlife during these critical times. People can provide water sources, native plants, and feeders for birds, which will help them during a time when these resources are otherwise very hard to find.

Throughout the drought at LaBagh, the slough remained dry, but the grassy plants flourished in this area. While birding, I often observed American Kestrels and Red-tailed

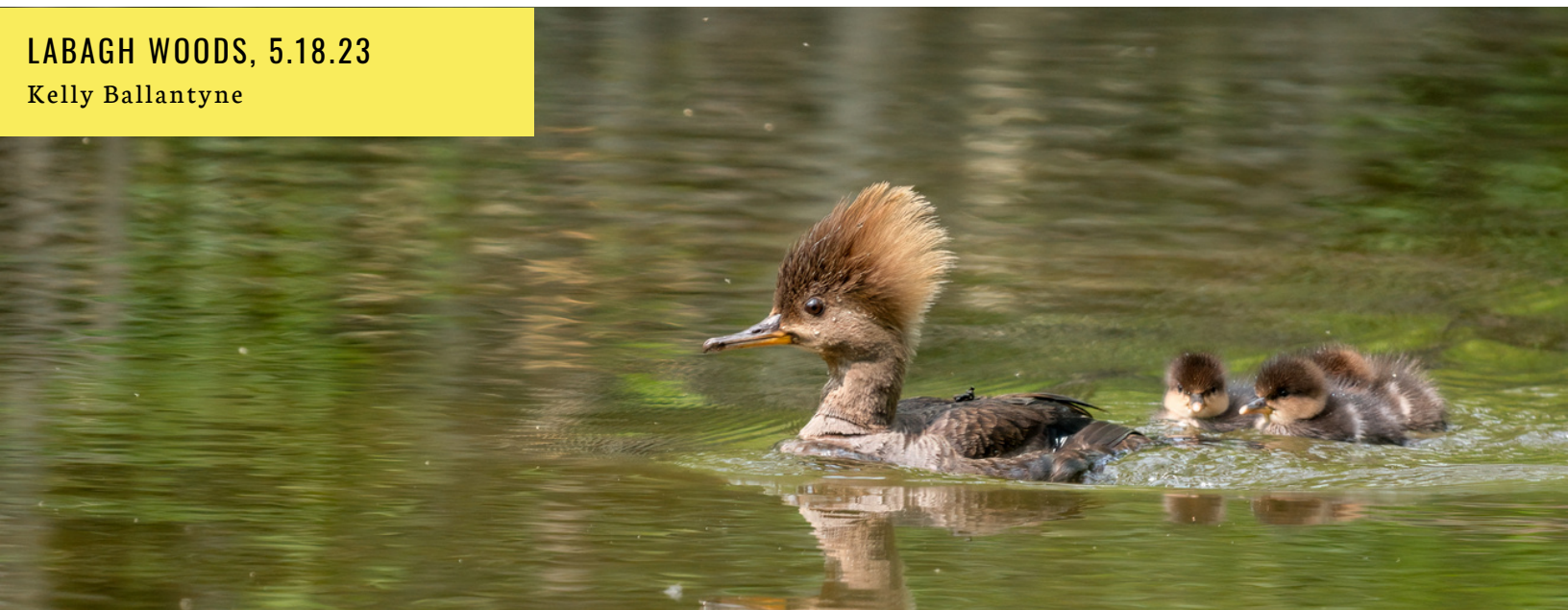
Hawks perched in dead trees overlooking the field with few other birds in sight. Occasionally, I still saw a pair of Great Blue Herons in the trees near the slough, but in the spring, I would observe them wading through the water to eat crawfish in this same spot. This was all a drastic shift from what I had typically seen at the LaBagh slough. The birds I originally observed rely on this slough for migration and breeding, and they now need more habitat than is available because these areas have dried up. The drought has impacted the level of the North Branch of the Chicago River as well, which is one of the main feeding sources for the slough. The North Branch's gage height was recorded to be as low as 0.57 feet in Niles in June and July of 2023. Low water levels in the river degrade habitats and are harmful to aquatic species because the water becomes

warmer. Up until early June I saw Wood Ducks wading down the river; when the river's water level began to fall, they disappeared. I have a feeling many birds who may have relied on the river for insects and vegetation had to go elsewhere to find resources as the drought went on.

Stephanie Beilke at Audubon Great Lakes pointed out that droughts are projected to become more common with climate change. According to Audubon's latest climate report, Survival by Degrees, up to two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk of extinction due to climate change and the increased drought conditions we are seeing. Stephanie mentioned that in the Calumet region of Illinois and Indiana, Audubon Great Lakes has been monitoring the impacts of habitat management and

LABAGH WOODS, 5.18.23

Kelly Ballantyne



restoration on breeding marsh birds, but often water level plays an important role determining which marsh birds are present. It is a tricky balance because water levels that are too high and water levels that are too low are bad for different birds; both conditions diminish the available habitat they need. When wetlands dry out, wetland dependent birds must move elsewhere. This displacement can be challenging, especially in the Chicago area where much wetland habitat has been lost to development and remaining habitat may be hard to find. Remaining wetlands also face additional challenges such as invasive species that become overgrown and too dense for birds to forage or nest in.

