

The best lesson from the pandemic? All you need to be a birder is patience, curiosity, and an appreciation for nature. (Floppy hat and khaki vest optional)

BY COTTAGE LIFE STAFF AND CONTRIBUTORS



# WE'VE GONE TO THE BIRDS





# WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BIRD?

BY JULIA ZARANKIN



NORTHERN FLICKER

repeated more times than strictly necessary. Ornithology oracle Frank Chapman calls that *peent* “the first notes of his love song.” And if a nasal note weren’t enough to get a girl going, what follows is nothing short of spectacular. The pouty, stocky woodcock hurls himself high into the ether “on whistling wings,” ascending in a series of wide circles, as if he’d suddenly developed the agility of a nymph. Then he plummets to the ground with a yelp—and does the acrobatic feat all over again. These *peents* and aerial dances work like a charm in the spring; the American woodcock mates morning and night without fail for eight straight weeks. What female wouldn’t be seduced by such a show? After witnessing the stocky bird’s transformation into an aerial gymnast, even I could be convinced to mate with a woodcock.

But transformative magic aside, I relish the woodcock’s demeanour: he’s so very much his own bird.

**IF I COULD GIVE AN AWARD TO MY FAVOURITE**, best-dressed bird, it would be the **northern flicker**, in honour of the cacophonous plumage he flaunts. Who ever said that polka-dots and dark stripes and red blots and flashy yellow wing and tail feathers and a jet-black handlebar mustache don’t all belong on the same bird?

Until I started birding in earnest and met the flicker, I remember walking into clothing shops crippled with anxiety, staring at sweaters without a clue as to what suited me. I remember approaching salespeople in desperation, hoping they would tell me what to buy, what would look good on me. My mother and sister both knew how to dress, but every time I put an outfit together, it didn’t look quite right. Something was off. I tried shopping with both my mom and my sister and ended up coming home with clothes that I wouldn’t wear. The colours weren’t bright enough, and the waistlines were too high, the shoes uncomfortable, the shoulders too broad. I couldn’t even pinpoint what was wrong; it just didn’t feel like me.

The day I saw the northern flicker sporting his busy attire with perfect confidence, I decided that if he could do it, I could too. I had always tried to buy clothes that made me look like everyone else; what would happen if I just bought things that made me smile?

I also fell for the northern flicker when I learned that Roger Tory Peterson, the most famous twentieth-century birder, the one who popularized the modern, portable field guide, counted it as his favourite bird. If Peterson registered the sublime in this regular North American breeder, then I could too. The fact that loving the northern flicker put me in Peterson’s illustrious company, however tangentially, made me love him all the more. >>

**I HATE THIS QUESTION** and yet I ask it of everybody I know. My own list shifts constantly—it depends on the season, and it changes to accommodate rarities and my current nemesis bird. I’m also loyal to my first sightings, and those still top my list when contemplating favourites.

But if I could get a bird inked on my body, it would be the **American woodcock**, the largest North American shorebird, which hangs out mostly on damp ground in the woods, perfectly camouflaged with its surroundings. To me, the bird looks like an accident of nature, its eyes grotesquely close together, perched high up on its head, giving it almost 360 degrees of vision for detecting predators, and a long, ultra-sensitive bill for probing the ground for worms that it cannot see. Stocky, short-legged, incessantly pouting, this is a bird with attitude. And yet the American woodcock is also one of the more curious Don Juans of the avian world; in early spring, at dusk, the bird engages in an aerial mating dance that counts among the more peculiar things I’ve ever seen.

The aerial display of the woodcock is so odd that many birding clubs host outings just to bear witness to the bird’s eccentric pre-mating performance. It begins with a nasal *peent*,



AMERICAN WOODCOCK

## YOU CAN SEE (MORE) CLEARLY NOW

Springing for a pair of binoculars? A magnification of 8x42 is easiest to manage for beginners. It gives a wider field of view, which essentially means the binoculars make it easier to spot a bird in motion. Image quality matters: you want a pair of binoculars where the image appears sharp, clear, and with true colour rendition. Make sure your binoculars perform well even in low light, because you’ll likely be birding in shade, at dawn, and at dusk. Test the binoculars in the store; try looking at colourful objects in darker conditions. Finally, eye relief is important. You want adjustable eyecups to accommodate glasses.—J. Z.

### FOUR PICKS UNDER \$500:

\$105



Celestron Outland 8x42

\$290



Vortex Crossfire 8x42

\$410



Nikon Monarch 5 8x42

\$395



Vortex Diamondback 8x42

Prices approximate





CAPE MAY



BLACKBURNIAN



PAINTED REDSTART

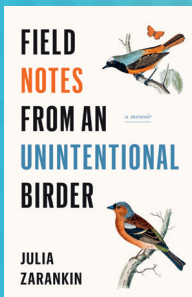
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO ANSWER the "favourite bird" question without mentioning warblers. These tiny neotropical migrants, which arrive in late April from their South or Central American wintering grounds, putter around for a month and head north to breed intensely, then perform the whole migratory ritual again, southbound, year after year, no matter the weather, are nothing short of extraordinary. Emblems of spectacular, intrepid tenacity, I couldn't imagine my life without devoting the month of May to their pursuit.

