

The Backyard Bird Chronicles

Written and illustrated by Amy Tan



Foreword by David Allen Sibley

ALSO BY AMY TAN

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FRONTISPIECE Dark-eyed Junco (fledgling)

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Start?

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And, most of all, to my dear editor, Daniel Halpern. This book was entirely your idea, and I am grateful beyond words for reasons only you understand.

Foreword

by David Allen Sibley

hen I was seven years old, on a bright and sunny spring day in southern California, a dozen or so male Yellow-headed Blackbirds were lined up along a wire, bold yellow and deep black against a bright blue sky. I tell people this is my earliest bird memory, but more precisely I should say it's my earliest "birding" memory, because I was already fascinated by birds. The spectacle of those Yellow-headed Blackbirds prompted my older brother to start keeping a "life list" (a tally of all the species of birds he saw), and weeks later that prompted me to start keeping a life list, too, and that transformed my interest in birds into a quest with a sense of purpose and even urgency. I never slowed down.



Anna's Hummingbird (female)

Like most kids, I enjoyed drawing and I laid down enough "pencil miles" (a fun phrase I just learned in this book) to develop some skills at a young age. So by the time my own bird obsession started to take hold, drawing was a natural part of that. I consider drawing mostly a brain exercise. The hand that controls the pencil to make lines on paper is a small part of the whole process. You can learn how to draw, and then drawing

anything becomes easier, but drawing is really a different way of seeing, converting something from three dimensions in the real world to lines on a two-dimensional sheet of paper.

Drawing something, like birds, actually depends more on your knowledge of the subject than on your drawing ability. And it is a deep and intangible sort of knowledge. Imagine your very wise birding mentor saying, "Yes, it is black with a yellow head...but do you really *know* what that bird looks like?" Drawing requires you to absorb details and then to combine them into a simplified and unified whole. Watching birds for countless hours is the way to get to know them, and drawing is the test to demonstrate that knowledge. The drawing is, in a way, like discovering the birds anew, as they appear on your paper. It usually means testing lines and shapes, erasing, adding a curve, sharpening or softening an edge, working to find the details that re-create the essence of the bird in a drawing. And when that happens it feels like a small kernel of truth has been revealed.

I was lucky to be a bird-obsessed kid with an ornithologist for a father (which might not be purely a coincidence, of course). He was able to provide guidance, resources, and opportunities that are not available to most seven-year-olds, and I absorbed it all in the spongelike way that kids do. My peers in birding were mainly adults, and by the time I was ten or eleven those adults were starting to ask *me* questions about birds—which is hugely empowering for a kid.

Birds made sense to me, a lot more sense than the tangled and ephemeral web of middle school alliances. So I just watched more birds. Even at that age, it was clear to me that everything about birds follows patterns. Every new detail that I learned could be tucked into some part of my growing network of knowledge, where it connected with other facts and created new patterns to build on. The patterns in birds are sort of blurry and sloppy, though, so birds manage to be predictable and surprising at the same time. Great Horned Owls have their habitual routines and favorite perches, so you can predict the best place and time to see one, but still, you will see a Great Horned Owl only on a small percentage of your visits. You can get to know the habits of Bewick's Wrens over many years, and then see one doing something completely different, like bathing in water. Hermit Warblers follow a broad pattern of migrating through the Coast Ranges of California at about the same time every spring and fall, but to actually see one in your own backyard during those periods is rare and unpredictable, and feels like a gift.

Like eclipses and comets, these rare bird events might come around only at very long intervals. Unlike astronomical events, however, the behavior of birds cannot be described by an equation. They appear where they choose to appear and do whatever makes sense to them at the time.

BIRDWATCHING IS much more popular now than when I was a kid, and birding's popularity surged even more during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Many things have contributed to this rise. I think one of the biggest reasons for the decades-long increase in interest is a fundamental need to feel connected to the natural world.

In the last few generations our daily lives have become more isolated from natural rhythms. Climate-controlled buildings and electric lights allow us to keep the same schedule regardless of weather, seasons, or the time of sunrise and sunset. Refrigeration and other technology make almost any kind of food available at any time.

