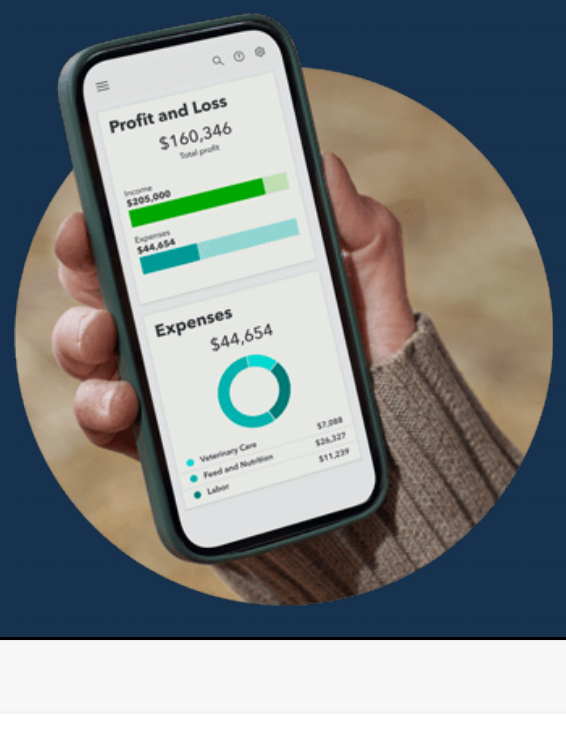



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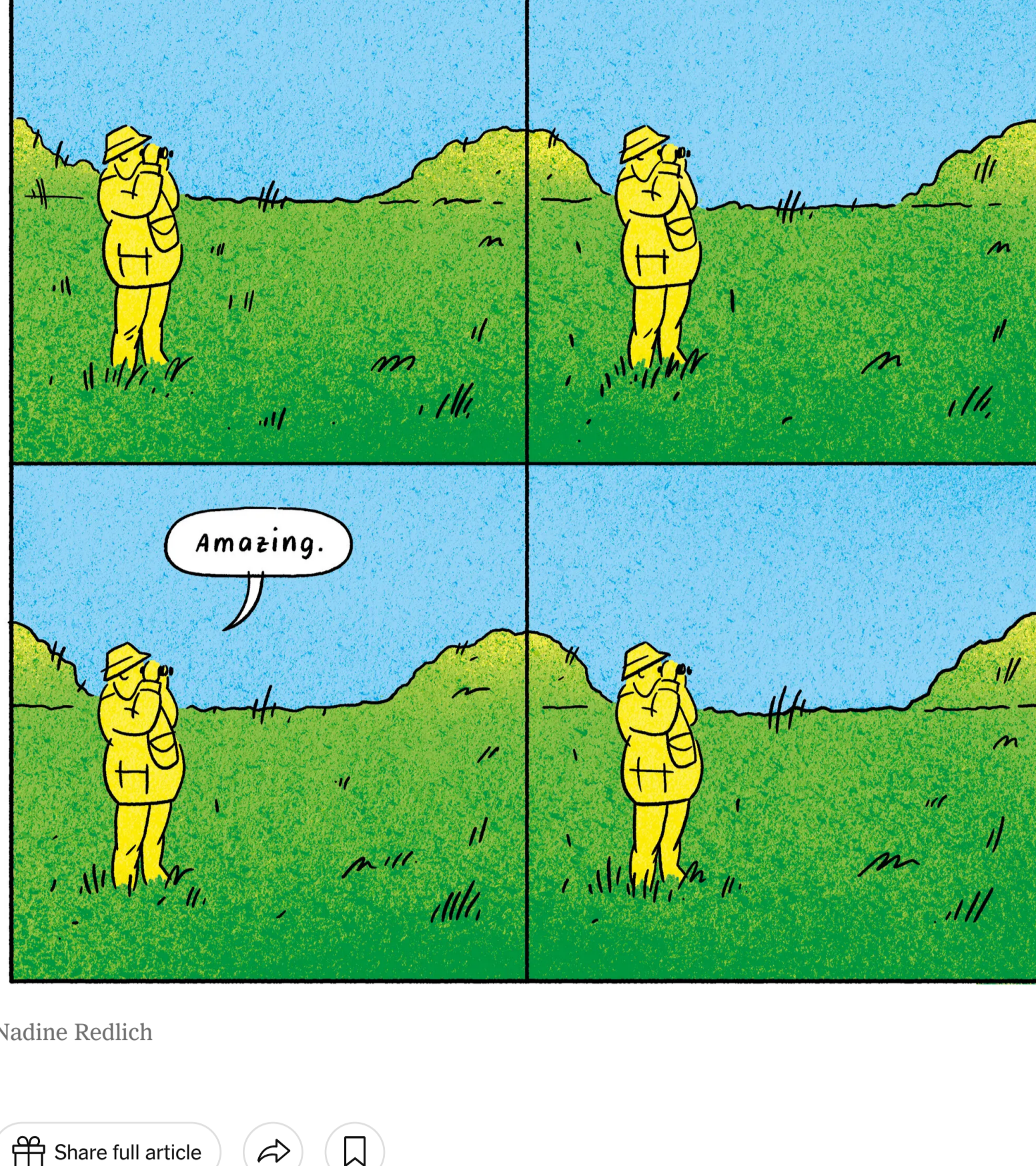


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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

When I Became a Birder, Almost Everything Else Fell Into Place

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By Ed Yong
Mr. Yong is a science writer whose most recent book, “An Immense World,” investigates animal perception.