Audubon Great Lakes is helping restore balance to extreme high and low water levels by helping install water control structures. Audubon Great Lakes recently partnered with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the Great Lakes Commission to restore connectivity between Powderhorn Lake and Wolf Lake. A water control structure was installed in this project connecting Powderhorn Lake and Wolf Lake so when the water is too high and causes flood conditions and loss of marsh bird habitat at Powderhorn,

the water control structure can let water back into Wolf Lake and eventually Lake Michigan. During dry seasons, the water control structure will be closed to help water levels rise. Higher water levels will help manage harmful invasive species and create marsh habitat that will help birds such as the Least Bittern and Pied-billed Grebe.

The LaBagh Woods North Branch Restoration Project continues to find ways to help bird species and other wildlife at LaBagh through its group of hardworking volunteers. Volunteers have worked to remove invasive Buckthorn in areas of the woods, plant native shrubs such as Bladdernut, and to collect native seeds. The volunteers are dedicated to helping provide an inviting space for migrating birds despite the setbacks these birds may face from concerns such as drought and a lack of resources resulting from this. They have planted over 4,500 native trees and shrubs in the past 9 years in an effort to ensure a productive habitat for the 216 bird species that migrate through or live at LaBagh. I had the opportunity to volunteer with them in October when I helped plant Bladdernut and Ironwood. I was able to learn about the impact they are making for the bird species at LaBagh firsthand and understand why these native shrubs are so critical in providing ideal food and habitat for them.



LABAGH WOODS, SUMMER 2023

Margie Griggs

It will take a few years to really see the impact this drought has had on the birds here as we observe how their populations may have been affected. I am hopeful the slough will return to what I have always known, and that by next spring the slough may be filled with water again. LaBagh is home to many different bird species and wildlife, and the slough is a special place hidden within our big city, which is why it is important to protect this precious habitat.



MONTROSE POINT, 10.28.23
Geoff Williamson

The Comeback Kid

BY MAX WACKER

Here are some interesting facts about Peregrine Falcons: In a dive, they are the fastest animals in the world. They are also one of the most widespread birds in the world. They are found on every continent minus Antarctica. The Peregrine Falcon is also Chicago's official city bird, with 2024 marking their twenty-fifth year donning the honorific title.

I like to think all these things go hand in hand, much like mustard on hot dogs. The Peregrine Falcon, in many ways, represents the essence of what Chicago is. Chicago's presence and influence has reached many places, people, and institutions—it is a world renowned city, with widespread influence.

New York may be the city that never sleeps, but Chicago feels fast. In [Life on The Mississippi](#) Mark Twain writes, "It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw through the last time." And granted, Mark Twain didn't have to suffer traffic on the Kennedy, but his sentiment accurately describes present day Chicago. The city is ever changing and adapting—like the Peregrine Falcon, who faced the brink of extinction, and found a new home in Chicago's skyline, with help from its citizens.

The Decline of the Peregrine Falcons

Peregrine Falcons were once abundant in Illinois. It is estimated

400 - 500 pairs of Peregrine Falcons nested in the midwestern and eastern United States. However, with the introduction of a pesticide known as DDT, Peregrine Falcons were almost completely wiped out. DDT caused abnormal reproductive behavior in adults, specifically causing eggshells to become too thin to allow incubation. The last successful nest from an Illinois Peregrine pair had been recorded in 1951. In 1973 Peregrine Falcons were considered endangered.

This egg thinning caused incubating adults to crush the eggs before the eggs could successfully hatch. Mary Hennen, Director of the [Chicago Peregrine Program](#), explains in this [video](#) that, thanks to cataloging and collections done by the Field Museum, researchers were able to compare egg shells

prior to DDT and see the damage that was being done by the introduction of DDT.

Mary suggests that, had samples not been collected and cataloged, the connection between DDT and the damage done to eggs may not have been made. It is because of the comparisons between cataloged samples of over 100 years and shell fragments from failed nests that preventative measures were enacted.

Hacking the Midwest

Hacking is a method of raising captive young in a pseudo-nest, usually referred to as a “hack box.” Hacking has been practiced for centuries and used for an array of birds of prey. The hack box usually has a sliding barred or grated door that allows the young birds to view the habitat of wherever the hack box has been set up. People attending to the hack box can feed the birds without being seen. Attendants are also able to trigger a trap door that allows the birds to leave.

The idea is the birds will venture out of the hack box and test the waters of the habitat they’ve been released in. They’ll learn to fly, to hunt, and to survive on their own, and over time, stop relying on the hack box at all. They’ll establish their own nests and find their way fully into the wild.



MONTROSE POINT, 11.1.20

Geoff Williamson

The Chicago Peregrine Program was established in 1985 with a goal to restore peregrines to Illinois. The Chicago Peregrine Program worked with the Raptor Center to obtain and transfer young peregrines from breeders and falconers. By 1986 Chicago’s first hacked peregrines were released on the roof of UIC’s University Hall.

The male, named Jingles, became the state’s first post-decline breeder. The hack site was moved to Fort Sheridan, and no peregrines nested on University Hall again until 1996. By this time, the peregrines had bred naturally at the site. Over the years, almost 50 buildings in the city have been used as nest sites. These nests are verified annually by scientists.

