



# CITY LIFE IS FOR THE BIRDS

—bird watching in... *New York City?*

**By Tristan Lowery**

It was birds, of all things, that first stoked my interest in cities. I lived in New York City for many years after college, and like most New Yorkers, always found myself too busy to give much thought to the origins and workings of the tremendous manmade environment around me. After a time, however, I came to miss the childhood encounters with wildlife I had growing up on the rural east end of Long Island—experiences I thought I’d long since abandoned for a life in the city. But in the end, strangely, it was the city that became the setting that rekindled my interest in the natural world.

Unless you’re looking for it, wildlife can be difficult to find in New York City. The idea that there was any room for it in that awesome expanse of concrete and

steel seemed farfetched to me at the time. Given my expectations, it’s ironic that my introduction to urban wildlife came courtesy of a New York City subway map when, during one of my rides, I noticed Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge (on the edge of the map, down near the Atlantic coast of Queens), a place I now appreciate as one of the premier birding locations in North America.

Anxious to see what wildlife this promisingly named place might offer, I made my first visit on an early summer morning (by subway, no less) and wandered around the West Pond Trail. The first thing that struck me was the habitat: I’d long come to expect sandy beaches wherever New York State met the sea, but Jamaica Bay was verdant



Jeff Nadler

glossy ibis



golden-winged warbler

and marshy, almost antediluvian. As I glimpsed through the reeds into the teeming/marshy wetlands beyond, a strange, dark bird with a purplish iridescence and a long, curved bill caught my attention. Outside of the tropical birds kept at the Bronx Zoo aviary, I'd never seen anything like it. To me, this strange creature would have seemed out of place anywhere but at an equatorial waterhole teeming with wildlife. Yet here it was in Queens—in New York City—calmly feeding among the tussocks of saltmarsh grass as 767s from JFK roared overhead.

After thumbing through my Peterson field guide, I identified the bird as a glossy ibis. In spite of the exotic appearance of this odd-looking bird, the range map in the guide indicated nothing amiss in its presence here in the forsaken outskirts of Queens. I checked the map again, just to make sure. It seemed that the glossy ibis—at least for part of the year—was just as much a New Yorker as I was.

Throughout the year, I made many more visits to Jamaica Bay, eagerly adding to my budding bird “life list” as I explored the refuge and discovered the surprising turnover of species the seasons brought. There were so many birds that



New York City has some great areas for bird watching.

it was difficult at times to keep up with them all. Even more puzzling than sorting out the various species of shorebirds were the questions my visits raised about the very existence of Jamaica Bay itself. How did this extraordinary place ever survive the inexorable onslaught of the development that now surrounded it on nearly every side? What would its future be, in this decidedly urban, and still growing, landscape? And most importantly, what were birds still doing in such a place?

I continued birding around New York City, eventually making my way into Central Park, undoubtedly the most famous urban park in America. Nestled within the skyscrapers of Manhattan, it was there that I first heard the famous “dawn chorus” of songbirds and discovered how urban parks become “migrant traps” to weary birds on the move, offering a hospitable patch of greenery among the seemingly limitless stretches of glass and asphalt. I became familiar with a bewilderingly colorful procession of warblers, vireos, orioles, flycatchers, tanagers and thrushes whose arrival I've since come to expect every spring like clockwork. Even in a city as big and uninviting to wildlife as New

York, the birds are there, if you know when and where to look for them.

In time, birds became emblematic for me of the relationship between cities and the natural world. Learning about birds in a city forced me to think about their place in our urbanizing landscapes and our very serious responsibility to protect them, both outside our doorsteps and beyond. I began to understand the importance of urban green spaces and responsible land use in preserving wildlife, even within the densest human settlements. For all their picturesque charm, the fabricated fields and woodlands of Central Park taught me the importance of managed landscapes.

The entire experience of birding in New York City quickly became a lesson in both urban ecology and in planning cities to benefit both people and wildlife. If nothing else, birding in a city like New York brings one face-to-face with the implications of climate change, development, and habitat loss on an accelerated scale; perhaps, I think, far less obvious “out in the country.” But at the same time, cities are offering solutions—sometimes unintentionally—to the often uneasy relationship between our developing world and the spaces we set aside for wildlife. Cities that grow higher



wood thrush

and more densely are now recognized as the most resourceful and least environmentally destructive forms of development we can build, preventing urban sprawl and preserving valuable habitat where it still exists.

Even taking the A train to Jamaica Bay was a defining act as an urban birder: my energy-efficient use of public transportation was both affordable and environmentally-friendly, and yet it was the remarkable urban infrastructure of the subway system that allowed me access to a wildlife refuge within America's most urban National Park.

As I discovered, birds (and other wildlife) have made their homes in our manmade environments, eking out their living in unwelcoming settings with astonishing resilience. Urban birds allow city

dwellers to experience nature without the inconvenience and costs of travel, and their presence in city parks, gardens and backyards can enhance quality of life and community desirability. Simple acts like bird feeding and nest box construction can instill in people a sense of stewardship about the wildlife in their own backyards, fostering greater local involvement and personal responsibility for our communities in general.

Cities are, of course, designed by and for people. But as I discovered—almost by accident—we've been building them for birds all along as well. Ever since I saw that glossy ibis, I've continued to watch and listen to birds in the cities I've lived in and visited.

I encourage everyone interested in birding to explore, as I did, the amazing wealth of bird life found in places like Central Park and Jamaica Bay. I think they'll be surprised by the tremendous variety of species that inhabit our city landscapes, and quickly discover just how accessible and rewarding urban bird watching can be.

An avid birder, **Tristan Lowery** is an intern with DEC's Hudson River Valley Greenway in Albany.