Last September, I drove to a protected wetland near my home in Oakland, Calif., walked to the end of a pier and started looking at birds. Throughout the summer, I had been breaking in my first pair of binoculars, a Sibley field guide and the Merlin song-identification app, but always while hiking or walking the dog. On that pier, for the first time, I had gone somewhere solely to watch birds.

In some birding circles, people say that anyone who looks at birds is a birder — a kind, inclusive sentiment that also overlooks the forces that create and shape subcultures. Anyone can dance, but not everyone would identify as a *dancer* because the latter suggests if not skill then at least effort and intent. Similarly, I’ve cared about birds and other animals for my entire life, and I’ve written about them throughout my two decades as a science writer, but I mark the moment when I specifically chose to devote time and energy to them as the moment I became a birder.

Since then, my Birder Derangement Syndrome has progressed at an alarming pace. Seven months ago, I was still seeing very common birds for the first time. Since then, I’ve seen 452 species, including 337 in the United States, and 307 this year alone. I can reliably identify a few dozen species by ear. I can tell apart greater and lesser yellowlegs, house and purple finches, Cooper’s and sharp-shinned hawks. (Don’t talk to me about gulls; I’m working on the gulls.) I keep abreast of eBird’s rare bird alerts and have spent many days — some glorious, others frustrating — looking for said rare birds. I know what it means to dip, to twitch, [to pish](#). I’ve gone owling.

I didn’t start from scratch. A career spent writing about nature gave me enough avian biology and taxonomy to roughly know the habitats and silhouettes of the major groups. Journalism taught me how to familiarize myself with unfamiliar territory very quickly. I [crowdsourced tips on the social media platform Bluesky](#). I went out with experienced birders to learn how they move through a landscape and what cues they attend to.

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I studied up on birds that are famously difficult to identify so that when I first saw them in the field, I had an inkling of what they were without having to check a field guide. I used the many tools now available to novices: eBird shows where other birders go and reveals how different species navigate space and time; Merlin is best known as an identification app but is secretly an incredible encyclopedia; Birdingquiz.com lets you practice identifying species based on fleeting glances at bad angles.

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This all sounds rather extra, and birding is often defined by its excesses. At its worst, it becomes an empty process of collection that turns living things into abstract numbers on meaningless lists. But even that style of birding is harder without knowledge. To find the birds, you have to know them. And in the process of knowing them, much else falls into place.

Birding has tripled the time I spend outdoors. It has pushed me to explore Oakland in ways I never would have: Amazing hot spots lurk within industrial areas, sewage treatment plants and random residential parks. It has proved more meditative than meditation. While birding, I seem impervious to heat, cold, hunger and thirst. My senses focus resolutely on the present, and the usual hubbub in my head becomes quiet. When I spot a species for the first time — a lifer — I course with adrenaline, while being utterly serene.

I also feel a much deeper connection to the natural world, which I have long written about but always remained slightly distant from. I knew that the [loggerhead shrike](#) — a small but ferocious songbird — impales the bodies of its prey on spikes. I’ve now seen one doing that with my own eyes. I know where to find the shrikes and what they sound like. Countless fragments of unrooted trivia that rattled around my brain are now grounded in place, time and personal experience.

When I step out my door in the morning, I take an aural census of the neighborhood, tuning in to the chatter of creatures that were always there and that I might previously have overlooked. The passing of the seasons feels more granular, marked by the arrival and disappearance of particular species instead of much slower changes in day length, temperature and greenery. I find myself noticing small shifts in the weather and small differences in habitat. I think about the tides.

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So much more of the natural world feels close and accessible now. When I started birding, I remember thinking that I’d never see most of the species in my field guide. Sure, backyard birds like robins and Western bluebirds would be easy, but not black skimmers, or peregrine falcons or loggerhead shrikes. I had internalized the idea of nature as distant and remote — the province of nature documentaries and far-flung vacations. But in the last six months, I’ve seen soaring golden eagles, heard duetting great horned owls, watched dancing [sandhill cranes](#) and marveled at diving Pacific loons, all within an hour of my house. “*I’ll never see that*” has turned into “*Where can I find that?*”

Of course, having the time to bird is an immense privilege. As a freelancer, I have total control over my hours and my ability to get out in the field. “Are you a retiree?” a fellow birder recently asked me. “You’re birding like a retiree.” I laughed, but the comment spoke to the idea that things like birding are what you do when you’re not working, not being productive.

I reject that. These recent years have taught me that I’m less when I’m not actively looking after myself, that I have value to my world and my community beyond ceaseless production, and that pursuits like birding that foster joy, wonder and connection to place are not sidebars to a fulfilled life but their essence.

It’s easy to think of birding as an escape from reality. Instead, I see it as immersion in the true reality. I don’t need to witness the main characters are on social media and what everyone is saying about them, when I can instead spend an hour trying to find a rare sparrow. It’s very clear to me which of those two activities is the more ridiculous. It’s not the one with the sparrow.

More of those sparrows are imminent. I’m about to witness my first spring migration as warblers and other delights pass through the Bay Area. Birds I’ve seen only in drab grays are about to don their spectacular breeding plumages. Familiar species are about to burst out in new tunes that I’ll have to learn. I have my first [lazuli bunting](#) to see, my first [blue grosbeak](#) to find, my first [least terns](#) to photograph. I can’t wait.

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