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Faces of birding

They come and go with the seasons, filling the air with song and the trees with color. And here in the Lowcountry, there are few things we take as seriously as our birds.

STORY BY BARRY KAUFMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA STAFF

It's hard to define exactly what the appeal is of birdwatching, at least for those sad souls who have yet to discover its joys. Part of it is the commune with nature, the unmistakable impression that when you are out seeking a glimpse of a bird you are merely a visitor to its beautiful world. Part of it is the thrill of discovery, spying a species you'd never seen before and securing bragging rights among fellow birders. There may even be a hint of jealousy for we the land-bound, knowing that at any moment our quarry can take wing and see the world from above.

It means something different for everybody, but as both an island tradition and an increasingly popular pastime, it's hard to beat a day spent watching the birdies fly by. You certainly don't need to tell that to these locals, three bird fanatics who have taken the hobby to new heights.

Sean Ryan

This self-described bird nerd is building an empire as a single father.

Among the many pleasures the hobby offers, birds present avid watchers with a sense of predictability in an often-unpredictable world. You know when the weather warms up which birds will start making their return to your home. You know which feed to put out to attract which bird. If you're experienced, you can tell what species belong to which songs.

"I love this hobby," said Sean Ryan, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited on Hilton Head Island. "I love the simple joy the hobby brings to people. I was introduced to the hobby by my wife, Jessica. Together we purchased our first Wild Birds Unlimited store in Hickory, N.C. That store was a life-changing experience, showing me a new side of life. We had a customer who would visit us every Tuesday, spending upwards of an hour talking about birds and what had happened in his yard that week. I looked forward to his visits and the engagement he brought into the store. This passion and joy was infectious, I wanted more of it.

Following that initial store, Ryan has migrated to four other stores looking east to High Point, N.C., west to Chattanooga and Knoxville, and winging his way South to Hilton Head. When the time is right, he hopes to open another in Bluffton. Each location has provided a new learning experience and a new chance to spread the hobby.

"More than just selling birdseed, I love that the stores are my customers' happy places, and it's my happy place, too," Ryan said. "I'm a bird nerd, too. I have two feeder stations set up outside my home office windows. It's not Grand Central Station yet, but it's getting busy.



I love watching the birds swoop in to grab a peanut. I get especially excited when a migrating bird appears — my current favorite is the Rose-Breasted Grosbeak, who only shows up for about one week in the fall and the spring."

Later this year Wild Birds will offer a feeder maintenance service, providing on-site cleaning and seed replenishment. The cleaning helps keep the birds healthy, and the replenishment will ensure your birds continue to find food at your location. If they come to your yard and they don't find food, they'll find other sources and you lose your buddies.

"Our goal is to continue to share the joy that each of us feels with this hobby," Ryan said. "Each of us can do a little good in the world every day. Feeding birds helps them, and brings us joy. It's pretty much a win-win scenario in my book!"



BEYOND BIRDSEED Sean Ryan is the owner of Wild Birds Unlimited on Hilton Head Island. He also owns Wild Birds Unlimited stores in North Carolina and Tennessee. He hopes to open a Bluffton location when the timing is right.



How to attract more birds with Sean Ryan

We all want to attract as many birds as we can to our backyards. After all, it's far easier to simply hang out by a window with a pair of binoculars than it is to throw on a pair of hip waders or snake boots and chase them down where they live.

But how do you get the most bang for your buck? How do you ensure that the birds will flock to the haven you've created, and more importantly, how do you get them to keep coming back?

These are the questions that people bring to Sean Ryan all the time at Wild Birds Unlimited.

"It's not just seed. Some of them like suet, others mealworms, and there are all sorts of other factors to take into account," he said. "The staff in my stores are experts at helping you find the right solution for your backyard. Beyond just the in-store experience, we are growing our interactions with the local community. We offer monthly guided bird-watching hikes to local places like Pinckney Island, Jarvis Creek and Fish Haul Beach. These guided hikes help you identify local birds by sight and sound.

"We are also offering at-home services. Feederscaping brings a Wild Birds Unlimited expert to your yard and guides you through the best place to set up your bird station. One of our experts will come out to your residence or place of business and talk through where to set the feeders up to have the best views, how to keep away squirrels and more, then they can come set it up for you."

Patty Kappmeyer

This passionate bird photographer goes against the grain to get the best shots.

