



Sounds Like Fun! Birding (by Ear) is Now Easier *By Dan Murphy*

Learning theory says that the greater the number of senses students use to understand and acquire new concepts, the deeper those concepts will be ingrained in their minds — and the more easily they can be retrieved and applied.

Speaking of “applications,” Tracee M. Herbaugh, in an APNews.com article, waxed eloquently about how Merlin, the birding app created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, enriches not only the experience of birding itself, but also the connections she forges with family and friends.

This summer, relaxing in an Adirondack chair in her backyard, Herbaugh decided to experiment with Merlin’s “Sound ID” feature. A half-hour and several species later, she was amazed to see just how many visitors had joined the “usual suspects” among birds bopping around Boston. In fact, two of the birds she heard merited red dots, meaning that Merlin considered them “a rare sighting.” Buoyed by birds, she reflected on birding’s increasing popularity.

DOWNLOADING HAPPINESS

Isolated by the pandemic, people flocked outdoors, striving for connection with something greater than themselves. Hatched in 2014, Merlin’s popularity really took off during the COVID-19 outbreak. By the first spring of the pandemic, 67 percent more people had downloaded the app compared to the previous year. In 2021, when Merlin’s content creators introduced Sound ID, which identifies more than 700 species of birds in the U.S. alone, the app reached new heights. Because Sound ID displays spectrogram visualizations, those with

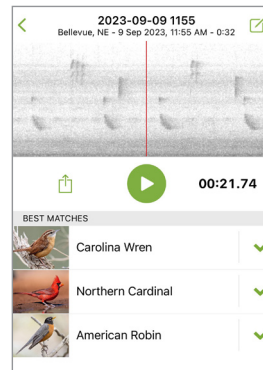
hearing loss can use the app, too — even if they can’t hear the birds! The app “listens” and shows hearing-impaired birders which birds are in the vicinity, enabling them to watch for birds and make visual IDs.

Worldwide users now number more than 7 million people. (Other popular birding apps include the Audubon Bird Guide, ChirpOMatic, Picture Bird, and Smart Bird.)

DEEPENING CONNECTIONS

Herbaugh believes that birding’s real value lies in bringing people closer to nature, and to one another. She recalls posting her bird list on social media and receiving messages from friends among Merlin users. She even reconnected with two childhood friends from far away.

Alli Smith, a project coordinator for



Merlin App screen detail showing bird song spectrograph and best matches.

Merlin, whom Herbaugh interviewed for her story, observes that connection is a frequent theme among the feedback Merlin users provide. “Birding is a surprisingly social hobby, and people are so excited about what they are seeing” that “it’s fun to share that with other people.”

John Smallwood, a biology professor and ornithology expert at Montclair State University, told Herbaugh that, “You’re looking at birds but you can’t help but see everything else, too. You see the entire ecosystem.”

Smith, from Merlin, emphasized, “We know that people protect what they care about, and you really only care about what you know. So Merlin is our way of making learning about birds available and accessible to everybody.”

Herbaugh takes this all personally. “If it takes technology to peel kids away from the screen and interested in the outdoors, so be it.

“As of now, my Life List on Merlin is 45 birds. My kids are the drivers for getting more on the list,” she adds.

GREEN CORNER: HOW YOU CAN COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

Conservation begins at home; each of us can help restore our unique ecosystem.

Rake-Less November

Tidy yards may look nice to us, but they are not nice for the critters that rely on fallen foliage to get through a harsh winter. Consider using leaves as mulch for garden beds, piling your branches in an out-of-the-way place, or only partially clearing your lawn.

Unwrap December

Though they may look picture perfect, many wrapping papers are not recyclable — especially those with glitter, or metallic finishes. Instead, wrap gifts with newspaper, butcher paper, or brown paper bags. Decorate before wrapping with colored pencils or watercolors for a festive finish.

