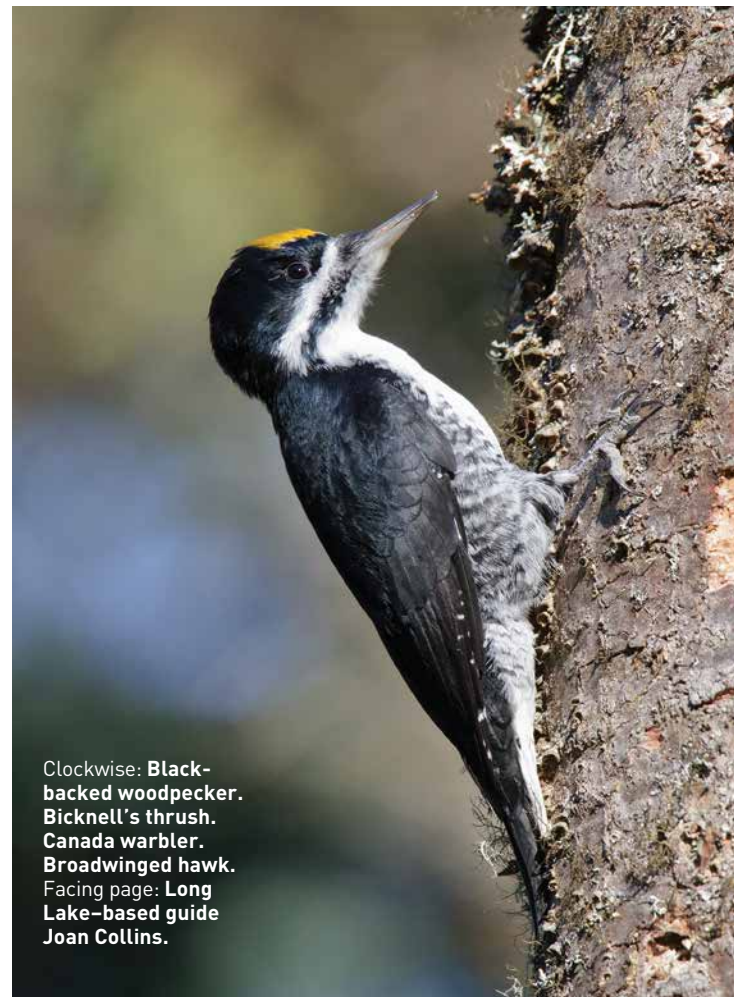


bird land

FROM WARBLER TO OWL, RAPTOR TO WATERFOWL, THE ADIRONDACKS IS AN AVIAN HOT SPOT. OUR INTREPID REPORTER GOES ON THE TRAIL WITH THREE LOCAL EXPERTS

BY CHRISTINE JEROME
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA EDGLEY AND JEFF NADLER



Clockwise: **Black-backed woodpecker.**
Bicknell's thrush.
Canada warbler.
Broadwinged hawk.
Facing page: Long
Lake-based guide
Joan Collins.



BIRD PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF NADLER (4). COLLINS PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIKA EDGLEY



AS A DEDICATED BACKYARD BIRDER *D’UN CERTAIN ÂGE*, I’VE LONG WANTED TO WRITE AN ARTICLE ENTITLED “BIRDING AFTER 60: ARE THOSE WARBLERS OR FLOATERS?”

It’s easy enough to name the regulars at my feeders, but it’s harder in the wider, wilder world, where avian suspects won’t perch long enough for me to identify them. (A friend confessed that as a beginning birder she was puzzled at seeing the term “unident” on a friend’s list and thought it must mean an exotic one-toothed bird.)

Published field guides, with their illustrations and detailed descriptions, are handy references, but first you have to find your quarry, and to do that it helps to know a resident birder, someone with years of experience with avian life cycles and preferred habitats. Go out with a knowledgeable local guide and you’re going to see and hear many more species than you could on your own. For those of us who don’t have a personal relationship with an avian maven, there are professional guiding operations in the park to help us augment that life list.

Diminutive but hardy, with the metabolism of a hummingbird, Joan Collins, of Long Lake, operates Adirondack Avian Expeditions. She’s a former computer systems engineer and a 46er, and is active in an impressive number of birding and conservation groups. When not participating in censuses and ornithological studies, she’s publishing her findings and speaking on public radio. In spring she ranges all over the North Country, scouting nesting territories for the group and individual outings she leads. She’s a go-to person for professional artists and photographers who need to observe particular species for their projects.



