

Unexpected Wildlife

TAKING BIRDING TO NEW HEIGHTS

It will not be for everyone, especially anyone suffering from claustrophobia or a fear of heights. But if you've ever wanted to go birding 1,000 feet above the ground, surrounded by hordes of people from around the world, watching migrants at night from the top of the Empire State Building is probably your only opportunity. You can even combine the expedition with dinner and a Broadway show.

Each spring and fall, tens of thousands of migrating birds of more than 100 species fly above New York City at about the same height as the building's 86th-floor observation deck. A drawback for hard-core life listers is that they will not actually be able to identify the majority of these birds. With lights illuminating them from below, "most of the migrants look like small shooting stars," says Robert DeCandido, an urban ecologist and native New Yorker who leads nocturnal bird tours to the outdoor observatory during migration seasons.

DeCandido first discovered the iconic building's birding potential four years ago. Prompted by concerns that migrating birds were being attracted to its bright lights—then crashing into it and dying—he launched a two-year-long study to tally the number of migrants passing by and record mortalities. Every night between sunset and midnight, from mid-April to mid-May and from mid-August to mid-November, DeCandido and a team of volunteers staked out positions on the deck's northwest corner, peering up with binoculars while the crowds around them looked down. At the beginning of the study, "I cringed every time a bird approached," he recalls. "Yet after seeing more than 30,000 migrants pass by, I've yet to see one smack into the building. Instead, my colleagues and I have enjoyed some of the most thrilling birding I've experienced anywhere."



From top, year of the Empire State Building (top-left), mechanical ladders may in a single night spot thousands of migrating birds, including common nighthawks (left) and eastern phoebe (right), as well as peregrine falcons (center) that hunt and catch their prey.

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Some evenings were particularly memorable. On one October night, the researchers spotted 1347 small birds such as warblers, woodpeckers and sparrows between 7 p.m. and midnight. From 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. alone, they tallied one migrant every 4 seconds. Other highlights included watching many birds—including northern flickers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, common yellowthroats and black-chested blue warblers—land on the deck to rest, sometimes for an hour or more. Once, an eastern phoebe perched on the railing just above DeCandido's head, allowing him to catch insects attracted to the lights for a full 10 minutes.

On another night, the group watched in amazement as a peregrine falcon—obviously a distant pro-

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cessor made 25 short after migrants, catching 7 of them. "The falcon would catch a bird, then zoom out and hang in mid-air above the deck waiting for the next group of migrants to appear," says DeCandido. Peregrine hunting never got out to be a regular occurrence; that fall, the researchers saw the raptors pursue migrants 111 times and make 93 captures.

An unexpected bonus of the research, says DeCandido, was inspiring future birders and conservationists. During the study, he estimates that at least half a million people—between 2,000 and 3,000 a night—visited the observation deck. Though most of them ignored the scientists, some became curious enough to look up at the sky themselves. Once they did, "their reactions ranged from these tracks to ask about what they were seeing," says DeCandido. "Why were birds flying at night? Where were they going? How did would they get by morning? I felt each night full of hope: Migrating birds had captured people's attention, and now they were aware, they cared."—Laura Ziegler

Full in the best time to spot nocturnal migrants from the top of the Empire State Building, especially the first half of October when annual migration is in full swing. Plus to arrive on the observation deck by 8 p.m. To see more, visit www.esbny.com. For a guided tour with DeCandido or one of his colleagues, contact us by edit@nwf.org.

Some evenings were particularly memorable. On one October night, the researchers spotted 3,387 small birds such as warblers, woodpeckers and sparrows between 7 p.m. and midnight. From 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. alone, they tallied one migrant every 4 seconds. Other highlights included watching weary birds—including northern flickers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, common yellowthroats and black-throated blue warblers—land on the deck to rest, sometimes for an hour or more. Once, an eastern phoebe perched on the railing just above DeCandido's head, sallying forth to catch insects attracted to the lights for a full 10 minutes.

On another night, the group watched in amazement as a peregrine falcon—ordinarily a diurnal predator—made 25 dives after migrants, catching 7 of them. “The falcon would catch a bird, then zoom out and hang in midair above the deck waiting for the next group of migrants to appear,” says DeCandido. Peregrine hunting turned out to be a regular occurrence; that fall, the researchers saw the raptors pursue migrants 111 times and make 37 captures.

An unexpected bonus of the research, says DeCandido, was inspiring future birders and conservationists. During the study, he estimates that at least half a million people—between 2,000 and 5,000 a night—visited the observation deck. Though most of them ignored the scientists, some became curious enough to look up at the sky themselves. Once they did, “these nonbirders stopped in their tracks to ask about what they were seeing,” says DeCandido. “Why were birds flying at night? Where were they going? How far would they get by morning? I left each night full of hope: Migrating birds had captured people's attention, and once they were aware, they cared.”—*Laura Tangley*

Fall is the best time to spot nocturnal migrants from the top of the Empire State Building, especially the first half of October when winds are from the northwest. Plan to arrive on the observation deck by dusk. To save time, order tickets beforehand at www.esbnyc.com. For a guided tour with DeCandido or one of his colleagues, contact rdcny@earthlink.net.

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