ON THE HORIZON

November

MEMBERS PROGRAM

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9

What: Let's Talk Turkey

Learn all about wild turkeys with a showing of the fascinating PBS documentary, *My Life as a Turkey*.

When: 6 p.m. social, 7 p.m. program

Where: DJ's Dugout meeting room
777 N. 114th Street, Omaha

How: register at Audubon-Omaha.org

Who: Members and the public (free)

FIELD TRIPS

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9

What: Hawk Watch

Meet Bob Wells to watch and report sightings of raptors for HawkWatch on the tower at Hitchcock Nature Center

When: 9 a.m.

Where: Hitchcock Nature Center
27792 Ski Hill Loop, Honey Creek, IA

How: Meet at the base of the tower

Who: Members and the public (free)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18

What: EZ Does it Urban Birding

New birder? Too busy for an all-day excursion? Virginia Stauffer will lead a birding walk at a leisurely pace.

When: 9-11 a.m.

Where: Towl Park
9310 W. Center Rd., Omaha

How: Meet in the parking lot

Who: Members and the public (free)

December

MEMBERS PROGRAM

No program is currently scheduled for December - it's a busy month for many.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17

What: Annual Christmas Bird Count

How: register at Audubon-Omaha.org Calendar of Events. The bird count coordinator will contact you with details on who, when, where and how.

Who: Members and the public (free)

Field Notes From the President



By Christine Prescott, President, Audubon Society of Omaha

As the Share Omaha Giving Tuesday initiative approaches on November 28, the Audubon Society of Omaha is brimming with gratitude for the unwavering support it has received from its dedicated members. The upcoming Giving Tuesday promises to be a pivotal day, uniting communities in the spirit of generosity and providing crucial funding that directly advances the society's mission of conservation and environmental education.

The Audubon Society of Omaha is deeply committed to the preservation of prairies and the promotion of environmental education, with initiatives such as the Student Art Contest at the forefront of its endeavors. The support garnered through Share Omaha Giving Tuesday is integral to the society's ability to sustain and expand these critical programs.

Funds raised through Share Omaha Giving Tuesday play a central role in the society's prairie conservation efforts. These contributions are instrumental in restoring and maintaining natural habitats, ensuring that these ecosystems and their diverse wildlife populations continue to thrive.

Additionally, the financial support from Share Omaha helps cover the expenses associated with the Audubon Society of Omaha's Student Art Contest. This contest not only encourages artistic expression but also serves as a vital educational tool, cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation for the environment among the younger generation.

The Audubon Society of Omaha extends heartfelt appreciation to its members, acknowledging their thoughtfulness and generosity. Their commitment to the cause is a powerful testament to the strength of community collaboration and the shared vision of a world where nature and wildlife are cherished and protected.

As the Audubon Society of Omaha prepares for this year's Giving Tuesday on November 28, the support received through Share Omaha serves as a beacon of hope and encouragement, propelling the society forward in its tireless pursuit of a greener, healthier planet.

The eyes have it – your photos

We love to see your bird photos! Please email them to photos@audubonomaha.org



Barred Owl, photo by Jennifer Dobby



Harris's Sparrow, photo by Elizabeth Winter

Your Window to the World of Birds

When the weather outside is frightful, and your inner fire is so delightful ... why not bird, why not bird, why not bird?

The New York Times Wirecutter tracks trends showing how to get from Point A to Point B with maximum efficiency. Wirecutter contributor Dan Koeppel recently focused his attention — and binoculars — on birding. From your window. Here are some timely tips from his column to help you weather the weather. Remember, as someone once said, “Winter is coming.”

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

“When you embrace birding, the world opens up to you,” observes Nick Lund, author of “The Birdist’s Rules of Birding” blog, quoted in Koeppel’s article. Birder numbers are soaring, with more than 45 million watchers accounting for an economic impact of \$41 billion a year, based on US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates.

