

THE ART OF FLOCKING



A Birding to Change the World

ACTION GUIDE

BY TRISH O'KANE © 2025

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Birding to Change the World*.

Thank you for loving our feathered friends.

This action-guide expands on the book's main themes. It aims to connect you to your neighbors, both feathered and human. And to the nature that surrounds you, whether you live in a large city, tiny town, or in the countryside. I've written it with nature lovers, teachers, students, citizens and neophyte birders in mind. It can be used to develop curricula or for community organizing. And not just on behalf of birds! You know from the book that birds defend their territories and their young ingeniously in mostly non-violent ways, repelling enormous predators like us. They can teach us how to defend our beloved home territories, our democracy, and our planet. They've turned defense mechanisms into art forms through singing, dancing, and flying. Every day they show us the way forward.

Each chapter includes a set of "homing-work" options based on my awakening. There are three categories of homing-work:



1. Be the Bird

physical activities to get your heart pounding and your soul singing



2. Explore

walking adventures to discover your home territory and to meet other nature- and justice-loving humans

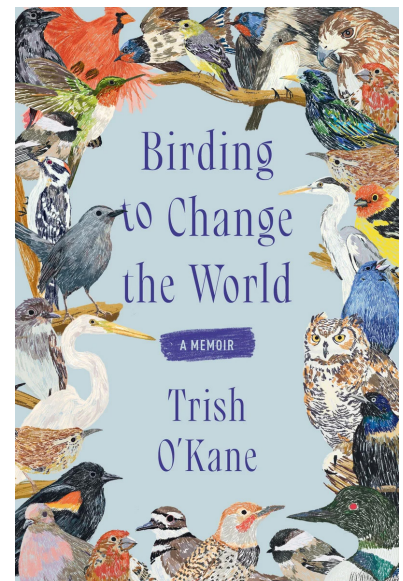


3. Flex Your Citizenship Muscles

research and organizing exercises to defend your territory and to connect more deeply with all your neighbors, both human and more-than-human.

Pick and choose the homing-work that most appeals to your soul, skip around, or try them all.

For readers who are already flexing their citizenship muscles on behalf of a place, a tree, your neighbors, other living beings, our democracy, our children, or any cause that lives and beats in your hearts, the *Flex Your Citizenship Muscles* activities are especially for you. If you're trying to start a local group, check out the nuts-and-bolts background material in the appendix on how Wild Warner began. For teachers, the appendix also includes the syllabus I use when I teach my *Birding to Change the*



World course. Have at it. Educators in several states are creating their own versions. I invite you to join them!

Gear | Many activities involve exploring on foot. Wear good shoes and comfortable clothes. You'll be more effective and you'll give yourself some surprisingly welcome peace if you leave your phone at home. I recommend carrying a small backpack with food, water, a small notebook or fieldbook, binoculars if you have them, and a bird identification field guide. You may also need a clipboard with blank paper for drawing. Instead of buying expensive binoculars and a new bird identification guide, reach out to elderly relatives or elderly neighbors, or try your local used bookstore. Is there a bird lover in your family or neighborhood? My father's old National Geographic field guide was published in 2002 but goes with me, everywhere. Yes, I have newer, fancier guides I study at home. But you read my book so you know why my father's guide is so precious to me. I have students who come with tears in their eyes to show me a grandparent's field guide. They point to their grandparent's notes in the margins and tell me how those notes bring them closer to that family elder who may be gone. A bird field guide can be an intergenerational bridge, every page full of memories and magic.

A Final Suggestion | A final suggestion: this is a scary time for our country and for our planet. We need each other more than ever. This is why students in my Birding to Change the World course at the University of Vermont must choose a class "bird buddy." My students complete weekly birding assignments with their buddy and even write some papers together. You, dear reader, will have a lot more fun if you walk and cavort and poke around with a comrade. Remember that the book is about activism powered by joy.

Joy, first!



Prologue



BE THE BIRD!

During COVID I realized that my students and I needed more joy. So I started class by learning a bird dance or song together. Today you are going to learn one of the easiest bird dances — the Woodcock Booty Bob. Go to [Funky American Woodcock](#). Sip your coffee and watch this video very carefully. Now stand up and rock it! The Woodcock Booty Bob is really great for your diaphragm and pelvis. We all sit too much. You might want to incorporate it into your daily exercise routine. When I'm writing, I get up frequently and bob my booty.