Between 1986 and 1990 the Chicago Peregrine Program released 46 Peregrine Falcons from four different hack sites. This method worked well for peregrines in the Chicago area, and the birds quickly adapted using skyscrapers as their nesting sites. In 2015, Peregrine Falcons were removed from the Illinois endangered list, but were still protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. At that time, The Chicago Peregrine Program was monitoring 29 peregrine territories. Twenty pairs attempted breeding, and fifteen were successful.

New Neighbors; A Long Term Lease

Peregrine Falcons are naturally a cliff dwelling species. They adapted well to being released in an urban



126TH STREET MARSH, 2.21.22

Walter Marcisz

environment, finding that the various architectural styles in Chicago provide ample nest sites, and city blocks were similar to the cliff formations they were used to. Peregrines don't build conventional nests but lay their eggs in a scrape, which is a small depression made on a ledge. Ledges that give peregrines the ability to see all around them and have wind blockage make excellent nesting sites.

However, Peregrine Falcons don't have the entire city at their disposal. The Chicago Peregrine Program works with tenants, building managers, and engineers to help assure the birds and occupants can co-exist as much as possible. Established nests may not be tampered with during breeding season, but once the season is over, tenants can work with the Chicago

Peregrine Program to set up safe measures that will prevent the peregrines returning to the specific site the following season.

The relationship between the volunteers at the Chicago Peregrine Program and willing citizens of Chicago is symbiotic. The Chicago Peregrine Program helps educate and sets up safer habitats for the peregrines, while the public can help monitor and relay information.

This information from the public is instrumental in helping the Chicago Peregrine Program gather as much data as possible.

Chicago is known for its abundance of great food, and Peregrine Falcons reap this benefit as well. Peregrine Falcons are not picky eaters by any means—it's been documented that over 450 different avian species

have been predated by North American Peregrine Falcons. Scientists collect information on the food peregrines eat by examining remains left at nest sites. That data helps researchers better understand migration patterns and hunting habits. For example, during winter, peregrines tend to seek prey over open water and will also eat more of what is readily available.

Democracy for the Birds

The Peregrine Falcon became Chicago's official bird by a vote. Not just by a vote of a few select board members, or a small organization, but rather this was a vote held by the Department of Environment that some 42,000 people participated in. It's hard to not think about the adage of "vote early, vote often" being applied to this event. People love to pick a side, and it's fun to think that was the case for this vote. Were people going door to door campaigning for their favorite possibility?

I spoke with Suzanne Malec-Mckenna, who at the time was the Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Environment. The Chicago Department of Environment worked hand in hand with an organization called Nature Chicago, started in 1998. Nature Chicago laid a lot of the groundwork for the Bird Vote and worked with

all facets of the city to not only bring the whole thing to fruition, but also to make sure as much of the city was involved as possible. There were newspaper articles, radio advertisements, and a party at Navy Pier.

The actual vote took place in 1999 between October 16 and 22. Twenty-eight voting locations were set up throughout the city at Park District facilities, City Hall, and high schools. The candidates on the ballot included Belted Kingfisher, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Cedar Waxwing, Common Nighthawk, Eastern Kingbird, and the Peregrine Falcon. All were welcome to vote; you didn't have to be a registered voter.

In a Chicago Tribune [article](#) published on September 27, 1999, writer Mary O'Brien made the campaign very presidential. The article stated the bird vote would happen every four years but offered no indication whether the "elected official" would only be allowed two terms. In the article, Terri Likens, who formerly edited the Chicago Audubon Society (now [Chicago Bird Alliance](#)) newsletter, saw specific bird camps form and expected lobbying for specific birds.

Terri also explained that each bird had distinct personalities and nicknames, as if they each had their



EGGERS GROVE, 10.7.19

Walter Marcisz

own campaign ads. The Black-crowned Night-Heron (Likens' personal favorite) was nicknamed "Blues Bird—because it hangs out at night on the South Side, with bloodshot eyes." The Cedar Waxwing was nicknamed "The Rush Street Bird—because it gets drunk by eating fermented berries." Suzanne recalled that the Peregrine Falcon was appropriately named "The Comeback Kid." Of those three, there definitely seems to be a clear winner based on the nicknames alone.

Unfortunately, I was not able to source a picture or a copy of the ballot used in the vote. Suzanne states it was "awesome" and featured hand drawings of each potential bird. Hearing Suzanne

reminisce, it does sound like the event was a labor of love. I reached out to the Chicago Board of Elections, the department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, hunted online, talked to people at the library, bugged people on LinkedIn, and still could not locate the ballot. With our present seemingly infinite and constant access to information, it's hard to imagine a picture isn't floating around somewhere. Yet, the fact that it is so elusive does make it seem all the more mysterious. (If anyone reading this has any information about how to obtain a copy of the ballot, please reach out to COS.)

