

TIME TO *TAKE FLIGHT*

Whether it's the joy you derive from hearing bird calls at dusk, walking across an entire Alpine kingdom or losing yourself in a rapture of blues, travel is all about emotion



THE QUIRKY JOYS OF BIRDING

I grew up with a bird book in hand, methodically ticking off all the species that my family would spot on long summer walks in northern Ontario and on cross-Canada drives. I knew my urban blue jays as well as my cottage country great blue herons. Baltimore orioles made me love orange and black. Gulls dive-bombed me once when I made my pediatrician father patch up a bird with a torn wing. I collected broken eggs the way other girls collected dolls and felt deep sorrow for the unlucky birds that crashed into our windows. I loved the drama of birding but eventually shelved my dog-eared field guide to pursue seemingly more exciting passions.

My re-entry into the bird world began in 2016 in Nebraska – where I went to write about one of the world's great migrations. Some 1.2 million **sandhill cranes** – more than 80 per cent of the global population – converge on the Platte River each spring while flying between wintering areas in Texas and Mexico and summer breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia. Migrating ducks and geese, and sometimes even rare whooping cranes, join them and they all fatten up together. Bird nerds like Jane Goodall come to watch.

Do I love the slate grey cranes with crimson-capped crowns more at sunrise or sunset? Like watching the Super Bowl, I'm in it for the spectacle and the roar of tens of thousands of birds. Just before sunrise, I have crept to riverside blinds and sat in silent reverie as the cranes awoke and chattered quietly before making noisy mass exits. Sunset was equally mesmerizing, as things went

from cacophonous to hushed when the flocks returned from foraging for corn and settled on the shallow river. Make sure you do both times of day, like I did: one with the Crane Trust and the other with Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, because the vibe is different. But, as Rowe volunteer Pamela Bergmann warned me: "Be careful – this is contagious."

Nebraska has a second, even stranger, birding spectacle going for it: **prairie chicken** courtship rituals. They are "the best movie you'll see all year," Nebraska biologist and bird expert T.J. Walker once told me. "The fighting, the drama, the romance – it's just a great show." These guys inflate orange neck sacs, raise ear-like feathers, lower their heads, flip up their tails and stomp around patches of mixed-grass prairie called leks while moaning. It's all for – you guessed it – sex. Intimidation tactics and battles are guaranteed.

Nearly nine years after the sandhill cranes and prairie chickens roused my inner birder, I find myself wrapping my travels around feathered friends as a way to connect with nature. It helps that I mainly write about national parks and protected places. Communing with quirky **American woodcocks** made my trip to Ontario's Point Pelee National Park. Feeding **Canada jays** by hand while dogsledding with Wapusk Adventures in Churchill, Man., was a thrill. In Barbuda's Codrington Lagoon National Park, in the Caribbean, I watched **magnificent frigatebirds** (which are slightly bigger than brown pelicans but look like pterodactyls) feed their chicks, but missed seeing males inflating their bright red throat pouches like balloons during courtship.

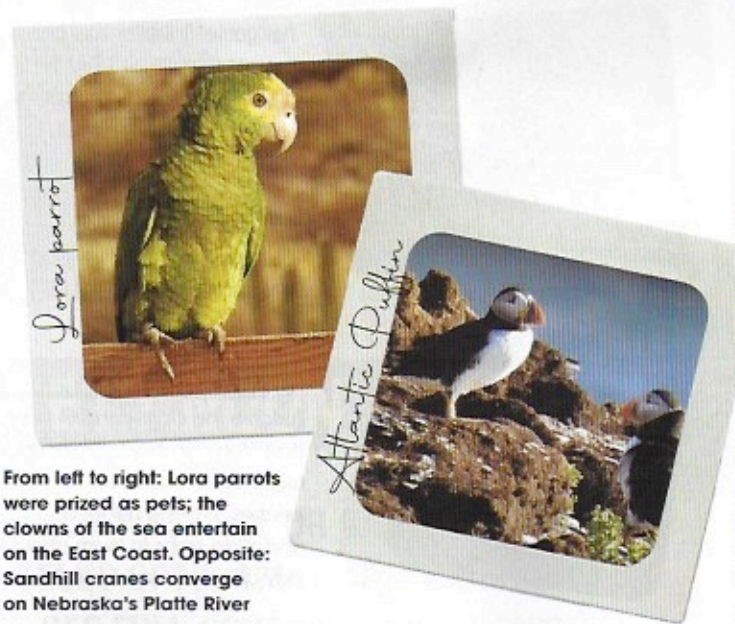
People love luxurious and

laid-back Anguilla, but instead of relaxing I made a beeline to tiny and uninhabited Sombrero Island with the Anguilla National Trust to see **brown boobies**. While not quite as adorable as the famous **blue-footed boobies** of the Galápagos, the brown boobies were guarding eggs in ground nests made of twigs, so I got unexpectedly close to them. I flew to Aruba just to celebrate how Arikok National Park had reintroduced a locally extinct parrot that was almost wiped out by the illegal pet trade. Park rangers took me to the spot where they had just released the clever and friendly **yellow-shouldered amazons (Loras)**, and I got to witness the love the rangers have for these colourful beauties when the birds returned to be fed.

If you ask me what my favourite bird is, I'll always say "the one I'm planning to see next." This year, that means the **flamingos** that call the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary in Dubai home. I don't want to just see these elegant pink beauties in a city known for luxury, I want to photograph them foraging in a wetland with the Burj Khalifa – the world's tallest building – behind them. I am

curious to find out how the most populous city in the United Arab Emirates protects the natural environment around them.

Actually, I fibbed – my favourite birds are **Atlantic puffins** from Newfoundland and Labrador. It's probably the best place in the world for puffin watching. I even painted my house on Fogo Island orange, as a nod to the striking colour of their beaks when mating. Take a boat trip to Little Fogo Island, where you'll see the clowns of the sea swimming, flying like wind-up toys and awkwardly waddling around cliffside burrows. To watch puffins for free from land, go to Elliston on the Bonavista Peninsula. But to make a difference, volunteer with the puffin patrol and help save the "pufflings" that are drawn to shore from the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve by light pollution. Instead of following the moon out to sea, the young birds wind up in seaside towns and communities where they're run over and attacked by animals. Saving them involves driving around at night with nets and pet carriers and isn't as easy as it sounds – I tried twice – but what birder doesn't love a challenge? —Jennifer Bain



From left to right: Lora parrots were prized as pets; the clowns of the sea entertain on the East Coast. Opposite: Sandhill cranes converge on Nebraska's Platte River