

## Boots on the Ground

“Look, up there, on that peak,” our guide said. And through a borrowed spotting scope, I saw the pair of Gyrfalcons. Erect, watchful, the personification of “raptor.” We’d just come from the Latrabjarg Bird Cliffs on the western-most point of Iceland – and Europe. The cliffs, as many of you know, are home to hundreds of thousands of Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills and Murres. I’d never seen an avian blanket on such a massive piece of landscape.

That’s my highlight reel – the best I can offer as a novice birder. I have a lot to learn about birds and I’d like to ask your help: Set me on a birding path worthy of Audubon. After an initial week in New York in September, I want to go birding with you. I’m going to spend most of that month – my first real month on the job, learning in the field. I can’t think of a better way to tap into your passion and to get to know your issues and your thinking.

While I’m a budding birder, I’ve run an environmental NGO for almost 5 ½ years and I’m a life-long outdoorsman. I know that, like the people at EDF, Audubon’s staff and its volunteers are there to help the planet thrive.

As I’ve talked to friends about Audubon in recent weeks, I’ve told them this: “In journalism, we learned to ‘follow the money.’ In conservation, it’s ‘follow the birds.’ I’m thrilled to represent an organization that believes that by focusing on birds and IBAs, we get a clear view of the health of nature’s ecosystems – the systems that benefit humankind and birds alike.

I’ve learned a couple of things in the process of becoming your new President and CEO. First, I’ve come to understand that Audubon doesn’t belong to the New York home office. And while the state offices do tremendous work, they represent something larger. The chapters and their volunteer leaders do Audubon’s grassroots work. But the fact is – and I will keep this thought at the center of my work as your new President – we are all Audubon.

Here’s the other thing I’ve learned. While I’ve always associated birds with special moments (I’ll tell you about the Blue Herons at the Merwin Lake – in search of the legendary D.B. Cooper sometime), I’m just beginning to see and appreciate them. I was going on last week with a friend about “heroic migratory songbirds that shed ¾ of their body mass during their migration,” and he said, “wow, they really do have you, don’t they?” From the canopied running trail where I put in five miles each morning to a peak overlooking Hong Kong to the Brown Pelicans in Louisiana’s Barataria Bay, birds have moved to the front of my awareness in the past three months – and are no longer part of nature’s background imagery. I’m guessing that’s an early stage of a birder’s evolution, so rather than being shy about admitting it, I’m proud to be on the road to discovery.

I’ve always enjoyed nature. I put myself through college working at a backpacking store. I’ve hiked most of the John Muir trail, backpacked in the Cascades and up Mt. Whitney and kayaked from Alaska to Quebec to the Colorado River – and on the Hudson River I see from my home.

But something’s different now – it’s all about the birds.

I told my 14-year-old daughter, Nicole, I was considering this opportunity and asked her advice. “Take it,” she said, without hesitation. “You already have the app on your I-phone.”

You’ll be hearing more about how we’ll organize the logistics of my boots-on-the-ground month in the field. I’d appreciate your help and I’m looking forward to getting to know you.

David Yarnold