Suzanne reminisced fondly about Chicago during that time. Listening

to her talk, one got a sense Chicago, and specifically Mayor Richard Daley, was driven to make nature a focal point in the city. Suzanne directed me to a publication called [Birds of the Windy City](#), which was published by Nature Chicago. In it is a picture of Mayor Daley signing the Urban Conservation Treaty for Migratory Birds, while a Peregrine Falcon and their handler watch on. The publication even includes the peregrine's seal for the "Official Bird of the City of Chicago." Suzanne told me: "Back then, Nature in cities [wasn't] on the tip of peoples tongues," and it does seem Chicago was trying to shift that narrative with events like the bird vote, and the Birds of the Windy City publication.

A City Divided

In searching for information about the Peregrine Falcon related specifically to Chicago, there were a surprising number of videos with titles like "Peregrine Falcon attacks pedestrian." My research to this point was solely focused on the positives of the Peregrine Falcon over the past years; it was surprising to see these videos circulating.

Then, while attempting to track down a copy of the bird vote ballot, someone from the Chicago Board of Elections sent a Chicago Tribune [column](#) titled "Bird-Brained

Choices an Insult to True Chicago Denizens" by John Kass. This article, which was printed one day after O'Brien's article, tries to poke fun at and discredit the vote, going so far as to call it a "scam."

Kass's main argument seemed to be that none of the birds on the ballot are true Chicago birds. Kass wrote: "[Peregrine] Falcons are beautiful birds, but when you think Chicago, you don't think falcons."

Kass's article was meant to be satiric, but it turns out others shared the sentiments expressed in his column. In the book [The Peregrine Returns](#), written by the director of the Chicago Peregrine Program, Mary Hennen, a section titled "Differing Opinions" navigates why some people were against the re-introduction of Peregrine Falcons and discussed challenges the falcons still faced. The reasoning included fears the falcons would wipe out other bird species and concerns imprinting urban environments on Peregrine Falcons would prevent them from using historic cliffs.

I reached out directly to Mary to get her thoughts on whether the [recent videos](#) that have been circulating has caused a shift in perspective on Peregrine Falcons over the past few years. Mary informed me she had written about this exact thing on the Chicago Peregrine Program's

[Facebook](#) page and provided me with the [post](#). The specific event Mary was writing about had to do with a female peregrine that was nested on a ledge closer to street level and had a fledgling getting ready for their first flight by walking around the nest and flapping their wings.

I think her thoughts are summarized well by these few sentences: "Interactions between peregrines and humans are rare. That having a sidewalk closed for a few days is a small price to pay for having a remarkable species like peregrines living in the world with us. And—that a protective mama is just that and no more, a protective parent and not someone out to hurt people just for fun." In response to my question about a shifting perspective, Mary said, "No, I don't really think it changes people's perspective much. Most people who know what a peregrine is will understand the situation. Those who just react to the drama will forget about the birds once the next sensationalized story comes along."

Where Are We Now?

The Chicago Peregrine Program works hard year-round to continue to monitor and research Peregrine Falcons. Their Facebook page is extensive and kept up to date. It's a great resource for what is going on



NORTH POND, 4.13.22

Geoff Williamson

with peregrines in the city right now. In *The Peregrine Returns* Mary writes, “We must remain a liaison for the peregrine to the public. I believe the second-greatest need is education.” Social media has played a big role in educating people, but also in providing the ability to share pertinent information to a large audience. The Chicago Peregrine Program’s Facebook page is followed by people in over fifty countries.

Mary hopes the success of the Peregrine Falcons can be a launching pad for other conservation issues, such as habitat change and global warming. Both Nature Chicago and the Chicago Department of Environment were shut down, which Mary surmised

was part of the reason why the bird vote never happened again and didn’t follow the four year cycle the Chicago Department of Environment was hoping for. Suzanne explained that much of the Chicago Department of Environment was taken over by the Chicago Park District. But Mayor Brandon Johnson’s 2024 budget, passed by city council, provides funding to reopen the Department of Environment, so a new bird vote could be on the horizon.

It will be interesting to see what Chicago has in store, not only for Peregrine Falcons, but for all birds. Many people are working to make this city more bird friendly, and those initiatives make the city more nature focused. With the

Department of Environment being reinstated, hopefully these initiatives can grow and become more widespread. It’s hard to know what impact a reinstated Department will have. Possibly, it can become the catalyst for launching more conservation efforts, like Mary hopes.

If nothing else, the Peregrine Falcon can teach us to bet on the underdog. It’s hard to imagine the anxiety and skepticism that surrounded the first hack box in Chicago. Did people think the peregrines in that box were going to help change the course of their population for the foreseeable future? Someone among them had to believe it was going to work, and it’s amazing how well it did. It provides hope for moving forward and what we can do as a city and for the next necessary conservation effort.

Mary writes in *The Peregrine Returns*, “If everyone does a small amount of work towards conserving the environment, collectively, we can make a great difference. The Chicago Peregrine Program is a wide and diverse group, all volunteers with a united interest and concern for peregrines. I believe that has been the key to our success; whatever we do, we must find a way to continue our role as peregrine Ambassadors.” Hopefully we can take that sentiment and practice into the new year and years beyond and make great, great changes.



Gifts, Gestures, and the Bird Art of Wooing

BY KRIS HANSEN

As you start shopping for your true love for the holidays, consider a carefully selected twig. A slightly smooched berry. Or perhaps a mouse on a stick.