EXPLORE

Take a Starling Stroll

The prologue of my book introduces the concept of a murmuration, where starlings swirl together through the sky by the hundreds, thousands, even millions in a massive choreography of beating wings (pgs. xiv-xv). Scientists who have studied murmurations for nearly two decades discovered that the giant swirls are usually activated by one bird who begins turning when she sees a predator in the distance. Seven neighboring birds see that first bird turning to escape the predator and follow suit. Each of those seven starlings activates seven more in a feathered law of seven. Wherever you live, there are probably starlings and they are easy to find and to watch. They are also loud and make strange whistly noises from the treetops (they can also be trained to talk — google that!).

Find the nearest starling hangout near your home. Watch them 10-15 minutes every day for a week, or as many days as you can. When they whistle, can you whistle back? Try it. They don't care if you're a crappy whistler. That's one of the perks of hanging out with birds — they're not judgmental.

When birds find a safe territory with food, they usually stick to it. Your starlings will probably be in the same spot every morning at the same time. They like tall trees and power lines so they can see that predator coming. Sit down and enjoy the show. If they suddenly take off and start swirling, use your laser vision to see if a slightly larger bird is pursuing them. In my neighborhood cemetery where I take my starling strolls, the feathered chaser is a merlin, a small falcon with very pointy wings. The first time I realized this, I was astonished because at that time, you rarely saw merlins in cities. But thanks to urban pigeons, starlings and house sparrows, this gorgeous little falcon is ripping across our city skylines, making its sweet and strange high-pitched giggle. Look up MERLIN on Cornell University's public portal, [allaboutbirds.org](#). Hit "sounds" and listen to that giggle. Now giggle like a merlin!





FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Study a Murmuration

Is there a social movement you admire and want to learn about? Scroll through the “Reading to Change the World” list at the end of my book. Find a book that can help you and if you’re in a local book club, get your reading comrades to read that book so you can all learn together. Or maybe your community was the site of a movement that made history. Maybe your community parks or bike paths or affordable, beautiful public housing, or renewable energy projects or serious local civil rights protection all happened because of a handful of unsung heroes. Who started that murmuration? Who was the very first human starling to make a turn? How and why did they do it? How did they persuade the human starlings around them to turn? Find out. If these local starlings are still alive — interview them. Study my dissertation chapter in the appendix to help you prepare for the interviews. Chapter eight of my dissertation is based on long interviews with three unsung hero-starlings who protected Warner Park for decades before I moved there. I interviewed them for hours, several times and learned so much (two of the three are in the book, Heddie Jacobsen and Jack Hurst). After you interview a local starling-hero, publish that interview in local media or share it on social media. If your local heroes are not alive, use the public library, especially archives of neighborhood newsletters and local media, to find out what they did and how they did it. Ask a reference librarian for help (a reference librarian is your best friend — they know where to find the buried treasure).

Gratitude is attitude. Buy some flowers and visit the grave of that local hero. Sit down and talk to them. Thank them as you leave the beautiful bouquet. And if you really want to thank them, start your own murmuration for justice or join the murmurations happening in communities all over the country in organizations like [50501](#) and [Indivisible](#).



CHAPTER 1

Strange Teachers



BE THE BIRD!

Now that you have your Woodcock Booty Bob perfected (you've been practicing every day, right?), teach it to a buddy or family; kids love bird dancing. Use the video. Or choose your own music. Make your own video!



EXPLORE

Follow the Water

In this first chapter, water, in the form of a category 5 hurricane, becomes one of my most important life teachers. Since Katrina, I see water very differently. Katrina forced me to think about how water flows through my life, my home, and my home territory and how I use it and abuse it. Now, wherever I go, I want to know where this lifegiving source is coming from and where it is headed to. This exploration will help you discover how water flows through your home territory. And if you haven't found a buddy, yet — do it. Because this is the perfect buddy activity.

Do you like Sherlock Holmes? Imagine him hot on the trail of water (or swimming underwater in that trench coat with his magnifying glass). Put on your trench coat and follow the water in your neighborhood. Here are four different watery scenarios:

1. **If there is a wetland, stream, river, lake or pond near your home, spend 15-20 minutes a day sitting on the shore.** Who uses the water? Who lives there? Does it look clean? Loved? Do these waters have a name?
2. **If there is no water body near your home, wait until after it rains or walk in the rain!** Then go on a puddle search. Find the biggest puddle in your neighborhood, stomp in it, and then sit under a tree close by that puddle, but not too close. Settle in for 15 to 20 minutes. Who drinks from this puddle? Who bathes in it? You might surprise a robin in their morning clean-up ritual or you might see a squirrel drinking.
3. **Stormwater drains are another explorer's treasure.** The kids I work with just love them and I have to be careful to make sure they don't go in too far. When you get home, find out where that stormwater goes. How far is the nearest sewage treatment plant from your home? Are there news reports on what happens when it rains too much, too fast? Does the stormwater system get overwhelmed? Where does the untreated water end up? Go on a tour of your local sewage treatment plant.

