

Ode to Birding (Appreciation, Activism and Conservation)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

In Wes Anderson's classic film Moonrise Kingdom (1), we meet young Suzy Bishop, a twelve-year-old who always carries her indispensable pair of binoculars which she considers to be her "magic power". Straight out of an iconic Alex Colville painting as an attuned lensed observer, she uses her trusty magnifiers to peer up close at notable birds and wildlife in her geographic area of New Penzance, in addition to spying on curious human beings of interest from afar. While birders like Suzy are innately thrilled by avian displays of colour, movement and song, we will take a more generalized look at the quirky world of birdwatching which can dazzle us, inspire us and educate us about the natural world and its fragile state of fleeting beauty.

After taking an ornithology field course at the QUBS (Queen's University Biological Station) during the spring of 2005, I soon developed a naturalist's passion for identifying and observing the behaviour of the Class Aves (also known as birds). Eager to share this new-found passion with my mother as her retirement age approached, I bought her a copy of Dr. Bridget Stutchbury's 2007 book "The Silence of the Songbirds" (2) which followed up on conservationist Rachel Carson's controversial account of the impacts of DDT on wildlife published under the title "Silent Spring" in 1962. After pouring through the book's pages on ornithology, field work abroad and the critical conservation efforts to protect songbirds from extinction, my mother soon discovered the benefits of being a citizen scientist and a birder, eagerly getting up early to head out to places in the outskirts of Toronto like the Leslie Street Spit and Colonel Sam Smith Park to observe the seasonal waves of winged songbird migration along with the shorebirds and waterfowl gathered at the edges of Lake Ontario throughout the calendar year. We would soon partner up (especially in April-May), putting on rainboots, grabbing our travel mugs, field guides, binoculars, DSLRs and even an old bird call CD from QUBS to visit Tommy Thompson Park's Wet Woods, an old landfill site converted into a haven and mecca for avid birders of varying levels from all parts of the GTA (Greater Toronto Area). When visiting Colonel Sam Smith Park and the Spring Bird Festival with its renowned annual 'Wimbrel Watch' from a jutting part of the neighbouring rocky peninsula, we would make sure to make a stop at Birds and Beans in nearby Mimico to fill our travel mugs and pick up a few bags of certified bird-friendly coffee beans grown under native forest canopy shade.

While we would later drive back into the busy metropolis of Toronto—with its tall glass towers and matrix of paved streets—at the conclusion of our morning birding expeditions together, another avian conservation issue detailed in a later chapter of Dr. Stutchbury's book would engage both my mother and I in taking an activist's stance in regards to bird casualties in the heavily urbanized downtown core of our busy city.

Waking up before the crack of dawn during the peak of either spring or fall migration, I would sometimes join my mother with a butterfly net, gloves and a large supply of brown paper bags to patrol for injured or dead birds unable to navigate or exit the confines of Toronto's maze-like financial district. These feathered casualties had tragically collided with glass building structures while attempting to fly North to their breeding grounds or South to winter foraging grounds depending on the season or time of year. This type of activist field work promoting bird friendly guidelines for urban tower construction, customized treatments applied to glass surfaces, along with sounding the alarm in regards to city light pollution, led us both to a notorious 'bird trap' tower complex in Scarborough, Ontario called Consilium Place. Waking up early on Sunday mornings during the fall migration season of 2011, we picked up scores of dead birds like the Ruby-throated Hummingbird that had collided with the highly hazardous mirrored glass of the three-tower complex on their migratory flight route South through the eastern suburbs of the GTA. A dataset of bird casualties at Consilium Place compiled by Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP) soon was used by groups like Ecojustice to take legal action against the owners of the property. Through Ecojustice's prosecution under the Species at Risk Act, Consilium Place complied with adding bird-friendly glass treatments to high collision risk areas of the large tower complex, to clearly signal to migrating birds that they were flying in the proximity of an otherwise invisible barrier window.

On a recent trip across the Atlantic to the Isles of Ireland, I sat by my passenger seat window as the plane descended toward our destination with a bird's eye view of the myriad of human colonized lands down below. This view of the patches of farmland, encroaching human infrastructure, aggressive residential settlement and industrial development made me ponder how intimidating a migratory flight in the year 2026 must be to a bird looking to land and refuel on their long round-trip commutes of spring and autumn. Thinking back to a recent birding expedition to Rondeau and Point Pelee along the shores of Lake Erie, I was struck by the proximity of large tracts of farmland recently converted to greenhouse farming, allowing for higher yields of crops over a prolonged harvest season. The combination of these expanding artificially created grow-houses and the many wind generator farms in the area, surely pose an even greater challenge for navigating birds looking to touch down during peak migration season along their preferred fly-routes and previous temporary foraging areas of choice. Another clash between migrating birds and human expansion is now set to occur with the renewed threat of jets at the Toronto Island Airport. While citizens of the City of Toronto have more often opposed this special runway expansion through supporting activist groups such as No Jets TO, higher levels of government may try to by-pass environmental protection legislation which would negatively impact nesting birds in the area. This further expansion could result in the covert culling of native (non-invasive) species like the Double-crested Cormorants (*Nannopterum auritum*) which nest in large colonies

along the northern shores of the island near Gibraltar Point. This colony which is stunning to observe especially in the month of June when they gather collectively in their preferred island nesting habitat to sustain their local population, makes some birding enthusiasts visiting the island as a bird sanctuary worry about the competing interest between the heavily stigmatized black-feathered residents and the increased airspace needed to accommodate jets in proximity of Hanlan's Point ferry docks.

While Dr. Stutchbury's important pitch on protecting Aves continues to resonate today as the many manifestations of human colonization and earthly supremacy drive more and more species of songbirds (and other avian groups) toward the brink of extinction, an appreciation of the varied beauty of these incredible creatures may slow or curb this negative change through small community efforts, local activism like Lights Out Toronto and an adherence to more bird-friendly standards of construction and consumer culture. I hope that many years after my passing, generations of young folk will continue to experience the pleasure of hearing the calls of spring Warblers in places like the ravines of Toronto.

Sources:

1. Moonrise Kingdom (2012). Dir. Wes Anderson. Focus Features. USA. 94 min.
2. "The Silence of the Songbirds", Bridget Stutchbury, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto. 2007.