Those might not be the wisest choices for you, but they would certainly work for birds, says [Kevin McGowan](#), senior course developer and instructor for the Bird Academy at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Gift giving among birds is often central to mate selection, to the number and vitality of eggs, and to the successful

raising of chicks. The most common types of gift-giving involve courtship feeding and nest building. Both behaviors, as well as mutual preening, help get the happy couple ready to successfully mate.

Birds shrink their sex organs during the off season, which helps them weigh as little as possible and use their energy for feeding and migration, McGowan says. “In the spring, the sight of former nests and the lengthening days trigger the hormones that enable the testes and the ovaries to grow and resume functioning.”

How big do those sex organs get? Well, if a human male’s testes were proportional to a bird ready to mate, they would each be roughly the size of a softball, McGowan says. A

woman’s ovaries would grow from the size of almonds to walnuts. And that’s before there are eggs.

“Birds need to get physiologically synchronized,” McGowan says.

“When the female begins making eggs, the male needs to be ready to make sperm. Courtship behaviors helps their bodies make the necessary changes so they are both ready to mate at the same time.”

Seeds, Nuts, and Meaty Morsels

Humans take their significant other out to dinner as part of courtship, but among birds, it’s all about bringing dinner home.

“Courtship feeding, when the male feeds the female, is a typical thing that often happens right before

copulation,” says Mary Hennen, collections assistant in the Bird Division at the Field Museum. Many scientists think the behavior evolved during courtship as a way to demonstrate that the male will be a good provider. “The males will do a lot of the hunting during egg laying and incubation and when the chicks hatch,” she says. “She’s heavy with eggs, so it is easier for her to conserve energy and use it for egg laying if she doesn’t have to go hunting.”

In *The Birder’s Handbook*, researchers Paul Ehrlich, David Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye explain that, among Common Terns, the male’s ability to keep the refrigerator stocked matters. The volume and nutritional value of what the male delivers determines how many eggs the female lays and their weight and vitality. To demonstrate his skill as a provider, the male tern will display a tasty fish to females in the breeding colony. Once she accepts his gift, the male feeds the female for several days during what the researchers dubbed “the honeymoon period.” It’s hard for her to hunt for herself since she weighs half as much before she lays her three-egg clutch as she does during the off season. He will continue to feed her throughout egg laying and incubation.

Sometimes a girl’s gotta ask. Instead of fluttering her non-existent eyelashes, female Northern Cardinals may imitate the begging behavior of a fledgling, using trembling wings to encourage a male to feed her. If he’s a little dense, she may just snatch seeds or other morsels from his beak. Once he gets the hint and begins feeding her, she will allow him to copulate, confident that he will also feed with their future chicks. Similarly, a pair of Blue Jays will pass a seed back and forth dozens of times before one eats it.

Does your love fancy a shish kebab? The Great Gray Shrike impales a selection of delicacies—insects, small rodents and songbirds—on a sharp twig and presents the skewer to potential mates. According to research, females usually select the male with the largest and most appetizing offering.

But for sheer spectacle, look to raptors such as the Peregrine Falcons that Hennen studies. “Peregrines do food transfers in flight. He’ll be flying upright, with food in his talons, and she comes up from underneath, upside down, and she takes it from him midflight,” she says.

Peregrines also do food exchanges with their fledglings so they



KIMBLE, TEXAS, 5.16.23

Iris Kilpatrick (Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology)

practice flight behaviors, but Hennen questions whether that is a gift. “I’d call it a teaching tool. For it to be a gift, I think it would be part of courtship.”

Sticks and Stones

Many ladies like a big rock. If you are a Rockhopper Penguin, you’d like a whole pile of them—the taller, the better.

“The males get to the nesting grounds, or rookery, first. They start building up that nest, so when the females arrive, it’s almost completely built,” says Michelle

Nastasowski, a trainer in the ocean program at the Shedd Aquarium. The previous season's nest will have broken down during fierce weather, so there is a lot of work to do. In addition to gathering stones, they aren't above stealing choice stones from each other. "Most of the movement of the rocks, so to speak, is done in the very beginning," she says.

Why rocks? Rockhoppers, which are endangered, are native to South Africa and the South Pacific Islands, where the shore is barren and wind-swept. They make their nests from stones to elevate the eggs and future chicks above ground that is cold and wet from rain or snow. Gentoo and Adélé Penguins pass stones to each other as they finalize the nest, she says. Penguins from regions with sandy shores, such as the South American Magellanic Penguins at

The Shedd, don't give gifts, instead building their nests from sand, twigs, and leaves.

When a female Rockhopper is choosing a mate for the first time, she will inspect the tallest nests, Nastasowski says. The available males will be calling and bowing to attract the attention of single females. Once a pair has mated, they will usually return to each other and the same nest season after season.

"We will see the nest being worked on throughout breeding season, so even once the eggs are laid or chicks are hatched, they will spruce up the nests here and there and continue to build a little bit," she says.

"However, after the chicks hatch, the adults will focus on bringing back a belly full of fish to feed them."

Trainers at the Shedd encourage these behaviors by providing stones during the breeding season and removing them during the off season. They also modify the lighting to trigger mating rituals. Aquarium males have an advantage over their wild brethren—the trainers provide ice cubes, which the males delight in presenting to the females. Nastasowski says the tactics are working, since a Rockhopper chick was born in June 2023, and they are hoping for another chick in 2024.