4. Local fishermen are amazing sources on water quality, and the older they are, the more they know. I could never have written my dissertation or my book without Jack Hurst. Get in a kayak or canoe and chase down a local fisherman. Interview them from your kayak or canoe perch. What do they catch? How do they cook it? What's the biggest, craziest fish they've ever caught? (Fishermen love questions like this). How does fishing make them feel? How have the fish species changed over the years? What is happening to the water quality? Don't assume it's all bad news because people across the country have worked hard to clean up local waters — thank you environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, President Richard Nixon (credit where credit is due), and the 1972 Clean Water Act, which we need to defend.

When you get home, draw a rough map of the water. If your buddy is still with you, have a coffee and discuss your discoveries.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Study Alarm Networks

In this chapter I describe the Avian News Network (ANN) I heard operating in New Orleans on the levee, 48 hours before Katrina hit (pgs. 12-18). Chickadees make an alarm call that can travel 100 mph and that at least 50 bird species — and even squirrels and chipmunks — understand. Who are the human-chickadees in your neighborhood, the first to notice a developing problem and the first to warn everyone? How do they warn everyone? Is it through Front Porch Forum or other hyper-local media? If you don't already use that media — start studying it. I learned very quickly in Madison, Wisconsin that the most important media to protect Warner Park was our free printed neighborhood newsletter.



CHAPTER 2

C'est Levee

**BE THE BIRD!**

Find a cardinal in your neighborhood. If you can, go look for one in the morning when these birds sing loudly. Cardinals are one of the few species where both the red male and the tawny female sing. Watch one sing for at least 10 minutes and then go home and look up “cardinal” on Cornell’s allaboutbirds.org. There you’ll find everything you ever wanted to know about your neighborhood bird and you can watch videos of the bird singing. If you can whistle, experiment and try to sing with the videos. If you can’t whistle (learn to whistle — it’s so much fun!), then sing along, using this mnemonic, “Birdie, birdie, birdie.” If you really don’t want to do this because you think you cannot imitate a bird, watch this video: [Woman Who Can Make 146 Birdcalls](#). And here is another hilarious video I use to teach loon calls: [Barefoot Bushcraft](#). The point isn’t perfection — the point is to try! Make a fool of yourself! If you have kids or work with kids, it’s such a playful way to learn together. Did you know that humans use just two percent of the air we breathe to sing, while birds use almost 100%? Avians’ extremely efficient use of oxygen is why a tiny bird like the winter wren — weighing the same as three-quarters of a tablespoon of sugar — can produce ten times the sound of a rooster, pound for pound. Little kids love to make noise so they find this science interesting.

**EXPLORE****Put the Humor into Your Humurus**

As you know from reading my book, I come from a warzone family in Northern Ireland. I also had the honor and privilege of living in Central America for ten years, where I worked as a human rights investigative journalist. In Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala, I was surrounded by incredibly courageous super-citizens determined to change their countries. I learned from them and from my Irish family that laughing in the face of extreme adversity was how they had dealt with centuries of political and economic chaos (singing, dancing and drinking also helps). I found that same life-saving humor and rich culture in New Orleans. In the aftermath of Katrina, people clung even more fiercely to their traditions, prancing in Mardi Gras parades just months after the hurricane, which seemed totally demented to me at that time. But their stubborn humor and determination to find daily joy was contagious. On my morning walks to Loyola University to teach, my eyes were drawn to funny yard signs and strange graffiti. As you know from reading this chapter, these moments helped me get through some very



rough teaching days. And they will help you, too. That's why for one week on your regular morning walk, while you're noticing the birds and squirrels, keep your eyes open for funny stuff. Your homing-work is to find at least one funny, quirky, weird, and wonderful thing every day in your neighborhood that makes you laugh.

