Journeys@Home

Backyard Birding

Artist-explorer Tony Foster rarely includes wildlife in his watercolor landscapes, but his souvenirs provide clues about the animals encountered while painting in the wild. In this work he features paintings of flamingo feathers as a nod to the birds that thrive near the Parinacota volcano in South America.

There is a lot to learn about our feathered friends that may surprise you. Get ready to meet some new neighbors, the birds that make their home right outside your door!

Before You Go

Study the types of birds that may live nearby. If you’re in the Bay Area and are just getting started, www.siliconvalleybirding.org is a great place to start. Try out Song Sleuth, an app that helps identify birds by their song. Also, check out The Foster’s website for many ideas and resources in our online learning program, Journeys@Home.

Choose gear to help record your observations, and now it’s time to explore!
Get Outside

From exploring nature in your own yard to tuning into the wildlife in a nearby park, there are endless opportunities to explore the wild around you. Get ready to meet the birds who live nearby but belong to a fascinating class of animals found in a diverse range of habitats all over the world.

LOOK AROUND

Venture into your yard or take a walk down the street. Be as quiet as you can, as you’ll usually hear birds before you see them. Try to sketch details about each bird’s feathers, beaks, and feet. What might each feature tell you about their behavior? Keep an eye out for nests. They might be in a tree, on the ground, or even near your own roofline. Learning how birds nest can show you how they keep safe from predators.

FIND A SIT SPOT

Find a spot close to home where you can sit regularly and observe nature. You will begin to know the birds that live nearby and how their calls change depending on their mood. Visit at different times of day and different times of year so you build a connection to the place like a friendship.

SOUVENIR CHALLENGE

Collecting and creating souvenirs is central to Tony Foster’s process. He finds objects like maps, soil, and rocks, and draws detailed studies of flora and fauna which he keeps as reminders of his experiences in the wild. These souvenirs symbolize a place’s history, adding a meaningful layer to his landscapes while preserving the natural health and beauty of the wilderness. Can you create a unique souvenir to remind you of your birding adventure? Try to search for something that symbolizes the natural history of your neighborhood. Consider drawing or photographing your object, being careful to leave your wilderness as you found it.

BACK TO YOUR STUDIO

Tony Foster’s works are rarely completed onsite. Only through the lenses of time and memory does the story he’d like to share come to life. Share your notes, drawings, and memories with each other and see how they might be incorporated into one of the following projects.

Allen’s Hummingbird
*Selasphorus sasin*
Photo by Glenn Bush

Acorn Woodpecker
*Melanerpes formicivorus*
Photo by Marlin Harms

Red-Winged Blackbird
*Agelaius phoeniceus*
Photo by Phil Kahler
Activity: Bird Nests

THE TOOLS YOU’LL NEED

• 1 Cup Baking Soda
• ½ Cup Cornstarch
• ¾ Cup Water
• Mixing Bowl
• Cooking Pot
• Plastic Wrap
• Natural Materials gathered from your yard or during your walk. If you saw a bird nest on your walk, consider trying to create your nest from the same materials that the birds used for theirs.

Step 1
Pour 1 cup baking soda and ½ cup cornstarch into a bowl. Whisk together. Add ¾ cup water and mix together until it is of uniform consistency.

Step 2
Heat mixture on the stove over medium heat until it thickens. Stir the mixture until it looks like lumpy mashed potatoes.

Step 3
Pour the mixture into a bowl, and cover it with plastic wrap. Push the plastic wrap down on the mixture to keep it from being exposed to air and drying out. Allow the mixture to cool.

Step 4
Once cool, knead the dough until it is uniform in consistency. It should have a silky texture. Shape into a bowl, which will serve as the base of your nest.

Step 5
Push in the natural materials that you’d like to include in your nest.

Step 6
Once you’ve added all the materials you’d like, let your nest air dry overnight. Keep as a memento of your first family birding adventure.
Activity: Bird Feeders

Continue to learn more about the birds in your backyard by inviting them closer with homemade bird feeders.

THE TOOLS YOU’LL NEED

- Bagels (preferably left overnight to harden)
- Bird Seed
- Peanut Butter (Sun Butter or Lard will also work)
- Twine or String
- Container for Bird Seed

Step 1
Cover your bagel in peanut butter (or alternative).

Step 2
Roll your covered bagel in bird seed.

Step 3
Loop string through the bagel hole, and tie the ends together.

Step 4
Pick a spot in your yard where the birds can find their special treat!

WHO COMPETES WITH BIRDS FOR FOOD?

As you watch to see which birds your feeder may attract, you might be surprised to see the other animals who are drawn to your bird feeder. In what other ways do these animals compete and coexist with your neighborhood birds? Draw or write notes to document the story of your bird feeder. How long did it last in your yard?