

BIRD WATCHER'S Digest



The Backyard

One Feather at a Time

Sometimes one bird is all it takes to make a birder

My love for birds began in Florida, where extraordinary birds hang out on the sides of everyday roads, and flocks of ibis, with their scythelike bills, pluck at front lawns in upper-class neighborhoods. Great blue herons seem nearly as common there as sparrows, but they are not common looking; they are wholly majestic. They inspire awe with their height and fiercely pointed bills. They demonstrate unending patience and grace as they stand over streams waiting, waiting for a meal. The heron's inky stripe of an eyebrow gives it the look of a distinguished editor—someone who notices details for a living.

Once I saw a great blue heron preening its manelike breeding plumage in the wind. The feathers blew in long, wispy waves. It was like seeing my childhood ballet teacher take down her tight bun to unleash a waterfall of hair, or like seeing a tough-looking motorcycle rider

remove his helmet to reveal a wind-blown ponytail. I'll never forget it. It was something private and passionate. It was the heron's love letter to its mate. But it was I who fell in love.

When we moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, my love for birds continued into my backyard. At first I disliked how shady it was there. A canopy of branches and fat leaves blocked most of the sunshine from my bedroom. But soon I realized these branches are home to many winged species: dark-eyed juncos, lesser goldfinches, house finches, chestnut-backed chickadees, Hutton's vireos, California towhees, robins, golden-crowned sparrows, Anna's hummingbirds, and an occasional scrub-jay and varied thrush. I didn't know what any of these birds were until I started searching for them in my bird book.

Looking for each bird was a challenge—like a treasure hunt. The clues were in the colors of the feathers, the body shape, the call, the way it

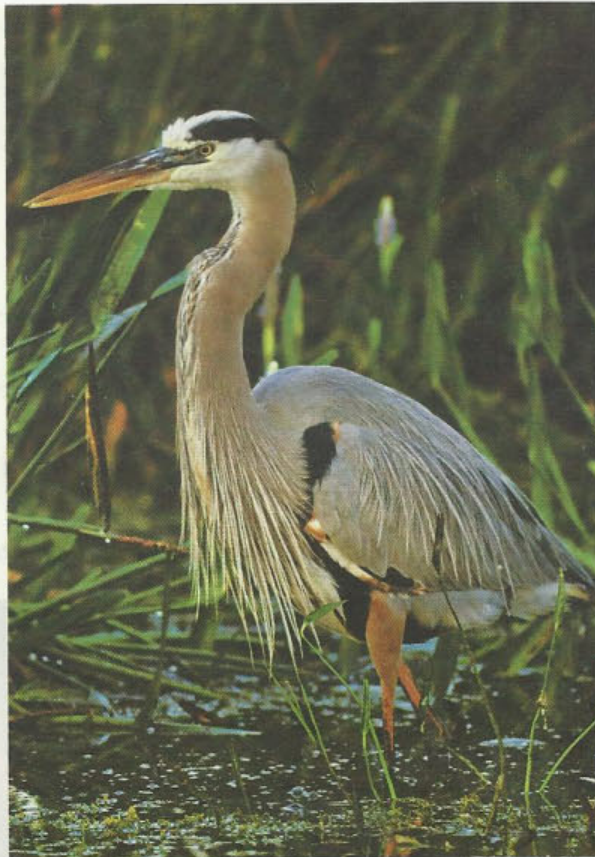
CLIFF BEITTEL

JENNICA PETERSON

hopped or flew, its food, its geographical region. I'd hunt through the pictures, looking for likely suspects, and then go online for backup information. Suddenly I was taking the project of finding each bird seriously. But it was a kind of seriousness that gave me joy. Identifying each bird is a focused study of nature that I haven't had since perhaps high school biology class. It's a contemplation of the everyday details of this world that are so easily glossed over in our busy lives.

The joy when I knew I'd identified a bird correctly surprised me. How often do I really get to find absolutely correct answers these days? As I've grown older, the world is less and less black and white to me. And my job as a writer is to explore gray areas and try to make sense of them in my own subjective way. But when I identify a bird, it is an absolute matching of one answer to one question. It is quite black and white, or, in the case of a varied thrush, orange and gray, or for a lesser goldfinch, bright yellow, olive-gray, and black.

On a recent weekend my husband and I went bird watching in the Sacramento Valley—hard-core birding. We worked from dawn to dusk to identify as many species as we could.



Male great blue heron in breeding plumage.

It was exhausting in the way of a good workout. When I returned I found myself telling my neighbor about the Pacific Flyway and the snow geese that fly thousands of miles from Siberia to winter in the heart of California. As I was telling her these things, passionately, without hesitation, I realized I have become a birder. A 100 percent certified birder. But I'm not ashamed of it—I'm thrilled, because I have found a way to study and fall in love with the world—one feather at a time. ♣

Jennica Peterson is a writer who lives in San Francisco, California.