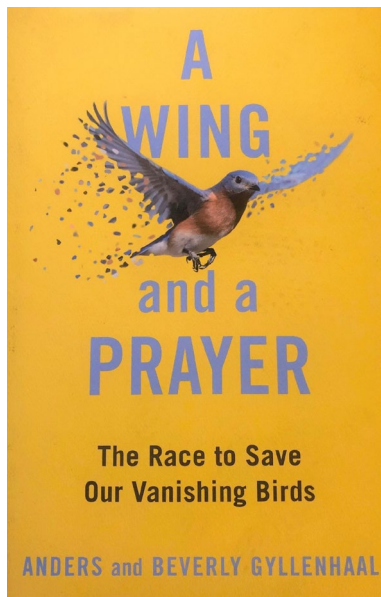


Birder's Book Review:

A Wing and a Prayer: The Race to Save Our Vanishing Birds **by Anders and Beverly Gyllenhaal**

Steve Shultz



Three billion birds. Groundbreaking work by Canadian Wildlife Service bird population specialist Adam Smith strongly suggests that North America lost this staggering number of birds over the last fifty years. To put that into perspective, the total population of North American birds, swelled by newly fledged young, is estimated to peak in late summer at between 30 and 40 billion. This is reduced by mortality over the winter to a former baseline spring estimate of 10 billion birds. Which is now just seven billion. The ability to quantitatively value the loss of birds across the North American landscape offers more than a tragic footnote in peer reviewed literature, rather it empowers myriad conservationists with a tool to grab the attention of an often distracted public and focus on local, state, national, and international efforts to reverse the tide of declining bird populations.

Anders and Beverly Gyllenhaal, who reside in Raleigh, NC, jumped headfirst into birding as “an antidote to city life” after careers in journalism that took them from Miami to Minneapolis and Washington, DC to Raleigh. Provided with a Covid-era opportunity to explore the United States via truck and Airstream trailer, they set out to discover the state of birds in America. The result of this journey, which visits central Florida prairies to witness efforts to keep the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow from tipping into extinction, searches for the “Oh God Bird” in the swamps of Louisiana, and visits farmers in Wyoming who are banding together locally to preserve habitat for Greater Sage Grouse, provides insight into the challenges and successes of stabilizing the recent freefall of bird populations.

Along the way we meet strange bedfellows. U.S. Army generals willing to prioritize woodpecker nesting against live fire exercises join with Hawaiian law students grubbing plants on the side of a volcano and a farmer in Ecuador, who converted from subsistence farming to become protector of one of the rarest birds in the world, in saving endangered species.

But how can we avoid species becoming endangered in the first place? The Gyllenhaals argue the economics of saving birds before that critical tipping point and demonstrate how much more successful and less expensive efforts to avoid getting to the precipice can be versus trying to bring a critically imperiled species from the brink of extinction.

I know, works delving deep into the state of nature as it exists today can sometimes be a bit dry and even depressing. Lots of numbers, lots of references, lots of bad news. *A Wing and a Prayer* successfully avoids the stereotype. Fast paced, with bits of travelogue interspersed with science, charming looks at birds, and interviews with leading figures in conservation, the book makes for an enjoyable read. Anders and Beverly allow us to experience again the excitement of being a fledgling birder, of travelling to see new species, and of joining a worldwide community of individuals enjoying all facets of birding. It is here that we see the importance of welcoming new birders, and especially young birders, who will be the next generation of voices promoting conservation.

The Gyllenhaals share experiences on their journey to learn more about the birds around them. On the outskirts of Washington, DC during fall migration, inclusive birders enjoying a rare Dickcissel sighting ensure that the newcomers not only appreciate the opportunity to tick off this grassland species in decidedly uncommon habitat, but forge lasting friendships. Unfortunately not all of the experiences are positive, as in trying to participate in a North Carolina app-based bird alert when “a nasty message from the group’s moderator” resulted in the understanding that “there do exist birders for whom two questions are one too many.”

A Wing and a Prayer weaves science and storytelling into a compelling and enjoyable read that not only explains the problem, but offers solutions. The final chapter provides 30 suggestions to save our vanishing birds, as well as links and contact information for organizations spanning Ducks Unlimited to eBird to your representative in Washington, DC.

In addition to compelling content, the quality of the printed product impresses. Thick, luscious pages make for a wonderful tactile experience, while the print size, font, and use of color make for an easy read. Notes are contained in an appendix that allows for the flow of reading to be uninterrupted, and photographs throughout the book add interest and create connections with birds and people highlighted throughout the work. *A Wing and a Prayer* earns a spot on the bookshelf as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act.

A Wing and a Prayer: The Race to Save Our Vanishing Birds. Anders and Beverly Gyllenhaal. 2023. Simon & Schuster, New York, NY. 310pp. ISBN 978-1-9821-8455-1. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Did You Know?

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