As she speaks over the phone to a writer hundreds of miles away, Patty Kappmeyer's focus is on the fine mists before her, and the majestic birds they conceal. Having taken a trip to the Gulf Coast in spring, one might assume she's in town for Mardi Gras. Instead, she's there for something far more exciting.

"It's been really foggy here, so we haven't really been able to see very much," she said. "But I've counted 25 species already."

Beyond the chance to sample the different avian sights that the Gulf Coast offers, Kappmeyer was drawn here by an artist whose inspiration mirrors her own. "Walter Anderson was a local artist here who used to row out to Horn Island, camp out, and illustrate the birds," she said. "There's a museum of his work in Ocean Springs, and that's been on my bucket list."

Sorry, Mardi Gras, you'll have to wait until next year. Inspiration is the true destination on this trip.

Like Walter Anderson, Patty Kappmeyer's art centers around birds. And like Anderson, she is not afraid to go far afield in search of inspiration, sneaking through marshes and pluff mud to capture that perfect image with her camera. "I never know what I'm going to get when I go out there," she said. "I go against the grain – I'll go out at high tide during a storm and just get the best shots."

Her love affair with photography began in her native New York, where she grew up at the edge of a state



park and spent hours roaming its forests. A photography class during day camp showed her a way to transform her love for the outdoors into an artistic medium. And when she visited Hilton Head Island in the early '80s, it crystallized what would become her lifelong passion for bird photography.

"The herons and egrets just fascinated me," she said. "You just couldn't ignore how beautiful the nature was, especially in the '80s when the island was not as developed. I got that bug. I've seen it happen to a lot of people."

She would return to her rental home on the island routinely, following the migration of her muses with each warm season, until moving here full-time six years ago. It wasn't long before Hilton Head Audubon saw the opportunity to put her keen vision to use.

"I joined when I didn't even live here, just to get updates and know what was going on. I was friends with the outgoing president, who convinced me to join the board," she said. Using her marketing background, she dove into the organization's website and social media, raising its profile during a time when its Facebook group ballooned from 300 to around 3,400. "People are really getting into birding."



EAGLE EYE Photographer Patty Kappmeyer is happiest when she is knee-deep in pluff mud, wandering the marshes or forests seeking out birds. "Each bird has a soul and personality that I try to capture through my photography," she said.



How to (safely) shoot birds with Patty Kappmeyer

For years, Patty Kappmeyer's lens has captured stunning images of birds, both here in the Lowcountry and around the world. Here she shares a few tips for getting that gorgeous shot.

Dress the part and keep your eyes open: "Definitely wear proper footwear. I have snake boots on whenever I go out. In our area, personal safety is important. I can't tell you how many people have been stuck in pluff mud or lost camera gear. Be aware of the tides and your surroundings."

Keep your distance: "Use a long lens if you can. I typically shoot with a 400-600 mm lens. If you don't have that, you can use teleconverters to extend your photographic reach on a 100mm or 200mm lens."

Unless you can get close: "I typically don't use a tripod. I lay on the ground. Get low to the ground as much as possible if you're shooting shore birds and backyard birds. It really changes your perspective on your subject."

Learn how to shoot manually: "That way you can really control shutter speed, aperture and ISO, and that's where you can play with the light. Shooting in auto, the camera makes all those decisions for you."

Train your mind first: Before you can shoot the bird, you need to do your homework. "It's not about the camera. It's about knowing where the bird is going to be and when."

Watch the weather: "I went out to Mitchelville Beach the night before Tropical Storm Elsa. It wasn't high tide, and the tide was already high. I saw night herons and egrets heading into the woods, and clapper rails moving to higher ground. To be able to witness that was fascinating."

Most importantly, respect the birds: "The habitat so fragile, and you don't want to scare the birds. Look for signs of stress, and don't approach nesting birds and give shorebirds a wide berth."

Lynn Hodgson

Birding gives this naturalist a good excuse to explore new places.

When you hear the bird calls, really hear them, you'll know that you're in Lynn Hodgson's world. Physically, this world lies just beyond the gates of Audubon Newhall Preserve, down a path that snakes between saw palmetto, loblolly pines and magnolias, with roots painted blue so you don't trip. It surrounds a tranquil pond where herons and egrets visit. It soars up to the very tops of the red cedar's highest branches, swirling in the breeze.

