

I'm Anti Dopamine Maxxing
The Case for Teen Birdwatching
By Avery Mizrahi



A sleepy female Mallard floats peacefully. Photo by Avery Mizrahi.

A few months ago, my family decided to make the 1.5 hour drive to Bear Divide. Expecting to see what scientists called the “migration of a lifetime”, we trekked up the hill to find... fog. Hint: birds don't fly in fog. After a few minutes of defeated sighs, we decided to go on a nearby hike unprepared, scrambling over log bridges in our sweatpants. That was when I heard a distant *TWOOK*. I peeked around the corner to find a chubby creature, adorned with a massive feather sticking out of the top of his head. I tried to quickly beckon my parents over as the Mountain Quail, notoriously hard to spot, let out one last *TWOOK* and un-majestically sprinted into the forest. I couldn't stop smiling. There is something so special about being completely in the moment, discovering a real life easter egg. Even if you're not a bird-nerd like me, this is something I believe everyone can enjoy.

Again and again, research supports the benefits of birdwatching. According to a recent study, hearing or seeing birds can improve mental well-being for up to eight hours (Hammoud et al., 2022). Additionally, hearing birds for even six minutes can have significant effects on symptoms of depression

and anxiety (GMA3 2023). Being around birds can even be as gratifying as money; 14 species equates to the feeling of earning an extra \$150 a month (Haupt, 2022). Beyond the mental, Tammah Watts in her book “Keep Looking Up: Your Guide to the Powerful Healing of Birdwatching” uses this activity as a non-pharmaceutical alternative to chronic pain.

But, why? There are many different hypotheses for why we find birds so healing. One may be the difference between direct attention and fascination. According to University of Michigan researchers, most of our attention can be described as direct attention: all that grinding and thinking that leads to burnout. The remedy to direct attention is fascination. That feeling is often associated with birdwatching, as one becomes enamored with their environment. Mindfulness provides a reset from task-fatigue (Tiller, 2024). This enamoration is known as the **Biophilia Hypothesis**, or the belief that experiencing nature is integral to our identity as human beings (Kellert & Wilson, 1999). This may be why we fall into a **Flow State** when birdwatching. Flow is not something special to birdwatching, it can occur during any number of immersive activities - from writing, running, or playing music. It is categorized as an enjoyable state of consciousness where one loses track of time and leads to an increased sense of clarity, happiness, and concentration (Abuhamdeh, 2020).



A Marbled Godwit poses at the Bolsa Chica Wetlands. Photo by Avery Mizrahi.

It seems ridiculous to find such euphoria from just observing a flying animal, but time and time again I feel it. I felt it on November 4, 2023, which turned out to be one of the worst days of my life. I was absorbed in my world, feeling a constant sense of anxiety and shame. I felt I couldn't escape my own brain. However, I had already planned a bird walk at the Mile Square Regional Park in Fountain Valley, California. The last thing I wanted to do was stand around and look at some birds, but then I saw a Vermillion Flycatcher. Then a Red Shouldered Hawk. And more and more fascinating creatures. I slowly let go of the constant drum of ineffective thoughts, and became fully present. I probably would've had a panic attack without that hour and a half in nature. I felt this flow again with my bi-weekly visits to the Bolsa Chica Wetlands this summer. Half of all bird species observed in the United States can be found in Bolsa Chica. Spending over 20 hours walking the Wetlands, meeting fellow birdwatchers, and I felt that sense of clarity every time.



A Great Blue Heron playfully picks up sticks and tosses them at the Bolsa Chica Wetlands. Photo by Avery Mizrahi.

This is not to say I'm any better than the average teen. Embarrassingly, I remember going on Instagram while at the Wetlands to post about my day, only to find myself sitting on a bench scrolling 15 minutes later. At home, I am not immune to addictive algorithms either. It is not uncommon for me to spend hours typing on Google Docs on my medium screen, while taking breaks to watch book reviews on

my big screen, only to get distracted with Pinterest notifications from my small screen. This is interspersed with sugary snacks and online shopping - any way to get that all-too-common instant gratification. I know I'm not alone in this. I also know I'm not alone in the emptiness two hours of watching 3 second videos leaves me with. There is only one way I know to combat this short term gratification or "Dopamine Maxxing": birdwatching. Being in the moment leaves me with a satisfaction my myriad devices never does. And yes: it's hard. It's boring sometimes (the average age of a birdwatcher is 53 years old for a reason). You should do it anyway. Technology can even be helpful: apps like Merlin help you identify a bird based just on its sound and eBird will help you track all the birds you see. Six minutes in your backyard is all you need.

See the birds and behaviors in this article!

- Mallard
- Mountain Quail
- Marbled Godwit
- Great Blue Heron
- Spend 6 Minutes Birdwatching

About the author: An aspiring [neuroscientist](#), [Avery Mizrahi](#) is a rising freshman at Harvard University from Long Beach, California. She is a former NSF-funded Fellow of the UCI Yassa Lab, presenter at the Learning and Memory Conference, and an international touring dancer. When she is not in the lab or birdwatching, she enjoys ballet, reading, hiking, and picking up new languages. Follow @averyamizrahi on instagram for more.

Citations

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