



BOOK NOTES

Birder on Berry Lane: Three Acres, Twelve Months, Thousands of Birds

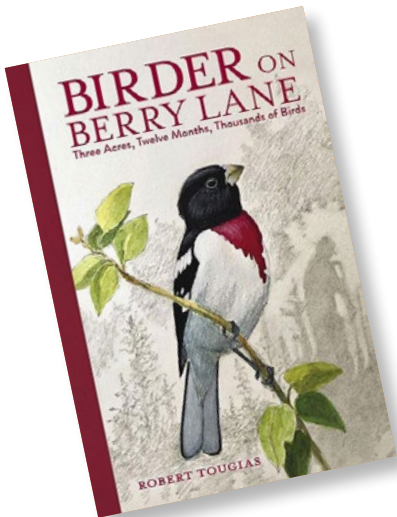
Robert Tougias, Imagine, 2020, 6.25 x 9 x 9.2 inches, 244 pages, hardcover, \$19.99.

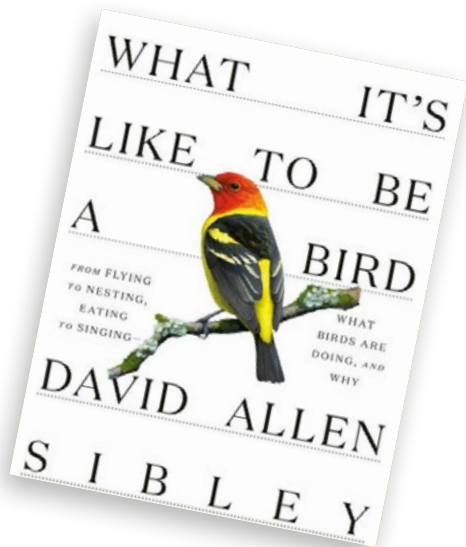
In these times of pandemic bird watching, when the bulk of our favorite pastime is performed close to home, you'd think that reading one birder's commentary on doing just that over the span of three acres and 12 months would be overly mundane and perhaps even trite. Not so, fair reader. Tougias's richly detailed de-

scriptions of his Massachusetts home patch and its birds put you in his shoes as he reasons that a red-shouldered hawk is stalking his feeder for mice rather than songbirds, appreciates how eastern phoebes return to the same nest after migrating hundreds of miles, and accidentally albeit explosively flushes a ruffed grouse in a neighborhood woodlot. Lately, it's nice to get out of one's head and into someone else's, and the birding episodes in this book border on luxurious.

The book's physical look and feel are akin to a children's storybook, with its smooth hardcover, thick textured paper, and black-and-white illustrations accompanying every chapter. And I'm ashamed to admit that, as I began skimming passages for this review, my initial thought was, *Why, these chapters read like little blog posts.* It's been a tough stretch of months beyond Berry Lane. But this volume is comforting and easy to digest, exactly what some of us need right now.

—Sarah Clark





What It's Like to Be a Bird: From Flying to Nesting, Eating to Singing—What Birds Are Doing, and Why

David Allen Sibley, Alfred A. Knopf, 2020, 8.75 x 1 x 11.3 inches, 240 pages, hardcover, \$35.

It's probably fair to say that most serious birders have a Sibley field guide on their bookshelf, or in their satchel, car, or smartphone—or all of the above (like me). We trust Sibley and his precise illustrations, and rely on his help to find and identify birds. In this book, Sibley's art—fewer portraits, lots of birds in action—figures prominently, but it's the text and Sibley's encyclopedic knowledge of bird behavior, anatomy, and social

systems that contribute most to the heft and value of this book. Like a field guide, *What It's Like to Be a Bird* is not intended to be read from cover to cover, but a book most birders will crack open, flip through, and study ad infinitum.

The introduction to this book is a fascinating and lengthy collection of topically ordered facts about birds—information that will wow even longtime birders—with links to related topics elsewhere in the book. Then comes the heart of the book: a focus on 96 species or groups of birds with essays on their special adaptations, accompanied by Sibley illustrations the likes of which you haven't seen before. For example, an essay on how waterfowl keep warm in frigid water includes a drawing of a segment of arteries and veins in a duck's leg, and how they intertwine to warm the extremity, with a measure of the blood temperature in both types of vessels at various distances from the body. It's called countercurrent circulation. Who knew? In the cormorant section, a diagram of the anatomy of a diving bird's eyeball accompanies an explanation of how they see clearly—while we see so poorly—underwater. *What It's Like to Be a Bird* is required reading for bird-nerds and bird-nerd wannabes. —Dawn Hewitt



Once Upon a Feather: A Field Guide to Fantastic Birds

Christina Baal, author and illustrator, 2020, paperback, 8 x 10 inches, 103 pages, \$29.99.

When Christina Baal (artist of this issue's cover) launched a Kickstarter campaign earlier this year to raise funds to self-publish *Once Upon a Feather*, she exceeded her goal in *thirty minutes*—and went on to raise several times her goal amount for initial publication. This is surely a testament to how much her fanbase adores her artwork and how eager we were to see this project combining ornithology and mythology come to life. Still, I was not prepared for what I found on the pages inside when

my copy arrived. Yes, the book is brimming with Baal's characteristically vibrant art, infused with personality and detail

that my eyes want to linger over, and I can only imagine the hours she spent illustrating each of the 30 species included.

But it is the accompanying text that I quickly realized must have been the central

labor of love for this project. In true field guide tradition, it offers physical and behavioral descriptions along with information on habitat, range, and life history—but these are *fantastical* birds, some still living, some alive only in legend. Through extensive research and a deep connection to mythology and nature, Baal brings them all to life before our eyes in words and pictures. In short, this ain't your parents' field guide. It's a journey across time and distance that sheds light on our earliest appreciation of birds and the significant roles humans have assigned them since the beginning of time. Most importantly, *Once Upon a Feather* inspires us to seek all these birds, or glimpses of them, in the world around us today. —*Jessica Melfi*