Among House Wrens, according to All About Birds, "Courtship hinges on the female's assessment of the male's house and surrounding property, rather than his wooing her with dinner or dancing. When a female arrives on a male's territory, he often leads the female directly to his nest cavity—one of several on a



SHEDD AQUARIUM, SPRING 2023

Courtesy of the Shedd Aquarium

given territory that he may furnish with sticks, providing a foundation for additional construction by the female. The female thoroughly evaluates one or more cavities, entering and exiting multiple times and inspecting the immediate surroundings. If one nest cavity is to her satisfaction, she will begin construction, thus confirming their bond for at least the coming breeding cycle.”

The male Prothonotary Warbler takes this even further, often finding and furnishing seven or more nest cavities for a female to inspect—and she may turn her beak up to all of them.

Joint nest-building is common among many species, McGowan says. For example, the Great Blue Heron will present a female with sticks. Once she accepts his offering, they will build the nest together.

And, if you watch the [webcams](#) managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, you are familiar with the resident pair of Red-tailed Hawks that nest every year near the athletic fields. The male, Arthur, brings Big Red a selection of sticks both before she lays eggs and while they are raising the chicks. “Even if they are at an existing nest, the male will continue to bring new sticks and the female will rearrange them.

This behavior continues until after the fledglings leave the nest for good,” McGowan says.

When is a Gift Not a Gift?

Thanks to nature documentaries, the birds most often associated with giving gifts are bowerbirds, native to islands in the South Pacific. There are 27 species, each of which fashions elaborate structures out of sticks and grasses, then decorates the entrance with a carefully curated collection of objects. Yet those bowers aren’t gifts at all, says Beau Parks, Zoological Curator of the Birds & Wildlife Trek at the Tulsa Zoo, who oversaw Fawn-breasted Bowerbirds at the zoo before the group was transferred to the San Diego Zoo.

“The bowers aren’t actually nests. It’s less of a gift and more of inviting females over to see your collection of stuff and hoping they’re impressed,” Parks says.

Some species, such as the Golden Bowerbird, make “maypoles,” a collection of twigs erected around a living sapling, sometimes with a roof connecting the tops. The male conducts his courtship display in a circle around the maypole.

Other species, such as the Satin Bowerbird, create two walls that



YATES, NEW YORK, 5.9.20
Bill Brown (Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology)

arch toward each other, called an avenue. “They will paint the insides of the bowers with macerated berries and grasses and stuff like that. They don’t just build the bowers, they paint them and make them really nice,” he says. Males will return to their bowers for a decade or more, embellishing the structures.

In addition to the spiffy paint job, bowerbirds decorate the entrance with colored items specific to their species, Parks says. For example, Satin Bowerbirds decorate the entrance only with objects that are blue. “The color is the important

thing, and uniformity of color seems to matter,” he says.

Fawn-breasted Bowerbirds use only green objects, including leaves, which need to be refreshed as the color fades.

“Some males arrange the objects from largest, closest to the females, to smallest, closest to himself, perhaps to make himself look bigger,” Parks says. Males of all species brazenly steal objects from each other. Females seem to be impressed by the size and complexity of the bower and its collection. The couple often mate inside before she goes off to build a nest and raise chicks alone. If a female sticks around after mating, the male will chase her off. He wants

to resume inviting new females to check out his pad.

Lest you think males have all the power in this situation, remember that they create the bowers near to each other in an area called an exploded lek. Females can easily check out multiple bowers before they consent to mating, giving older males with bowers that have been built over multiple years the advantage, Parks says.

But the most notable folktales about birds giving gifts belong to American Crows, McGowan says.

“American Crows have a reputation for giving gifts to humans or to each other, but this behavior has not

been documented,” he says. What has been documented are juvenile crows collecting shiny objects or items that are not commonly found in the area, apparently out of curiosity. For example, a young crow collected stones from the broken bottom of a store-bought planter, leaving them on a nearby picnic table.

“These young crows will carry such objects for a period of time and then leave them, sometimes on porches or other areas in their territory. People who feed crows often consider these gifts,” McGowan says.

So, as Hennen says, the value of the gift is in the eye of the beholder.



DAYTONA BEACH, 11.25.21

Nina Ehmer (Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology)

TECHNY BASIN, 8.19.22

Katharine Spencer



Book Review:

Fen, Bog and Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis

Annie Proulx



Scribner, 2023

BY PATRICIA O'DONNELL

They have been dredged, drained, and destroyed across the globe. Long loathed, feared, and vilified, fens, bogs, and swamps may be among earth's most misunderstood natural resources. Now Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Annie Proulx is here with a poetic elegy to win over anyone not on the side of saving the world's wetlands. Proulx combines the power of her pleasurable prose with that of writers ranging from Dante to Thoreau to Vladimir Nabokov. An artist in her own right, Proulx relates wetlands to wide-ranging works of art like Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon" and Joseph Beuys's "Bog Action," a 1971 performance art piece in which he plunged into a bog. This global history of peatlands is so broad, it touches on bog bodies, the Roman

Empire, slavery, homosexuality, Brexit, and Nazis—and sometimes the text gets bogged down in the details.