When you get home, get a piece of butcher block paper. You are about to begin your neighborhood map on which you'll record some of your weekly homing-work. Start by drawing a rough grid of your closest neighborhood streets with squares for houses. Number them. If there are water features or woods in your neighborhood, draw big circles for those (or if you're an artist — go for it). Once you have that grid of houses, start recording the daily funny stuff. Do your neighbors have weird lawn ornaments? Funny signs? Every year, my neighbor sets up an army of lighted elves, tin soldiers, and giant candy canes on his front lawn for Christmas. Last year this neighbor had a major family health disaster, so I wanted to make him laugh. After dark, I “donated” two new lawn features (a lighted Virgin Mary and a lighted and very sparkly Santa's mailbox) to his display. His family spent two weeks trying to figure out who the donor was. When I finally confessed, we had a hearty laugh together.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Based on what you've learned during your week-long Funny Walk, try one of these activities. Make a funny lawn sign. Write some jokes. Or learn five innocuous jokes and tell one a day to someone for five days. Take a loved one or lonely neighbor to a comedy show. Draw funny cartoons with your kids. Write silly limericks. “Donate” a lawn ornament. Celebrate every April Fool's Day!

I'm very lucky because in Vermont we have [Bread and Puppets](#). Do you have a local theater group you can support? Or a group that organizes funny parades and uses satire to get people to think? Do you have any skills you could volunteer? Maybe you could help build funny floats like New Orleanians do during the months they prepare for Mardi Gras. See [Krewe du Vieux Parade 2025](#) to get inspired and to laugh your head off.

CHAPTER 3

Song of the House Sparrow



BE THE BIRDFEEDER!

If you've read Mark Bittner's marvelous *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, you know how the simple act of standing outside, hands filled with birdseed, changed his life. Time to channel your inner St. Francis. Study the [Bird Whisperer's step-by-step method](#) for handfeeding. And then stand outside in your yard for about 20 minutes a day for a week, absolutely still, hands filled with seeds. Make it your daily meditation. If you don't have a yard, you can do this on an apartment balcony. Some people wear huge sombreros and put seed on the brim. Get a sombrero. Or try handfeeding at your nearest park. Join the pigeon-feeders. They'll teach you and tell you amazing stories about these unfairly maligned marvelous birds (how quickly we forget the [heroic carrier pigeons](#) that saved thousands of soldiers during WWI and WWII).



EXPLORE

Hug a House Sparrow

As you learned in this chapter, house sparrows are among the most despised avians on earth. And yet, these scrappy little birds saved my sanity during one of the roughest times of my life. This week, take a house sparrow walk. You'll find them in your neighbors' hedges because they are the English house sparrow, so they love our English hedges. In a city, you'll find them under restaurant tables stealing crumbs. Or try your local Lowe's or Home Depot and follow the chirps. Spread seed on the ground in front of you and see how close they will come. Can you imitate their chirp? Can you distinguish the black-throated male from the female? Now, go back to your beautiful, evolving magical neighborhood map. Draw the house sparrow hot spots on it and jot down the types of vegetation in hot spots. Also record all the birdfeeders you've noticed on neighbor's front lawns. Are the house sparrows gathering at the feeders? How many birdhouses have you seen on neighbor's lawns? Are house sparrows coming in and out of them?



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Research

The house sparrows gave me the emotional strength to teach in New Orleans after Katrina. As I taught in the ruined city, I realized I wanted my students to see who was doing the rebuilding. We quickly learned that most of the people doing the hardest, dirt-



iest work removing mountains of toxic debris were migrant workers from Latin America. They were forced to do it without safety equipment because their employers did not provide any, despite federal regulations. If there has been a climate disaster in your community, who cleans up the mess? Where do the workers live during the clean-up? Did they lose their own homes? Or did they come from somewhere else to do this essential work? Search online for local news stories or health studies on how toxins released in the water or air during flooding or fires affect public health.

Find a local group that supports these rebuilders. Contact this group and ask what they need. Offer your skills or resources. If you have language skills, offer to interpret. If you like to write — write a public thank-you letter to this group and publish it as a letter-to-the-editor or an op-ed. In Burlington, Vermont, where I live, that organization is [Migrant Justice-Justicia Migrante](#), which has developed a powerful local organizing model to defend workers' rights. If you're an artist or graphic designer, offer to design posters or spruce up that organization's website. Whatever it is you can do with whatever skills and love you have — do it. Do it for your immigrant ancestors who fled persecution or famine or war or genocide or racism. Do it because every small act of love has ripple effects that can help overcome the current wave of hatred and vitriol. If you're in a local book club, pick one of the books on racism or migration on the "Reading to Change the World" list at the end of my book. If you're not in a book club — join one! Or start one.

