

Trail Birds



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY WARREN AND LISA STROBEL

A few years ago, while section-hiking a portion of the Trail through Shenandoah National Park, we met a thru-hiker named Matt (we've long forgotten his Trail name) who told us something we'd never forget. "Everybody," he said, "has to hike their own hike." We do hike our own hike. We have walked every mile (595 Trail miles to date) wearing a pair of binoculars. We not only hike the Appalachian Trail, we "bird" it. Being avid birders has given us an opportunity to more deeply appreciate the vital habitat of the A.T. and the lands that surround it, and to reconfirm the importance of preserving and enhancing the Trail. It's well known to most everyone familiar with the Trail that it provides a critical corridor for both fauna and flora. But the Trail's importance to the avian life of North (and even South and Central) America, is hard to overstate. The Appalachian Mountains are irreplaceable north-south migratory flyways for raptors and songbirds, and serve as feeding stops and breeding grounds, as well. They are the bird equivalent of interstate highway, fast-food joint, and comfy home, all in one.



A.T. lands are intimately connected with the history of modern American birding. Top: an Osprey soars over the Trail; Above: Warren and Lisa have identified 103 species of birds—about one-eighth of all the bird species known to breed in North America.



THE SHEER DIVERSITY OF BIRDLIFE

supported by the A.T. is breathtaking. On our hikes, we've identified 103 species of birds. That's about one-eighth of all the bird species known to breed in North America—and we're not close to finished yet. The list encompasses everything from bald eagles to the tiny colorful gems known as wood warblers; from common forest birds like tanagers and vireos to water birds like cormorants and herons.

We've watched swans and ducks glide on the lake in Boiling Springs, spied American kestrels hunting on the winds over what was once a desolate mining wasteland outside Palmerton, and surprised a mother wild turkey and her six chicks in an overgrown yard outside an Appalachian Trail Conservancy-owned house just south of Pochuck Shelter on a Fourth of July morning. (Ben Franklin thought the turkey, not the eagle, should be the United States' national symbol). We were even thrilled to the sundown-sound of a whip-poor-will as we bedded down in our tent at a shelter in the Shenandoahs. The whip-poor-will was particularly special, the first we'd heard or seen in our lives. A "life bird," we birders call it.

The A.T. hosts rare or threatened species of birds from north (Bicknell's thrush) to south (Swainson's warbler) and in between (cerulean warbler). Leading American birders have long understood the importance of the Appalachian Mountains to the continent's birdlife, and Trail lands are intimately connected with the history of modern American birding. Roger Tory Peterson, the late dean of twentieth century birders, called Hawk Mountain one of the 10 best bird-watching spots in North America. Hawk Mountain, in Pennsylvania, is the most famous place on the East Coast to witness the majesty of raptor migration, but it's far from the only one on the Trail. We've stumbled into fellow birders at Afton Mountain, Virginia, and Raccoon Ridge, New Jersey, and joined them in some impromptu hawk-watching, a pleasurable pack-break if ever there was one.



BLUE-HEADED VIREO

MERLIN

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL



We've watched swans and ducks glide on the lake in Boiling Springs, spied American kestrels hunting on the winds, and surprised a mother wild turkey and her six chicks just south of Pochuck Shelter.

CHILDRENS LAKE, BOILING SPRINGS
PHOTO BY JOE GOLDSTON

EVERY BIRDER KEEPS LISTS — lists of birds seen in a lifetime, in a state, in a year (or along the Appalachian Trail) — and we're no exception. But for us, birding is much more than that. Birding is learning, really — about how to identify birds, yes, but also about habitat and migration, about seasonal changes and threats to species, and about the pulse of the earth. Being section hikers, not thru-hikers, we get frequent reminders of how fragile the corridor is that encompasses the A.T., and how narrow the parks, forest, game lands, and easements are that buffer it. We can't count the times we've finished a two- or three-day hike, descended along narrow mountain roads through charming small towns, and, within shockingly few minutes, found ourselves back in the world of interstate highways, fast food restaurants, and big box stores.

Back in the woods, there are nicer surprises. Once, in Georgia, along the Trail's first dozen or so miles north of Springer Mountain, we were stunned

Warren takes a moment on the Trail to update his bird list.



to come across a flock of dark-eyed juncos in mid-summer. These handsome grey-and-white birds, known as “snowbirds” at backyard bird feeders, arrive in most of the U.S. from their northern summer breeding grounds in the fall and are gone by Easter. What were they doing here in July? We thought we'd made an important ornithological discovery until we checked one of our many field guides — the Appalachian Mountains support a small year-round junco population. For birds, as well as a birder, the A.T. truly is special.

So, how do you bird the A.T.? Do hiking and birding interfere with each other? The answer is yes, and no. If you're trying to rack up 25-30 miles a day, serious birding is out of the question (although there might still be time to check out the eagles during a breather at a lookout point or watch indigo buntings float over a field). Certainly we haven't set any land-speed records, and we've done some painfully slow miles when the woods are bird-rich, stopping to look, listen, and pish. Pishing is one of those odd birder behaviors: making *pssshhh*-like noises or clacks will actually attract birds, who fly in to check out the source of the odd sounds — especially in spring.

But to bird the A.T., all you really have to do is be there. Listen just a little and you might hear the mid-summer “chik-bir” of a stunning scarlet tanager in the tree canopy above you, the haunting, spiraling trill of a veery just before sunset, or a barred owl belting out his “who cooks for you?” repertoire. So, hike your own hike by all means. But make a little time for the A.T.'s very special birds.

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SCARLET TANAGER

WILD TURKIES

PRARIE WARBLER

The Appalachian Mountains are the bird equivalent of interstate highway, fast-food joint, and comfy home, all in one.



DARK-EYED JUNCO
COURTESY USFWS