Proulx understands the importance of wetlands to birds, and writes, "swamps and birds go together; when the swamp disappears so do the birds." She describes efforts to protect migratory birds by conservationists such as Brooke Meanley, author of Swamps, River Bottoms and Canebrakes, who sang the praises of Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp, once home to the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker: "The live oak hammocks, alligators and large wading birds, and the legends. It is the most picturesque swamp in North America." Meanley studied swamp habitats for decades as an ornithologist for the Department of the Interior, observing Bachman's

Warbler in South Carolina's POn Swamp twice. Once the seventh-most-common migratory bird, Bachman's Warbler "has not been seen since 1977 and is now presumed to have joined the Passenger Pigeon and the Ivory-Bill." Proulx then tells of the hunt for the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker in the swamps of Louisiana by Cornell Ornithology's James Tanner, who may have been the last person to see the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker when he studied a family of them in the 1930s.

The tales of loss continue as Proulx laments the poor fen people of England, worn down over centuries of protest against fen drainage until it became an accepted inevitability. She describes the fight to save Scotland's Flow Country bog, a major nesting habitat for migratory birds, as "one of the fiercest environmental battles in British history," but offers hope since "a series of complex laws, EU Habitats Directives and greater knowledge of wetlands values [have] opened a way

to bog restoration." The peat restoration has begun holding in the deadly methane gasses and CO2 which make bog destruction such a scary quagmire. "Methane is eighty times more powerful than carbon dioxide in its ability to push the warming of the world. We must somehow reckon with it," she writes.

With each chapter, the mournful accounts of loss add up, as in the 500,000 acres of swamp-marsh in northwest Indiana lost to the drainage of the Kankakee Marsh for conversion to farmland, resulting in a myriad of problems including erosion and flooding. Northeast Indiana's Limberlost Swamp was also drained, disrupting habitat that "was made up of timber, reeds, sphagnum moss, orchids, sundew, pitcher plants and grasses that nurtured great crowds of water – and migratory birds, snakes, frogs and other amphibians, deer, muskrat and beaver, mink and an encyclopedia of insects, including rare moths and butterflies."

Proulx insists the book is not a call to action ("That's not my thing," she says.), and it is more dirge than directive, but action is required to save our wetlands as their imperilment reaches a crisis. The recent Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency decision left thousands of wetlands vulnerable to pollution without penalty in May 2023, when the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government has no authority over pollution discharged into wetlands near bodies of water unless they have "a continuous surface connection" to those waters. The Biden administration was forced to lift the EPA's protection over millions of acres of U.S. wetlands.

Fen, Bog and Swamp includes an old rhyme that says it all:

The law doth punish man or woman
That steals the goose from off the
common
But lets the greater felon loose
That steals the common from the
goose.



HUMBOLDT PARK, 4.2.23
Alex Muench

COS Local Field Guide

Dark-eyed Junco

Winter Resident

BY LAUREN KOSTAS



IDENTIFICATION

The Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) is an abundant and widespread New World sparrow, whose arrival to the Chicago area is an early sign of winter.

THE ACT

These hardy, sociable birds form large flocks that overwinter throughout the United States. They are often found hopping on the ground and scratching with both feet to uncover seeds. In flight, they flap continuously and pump their tails, their white outer tail feathers flashing open, looking like a white v.

THE SOUND

Dark-eyed Junco sounds include high, thin, chipping notes and a metallic trill on the same pitch. In confrontation, they can issue a “que que” sound, likened to laser fire in a Star Wars movie.

THE PLACE

Woodland breeders, in winter juncos typically move to more open areas such as edges and clearings. They are very comfortable in suburban areas, backyards, and parks, and are frequently found hopping along the base of trees and shrubs.

THE LOOK

These medium-sized sparrows are about 5.5 inches tall with a long tail. They have a roundish head and a short, stout bill.

THE COLORS

Juncos are divided into six forms. The juncos in our area are the “slate-colored” form. Males are dark eyed with a slate gray head and back, a white belly and a pale, pinkish beak. Females have a tan/brown head and back. All sport white, outer tail feathers.

WOLF LAKE, 1.4.18

Walter Marcisz

Spring and Fall

Dark-eyed Juncos begin migrating to the area in late September and are mostly gone by mid May. While they are on the run you can find juncos most anywhere, including your own backyard. In Chicago they often tag along with House Sparrows. Try spotting them along the lakefront as they funnel along their migratory route.

[Grant Park](#)

[Jackson Park](#)

[South Shore Cultural Center Park](#)

[Jarvis Bird Sanctuary](#)

Winter

In winter the Juncos are settled down but still widespread, as happy with suburban yards as they are with urban parks, and fields. It's also a good time to find them during a peaceful winter hike through a forest preserve.

[Deer Grove](#)

[Miami Woods](#)

[Sagawau Environmental Learning Center](#)

[Sand Ridge Nature Center](#)



Oregon Dark-eyed Juncos breeds on the West Coast and are uncommon visitors to the Chicago area. Notice the stark contrast between the light brown back and dark hood.

