



You know it when you see it.

Not long ago my friend Mariana Cosse in Uruguay sent me a photo from the streets of Montevideo of a mural depicting a woman watching a heron through a scope. Painted bold reds and blues against the white exterior wall of a garage in a residential neighborhood, the mural suggested quiet time in nature, on a street where there is no sign of greenery. And not just time in nature, but a particularly recognizable angle: a woman with optics, a bird in her sightline. Boom, that's a birder!

MURAL BY ARTIST CECILIA RODRIGUEZ ODDONE (CECIRO), IN HER OWN WORDS.



This mural (came to be) in June 2020, in the midst of a pandemic where all projects were canceled or postponed. Because of a great need to go out and paint on the street, I did a scouting of free walls in the neighborhood, I found this wall, and when I asked the owners for permission to paint there, they offered me a payment for the mural. This mural is called Ecofeminism, a theme that I have been working on for years. It shows a woman observing a black heron in freedom. I (emphasize) the need for a paradigm shift in which caring for the environment is urgent and the close relationship between the female universe and care of natural resources. From my experience as a visual artist, I see art as a powerful tool for awareness and change.

The Birder

Illustrated

How Women Artists Are Capturing the People Side of a Practice **BY BRYONY ANGELL**

That image sent by Mariana propelled me on a search for more illustrated images of birders, and for my beat, female-identified birders if I could find them. And find them I did.

Why does this matter? We lovers of birds are accustomed to imagery of birds in art and photography, but seldom have we seen ourselves rendered in media in the same way as other people engaged in outdoor activities. Hunters, anglers, and horse people get their due, but where are the popular illustrated images of birders?

And what exactly is a “birder” image, and how did it become recognizable, parsed from a hunter or hiker? As birders we have visual cues in the field or when looking at images of ourselves. In my observation, a birder is framed with binoculars or a scope, and ideally a bird nearby for context. And she’s not holding a gun.

The idea of *watching* birds came into practice when bird conservation advocate Florence Merriam Bailey urged readers to use available optics to observe birds, instead of shooting them. Her book *Birds Through an Opera Glass*, published in 1889 in the US, is the earliest recorded evidence of this pivot from hobbyist and scientific collector of bird skins and eggs to benign, hands-off observation in recreational birding. Yes, we have a woman to thank for this quintessential birdwatcher profile. Bailey’s legacy deservedly holds, as you’ll see later in this story through the artwork of Andrea D’Aquino.

Like Bailey, the artists Stacie Balkaran, Andrea D’Aquino, Jenny Kroik, and Annamaria Savarino Drago revere birds and readily identify with Bailey’s suggested practice of bird observation. And like her, they are striving to popularize the practice of birding, this time visually. Balkaran, Kroik, and D’Aquino work as professional visual artists and communicators in different industries, while Savarino Drago’s background is as a field biologist. I spoke to them by phone to learn more about the origin of the specific image each produced, and below are their stories in their own words, lightly edited for clarity.

Why did you choose a birder as a subject? What is the story behind the image?

Andrea D’Aquino: I wrote and illustrated a picture book about a pioneering birder and naturalist (*She Heard the Birds: The Story of Florence Merriam Bailey*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2021). I learned of Merriam Bailey through the *New York Times* “Overlooked No More” obituary section. I was looking for a subject for another children’s book after the success of my book about artist and sculptor Ruth Asawa (*A Life Made by Hand: The Story of Ruth Asawa*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2019).

I had a gut feeling about Merriam Bailey being a great subject right away; she appealed to me personally. I live near the Hudson River in New York City and am drawn to nature. A book about her would be not just a history lesson, but include issues around birds, the environment, and the current state of things that are still relevant. She was an activist—she and others took a stand against a powerful industry [the feather trade].

Jenny Kroik: I have become obsessed with birding in the last two years. My friend Annie Novak was the one who got me addicted to birding, and our very first outing stands out in my mind. We went to Cape May, much earlier in the day than I ever wake up. If I had tried to do it on my own, it wouldn’t have stuck. You learn faster from good sources. [As an editorial illustrator] I paint a lot of what I see around me, so it makes sense that I painted a birder: me. Since it was during the pandemic, pre-vaccines, and I didn’t see a lot of people back then, I painted myself.