Koeppel and his father (an avid birder) weren’t exactly birds of a feather, at least in the beginning. It took years for Koeppel’s interest to take off. Birding “seems beyond geeky to some, but once you start looking at it as a sport, or a game, it becomes deeply fascinating,” if not an obsession, he writes.

Identification, classification/counting and unpredictability combine to offer soul-satisfying skills to those willing to invest the time to take up birding. Koeppel breaks down birdwatching into three steps.

1. OBSERVING THE BIRD

Most beginning (and grizzled) birders can probably see a lot of birds through their windows, from the comfort of their own home, he notes, especially if they’ve set up a feeder. Dawn and dusk are particularly good times to catch a glimpse of a few of the more than 900 species of birds in the U.S. To amplify your experience,

Koeppel suggests purchasing a pair of binoculars. For less than \$300, he says you can buy an “excellent pair.” Wirecutter recommends the Athlon Optics Midas ED (8 x 42), with several more options across a variety of price points and performance capabilities described on Wirecutter’s website.

Seeing birds is just the beginning, he cautions. You will need to look more closely to pinpoint particular characteristics, such as the color, size, and shape of wings, beak and body. Try to observe birds in motion: what they’re doing will provide clues as to who they are, which is Step 2.

2. IDENTIFYING THE BIRD

Finding the right field guide to help you identify the birds you see is an absolute necessity, Koeppel emphasizes. His recommendations? Kenn Kaufman’s Field Guide to Birds of America and any of David Sibley’s “excellent manuals.” And here’s an insightful pro tip: Keep a guide in your bathroom so you can study it on a, more or less, regular basis.

Illustrated bird cards also make Koeppel’s list of helpful hints, especially if you leave one by your window. He adds that regional bird cards are available for most states.

App-based guides are good, too, he says, naming the Merlin Bird ID app, created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, calling it, “free, comprehensive and efficient,” and noting that it includes a database of sound recordings of bird calls/songs.

In case you’re wondering, Koeppel highly recommends that readers get involved with their local Audubon chapter, and even offers a link to an Audubon article on “out-the-window, urban birding.”

3. DOCUMENTING THE BIRD

Finally, make a list. Make drawings. Keep a record of times and places you observe your feathered friends. There are even global communities of “listers.” Koeppel says Cornell’s free eBird includes “built-in checklist tools” that can help you contribute to “a global database of bird sightings.”

MAKING CONNECTIONS

It’s one thing to connect to nature. It’s quite another to connect across generations. Over several decades of birding, Koeppel’s father identified 200 species on his “yard list.” Koeppel made a deathbed promise to his father that he would identify a bird that had successfully eluded his dad. It took him five years, but Koeppel finally found it. He probably found a little more of himself, too.



Giving Tuesday: Give the gift that keeps on giving

Giving Tuesday, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, is a designated national day to support the work of nonprofit organizations. Locally, on November 28, Share Omaha will sponsor a 24-hour fundraising event to raise support for Omaha-area nonprofits.

Support our cause — the health of the environment — by donating online by credit card on Share Omaha’s website, <https://shareomaha.org>.

Audubon Society of Omaha is a 501(c)(3) organization, and your donation is fully tax deductible. Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.

Follow Up: AltEn Cleanup at Mead Continues

By Dan Murphy

IT TURNED OUT TO BE TOO

GOOD TO BE TRUE. Back in 2015, six leading seed companies believed they had found an efficient, cost-effective way to dispose of unused seed that had been treated with pesticides and fungicides. Kansas-based biofuel concern AltEn would take the seed, transform it into ethanol and sell the resulting byproduct, called *wet cake*, to farmers, to use as fertilizer. Just for reference, most ethanol plants produce the fuel using harvested corn or grains, which are safe for human consumption, and dispose of the waste with minimal risk to people or the environment. AltEn soon housed one of the largest stockpiles of surplus seed corn in the U.S., and most of those seeds were coated with neonicotinoids, aka “neonics.”