But a favourite warbler? I've now seen some visually stunning ones, including the **Cape May**, the **Blackburnian**, the **Painted redstart**, the **Prothonotary**, whose yellow has a twist of orange—he's the Meyer lemon of warblers—and the **Canada warbler**, whose necklace I'd like to copy and wear. I've had arguments with friends at the banding station about the value of subtlety; there are those who wax lyrical about the female black-throated blue, and while I'm thrilled to no longer misidentify her, the white handkerchief on a mostly olive-coloured body doesn't quite make my heart race.

If we're talking favourites, though, I'd have to turn back the clock to the first time I correctly identified a warbler on my own, and the champion there is indisputably the black-and-white warbler. Not only was it the first warbler I found myself, but it also stunned me with its elegant simplicity, and, on closer observation, its resemblance to a zebra trapped in a tiny songbird's body. Could anything top that?

**THE TRUTH IS**, I have many favourite birds. So why do I torment people with a question that I can't even answer myself? Because it opens the door to conversations about my very favourite thing: birds. And before we know it, we're trading photos of rarities and the commonest of birds, entering into friendly competition about what we've managed to see, learning about phenomenally strange avian behaviours.

My favourite bird changes depending on the family, the season, the rarity factor, whether I managed to locate the bird myself, whether we locked eyes in the field or not. But in general, unless I'm staring at gulls, or muttering obscenities under my breath while trying to distinguish a Baird's from a white-rumped sandpiper, my favourite bird is the one right in front of me.



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PROTHONOTARY



CANADA WARBLER

## TAKE YOUR BEST SHOTS



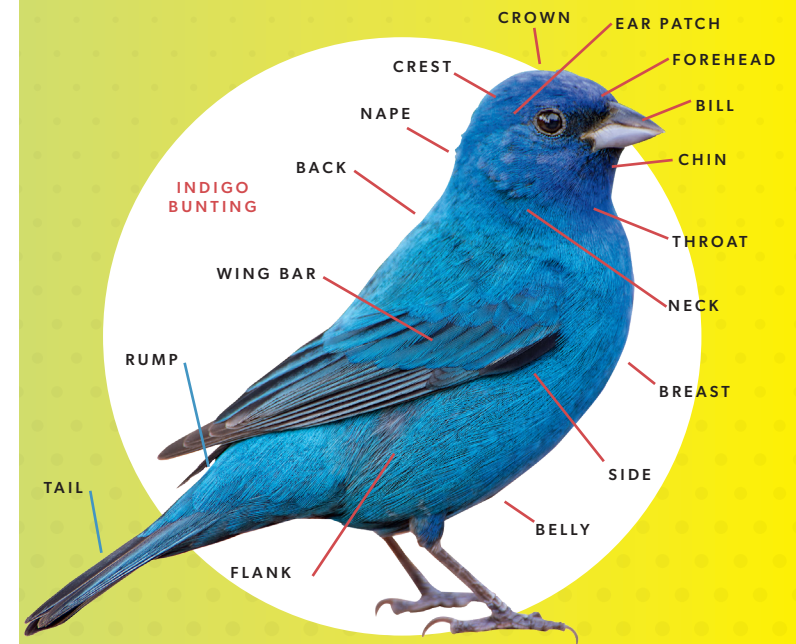
If you're new to birding, Tony Beck may consider you late to the party. "People are finally noticing the magic of birds," says the seasoned birder and wildlife photographer, who bought his first film camera in 1983. He has tips for budding bird photographers.

- 1 Ideally, "every birdwatcher would have a camera with a telephoto lens," says Beck. A telephoto lens allows you to capture close-ups without disturbing the bird. Plus, high quality photos help you keep accurate records of your sightings. Expect to pay at least a few hundred dollars for a suitable lens.
- 2 Put the bird's well-being first. If a bird is using energy to escape you—energy better used to find food or flee true predators—stop and don't go any closer. "If the bird relaxes, you can try to approach." But if the bird flies away, leave it alone. Otherwise, you are harassing or even endangering the bird. Avoid eye contact—at least initially—and approaching birds head-on, Beck adds. To many birds, this is how a predator behaves.
- 3 For novices, lugging around heavy camera equipment without scaring birds away may seem nearly impossible. The solution? Beck says a bridge camera—they fill the gap between point-and-shoot and SLR cameras—is "an economical and convenient way to get bird photos." These cameras have wide angle and telephoto capabilities to meet birding needs; just don't go expecting professional quality photos. (Beck prefers his 500-millimetre Nikon D850 camera—\$3,899.)