Hodgson's world is a physical place, but to enter the world where you can truly hear the birds, and understand them better than you did before, you first have to hear things the way she does.

"I tell most of my birds by sound rather than sight," she said, mimicking the sound of a nearby yellow-rumped warbler with a loud "tsk tsk tsk." Walking through the physical space of her world around Newhall, you can't help but start trying her ears on. Like so many who have taken her educational tours of the preserve, you start to develop her knack for picking out errant notes floating by.

But don't be surprised if you don't know them all by sound after your first tour. It's not something she learned overnight.

"I've been a birder since I was about 12," she said. "For Christmas, my grandfather gave me a Golden Guide Bird book, so I was in the backyard just trying to find these birds. I think a lot of us started with the Golden Guide."

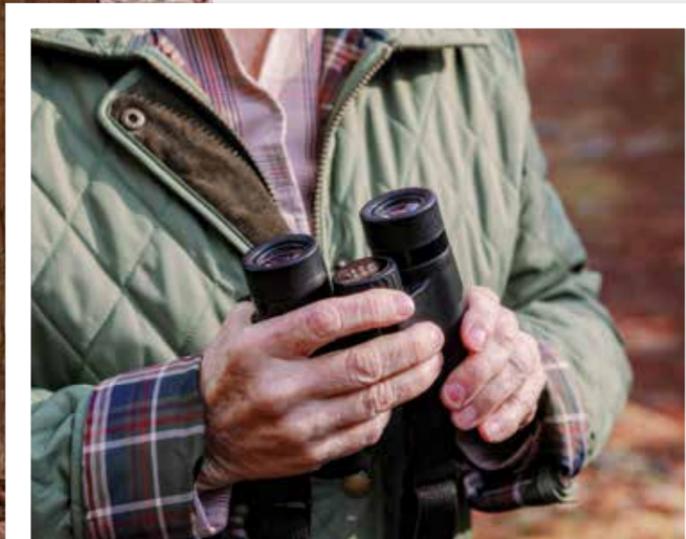
After leaving her Atlanta hometown, and with many moves before and after earning a Ph.D. at Stanford, most of Lynn's professional career was spent as a professor of biology, studying



seaweeds in Hawaii. She never lost that love of birding. She may not have been able to get out then as much as she does now, but that all changed when she moved to Hilton Head Island in 2017. Her family had a weekend home here for about four years in the 1960s and she had fond memories of the island.

"But when I moved down here, it was kind of like, 'Well, now what?' So I jumped in the birding community and started going on all the Audubon tours," she said. She was soon leading them, while also serving as the vice president of Hilton Head Audubon. "I'd been a member of Audubon and the Nature Conservancy and some others for at least 20 years, but I really started getting serious about learning bird calls after I moved down here."

Today, when you step into her world, she shares these bird calls with you. And after a few laps around the pond, you'll start to understand that world. You'll hear the calls, echoing through the forest, and before long, you'll begin to understand, like she does, what they're saying. It's an entirely different world, one she is more than happy to take you to.



WELCOME TO HER WORLD Lynn Hodgson has been a member of National Audubon and various local Audubon chapters since the 1980s. She moved to Hilton Head Island in 2017 and immediately became active in the local chapter.



How to speak bird with Lynn Hodgson

Within the forest of Newhall Audubon Preserve, an entire symphony of bird songs surrounds you. And while we may hear indistinct, sometimes chaotic chirping, Lynn Hodgson hears the calls of the birds who serve as her companions in this wilderness. Here she shares a few of the songs to look out for on your next adventure.

Cardinals: "They sort of say some version of 'pretty pretty pretty pretty.' Everyone makes up their own mnemonics.

Fish crows: While an American crow has a distinctive "caw," its aquatic kin sing with a subtle difference. "The fish crow is very nasal. It's more of an 'eh eh.'"

Towhee: During the winter, this bird will sound off with a short "vleep" noise, but this time of year they ramp it up as mating season begins. "Now they've started to sing. The mnemonic for that is 'drink your tea.'"

Carolina wren: While Hodgson will tell you that these birds say something akin to "cheeba cheeba cheeba," she cautions that it isn't all they say. "That's one of many. They like to fool you — they all do."

Bluebird: One of the few who will tell you who they are. "They have a relatively soft little call. I like to think of it as, 'I'm a bluebird. I'm a bluebird.'" LL