Only a few generations ago all of our ancestors were more connected to nature. They lived in houses, on farms, or in towns, not in wilderness, but life still moved to natural rhythms. Food was local and seasonal, and activities were planned around the daily cycle of the sun and the annual cycle of seasons. It was useful for them to know the birds by sight and by sound. The arrivals and departures of different species of birds were like a perpetual calendar, marking important dates in the changing seasons. Some birds were food, some were competitors (eating crops), some were helpers (eating pests that could destroy crops). In a way, everyone was a birdwatcher, as humans had been for tens of thousands of years. The ability to recognize and remember patterns—one event or fact being associated with another—is a basic survival adaptation. Our brains have evolved to be very good at it, but it is a fundamental ability common to all animals. It's what allows a pet goldfish to anticipate when food is about to be dropped into its bowl. It allows birds to recognize that some people are dangerous, but they get fresh food when Amy Tan walks onto the deck. It allowed humans a thousand years ago to associate certain bird songs with the best time to plant crops. It allows birders today to identify birds, and to anticipate where and when each species can be found.

There are patterns everywhere, of course—for example, in regional styles of cooking or in the kinds of ads we see online—but I believe that we have a special affinity for the patterns of nature. The birds themselves provide an endless fascination of patterns—colors, shapes, sounds, movements, migration, nesting cycles, et cetera. Even more important, learning about birds opens a door to the entire natural world.

In the same way that having a friend in a distant city heightens our awareness of things that happen there, getting to know birds adds meaning and context to everything that is affecting their lives. We notice rain, wind, insects, frogs. We become attuned to plant communities—the countless variations of "woods" and "fields" and "mudflats," each preferred by different species of birds. We think about dinosaurs (the ancestors of birds), ice ages, ocean currents, continental drift, and evolution. We think about geography; even in a California backyard like Amy Tan's, it is possible to see birds that spend part of their year as far away as Alaska and Argentina.

Birdwatching is ostensibly about finding and identifying different species, and there is great satisfaction in learning the birds and how they fit together with one another and with their environment. But I think there is more. I think the most basic reason we enjoy birdwatching (and the same reason we enjoy other outdoor hobbies like gardening and fishing) is that it directs our attention outside, where we see the sunrise, feel cool mist or hot sun, watch an approaching storm, get bitten by mosquitoes, taste wild blackberries, and so on. It fulfills a deep and instinctive urge to plug into the rhythms of what is happening around us. It makes us part of something larger and gives us a sense of our place on earth.

ON THE SURFACE, this book is a nature journal; a collection of delightfully quirky, thoughtful, and personal observations of birds in sketches and words. Writing, like drawing, works best when it simplifies the complex, using just the essential words and phrases to show us the outline of a scene and convey an idea or a feeling, and Amy Tan, of course, is a master of that art. The drawings and essays in this book do a lot more than just describe the birds. They carry a sense of discovery through observation and drawing, suggest the layers of patterns in the natural world, and emphasize a deep personal connection between the watcher and the watched.

The birds that inhabit Amy Tan's backyard seem a lot like the characters in her novels. I can imagine this book being the notes for a new story with the cast of characters including the nonconformist Hermit Thrush, the comical towhee, the tiny but fearless hummingbird. Their lives intersect, diverge, collide. Some stay on the same few acres for their whole lives, raising families and enduring through changing seasons, floods, droughts, and predators. Others travel halfway across the globe to get there, trading the lean season for a daunting migration, with stories of loss and triumph, and a fierce and elegant determination to survive. It is a sweeping epic that spans generations and continents, and birds bring it to your backyard.

Identifying birds is just the beginning of birdwatching. Your wise mentor would say, "Yes, that is the name, but you must *know* the bird." Once you learn the names of the characters and start to appreciate their individual abilities and foibles, you realize that an infinitely expanding drama is unfolding in front of you. This book is really about getting to know the birds, learning their stories, and gaining a new appreciation of the world through that connection. As Amy writes in one entry: "Thanks to the birds, I have never felt cooped up staying at home. So much remains new, so much can be discovered...when watching birds, I feel free."