

## A Birding Interview with Laura Erickson

Laura Erickson is on a mission to bring the joy of birding to the masses. Beyond her role as Science Editor at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Erickson draws on her many skills as a scientist, teacher, writer, blogger, radio personality, podcaster, public speaker, photographer, and owner of Archimedes the educational owl to promote the understanding and protection of birds. Her “Laura Erickson’s For the Birds” website is a *tour de force* of tips, insights, stories, photos, and products to help people enjoy and learn about birds. Erickson has published five books about birds, including *Sharing the Wonder of Birds with Kids*, *101 Ways to Help Birds*, and *Twelve Owls*, and she has been honored with the Frances F. Roberts Award from the Cooper and Wilson ornithological societies.

In this inspirational *Birding* interview, Erickson shares her tips for nurturing beginner and intermediate birders, fondly recalls a tapeworm named Roger, and explains why birders should be more like chickadees.

—Noah K. Strycker

**Birding:** Why are you so passionately “For the Birds”?

**Laura Erickson:** Birds have filled me with joy and wonder since I was very little. My earliest memories are of pigeons flying with abandon over the Chicago skies and of sparrows cheeping in the evening outside my bedroom window. They seemed to be telling each other about their day’s exciting and happy adventures. As I grew up and learned more about real birds in the real world, my sense of wonder and appreciation grew. I can’t think of anything else that so appeals to my mind, heart, imagination, and soul. I hope those feelings come across in my “For the Birds” website <[tinyurl.com/3cyjy2l](http://tinyurl.com/3cyjy2l)>.

**Birding:** Why do you tend to focus on the practical aspects of birds and birding?

**LE:** As a city girl from a blue-collar family, I didn’t know how to go about being a birder as a child. Even by the time of my college graduation, I had never heard of a field guide, and I thought binoculars were for soldiers, detectives, and peeping toms. Because I so vividly remember the joy of discovery

about each bird, but also how bewildering it was to pick up each skill I needed to watch birds, I enjoy helping beginners with the basics. I love learning as much as I can about how each species negotiates life, and I love sharing what I learn with others.

**Birding:** What are some ways that adults can share the wonder of birds with kids?

**LE:** When dealing with our own children, making birds exciting for them is key. Having feeders at the windows, and creating quality habitat in our backyards so that interesting birds are always present can fill them with wonder. It’s important not to be too encyclopedic about birds, or to try to force children’s interest.

Sharing birds with other people’s kids is, for many of us, much easier than with our own kids. I brought a 12-year-old girl along on a nine-day birding tour to Texas once. She was much more intently focused than many of the adults, her excellent eyes and ears picked out several birds we otherwise would have missed, and her endless cheerfulness and enthu-

siasm were contagious. When I was a teacher, I invited my students to come along on Saturday morning birding walks. Decades later, I hear from some of them who still remember those fun times.

When we take young birders under our wing, bringing them along on some of our birding trips, we are ensuring the future of birding.

**Birding:** How did you start out in birding?

**LE:** In high school, I found a dead bird in the Chicago Loop, that maze of high rises in the heart of downtown. I had no clue what it was. A few years later, my husband suggested that his parents give me a field guide and binoculars for Christmas. I opened the guide right to the picture of that poor dead bird—it was an Ovenbird. Opening the book to that page was my “Helen Keller at the pump” moment—my epiphany. It was the key to everything that followed.

I spent the rest of the winter devouring that Peterson guide and then Joseph J. Hickey’s *Guide to Bird Watching* and the Golden Guide. By 2 March 1975, I felt ready to go out on my first birding trip. I went to a woodlot on the Michigan State University campus, and found my first bird. The first bird on my life list was a Black-capped Chickadee.

I spent quite a bit of time at the Fenner Arboretum in Lansing. The naturalist, Joan Brigham, seemed as thrilled as I was when I saw such commonplace birds as my first American Goldfinches and Chipping Sparrows. She made the birding community seem warm and friendly. More than that, she told me little tidbits about the lives and ways of each bird species.

My worst early birding experience was at the Morton Ar-

boretum outside Chicago in 1975. My mother-in-law and I found an American Coot, and I was thrilled. A while later, we encountered a couple of *real* birders. They asked if we’d seen anything good. My mother-in-law blurted out that “Laura just saw her first coots!” The look of disdain on their faces was humiliating for me. The hurtful memory of them, along with my lovely memories of Joan Brigham, taught me pretty clearly what kind of birder I did and did not want to be.