CHAPTER 4

Our Lady of the Applesauce



BE YOUR FAVORITE BIRD!

In this chapter, I discover a grey catbird meowing in my Madison backyard, which leads to my dissertation, an ornithology study on catbird migration, and eventually, the book. The catbird is still my favorite bird; a pair nests in my yard, every spring. Because of three summers of catbird field study in Warner Park, I learned the catbird's signature meow call, its rat-a-tat-tat loud alarm call, and its soft-kwut-kwut-kwut warning. Now in Vermont, when my catbird arrives in the morning to peck at the orange halves I leave out for him (often smeared with jelly), I can drive him crazy from my porch, meowing. He flies right up to the screen and peers in to challenge the male catbird invading his territory (I don't do this often). Who is your favorite bird? This week your homing-work is to become their Avian Ambassador. Start by using allaboutbirds.org to learn their song and alarm call. Even if you can't imitate it, at least learn to understand their language. Practice walking the way they walk. If they have a mating or courtship dance — learn it. If you are crafty — make a papier-mâché bird head or a bird mask. One semester my students surprised me by creating a playlist of songs with lyrics about birds. Find songs written about your bird and make your own playlist! Dance to it with your buddy or your kids. Find one poem about your bird and memorize it. Recite it to your buddy. Teach that poem to your buddy. Are there any popular sayings about your bird? For example, I really love “In the catbird seat,” which means you're sitting on top of the world just like this bird that is often perched on top of a bush so it can see. Learn a funny saying and use it every day for a week. Make a lawn sign or a bumper sticker with your bird's saying on it! Have fun answering questions from neighbors or people in parking lots staring at your bumper sticker.



EXPLORE

Follow Your Favorite Bird

For your homing-work, follow your favorite bird around the neighborhood. First, spend some time on allaboutbirds.org learning about your bird's nesting preferences; then get your buddy to help find possible nesting sites. The easiest way to do this is to watch your bird very closely in the spring. If your bird is a robin and you see it poking around on your lawn, gathering worms, watch which tree the bird flies to (it's best to do this from a distance and using binoculars because bird parents do not want to lead predators to their nests). You'll find that perfectly round mud and grass nest tucked in that tree somewhere. If you stand under the tree, especially in the morning, you'll hear the babies crying to be fed. Another way to find a robin's nest is to watch for robins with mud smeared on their chests in the spring. These are the mother-potters



out gathering building materials. They use their breast as a pottery tool to press the mud into a bowl. After you've found the magic nest, add it to your neighborhood map. Keep following your bird around and find your bird's food sources, water sources and safe roosting spots where they sleep at night. You are going to record all of this new information on your neighborhood map. You can find your bird's sleeping spot by watching where they fly to right at sunset. In some species, the males sleep together in a separate location from their mates. I love watching my yard robins do their little "goodnight, sweetie," routine. The male perches near his mate and gives a soft little "goodnight" cry before he flies off to join his pals in the male robin roost. She sleeps near the nest.

If you want to dig deeper about your bird use Cornell's academic database [Birds of the World](#), which compiles and summarizes the best scientific studies on each avian species, dating back a century. It also has a lot of crazy avian and human history, along with great graphic resources, song recordings, and maps of birds' migration routes. This is your go-to source, full of bird lore and strange factoids, to help meet your goal of becoming the most annoying person at any cocktail party.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Bake It Till You Make It

If Heddie Jacobsen hadn't crossed the street with a warm homemade apple coffeecake for us on our very first morning in Madison, I might not have written my book. That cake was the beginning of a relationship with one of my most important Warner Park teachers. Because of that cake, my husband bakes bread for new neighbors and I hand them a jar of my homemade raspberry or strawberry jam. Pull out your recipe books, especially the old ones that belonged to your mother or grandmother with stale flour still dusting their cover or gooey pages stuck together. Bake a treat and leave it on a new neighbor's doorstep or leave it on the doorstep of a neighbor you've never spoken to, before. If baking isn't your thing, give your new neighbor a little basket of locally-produced goods from a farmer's market. Include a packet of native flower seeds in your welcome-new-neighbor basket. Or pick a fresh bouquet from your yard, stick it in a mason jar, and take it to them. One of my favorite sayings comes from the women's suffrage campaign, "Bread for all and roses, too." I have a lot of wild roses and when I know a neighbor is hurting, I quietly leave a small shallow bowl full of them on their doorstep.