COOK COUNTY, 1.23.22

Ian Sarmiento



Slate-colored Dark-eyed Juncos are the most common juncos in the Midwest. Males are uniformly gray, while females and immature birds can be more brown in appearance.

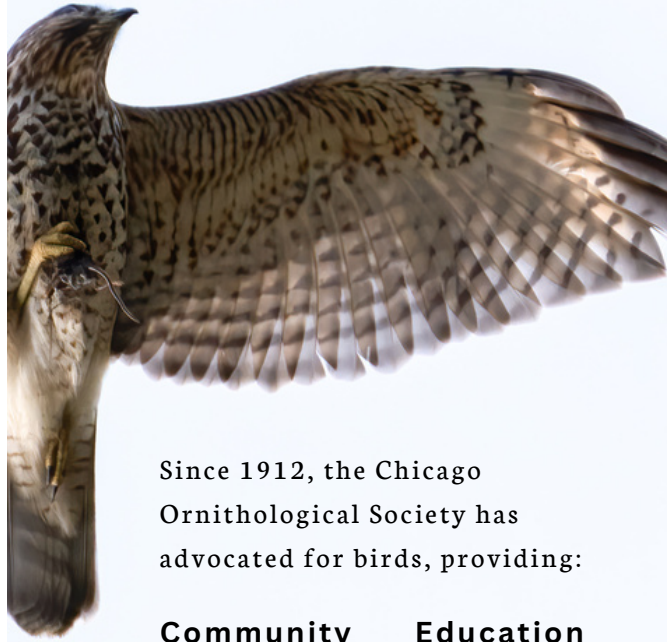
COOK COUNTY, 4.22.23

Ian Sarmiento



Pink-sided Dark-eyed Juncos are rare in the Chicago area. This form breeds in the Rocky Mountains and has a gray hood, brown back, and pink sides.

Think Globally Act Locally



Since 1912, the Chicago Ornithological Society has advocated for birds, providing:

Community Conservation **Education Field Trips**

Thank you for your support! Please consider renewing your [membership](#) for 2024 to help us continue our mission.

BIG MARSH, 10.28.23

Dustin Weidner

KRESS CREEK FARMS, 10.9.23

Ian Sarmiento

ICYMI: The Best of The Chicago Birder Blog

Enjoy diving into these popular fall posts from [ChicagoBirder.org](#).

[SO WE MET WITH MCCORMICK PLACE](#)



On October 18, the Bird Friendly Chicago coalition met with Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority (MPEA) and McCormick Place. Here are some takeaways and next steps for action.

[SIX BIRD FRIENDLY ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY](#)



COS president Edward Warden gives six actions the average citizen can take to help protect migratory birds in Chicago.

[2023 CHICAGOLAND CBC GUIDE](#)



It's Christmas Bird Count season! With well near a dozen counts happening throughout the Chicagoland area, how does one get started? We've got you covered!

[CHICAGO'S BIRD FRIENDLY DESIGN ORDINANCE: WHERE THINGS STAND](#)



Architect and former COS president Carl Giometti helps us navigate through the twisting path to bird friendly design legislature in Chicago. Learn where we are now, and where we go next.





PARK 566, 12.24.22

Kelly Ballantyne

Chicago Birder Bird ID Quiz

Take a look back through this issue of *The Chicago Birder* and see whether you can identify the species featured in the photographs. Look below to find the answers.

COVER	Peregrine Falcon	PAGE 18	Rockhopper Penguin
PAGE 1	Lincoln's Sparrow	PAGE 19	Blue Jay
PAGE 2	Green Heron	PAGE 20	Great Blue Heron
PAGE 3	Ross's Goose	PAGE 21	Great Egret
PAGE 4	Red-tailed Hawk	PAGE 22	American Coot
PAGE 4	Peregrine Falcon	PAGE 25	Red-shouldered Hawk
PAGE 5	Piping Plover (Sea Rocket)	PAGE 25	Rock Wren
PAGE 5	Bald Eagle	PAGE 26	Ruddy Duck
PAGE 6	Tree Swallow	PAGE 26	Red-breasted Merganser
PAGE 8	Hooded Merganser	LAST PAGE	Turkey Vulture
PAGE 16	Common Tern		
PAGE 17	Northern Cardinal		

The Last Page

PARK 566, 9.16.23

Dustin Weidner

BELMONT HARBOR, 2.18.23

Katharine Spencer





The Twenty-Fifth Checklist

Robyn Detterline

We've gone to the top of the world
to find what the wind might carry,

And it carries the whistle of birds,
though we discover no birds here.

Instead the ghosts of theropods
meander through flora and weep,

for weep they did when they realized
they could neither go forward nor back.

They climbed higher and shrank their skulls
and soon it seemed likely they'd fly,

yet for millions of years they stood alert
on the branches of prehistoric pines,

pondering their next hidden strategy,
which was naught but a little more ponder,

until one among them decided to leap,
deciding for a class entire,

and at the time many were left behind
and in waiting they ceased to exist,

but when a meteorite strikes all will leap
over earthquakes, tsunamis, and fire,

and only the winged need not come down;
Their wait is over; they're wholly new,

pioneering the top of the world,
from here seeing where things will go,

as we look from the same vantage
to find only the places we've been.