Last July I tagged along as she led six birders on a free excursion sponsored by the town of Long Lake. We were bused to three areas in the Moose River Plains—the Red River, Helldiver Pond and Lost Pond—on a hot, still day, and we would have pushed on to a fourth had all of us

except Joan not run out of energy. She was solicitous, offering bottled water, snacks, bug dope and sunscreen to her charges, dispensing bird lore in a friendly, patient way as we rolled along between short hikes. We saw or heard 46 species that day, including Nashville, Canada and mourning warblers, vireos, a broad-winged hawk and a chimney swift.

The next morning I met her at 2:45 a.m. at the Long Lake waterfront for a half-day of birding, just the two of us. She drove us north through the pitch-black night to Whiteface Mountain, where, thanks to an arrangement with officials, she’s able to access the toll road before daylight. As we ascended toward the summit, rags of fog drifted across the road. One lightbulb was glowing inside the castle as we turned around at the parking lot, and then ever so gradually, spectacular views of Lake Placid and environs materialized as the eastern horizon brightened. I can’t recall a more magical morning outdoors. Birdcalls were ubiquitous, although Joan heard many more than I could. A perpetual-motion machine, she strode along with her spotting scope over her shoulder (“Oh, it’s not that heavy; it balances”), ears tuned to a higher frequency. The finest birder-by-ear I’ve ever met, she can identify the members of an avian symphony by location (“Oooh, we’re surrounded by blackpoll warblers!”), direction of movement (“They’re going away to the left now”) and even activity (“They’re feeding babies!”). She can identify calls and songs from a moving vehicle, and she calls birds into viewing range by imitating their whistles, chirps and *churrs* or with an

KILLDEER PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF NADLER. NOBLEWOOD PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIKA EDGLEY



Willsboro’s Noblewood Park provides a welcoming habitat for birds. Facing page: Killdeer.



BIRD PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF MADLER (2). GROUP PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIKA EDGLEY

Clockwise: Collins leads a group searching for boreal species along the Roosevelt truck trail, in Long Lake. Gray jay. Northern harrier.



iPhone app. Despite her constant immersion in the world of birds, each expedition might as well be a treasure hunt. Her excitement is genuine, and it's contagious. On Whiteface she patiently guided me back and forth along several sections of roadway until I had heard a Swainson's thrush and seen my first boreal chickadee. Even better, the rare, endangered Bicknell's thrush obligingly perched atop a stunted spruce for my delectation.

Descending to the lowlands, we birded along Bigelow Road, in the town of Franklin, before strolling into nearby Bloomingdale Bog. Here Joan gave me some raisins and then, ostentatiously shaking the box, called in a family of half-tame gray jays. In no time there was a mid-sized bird gliding at high speed toward my face, only to flare out at the last minute and land on my outstretched hand. This juvenile jay tilted its head, considered my offering and pecked up two

morsels before launching back into the air. In all, we bagged 44 species that day: aside from the boreals I'd most wanted to see, we encountered a woodcock and two barred owls along the dark roadway as we drove north, and later found 11 species of warbler and a brown creeper. It was a fantastic day of sightings interspersed with information about each species and the prospects for its population. Joan Collins is not only a gifted guide but an eloquent educator.

FARTHER TO THE EAST, in Keene, you'll find John and Pat Thaxton, who for two years now have been operating Adirondack Birding Tours. A tall, slender reed with a mop of white hair, a Bronx accent and a wry sense of humor, John is a publishing-business veteran and writer with five books and numerous articles to his credit. He's also a gifted photographer and painter. Pat, a native New Jerseyan, is shorter and seems more serious but is every bit as sharp and sharp-eyed as her husband; she managed hospital laboratories on Long Island and later in Elizabethtown before retiring, and she handles the details of their guiding business. Like Joan Collins, both Thaxtons are 46ers and have long been involved with regional birding organizations. They're a fun couple to be around.

