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Backyard birding provides diversion during home confinement

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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A Northern Parula perches in a Laurel oak.

COURTESY/CHELSEA WISNER

Every spring billions of birds migrate from wintering grounds in the south to their breeding grounds in the north. These birds join the hemispheres, and at a time when many people are feeling isolated, can provide both a feeling of connectedness and a rewarding hobby. “Serious birders frequently travel to find specific birds and grow their life list,” notes Meredith Heather, graduate intern in Archbold’s Avian Ecology program, “but during migration the birds come to us and you don’t have to travel to enjoy them.”

Other birds spend all or most of the year in Florida, and they also can provide a fun diversion. “I’ve always enjoyed sharing my backyard with wildlife, but working from home and following the stay-at-home guidelines have given me the opportunity to learn more about their daily activities. I see a Great Blue Heron almost every day, but only very early in the morning, it is almost always gone by 7 am. The Northern Parula, on the other hand, sings from just about the same perch all day every day,” says Dr. Angela Tringali, post-doctoral researcher in the Avian Ecology Program.

Greg Thompson, a research assistant in the Avian Ecology Program has also enjoyed the birds in Dr. Tringali’s yard, albeit remotely. “Angela and I were having a video chat about a project, and I could hear Purple Martins singing in the background. I called out ‘Purple Martin,’ and she jumped up and out of frame to go look.” Neither got to see one of the beautiful indigo birds, but it made an otherwise ordinary meeting memorable.

Bird watching has long been a popular outdoor hobby. As people across the globe are staying home in response to the pandemic, it is becoming even more popular. Bird watching reduces stress and can be enjoyed alone and at home. “You don’t need a big yard to watch birds,” notes Thompson. “In my neighborhood I have watched the Northern Cardinals build a nest and Northern Mockingbirds and Brown Thrashers feed their fledglings.”

There are lots of resources available to people interested in birds. “Right now I am using three free apps,” says Tringali. “To help me identify birds I see, I use Merlin, which asks about the bird’s size, color, and activity to produce a list of likely species based on location. To identify birds I hear I use BirdNET. It lets me record sound on my phone, select and play back the song in question, and then tells me which bird it is. Between video conferencing with Greg and quizzing myself with BirdNET, I am getting better at recognizing calls. Finally, I record all of the birds I identify using eBird, which submits that information to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, where it can be shared with scientists and bird lovers across the globe.”

“The irony of being forced indoors is that it is giving everyone more appreciation for what is outdoors,” remarks Director of the Avian Ecology Program Dr. Reed Bowman. “The birds are doing what they’ve always done, but now more people are noticing. If you don’t already look for birds in your yard, now is a great time to start. Birds are active during the day, can be seen from just about anywhere, and provide a window to a wider world.”

If you pay close attention, you might be surprised to find just how much is going on in your own backyard.

A Moody