Annamaria Savarino Drago: Birding is important for me in my journey as a person; it is part of my identity. I don’t see images of women birding often, and want to see myself reflected in [the media]. I would have loved to see an image of a woman birding as a young woman. Women have inspired me to keep going in this field [of biology]. In Mexico [where I live], it’s still male-dominated, but this is changing. I wanted to

She Heard the Birds/Florence Merriam Bailey, mixed media (collage of hand-painted paper and drawing) by Andrea D’Aquino.



“I had a gut feeling about Merriam Bailey being a great subject right away; she appealed to me personally.”

—Andrea D’Aquino



draw an attractive girl, to show that loving nature is sexy. At the time I shared this image [2020], birding was becoming more popular among young people. I hope others see this and feel empowered.

Stacie Balkaran: Portland Audubon [Oregon] reached out to me because of Sam DeJarnett. I love Sam's podcast *Always Be Birdin'* and met her through social media. Birding ties me to an outside perspective of my life, and always from a place of joy. I appreciate the approach of birders like Sam, who encourage just looking up, seeing birds, and enjoying the jubilation in the discovery. It was a joy to make an illustration of Black birders for Sam's Instagram [@alwaysbebirdin].

Later, Sam was kind and brought my work up to Portland Audubon when they sought an artist to convey new sliding-scale programming: "The Bird Days of Summer." They wanted art depicting diverse people for the program's digital and print marketing materials. I worked with them while on the road moving from Oregon to Washington, DC, camping along the way. It was a cathartic way to say goodbye to Portland.

What did you want to evoke with the particular image?

Kroik: The painting was a conversation with my online community. I painted it as a quiz to see how many birds people can identify. A lot of the birds [in the image] were painted inaccurately, so it was a bit of a joke, too. It was a way to get people excited about birding and share with others how much fun I was having learning about birds.



"I paint a lot of what I see around me, so it makes sense that I painted a birder: me."

—Jenny Kroik

Birds of the New Jersey Coast, gouache on hot-press watercolor paper by Jenny Kroik.

Balkaran: In a world of flattening graphics, I am into lines. It's important in my line of work to show recognizable, real-world scenes—especially for neurodivergent people. The message "You are welcome here" can be really clear when you look and see yourself. "The Bird Days of Summer" illustration is a celebration of intergenerational families, people of color, and people with physical disabilities enjoying nature and feeling safe amidst it. The events are family-friendly, so showing how different families show up felt important to attract the community Portland Audubon wanted to grow. The natural landscapes reflect the programming's different locations, from Mt. Hood area to the Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden in Portland.