**Birding:** Out of your 101 ways to help birds, which one would make the most difference?

**LE:** Boy—that’s hard to say. The cumulative effect if we all saved natural resources—water, energy, paper and other wood products—would be huge, but individually, we can’t possibly make that huge of a difference. When we make our windows safer for birds, keep our cats indoors, and drive a bit

**Laura Erickson.**

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less and more slowly, we can individually save dozens or hundreds of individual bird lives. Buying a Duck Stamp puts more money into the National Wildlife Refuge system.

But I think the most important thing that we coffee drinkers can do is to make a market for bird-friendly coffee. “Shade grown” is a good way of thinking of this. Shaded coffee plants can grow within a healthy tropical forest, providing satisfying coffee for us while providing quality habitat for far, far more birds and other wildlife than sun coffee plantations. This may seem like an issue that’s pretty remote for us northerners, but a great many of our own nesting birds winter in the tropics, and as habitat decreases down there, chances of survival for wintering tanagers, warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and orioles decrease. For a few extra dollars a year, we do make a difference.

**Birding:** How do audiences react to your radio program, available in podcast format [tinyurl.com/3g4no7e](http://tinyurl.com/3g4no7e)?

**LE:** Over the years, “For the Birds” has amassed a pretty nice listener base. Many people, including both birders and non-birders, have told me how much comfort birds bring them when they or family members have been sick, and have mentioned how the program makes them appreciate the array of birds out there.

Doing the radio program has actually benefited birds, too. In the late 1980s, when I was fighting construction of a cell phone tower that was to be placed along our flyway north of Duluth, Minnesota, a lawyer provided me with all the assistance I needed to go to court to get the tower reduced to 100 feet, and refitted with no lights and guy wires. The lawyer didn’t know a hawk from a handsaw, and didn’t care, until he heard a “For the Birds” episode about the birds in Shakespeare. He wanted to volunteer to help me.

**Birding:** What odd things have you done for birds that we might not have heard about?

**LE:** I feel like a pretty normal person, but I guess I have done some quirky things. When my first book came out, Dave Barry was kind enough to write a blurb for it. He wrote, “This book is invaluable. For example, it states that as many as 1,600 tapeworms have been found in a single duck.” At the time, I was rehabbing a Common Nighthawk who had tapeworms, so I cleaned one off and sent it to Barry. He named it Roger and put it in his Christmas gift-buying guide for that year.

In 1992, on a peak migration day, an Air National Guard F-16 crashed in Duluth on takeoff. The day after the crash, suddenly two U.S. Air Force officers appeared on my

doorstep with the mangled and charred remains of two birds, and asked me if I could identify them. I managed to narrow it down to Lesser Golden-Plover (now American Golden-Plover).

When I attended an American Ornithologists’ Union meeting in Ames, Iowa, in 1992, I decided to enter their bird-calling contest for my owl calls. I became a finalist—something I had not expected at all. Because of that, I’ve given a lot of talks about owls. This led in a roundabout way to my receiving state and federal permits to keep an owl for educational programs. I’ve had Archimedes, an Eastern Screech-Owl, since 2000. He and I have been invited to appear at many Harry Potter events, and my webpage about the owls of Harry Potter is probably the most popular thing I’ve ever done.

This summer, I testified in a case brought against AT&T by the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness to stop a guyed, lighted, 450-foot tower from being constructed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The judge found for the plaintiffs and cited the bird issue in his findings.

I also am probably the only birder in the universe who has Joan Baez’s autograph on my Costa Rica field guide. But that’s another story.

**Birding:** What changes are coming up for birding?

**LE:** The number of human beings in the U.S. has more than doubled during my lifetime. It will take vast efforts at education—both nationally and locally—to ensure that we have quality habitat and can reduce the number of hazards birds face.

I think the number of birders engaging in “green birding” is going to increase. This is a wonderful development because extracting, refining, transporting, and burning fossil fuels have a huge impact on all kinds of critical issues that affect birds. Few issues are black and white, though. Traveling to exotic places to amass huge lists does indeed use up a lot of energy, but in many poor countries a healthy ecotourism industry can provide one of the only economic incentives to protect ever-diminishing habitat.

I think when dealing with one another, we birders should follow the example of chickadees. They allow other species to join their flocks, not judging Blackburnian Warblers for their excessively high-frequency songs or Red-eyed Vireos for never shutting up or Ruby-crowned Kinglets for being so hyperactive. Diversity equals stability, and this seems to hold true whether we’re considering flocks of birds or of birders. Keeping our numbers strong and our focus on both the well-being of birds and our own enjoyment of them is how we, and birds, will thrive long into the future.

