

IDEAS

# A Bird's-Eye View

The National Zoo's new walk-through aviary invites closer encounters with the feathered creatures you might see in your own backyard.

By Elaine Godfrey



A black-and-white warbler (Teresa Kopec / Getty)

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Have you ever looked at a duck? I mean really *looked* at one.

If you have, then you've probably noticed how a duck somehow manages to appear graceful and goofy at the same time, with her rounded head nestled perfectly into her

body and her rubbery feet flapping beneath the water. Sometimes she'll twist her elegant neck around to peck and pull at her wings, preening—which actually involves gathering oil from glands near her tail and combing it through her feathers to keep them waterproof.

This is important work for a duck. And it can be nice to watch, pondering how else she occupies her time and letting your mind wander back to childhood memories of Beatrix Potter's *Jemima Puddle-Duck* and Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*. I indulged in this for a while this week during a tour of the National Zoo's Bird House, in Northwest Washington, D.C. After six years of renovation, the exhibit will finally reopen on March 13. There, I met diving bufflehead ducks, friendly northern pintails, and charming ruddy ducks; I saw nonducks too, including shorebirds with their spindly circus legs and tiny fluttering warblers.

Like a duck, the Bird House can seem like a slightly silly concept. The National Zoo, and therefore the national taxpayer, spent \$69 million to create an exhibit full of flying creatures you can find in your own backyard—or at least in your general region. There are lots of other, more exotic birds in this zoo and in other zoos on the East Coast—birds with rainbow plumage and impressively long tails and glamorous pink legs. But that misses the point of the Bird House: The revamped exhibit is meant to celebrate the regular, everyday birds.

The walk-through aviary allows you to get up close to them, to learn about how even these common birds perform the extraordinary task of migrating thousands of miles between Canada and Central America each year. The purpose is also to teach us how to make our lives more compatible with theirs, not because they're especially striking or endangered birds, but because they're *our* birds—North America's—for at least part of the year.

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I met Sara Hallager, the zoo's longtime bird curator, during my tour last week. "I wasn't quite sure how people would receive these, you could say, *nonexotic* birds," she told me. But she's been gratified by the response. "I kind of like to watch people's faces as they come in," she said. "They just can't believe that they're in with the birds."

What exactly does a bird curator do? First, Hallager oversees all of the avian species at the National Zoo and manages all of their keepers. Because the zoo is part of a broader network of accredited zoos and aquariums, she also acts as a kind of animal distributor, packing up individual specimens and shipping them off to help populate other zoos. Hallager's main job since 2008—when she first envisioned an exhibit of neighborhood birds—has been working on the Bird House's redesign.

The first exhibit in the Bird House is meant to look and feel like the Delaware Bay, the estuary of the Delaware River and a major rest stop for migrating shorebirds. A path lined with water tanks and sand resembles a beach and smells like a barnyard. Here, I was introduced to long-legged avocets and dunlins, with their skinny beaks and spotted breasts. Clusters of tittering white sanderlings scurried around, and grasshopper sparrows flitted among reeds. I had never seen a live horseshoe crab before, but here was one right now, swimming happily upside down along the surface of the water. He has no predators in the Bird House.

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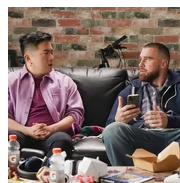
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Sometimes, at night, Hallager said, the birds like to gather on the path to sleep. “Do any of them ever feel the urge to migrate?” I asked her. They might, she said. But birds don’t migrate because of weather, she explained; they do so when their food sources run out. Here, that never happens. In all of these exhibits, the birds are free to fly where they want. They aren’t shy around humans, Hallager explained, but they have their boundaries.

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When I was a child, my bird-loving parents told me that I could capture a songbird simply by shaking a bit of salt on its wings. One winter day, excited by this prospect, I sat with my father in the woods for hours, waiting for the birds to come close enough to salt them. While we waited, Dad taught me their names and their sounds: the tufted titmouse (“*peter peter peter*”), the blue jays (“*cheeseburger! cheeseburger!*”), and the occasional Carolina wren (“*tea kettle, tea kettle*”). My parents had, of course, made up the salt trick, and I never caught a bird. I don’t remember feeling disappointed.

The second exhibit space along the path was loud and lively. It aims to reproduce a breeding ground in the Prairie Potholes, the wetlands of the Upper Midwest and Canada, where many birds spend the spring and summer months. The path runs through two pools, allowing underwater views of logs and reeds, and they are filled with ducks, all kinds. A few ruddy-duck males in the first pool splashed at us when we entered, and I gasped at their stunning turquoise bills—a feature that lasts only for the breeding season, to impress females. And this female was! Black-and-white buffleheads chased and clambered over one another, wrestling for pellets that Hallager dumped into the pool.

From a sign at the entrance, I learned that some ducks are *divers*, whereas others are *dabblers*. Divers sit low in the water and plunge under for their food. But dabblers sit higher, munching on surface vegetation and insects. The second pool was full of

dabblers with musical names: wigeons and teals and pintails and shovelers, all sitting or swimming or flapping or eating.

All of the ducks were brown, but in varying shades—russet, cinnamon, chocolate, tan—with an occasional swatch of white or green. A small northern pintail waddled out of the pool and onto the visitors' path, slowly approaching Hallager and me while we talked. Looking at the duck, I remembered how an ex-boyfriend had once described my aura as “totally brown”—ordinary-looking, he meant, and hard to pick out of a crowd. From a distance, this pintail might have blended in too. But up close, her tawny-and-cream feathers were gorgeous.

Hallager would not admit to having a favorite bird. When she joined the zoo in 1988, she wanted to work as a keeper for seals and sea lions—but she was assigned to birds instead. “I very quickly, within a few minutes, fell in love with birds,” she said. “They’re just beautiful. They’re so important to life on this planet, and to humans.”

The temperature in the third room of the Bird House is approximately 1 million degrees. Intended to replicate a bird-friendly Central American coffee farm, this exhibit was a sharp contrast to the first two: all lush tropicality. Palm trees and waxy-leafed monstera provide shelter for the 67 individual birds in this space; among them are palm warblers, mockingbirds, and scarlet tanagers. Whereas in the wild, you might catch only a brief flash of an indigo bunting or a cedar waxwing, here you’ve got a better shot at spotting and studying them as they swoop between trees and perch on tables for lunch.

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When we entered, a small flock of green parakeets flew across the high-domed ceiling, which seemed jarringly exotic until I realized that all of these birds are compatriots down south during the winter.

The Bird House is constantly reminding visitors that these birds are our responsibility. A good way to help them is to purchase coffee grown in bird-friendly habitats, which simply means that farmers in Central and Latin America grow coffee plants among other trees and plant life instead of clearing the land. Deforestation and habitat loss are the main threats to birds like the ones here, Hallager told me. The other top killers are glass windows and cats, which each kill at least 1 billion birds every year. Putting decals on your windows helps; all of the windows in the Bird House have stripes or dots etched on the glass to prevent collisions. As for cats, Hallager begs, please keep them inside.

Overcome by the humidity of the coffee farm, the two of us sought refuge back in the Prairie Potholes. As we talked, the female pintail duck edged closer to us, a curious glint in her beady eyes. “I mean, look at this little girl,” Hallager said, beaming at the duck. “Tell me that bird doesn’t have a personality or a soul.”

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