Skowhegan Bird Club

Concurrent with the start of the second session of the Skowhegan Bird Club, organizers and members decided to take inventory of its inception and trajectory. What follows are excerpts from a larger discussion about the Club’s impact on individual practices, outlooks, and everydayness, as well as hopes for the Club’s future.

Pallavi Sen (A ’17): Because we spend these relatively brief evenings together a couple of times a month, my hope was that through listening to somebody whose entire world is occupied by thinking about birds in different ways, that on leaving that evening and then waking up and living one’s life, each of us would be more attuned to the world that we live in and experience it on a different layer. So that we can begin to notice the things which have been with us—but were invisible—and care more about the world around us, and not be an observer.

I’m not at all somebody who sees a bird and knows exactly about it. I may know it in Hindi and Bengali, but I don’t know it in the English language, but I feel a lot less isolated, less alone, and also more joyful hearing things as I’m walking. I suddenly hear birds and it pulls me out of whatever I’m worrying about or thinking about and feel like, “Oh, there are all these lifestyles and life forms happening around me.”

Ash Ferlito (A ’12): Similar to that, my life changed and changed for the better when I started really noticing birds. It’s a completely grounding experience. When I traveled anywhere, the first thing I started to do was wonder who was around me. That’s not how I had oriented myself before. So it was really like fresh eyes for the world. And the more I thought about it, there’s all of these links to birding and birds and art. It’s about seeing and looking. And the birds themselves are these beautiful things that communicate and dance for one another, call to one another, perform for one another, and create sculptures in their nests. There’s all these ways that we can appreciate as artists the world of birding and birds through the lens of the things that we know, and at the same time injecting this otherness about it that allows us to completely appreciate these things just on their own.

Having that personal gratification of starting to really look at birds, learn about them, and how they move through the world and what motivates them, I just wanted to share that experience and talk to other people that had similar experiences or guide other people that were feeling isolated to have some kind of experience that took them out of them out of their moment or out of their mind, like Pallavi said, to look at the world around us. It’s such a cool opportunity to bond over that, and then invite these incredibly knowledgeable speakers with really interesting experiences to talk to us about it. I just think that level of information was both an opportunity for me to learn about what these people study and contributes, but also a really cool opportunity for these science-based researchers to talk to artists, and to give them a chance to reframe the work for a different audience. The feedback that I got after every lecture from the speakers that we invited was that people asked really great questions and questions that they’ve never gotten before. And, I think that’s kind of thrilling.

Gail Spake (A ’15): I’m usually a black box when I come to things because I paint when I listen to these meetings. I have to say, you guys have done an amazing job. The people that you’ve invited and the science-art-sharing curriculum has been really awesome. The people from Cornell Ornithology have blown my mind: like that guy goes and looks for nests in these wild places and that’s his job—I was jealous. I was like, I want to do that. So I want to thank you. That Skowhegan has a Bird Club was like, “Oh, that sounds like something I want to hear about.” But I had no idea what it was.

Binda Colebrook (A ’94): When I got the email about...
the Skowhegan Bird Club. I was working on a piece called the Hemlock Disappearing Act which looked at the demise of the Hemlock and the subspecies effect on species that rely on the Hemlock forest habitat, including a lot of species of birds. I was making detailed gouache paintings of those birds and it was totally amazed by their shapes, feather patterns and colors. There is nothing like looking at something up close and in detail to wake you up to something that was there all along. I have loved learning how to be a birder, and all the fascinating research on birds. Since then, new binoculars in hand, and the various birding apps on my phone, I have added a whole new dimension to going out into the landscape.

Gail: I think of birds as animals that make me aware that I’m part of the animal kingdom, because they’re with me. And last year, during COVID, I spent the year on an island where my studio was on the level of the height of the trees. I don’t know if you noticed, but the bird situation during COVID was crazy. It was more than I had ever seen. Because I was on the level of the birds, it was just stunning to me. I taped some of them—I don’t usually—videotape them. This is kind of a research, the next, and the bird song. The illustrator, the woman that talked about the placement of the birds was a little bit back on the head. Those bits of information add to whatever I end up talking about in relation to any body of work that I’m working on.

The other thing is, this is a very heartful group. It’s poetic and heartfelt and scientific and caring. It’s just very refreshing and grounding. So you say you find birds grounding. So do I. And that’s a joke, right?

Krista Caballero (A ’09): I think, as an alum, Skowhegan was such an incredible experience. It was also a complicated experience for me because I found out that my mom had a brain tumor during it. So I had to go back and forth. And, and so for me, actually, my experience at Skowhegan ended up being much more about the people, the support, and what artists as a community can do for each other. Since then, I don’t know how to say this, but if you don’t have a lot of money—how do you stay involved with Skowhegan? And this has been such a really meaningful way.

My artwork is very rooted for many, many years in birds, so for me this was just such a wonderful way of being able to connect with this incredible community of artists. I was part of a research, the next, and the bird song. The illustrator, the woman that talked about the placement of the birds was a little bit back on the head. Those bits of information add to whatever I end up talking about in relation to any body of work that I’m working on.

Krista: Yeah, and across discipline, right? Because, I found that to be so true. It’s like people across generations and disciplines are really interested in birds and, obviously, the speakers you’re bringing are an example of this art science connection. As somebody who’s really interested in situating the arts outside of just the arts, those kinds of moments are so beautiful and important.
death. Birds are the connector between land and sky, and life and death. It was my starting point for bird research. I like to study the philosophical meaning of birds as much as the Bird Club lectures on ornithology. Since Bird Club, I’ve spent more time on my bicycle. I witnessed birds hunting, such as a hawk hunting a pigeon in Central Park, and a crow hunting a pigeon around this wetland. I watched a hawk chase a magpie intensely. The hawk faltered and sat on a tree and then more than 20 magpies and crows sat together right next to this predator. Birds are not scared of killer or death. Likely, a dying love... Nature is interesting!

Speakers (Session 1)

Intro/How-To with Ash & Pallavi
April 29, 2021
Ash Ferlito (A ’12) & Pallavi Sen (A ’17)

Color, Material, and Emotion in Birds
May 13, 2021
Dr. Dakota McCoy

Show & Tell
May 28, 2021
Skowhegan Bird Club

The Amazing Sounds of Birds
June 10, 2021
Nathan Pieplow

Bird Song Share
June 24, 2021
Sarah Wagner (A ’15)

Searching for Lost Birds
July 8, 2021
John Mittermier

Show + Tell Recommendations Edition
July 22, 2021
Rachel Frank (A ’05)

Splendid Nests
August 5, 2021
Vanya Gregor Rohwer

Ink Dwell Studios
September 2, 2021
Jane Kim

To join or learn more about the Skowhegan Bird Club, visit: skowheganbird.club.

Follow on Instagram @skowheganbirdclub.