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG, YOU ASK?

Testing revealed that AltEn’s wet cake contained more than 1,000 times the level of toxins allowed by law. By 2021, when the plant shut down, it may have processed more than 1 billion pounds of neonic-treated seeds. Prevented by the state of Nebraska from selling the contaminated wet cake, the company simply stacked 115,000 tons of the stuff at its production facility just outside Mead, Nebraska. Some had already been spread across area farms.

Area residents complained of the stench emanating from AltEn seed piles and worried about potential health impacts, including perceived threats to groundwater.

SO, WHERE DO THINGS STAND

NOW? AltEn ceased operations in Nebraska. But the work of the six seed companies (AgReliant, Bayer, Becks, Corteva Agriscience, Syngenta and Winfield United) was just beginning. The coalition they formed, the AltEn Facility Response Group, is paying

for the entire cost of the cleanup, which is being led by NewFields, an environmental, engineering, construction and consulting firm. So far, the companies have invested more than \$28 million in the effort.

Testing revealed that AltEn’s wet cake contained more than 1,000 times the level of toxins allowed by law...and the company simply stacked 115,000 tons of the stuff at its production facility just outside Mead, Nebraska

Plans call for mixing bentonite into the wet cake, which has been buried temporarily under concrete and clay, to reduce its moisture content and convert it into solid waste. A pilot project will transport 24,000 tons of waste to the Pheasant Point landfill in Bennington, Nebraska, which is operated by WM (formerly known as Waste Management). After consultants thoroughly vet the pilot process, and make appropriate updates, Pheasant Point will eventually store all 115,000 tons of AltEn’s solid waste. At every stage, NewFields and its contractors will do all they can to ensure that the public is protected from dust and odors. Before leaving AltEn property, for example, loaded trucks will be cleaned and covered in plastic, “like a big burrito,” said Bill Butler, New Fields’ senior engineer and partner.

The site’s approximately 13.4 million pounds of treated and discarded seed will be incinerated in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at a “waste-to-energy” facility operated by Covanta. Steam produced by this

process will drive a turbine that generates electricity for residential use. Again, at every point in the process, contractors will protect the public from odors and dust.

Due to the magnitude of the mess, cleanup could take many more months, if not years.

Meanwhile, UNMC’s College of Public Health and Creighton University have been studying potential impacts on the health of Mead-area residents. Although the study confirmed the presence of pesticides in urine, the sample size was small and comparable to concentrations found in a 2015-16 Centers for Disease Control study of the general population. A few test subjects had higher concentrations of the insecticides. Over time, neonic concentrations decline, said Eleanor Rogan, an associate dean at UNMC’s College of Public Health. Tests showed no evidence of pesticide contamination in Mead’s source of drinking water.

Rogan emphasized that the studies constitute a snapshot in time, but that, currently, they do not demonstrate a link between any health conditions and exposure to chemicals from the AltEn plant. She added that the science evolves, and that experts are still learning about the effects of neonicotinoids on humans.

AND WHAT’S HAPPENED TO

ALTEN? The seed company coalition, AltEn Facility Response Group, has filed a lawsuit against AltEn and some companies tied to AltEn’s original owners, seeking to freeze their assets. In addition, one coalition company has claimed in a court filing that an AltEn owner has shifted assets to avoid paying for the cleanup.

Sources for this article include: Lincoln Journal-Star, University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health, NewFields.com, and Progressive Farmer, powered by DTN.

ASO in Action

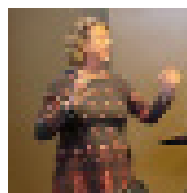
BIRD FEEDING PROGRAM DELISH

The September program about feeding birds was well attended and most came early to eat, drink and socialize. Thanks to Bob Wells for his tips and tricks – even the old guys learned a few new things. This was our first program held in a private party room at DJ's Dugout on 114th, equipped with AV equipment.