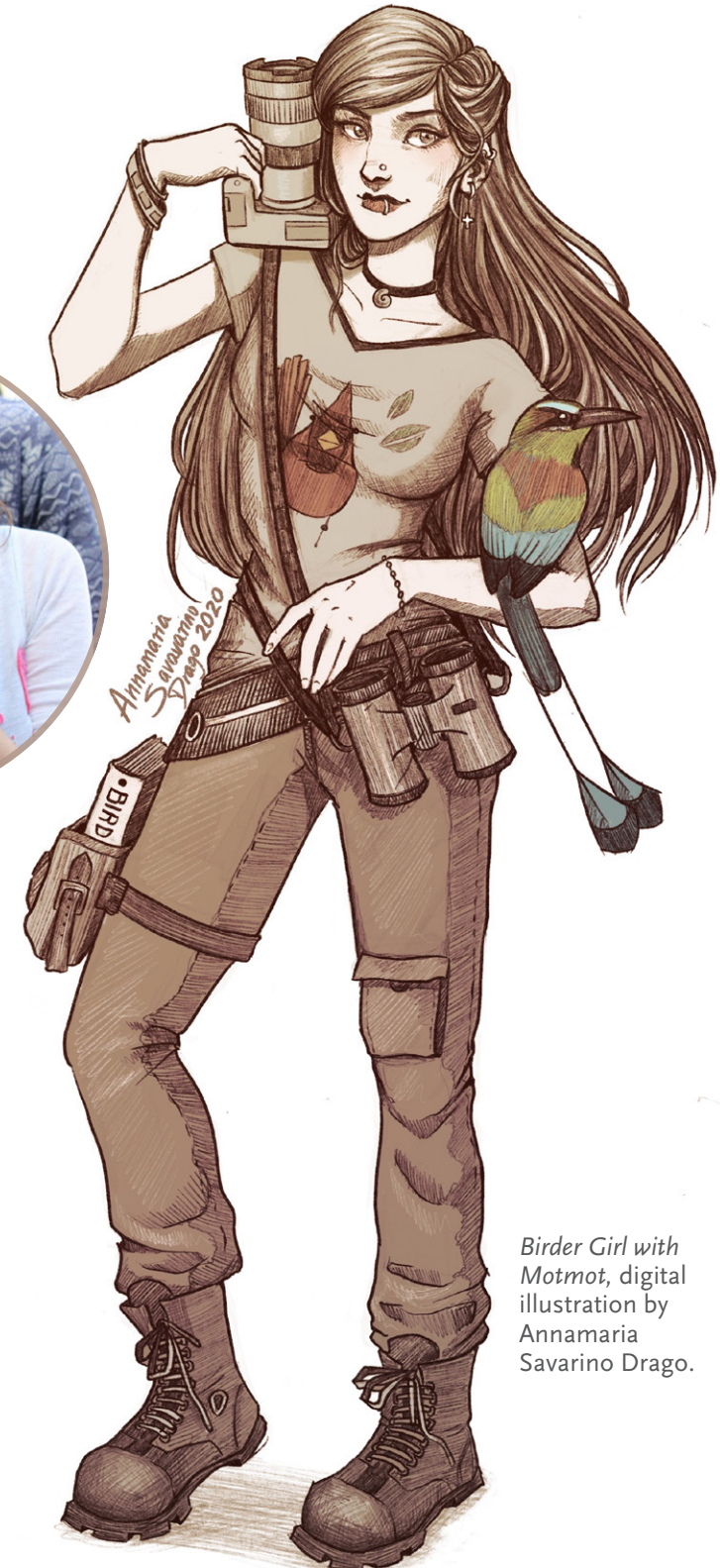
Savarino Drago:

A woman with binoculars means more than birding, [she] means strength, empathy, being fun, independent. These are qualities for life that I have taken from the women around me. She embodies what (and who) I admire: Her piercing reminds me of a dear friend; her T-shirt is a Charlie Harper design. There is always a reflection of myself in these drawings [too]. I'm a field biologist, studying birds. Since I posted this image, four women naturalists have commissioned me for portraits of themselves with their favorite birds.



"I would have loved to see an image of a woman birding as a young woman."

—Annamaria Savarino Drago



Birder Girl with Motmot, digital illustration by Annamaria Savarino Drago.



“I am feeling the tension of needing to tell this story while the land is here.”

—Stacie Balkaran



The Bird Days of Summer, digital illustration by Stacie Balkaran.

What's next?

Savarino Drago: I want to develop a web comic of this girl and the motmot. I'd love to draw a regional bird guide. One of the motifs in my drawings is the interaction of people and nature. I like to represent this connection as much as I can.

Kroik: I have painted other birders since then, including Annie from the Cape May trip. *The New Yorker* published the series I did of a visit to the Wild Bird Fund in New York City (“One Bird at a Time,” *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2022). There are a lot of fun stories [about birders] to be told [through illustration]!

Balkaran: I have an idea for a graphic novel about my relationship with birds, my Indo-Caribbean ancestry, climate change, and how bird behavior is changing. I have never birded in Trinidad [where my family is from], but relatives there have sent images of the climate crisis. By the end of my life, it's unclear if this small island will still exist. It certainly won't in its current form. I want to explore the implications of not being able to experience the place as my

ancestors did; how it feels to wrestle with identity amidst the loud ticking clock of the climate crisis. I am prepped and ready, and feeling the tension of needing to tell this story while the land is here to connect with still.

D'Aquino: I hope my book may introduce kids to a woman of accomplishment [who] at least up till now, has gotten little attention. 🐦

Find and learn more about these artists online:

- **Stacie Balkaran:** staciebalkaran.com
- **Andrea D'Aquino:** andreadaquino.com
- **Jenny Kroik:** jennykroik.com
- **Annamaria Savarino Drago:** [instagram.com/a.savarino](https://www.instagram.com/a.savarino)

Bryony Angell writes and birds from western Washington state. Birding culture is her beat; read more of her work at bryonyangell.com.