CHAPTER 5

The Quiet Broken Ones



BE THE BIRD!

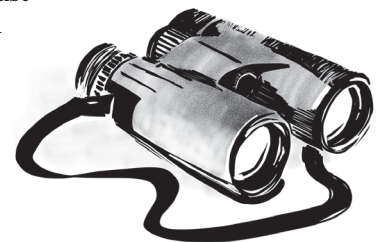
You've now learned to sing and dance like a bird, and you've learned where some of your favorite birds live and nest. You've also identified their potential food and water sources. Chapter Five is about the connection between our mental and physical health, and how nature can heal all of us in our quiet brokenness. Public health studies in several countries have shown that what's good for avians, is also very good for *Homo sapiens*. In neighborhoods with more vegetation and more birds, people are less stressed, less depressed, and less anxious. In England, researchers concluded that our mental health improves when watching "common" birds like blackbirds, robins, and crows (pg. 111). When we help birds, we help ourselves. So *be the bird* this week by thinking like a human parent of small children and then thinking like a bird parent, a creature that sings with the dawn and sleeps right after sunset. Sit down with your beautiful map that is becoming more layered and interesting with every walk you take (do this with your buddy and you can compare maps). You are going to study your own map carefully and take notes. Imagine you are a new bird in town, flying low over the neighborhood to scout out a good territory in which to raise your family. Are there enough big trees and bushes? Are there scraggly, weedy places where insects — birds' best protein — can hide and thrive? Or is your neighborhood manicured and mowed to a nub? Does everyone have a lawn? Do your neighbors use pesticides and have "chem" lawn signs? Are there any wildflowers? Are there any native plants or have people planted ornamentals that do not feed local insects? Is there fresh, clean water, clear puddles where birds can safely drink and children can play in the rain?



EXPLORE

The Lightscape, the Soundscape

Birds and most animals, including us, live by the rise and fall of the sun — this determines our circadian rhythms. What is the lightscape in your neighborhood? Do lights blaze into bedroom windows where children are trying to sleep and shine on trees where baby birds are in nests or where their parents are roosting? How dark is your neighborhood? What is the soundscape like in your neighborhood? Birds, especially young ones, need quiet just like human children. Studies show that loud noises raise our stress levels and can interrupt our sleep patterns, which can affect a child's ability to learn in school. Are there loud concerts, ballgames, and fireworks, in your neighborhood? Are there cars without mufflers zooming up and down your street? Do you live near a major traffic artery? Record any noisy and lighted trouble spots you've discovered on your map. When you're ready to join a murmuration — or start one of your own — these are places where you can make a difference.





FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Lawn Liberation Time!

Start flexing your citizenship muscles by reading entomologist Doug Tallamy's fantastic book, *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*. Get out your highlighter and take notes. There are some very exciting ideas in this book. Don't be overwhelmed — you are going to start very, very small. I suggest a circle that is just three feet in diameter. There are so many resources to help you do it. But look at your neighbor's yards, first. Is there someone who has already done it and who can mentor you? Many communities now offer free resources and assistance to plant native plants and convert your lawn. Robin Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, and a friend and mentor of mine, just founded [Plant, Baby, Plant!](#), a national organization with local chapters, everywhere. [Plant, Baby, Plant!](#) can help you transform your yard, one beautiful inch at a time. Also, check out your local garden store and your local university's extension programs online. Do they have a master gardening program you could enroll in?

If you do not have a lawn, try planting on a tiny section of the city terrace. Research your local ordinances, first, and see what you can do. Volunteer to help liberate a lawn at your local school or church. If you live in an apartment — liberate your balcony. Even just one beautiful potted plant with large red blossoms might attract a curious, hungry hummingbird. However, you can — *get your hands dirty!*

I composted my front lawns several years ago. One fall, I covered the grass with newspaper, leaves, and a tarp, for the winter. By early spring, the grass had died and turned into nutrient-packed soil on which I dumped a large bag of wildflower seed. Within a month, I had a beautiful mini-meadow. Because of this meadow, several times a day, a neighbor stops to admire the emerging flowers. And because I am often outside weeding, harvesting and planting, I have met so many neighbors. I know the names of their dogs and their children. In the seven years I've lived in this neighborhood, I've had just one complaint about the meadow. This lawn liberation has been the easiest way to meet neighbors and create community. And that community includes butterflies, fireflies (which had almost disappeared around here), beetles that migrating birds love to eat, and hummingbirds buzzing and diving into the bee balm, and the scarlet blossoms of my scarlet runner beans. I also threw piles of seeds of basil, sage, lemon balm, oregano, parsley, cilantro, lavender, and rosemary into the meadow. Now I can walk outside and grab handfuls of herbs to throw on a salad or give away. Our year's supply of garlic, along with potatoes and tomatoes, grow behind the tiny meadow.