EZ DOES IT On September 16, the EZ Does it Urban Birders, led by ASO board member Virginia Stauffer, were foiled by weather conditions and had to high-tail it out of Towl Park when the lightning alarms sounded at the nearby golf course. But they were back on the 23rd and enjoyed seeing a wide variety of birds.

WETLANDS FIELD TRIP The October 7 field trip to Fontenelle Forest's Wetlands was led by Tim Houghton and was well attended. Tim also organized a second field trip in October at Chalco Hills.



POLLINATOR GARDENS PROGRAM Attendees at our October member meeting were inspired by Jenn Duerr, of Nebraska Monarchs, as they learned how to turn their high-maintenance bluegrass into thriving native habitats for birds, bees and butterflies.

Teamwork preserves tallgrass prairie

By Dan Murphy

Spring Creek Audubon Center has partnered with the Solidago Conservancy and the Lincoln Parks Foundation to purchase and preserve an additional 310 acres of previously unprotected native prairie in Lancaster County.

Adjacent to the Center's existing 850-acre tallgrass prairie southwest of Lincoln and south of Denton, the newly purchased tract will play a major role in the creation of a Prairie Corridor. When complete, the prairie passage and trail will stretch 10 miles, from Pioneers Park Nature Center to the Spring Creek Prairie Center.

A news release from the center noted that, "with less than 2% of tallgrass prairie remaining in North America, this purchase will conserve and connect a larger habitat area to support the tallgrass prairie ecosystem for future generations." The center plans to build a 1.5-mile-long trail through the land.

The Solidago Conservancy, which is affiliated with the Lincoln Parks Foundation, helped negotiate the sale of the property with a private owner. Following this purchase, the partners driving the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch project will have about two-thirds of the land they need for the corridor. Partners include the Audubon Center, the city of Lincoln, the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and the Lincoln Parks Foundation.

Ensuring the conservation of the newly purchased property will connect the habitats — which include some woodlands — with the 850 acres of the Spring Creek Prairie. Audubon Great Plains Communications Manager Melissa Amarawardana said, "It's kind of been a dream of ours. When the opportunity came up, we were very excited."

Audubon Great Plains will now survey the property, conducting bird counts and identifying plant and animal species making their home on the prairie.

Information for this article came from the Lincoln Journal-Star.

RESOURCES & INFO:

HOW TO JOIN/RENEW/UPDATE

Join or renew your membership online at audubon-omaha.org and select "Get Involved." Save paper and avoid confusion. Your membership with National Audubon automatically makes you a member of Audubon Society of Omaha.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

Please call National Audubon toll-free at 1-844-428-3826, or send an email to audubon@emailcustomerservice.com

STAY CONNECTED

Join our email list at Audubon-Omaha.org under "Get Involved."

BEQUESTS & GIFTS

A bequest to Audubon Society of Omaha is a gift to those who will succeed us and secure our natural heritage. Want to honor a loved one and help ASO's local conservation and education efforts? You can make a donation anytime at Audubon-Omaha.org OR you can mail your check along with the name and address of the person to be notified to:

Audubon Society of Omaha
P.O. Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103

DID YOU KNOW?

If you are a member of the National Audubon Society and live in this area you are automatically a member of Audubon Society of Omaha – that's why you get this newsletter. If you prefer to skip the paper newsletter you can request the email version on our website by selecting Newsletter dropdown of the Who We Are tab on our home page: audubon-omaha.org

TAKE ACTION Big things are happening, so communicate with your elected officials. Go to audubon-omaha.org for links to contact info for each.

INJURED BIRD?

Raptors: Call 866-888-7261 to speak to a Raptor Conservation Alliance volunteer. Non-raptor: Call Nebraska Wildlife Rehab at 402-234-2473.

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STEWARDSHIP OF THE EARTH AND ITS CREATURES

the Meadowlark

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Dark-eyed Junco by Elizabeth Winters

The Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.

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