

Yard Birding During the Pandemic

By Nigella Hillgarth

During this pandemic I have spent time studying the birds in our yard. I decided to keep a photographic diary of the different species that use the garden. By doing so I got to know individuals really well and also recorded the natural rhythm of the bird community over the seasons. I found it enormously comforting to see nature flourishing in the midst of so much uncertainty and I wanted to share some of the birds with you.

When lockdown started in March, the yellow-rumped warblers were still here with our year-round residents, including the hummingbirds, the orange-crowned warblers, black phoebes and the song sparrows. I decided to put up more bird-feeders to entice species that don't normally come into the yard to move closer.



Black Phoebe



Mourning Dove

I would get occasional glimpses of lesser goldfinches, house finches and mourning doves, and so I put up a platform bird-feeder with mixed birdseed. I knew the house finches and doves would come flocking. They quickly found the feeder.

Male House Finch →



I could sit on the couch and study the different colors of the male house finches and even some of the females that are brightly colored.



Young male Lesser Goldfinch

I also wanted to encourage the subtly colored lesser goldfinches, but I waited before I bought Nyjer seed for them. That was because I committed the gardening crime of allowing the milk thistles to flourish and go to seed in order to attract the goldfinches. It was a joy to watch them as I sat on the couch a few feet away and I could study their delicate plumage, and the dexterous way in which they plucked seeds from the flower heads and devoured them ferociously.

Yard birding really helped to take my mind off the realization of the seriousness of COVID-19, and that, even though official lockdown might end, isolation may continue in many ways for a long time to come. Birds gave me great comfort and joy during this time - especially when spring migration began. It was such an affirmation to see birds coming through as migration got underway. One morning such delight as a warbling vireo decided to spend the morning in our yard!



Later the excitement of watching orange-crowned warblers darting in and out of the flowers looking for insects and following the insistent piercing cheap of their fledglings demanding to be fed.

Also, one morning hearing again the sharp tac-tac sound of the hooded orioles announcing their return and seeing the beautiful male with bright yellow and black plumage taking a quick drink at the hummingbird feeder by the front door. Later, as the summer progressed, watching the foolish antics of the oriole juveniles as they explored and played in the yard.



The garden is quiet now with just the resident birds left but Fall migration is underway and who knows what birds may visit! This week a migrating Townsend warbler took a bath a few feet from me and a Wilson's warbler flew by. Nature continues to bring me hope and nurture in this extraordinarily difficult time.



Nigella Hillgarth is a biologist, environmental advocate and photographer concerned with the impacts of climate change on ocean and coastal ecosystems. Nigella is a founding member of Ocean Collectiv – solutions for a healthy ocean. She was the 2019 Climate Art Fellow at the Center for Climate Change Impact and Adaptation at Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Previously, as President & Chief Executive Officer of the New England Aquarium, she raised the profile of the Aquarium's global conservation and research work by founding the Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life in June 2016, as well as developing a vision for the future of the Aquarium and surrounding Boston waterfront.

Earlier Nigella Hillgarth was Executive Director of the Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego where she produced the first major exhibit on climate change on the West Coast. Nigella was born in Ireland and received her Bachelor's degree in Zoology from Oxford University in the UK as well as her Ph.D in Evolutionary Biology. She has conducted research on behavioral ecology and evolution in birds in many parts of the world including the United States, Britain, India, Thailand, the Arctic and South America.

These photos were taken in the summer or early fall of 2020.

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