CHAPTER 6

A Category Five Plan



BE THE BIRD!

This week you are going to call like an owl. Owl calls are easier than most birdsongs. The easiest of all is the great horned owl's, "Who, who, who, who, who!" Use allaboutbirds.org to learn and practice. The eastern screech owl also has some fun screechy calls to try. If you're really adventurous, try the barred owl's booming, "Who cooks for you?" If you have kids, go outside at night and practice your owl calls. Spread out and call back and forth!



EXPLORE

Take an Owl Nest Walk With Your Buddy

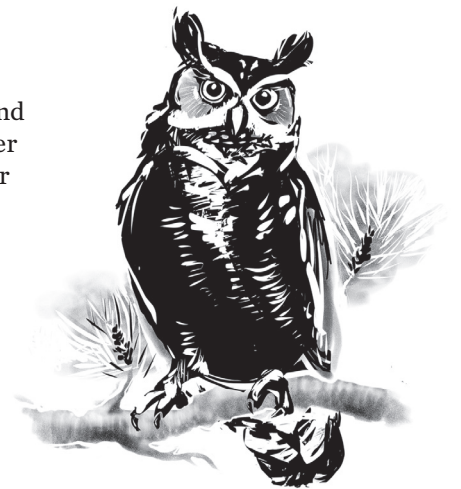
You know from this chapter how my personal biases complicated my search for an owl nest in Warner Park. Don't make my mistake and only search in the nearest woods. Those owls could be nesting right in front of someone's apartment window if the tree is big enough. Crows are also your allies when you are searching for owls. Crows hate owls because the owls eat their young. So if you hear a bunch of angry crows — run after them. You're very likely to find them giving crow hell to an owl or a neighborhood hawk. This is called "mobbing" and many birds, even tiny ones do it during parenting season. I'm always amazed to see a much smaller crow inching up to an owl, three times its' height, and feinting a punch with its beak. Stand back and watch crows zoom in from all directions to help their buddies. I've watched between 30 and 50 crows drive away enormous great horned owls just by shouting at the larger bird.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Help Migrating Birds

If it's springtime, get on Clemson University's Birdcast migration site and watch the radar light up as billions of birds head north, maybe right over you (you can also use it in the fall when the birds return south). Check your local bird group's species list or Ebird for a list of bird species that migrate through your area. Now look up those birds on allaboutbirds.org. Make a chart of where they are coming from and where they are headed to. Are there any marathon fliers coming from or going to South America? Look for warbler species, the tiny jeweled birds that fly north from South America and the Caribbean, many crossing the Gulf of Mexico. Which bird travels the furthest? How can you share that bird's story with your community? Sit down with your buddy or your kids



and draw that little bird. Maybe even draw the bird on your own hand-made map of its migration journey! Contact the editor of your neighborhood newsletter and offer them your drawing and a short story about this local migrating feathered hero. When people realize how far that bird has traveled, they are usually amazed and much more inclined to help. Birds that migrate at night are attracted by lights and get confused. They may fly around a building or cell tower until they drop from exhaustion. Audubon's national "Lights Out" program helps birds from Latin America get through our lighted cities and towns without getting confused and crashing into buildings (pg. 121). Is there a Lights Out program in your area? This is one of the best ways to help migratory birds. If your community doesn't have a program, your local Audubon chapter or birding group can probably help you. This is a relatively easy way to immediately help birds. You can also observe at night which neighbors keep night lights on. Can you practice jam diplomacy and take them some homemade jam? Or bake a pie and go talk to them. Show them your migration chart, your map, your drawings and beautiful photos online of the gorgeous little warblers struggling to migrate through your town or city. Maybe after a piece of pie you can persuade them to install motion detector lights. Offer to help them do it (and if they can't afford to, find out if the local birding group has a community fund to help people install bird-safe night lights. If the local birding group doesn't have such a fund — raise your hand at a meeting to suggest creating a fund. Audubon and local birding groups or birdseed stores also sell window stickers that help birds see and avoid window glass. Million and millions of birds break their necks and die every year because they crash into our glass skyscrapers and university buildings during the daytime. Researchers have developed several [inobtrusive stickers](#) that are fun to put up and that help migrating birds, and your local birds, too.

