The New York Times

How to Start Birding

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A green honeycreeper spotted on a farm in Colombia exhibits a rare biological phenomenon known as bilateral

gynandromorphism.

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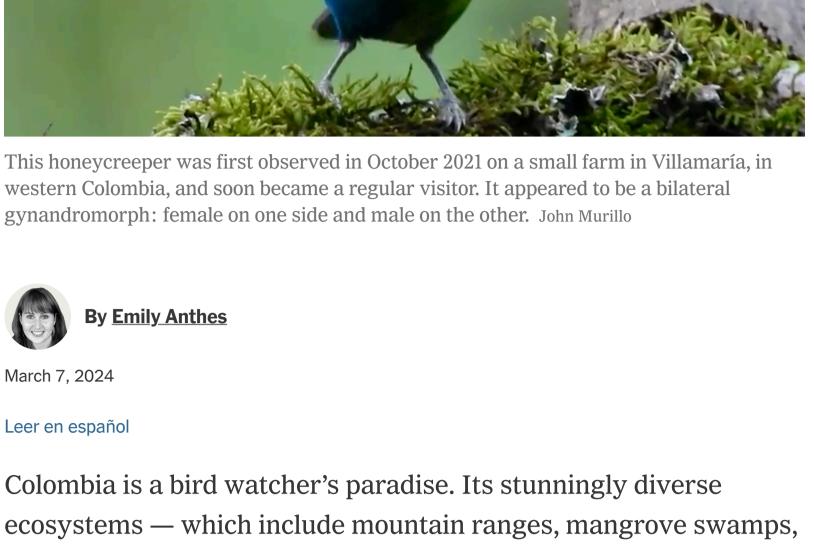
Female, and Completely Stunning

This Bird Is Half Male, Half



unusual creatures.

side and male on the other.



Caribbean beaches and Amazonian rainforests — are home to

more avian species than any other country on Earth.

So when Hamish Spencer, an evolutionary biologist at the

University of Otago in New Zealand, booked a bird-watching

vacation in Colombia, he was hoping to spot some interesting and

He got more than he bargained for. During one outing, in early

green honeycreeper, a small songbird that is common in forests ranging from southern Mexico to Brazil. But this particular green honeycreeper had highly unusual plumage. The left side of its body was covered in shimmering spring-green feathers, the classic coloring for females. Its right

side, however, was iridescent blue, the telltale marker of a male.

The bird appeared to be a bilateral gynandromorph: female on one

January 2023, the proprietor of a local farm drew his attention to a

"It was just incredible," Dr. Spencer said. "We were lucky to see it."

Gynandromorphism has been documented in a variety of birds, as

relatively rare and poorly understood phenomenon. The bird Dr.

well as insects, crustaceans and other organisms. But it's a

gynandromorphism in a green honeycreeper — and the first

documented in the wild. (The only previous example was reported more than a century ago and was based on a museum specimen,

Start from the basics. Begin with something foundational: Learn to identify a

the Merlin Bird ID app can help. If you spot a bird, pay attention to things like

the size, color, behavior, location and date. Binoculars and field guides might

few of the birds most commonly seen near where you live. Digital tools like

Dr. Spencer said. That bird displayed the opposite pattern, with

female plumage on the right and male plumage on the left.)

**How to Become a Birder** 

help, but are not necessary to get started.

chromosome and one with a Z chromosome.

and half," Dr. Spencer said.

Spencer saw in Colombia is only the second known case of bilateral

It is not entirely clear how the condition comes about, but one leading theory is that it results from an error during the production of egg cells in female birds. Female birds have two different sex chromosomes, designated W and Z, while males have two Z chromosomes. An error during egg cell production could result in two fused or incompletely separated cells, one with a W

If those fused cells are fertilized by two different sperm, each of

WZ chromosomes of a female in some cells and the ZZ

which carries a Z chromosome, the result might be a bird with the

chromosomes of a male in others. "And so you get a bird that's half

John Murillo, an amateur ornithologist who owns a small farm and

nature reserve in Colombia, first spotted the gynandromorphic

honeycreeper in October 2021. It became a regular visitor to the farm's bird feeding station, which was stocked with fresh fruit and sugar water. When Dr. Spencer and his bird-watching tour arrived at the farm more than a year later, Mr. Murillo pointed out the unusual bird and shared some photos he had snapped of it. "They're the best photos of a wild gynandromorphic bird that I've

• Birds of Prey: A new study found that 88% of 42 African raptor species

ecological roles, and losing them could have major consequences on

• An Innovation in Food Preparation: Goffin's cockatoos, long known as

adept tool users, are the first parrots found to alter their food by dipping it

have suffered declines over the past 20 to 40 years. Raptors play crucial

## • A Feathered Icon Breeds Again: New Zealand's national bird, the kiwi, has hatched eggs in the wild in the Wellington area for the first time in living memory, thanks to a multiyear conservation effort.

mates and reproduce.

a bit of a loner," Dr. Spencer said.

in water.

**More on Birds** 

African ecosystems.

<u>learned</u>. The bird's internal characteristics remain a mystery. In some, but not all, previously studied cases, gynandromorphic birds have had

internal sex organs that matched their external plumage, with an

suggest that some gynandromorphic birds can successfully court

ovary on one side and a testis on the other. Past observations

• Data Collection: Volunteers recorded important data on a strip of land in

Alabama that serves as a pit stop for avian migrators. Here is what they

But this particular green honeycreeper was never observed engaging in any courtship or mating behavior. It tended to avoid other green honeycreepers and often hung back from the feeding station until other birds had departed. "The bird was inclined to be

Still, it seemed to stick around, visiting the feeding station

obvious disadvantage, except possibly in finding a mate."

repeatedly over a period of nearly two years. "This bird was

**Emily Anthes** is a science reporter, writing primarily about animal health and science. She also covered the coronavirus pandemic. More about Emily Anthes Share full article

around for a long time," Dr. Spencer said. "It wasn't at any kind of

ever seen," Dr. Spencer said. "I thought, The world needs to see these." The photos were included in a paper that Dr. Spencer and several other scientists wrote about the unusual honeycreeper, which was published in The Journal of Field Ornithology in December. (Mr. Murillo was one of the authors.)

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