I opted for a full day's birding with them, and after a seven a.m. rendezvous at my bed-and-breakfast, we covered a lot of ground on an October day that started with frost on the ground but quickly turned blustery and mild. First stop was at the Intervale Lowlands, a 135-acre private nature preserve near Lake Placid, where we sauntered along mowed forest paths, across fields and past ponds. A battery of feeders near a parking area had attracted the usual chickadees and goldfinches and a passel of sparrows, including a Lincoln's. We were unable to turn up a black-backed woodpecker they'd hoped to show me, but a pileated was making a racket nearby and a Swainson's thrush hopped along a trail in front of us.

The day's itinerary they'd planned was designed to cover a variety of habitats. From Placid we headed down into what local birders call the "magic triangle," the rolling open country between Wadhams, Essex and Westport. We were rolling along a back road when Pat called out, "Stop! Back up!" There, in a strip of gravel beside a driveway, were two killdeer so cunningly camouflaged that I would never have seen them. The triangle yielded several raptors—a red-tailed hawk high overhead ("Tail!" John reported in birder shorthand), a northern harrier gliding above a field and a kestrel teetering atop a tree. At Noblewood Park, in Willsboro, we hiked through a locust grove down to the shore of Lake Champlain, where a flock of Canada geese on a sand flat was facing into the stiff south wind. Offshore a few cormorants and a black-backed gull were sharing a sandbar.

We moseyed downlake to the Westport boat launch, where we watched a bald eagle working thermals above the shore of Northwest Bay. It tilted and dipped, closer and closer, and then glided low over our heads, alarming the flock of mallards in a nearby cove into the air. A backlit buteo circling below fluffy clouds stimulated an informed discussion between the Thaxtons, who with the help of a Sibley guide decided it was a "roughie"—a young rough-legged hawk.

Our final stop was the tiny Hoisington Brook outlet, a bit farther south, and here we hit birding gold—far out on the lake, what appeared at first to be a common loon turned out, with the spotting scope, to be a red-throated loon. It was my first red-throat, and we later learned it was the earliest report of this species, by 15 days, in Essex County. By the time in

From left to right: **Boreal chickadee. Barred owl. Nashville warbler.** Facing page, from left to right: **Collins uses an iPhone app to call birds into viewing range with copycat whistles and chirps. Guides John and Pat Thaxton offer birders more than 20 years' experience in spotting and identifying Adirondack species.**



BIRD PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF NADLER (3). COLLINS AND THAXTON'S PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA EDGLEY (2)

midafternoon the Thaxtons returned me to my inn, we'd encountered 45 species. Amazing.

I've been visiting, and for short periods living in, the Adirondacks for more than 25 years, and as a backyard birder I've had a few yee-haw moments here: a small flock of pine grosbeaks at Coreys, a group of red crossbills next to what used to be the Grand Union in Indian Lake, the occasional eagle high above me as I canoed. It was circumstantial and utterly unsystematic birding, and from now on my efforts are going to be more directed. There's nothing like hanging out with people who know exactly when and where to go to find one of those elusive unidents.

If You Go ➔

Joan Collins leads group and individual birding trips year-round, for all levels from beginners to experts. Her Adirondack Avian Expeditions tours can encompass snowshoeing, hiking, canoeing and camping or simply easy walking and car birding. In addition, Joan uses a number of wheel-

With so many different habitats that are close to country roads, Adirondack birding doesn't have to involve a hefty hike. See www.adirondacklife.com/articles/birdland, starting May 15, for a selection of easily accessed destinations—plus the species you may encounter there—from veteran guide Joan Collins. On June 18, look for a birding-by-ear quiz devised by Collins at www.adirondacklife.com/blogs/birdquiz.

chair-accessible sites. Fees for a full-day tour are \$200 for the first person, plus \$50 for each additional birder; for a half-day it's \$150 plus \$40 per additional person. These fees are predicated on use of the client's vehicle; if Joan's SUV is used, 55 cents per mile will be added. Contact her at (518) 624-5528, www.adirondackavianexpeditions.com, or joan.collins@adirondackavian.com.

John and Pat Thaxton's Adirondack Birding Tours is also a four-season operation drawing on the couple's 23 years of experience

in the region. Tours can be tailored to individual needs. The Thaxtons use their own vehicle, charging 56 cents per mile; a full-day rate for the first person is \$190 and \$60 for each additional client; a half-day costs \$140 plus \$50 for additional birders. Contact them at (518) 576-4232, www.adirondackbirdingtours.com or contact@adirondackbirdingtours.com. 🌿