

Field Notes from an Unintentional Birder

Julia Zarankin

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Julia Zarankin's memoir is a moving, and often hilarious, account of how she—a type A, perfectionistic, and nature-avoidant novice—became a bona fide “bird nerd,” transforming her life in the process.

Zarankin's story begins from a dark place. Her marriage had fallen apart; she'd left a tenure-track position teaching Russian literature at a Missouri university; and, as a childless woman reaching her forties, thoughts of her own mortality were taking up altogether too much space on her radar. Moving back to Toronto, she was desperate to find something that would bring her a sense of peace. A few internet searches led her to birds.

At first, “birding”—not to be confused with “bird-watching”—seemed altogether too static a hobby for Zarankin's goal-oriented, approval-seeking nature. She writes that there was “something suspect” about people, mostly older and dressed in funny clothes, standing around for hours with binoculars glued to their eyes. Her initial birding experiences were less than stellar: a tower on the other side of the lake was all that she could identify. But finally, the sight of a red-winged blackbird astounded her, bringing her “as close as I'd ever stand to dinosaurs.”

Zarankin thought about that bird for a whole year before plunging into birding, which turned out to be both exhilarating and humbling. Her initial ineptness made her confront her past, her failings, and her poor self-image. Comradeship with other birders brought permission, and freedom, to fail. She learned she didn't need to be the best or the fastest; got “warbler neck” and needed emergency massage therapy; and even felt drawn to acquire weird birder clothing.

The book reveals that it was the wonder of the birds themselves that helped Zarankin heal, opening her eyes and her heart to a whole new way of being in the world.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 2020)

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