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## Bird Guide Is Top Flight

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM



Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal  
Mallard Ducks

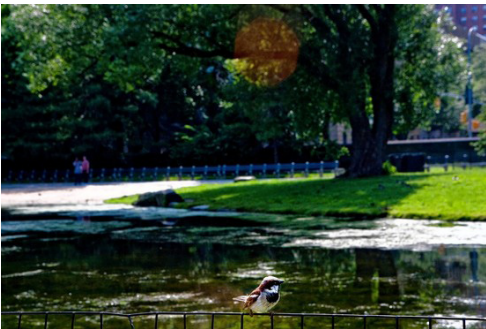
Even as bus roars past her bird-watching perch on a grassy slope just inside Central Park, 72-year-old Starr Saphir can detect a distinctive chirp amid the urban jumble.

“Oh, I just heard an Eastern Wood-Pewee further in,” she said, head cocked and eyes widening behind wire-rimmed glasses.

While a companion strained to catch the sound, Ms. Saphir spotted something else at the edge of a pond down the hill. “Ducklings over there on the right,” she reported.

After more than six decades spent birding in New York City, Ms. Saphir has seemingly supernatural powers of hearing and sight. The slenderest strand of birdsong or ruffle of feathers is enough.

She has devoted the last 30 years to guided bird walks through Central Park, leading four tours each week during the spring and fall, when the park fills with more than 200 species of migratory birds. Each tour lasts five or six hours.



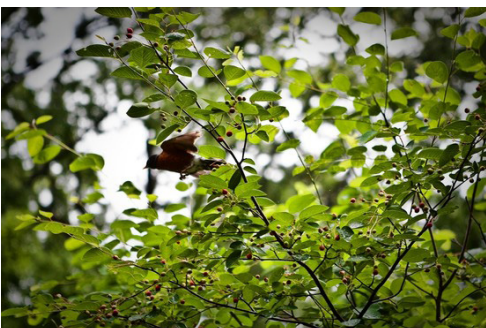
Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal  
A common Swallow

“You don’t have to be in Central Park for very long before hearing about Starr,” said Jeffrey Kimball, a devoted birdwatcher himself and the director of “Birders: The Central Park Effect,” a documentary set to air July 16 on HBO. “She’s known as the doyenne or the matriarch of the park.”

The film looks at the millions of birds that use Central Park as a rest stop on their migration along the eastern seaboard and the humans drawn there to observe them. Ms. Saphir emerges as one of the film’s main characters, alongside a handful of bird-obsessed New Yorkers both famous (novelist Jonathan Franzen) and unknown.

Ms. Saphir (pronounced “sapphire”) was six years old when she identified her first bird during a visit to her grandparents’ home in Stony Brook, N.Y. As she tells the story, her birding breakthrough came about when her grandfather’s car broke down.

“I got out and was looking around—this was on the old Jericho Turnpike—and I found a black-and-white Warbler. I knew what it was because my grandmother had a copy of the old Audubon prints,” she recalled. “You see these things in books and you don’t think they actually exist.”



Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal  
A Red-Breasted Robin

After that initial sighting, she would travel with her father from her home in Brooklyn’s Bay Ridge neighborhood to Prospect Park. “I almost never met another birder,” she said. “Occasionally we’d run into somebody. They’d usually be middle-aged men and they’d have their binoculars with them.”

Ms. Saphir didn’t lead her first bird-spotting tour until 1975, and that came about by accident. When no one from the National Audubon Society showed up for a guided walk through Central Park, Ms. Saphir took charge.

“I found out that I could teach,” said Ms. Saphir, who at that point had been a stage actress and a mother of two. “I had never known that, and I found out what a joy that was.”

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal  
Veteran birdwatcher and guide Starr Saphir in  
Central Park.

In the decades since, her fees for tour participants have inched up from \$3 to \$8, a price many of her clients have urged her to raise. But Ms. Saphir says she prefers to keep her services as accessible as possible, particularly as migratory bird populations decrease.

“If you see your city park as a place full of birds, you’re going to want to protect it,” she said.

Her low prices also encourage regulars. Lenore Swenson, a 65-year-old retiree, has been taking Ms. Saphir’s tours for 23 years and occasionally serves as substitute guide.

Spotting birds with Ms. Saphir is “almost like a social group,” Ms. Swenson said, even if she would be hard pressed to say what many of her birding companions do for a living. “The focus is on the birds.”

Ms. Saphir was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer 10 years ago, but her illness has hardly slowed her down. In fact, she found it had the opposite effect.

“When I thought I only had two years, I was teaching as fast as I could,” she said, resting on a bench near the Harlem Meer. “And then I calmed down and just enjoyed it.”

She even described the Central Park birding community as a kind of support group. One of the reasons she wanted to participate in Mr. Kimball’s documentary, she added, was for her fellow enthusiasts.

“We’re portrayed as being silly so often,” she said. “[The film] shows the great joy we have in just looking at birds. It also shows it’s not just knowing the bird’s name. That’s not where birding ends. That’s just something to hang your information on.”

She looked toward a little clump of dense growth in the middle of the lake, where a Green Heron had alighted a few moments earlier.

“I’m just going to look at the end of the island,” she said. And with that she was off, binoculars in hand.