- 5 Beck doesn't recommend smartphones for wildlife photography. If you want to use your smartphone, try placing your phone camera against the eyepiece of a pair of binoculars or a telescope. But capturing good photos this way takes a lot of practice, Beck notes.
- 6 When shooting, "I do like to get that 'standard textbook' pose," says Beck. That is, a profile shot where you can see all the characteristics of the bird. But eventually, he suggests, try capturing behaviour: preening, stretching wings, or interacting with other birds. Those shots are often the most remarkable. Of course, don't forget to put the camera down and "absorb the essence" of the beautiful bird before you. "I would rather get a good photo of a common bird than a fleeting glimpse of a rarity." —ADENIEKE LEWIS-GIBBS

## FLYING COLOURS

White ear patch? Grey-blue nape? And wait, are those the flanks or the sides? Or the belly? A key step to correctly identifying a bird is correctly identifying its various bird parts.



## TALK IS CHEEP

Some bird calls are rambling jumbles of chirps, squeals, squawks, screeches, and grunts. But sometimes birds sound like they're actually trying to tell us something.

 "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" BARRED OWL	 "Sweet sweet I am so sweet" YELLOW WARBLER	 "Tea-kett-le, tea-kett-le, tea-kett-le" CAROLINA WREN
 "Cheerily, cheer up, cheer up, cheerily, cheer up" AMERICAN ROBIN	 "Pleased, pleased, pleased to meet-cha" CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER	 "Witchety, witchety, witchety, witch" COMMON YELLOWTHROAT
 "Po-ta-to chip" AMERICAN GOLDFINCH	 "CHEESE-burger" MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE	 "Quick, three beers!" OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER



# TOP TEN FOR YOUR BIRDING BUCKET LIST\*



1

## BROWN CREEPER

Mottled brown, with white underparts; white stripe above the eye.

**Known for** Creeping along tree trunks, using its long, curved beak to probe for insects and their eggs. Unlike other trunk-creeping birds such as nuthatches, brown creepers only scale trunks facing up.



2

## CANADA JAY

(a.k.a. grey jay or whisky-jack)  
Dark grey backs, wings, and tail; lighter underparts. Off-white face, crown, and throat; black on back of head.

**Known for** Nesting early. Canada jays will lay and incubate eggs as early as February.



3

## EVENING GROSBEAK

**Male** Yellow breast, undersides, and eyebrow; brown head that blends to yellow; black and white wing. **Female** Mostly grey, with brownish head; black wings.

**Known for** Its thick, powerful beak. The cone-shaped bill is strong enough—25 lbs of pressure—to crack a cherry pit.



4

## BROAD-WINGED HAWK

Brown back, reddish breast; black and white bands on tail; wings white on underside.

**Known for** The huge, swirling flocks, or “kettles” of hawks during migration. From below, look for their stocky, pointed wings and large heads.

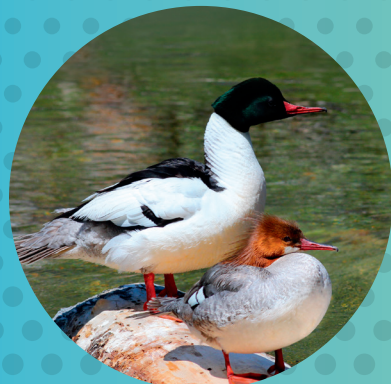


5

## NORTHERN FLICKER

Tan back and wings with dark bands; tan face and neck with a grey cap and a red patch on back of neck. Black bib, with white belly and sides. **Male** Moustache, either black or red (p.60).

**Known for** Its ground-foraging behaviour. A flicker can scarf 5,000 ants in one meal. Like other woodpeckers, they also “drum” on hard surfaces.



6

## COMMON MERGANSER

**Male** Green-black head; black back, white breast, neck, and sides. **Female** Rust-coloured head and crest; grey back; white breast and throat.

**Known for** Their large, adopted broods—up to 50 or even 75 ducklings, in rare cases. Experts believe that female mergansers will take care of each others’ abandoned babies.



7

## NORTHERN SHRIKE

Grey back and head; black wing and tail; white underparts; black mask and hooked beak.

**Known for** Their vicious carnivorousness. Shrikes often impale prey—mice, other birds—on sharp sticks or wire fences. They’re nicknamed the “Butcher Bird.”



8

## NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL

Round-headed with no ear tufts; mottled brown and white all over; white “V” between the eyes.

**Known for** Being one of North America’s tiniest owls. These gnome-like birds are no bigger than a robin, and weigh only 80 grams—that’s less than one fifth of a pound.



9

## BELTED KINGFISHER

Grey-blue crest, breast, and back; white collar and undersides; short tail. **Female** Chestnut-coloured band on stomach.

**Known for** Their cartoonishly huge, heavy, dagger-like bills. A mating pair uses their beaks, to, in three weeks, dig their nest into a sandbank.



10

## BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER

**Male** Orange upper breast and throat; orange-and-black striped head; black and white sides and back. **Female** Yellow instead of orange, with brownish-grey streaked back (p.62).

**Known for** That flashy plumage. Males are nicknamed “fire throats” for obvious reasons.