CHAPTER 7

Hail to the Thunder-Pumper



BE THE BIRD!

This chapter's avian star is the American bittern, the first bird that helped Wild Warner defend our wetland. A shy member of the shy heron family, this bird is a master of camouflage. When the bittern senses danger, it stretches its long sharp beak skyward, making its neck appear even longer and slimmer. The bird freezes and holds this position until the danger passes. The vertical stripes on its neck help it blend in with the reeds in a marsh.

Get your bird buddy or your kids and go to the nearest park or marsh. Dress in neutral or green colors. Stand in a line and raise your arms straight over your head; you are about to become marsh reeds. Bring your palms together and interlock your fingers. Point both index fingers skyward to form the tip of your long sharp beak (if you do yoga, this is a standing Crescent Moon pose or an upward side salute). Keeping the bottom half of your body straight, bend side to side from the waist and sway softly and silently in the breeze. After your stellar reed imitation, stand absolutely still. How long can you stand still like a bittern? Challenge your kids. Make it a contest. Some of the kids in our after-school birding program love to dare each other to see how long they can balance on one leg — like a yoga tree pose!

The bittern is so cool because it is an avian with extreme behaviors — statue-like and secretive most of the time, and then suddenly scaring the hell out of people with its crazy call. Time to boom like a bittern! Watch this [YouTube](#) of the bittern's mating dance. Now lean forward and creep along with those lovely yellow-green feet to impress your potential mate. When you are ready to boom, stand still and declare very loudly: Gloop! Gloop! Oonk-ka-lunk, oonk-ka-lunk, oonk-ka-lunk! That was not loud enough. Ardent male bitterns can be heard as far as a mile away. So do it, again. Really bellow this time. Your kids will love this. Have one kid stand far away to see how far away your "bitterns" can be heard.



EXPLORE

The Wild World of a Public Meeting

You are going to channel your inner bittern and be still and quiet. Except instead of doing it in a park or on the edge of a marsh, you will do it in a public meeting. To find meetings, search your city council's webpage. Look up meetings for councils, commissions, committees, and boards. Which government entity oversees your local greenspaces? Is it a parks commission or a conservation commission or an environmental commission? Go to a meeting



with your bird buddy and/or your kids to observe and listen. Bring that field notebook to scribble your heart out.

These are prompts I give to students when I send them to their first public meeting:

- ▶ Describe the meeting and the agenda: number of people in the audience; number of speakers; number of members on the board, commission or committee; length of the agenda and level of formality.
- ▶ Which commissioner was the best speaker? Why?
- ▶ Who ran the meeting? Did they do a good job? Why or why not?
- ▶ Did members discuss contentious issues?
- ▶ Did the public have the time and space to give meaningful input? If so, how many minutes did each speaker have? Who was the best public speaker? Why? What made them most effective?
- ▶ Could members of the public ask questions? Who spent the most time speaking at this meeting?
- ▶ Did attendees agree to *do* anything? What were the outcomes?
- ▶ Were any members of the media present? Who documented the proceedings?

NOTE if you already attend public meetings, skip to Chapter 12 of this guide to learn how to participate in a deeper way.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Show Gratitude

Afterwards, have a coffee or beer with your bird buddy to share your findings. What did you learn? Did anything surprise you? Together, look up the commissioner who most impressed you. Research their background. Write an old-fashioned snail mail letter and thank them for their service (mention their past accomplishments to show you've done your homing-work). Ask if you and your buddy can take them for a coffee to learn more about their important work.

CHAPTER 8

Roll That Teacher Down the Hill



BE THE BIRD!

If you can bow, flap your wings, leap into the air and twirl around — you’ve got this! One of the avian stars of this chapter is the sandhill crane. Sandhill cranes do not dance alone so you’ll need your buddy. You are going to learn the sandhill crane courting dance. Cranes dance and vocalize in pairs. Their crickety-crick call that sounds like a dinosaur is actually a duet — the mates are answering each other. Use these videos to learn the dance of the sandhill Crane and to make their crickety-crack call: [Sandhill Cranes Dancing](#) and [Birdnote Courtship Dance](#).

Every spring cranes gather by the thousands in [Nebraska](#) to dance. Practice their dance every morning before you go outside in the spring. It’s a dance of hope because cranes are a comeback kid species that nearly went extinct (pg. 181). As you learn and dance, remember that cranes are huge birds and need open, quiet spaces. If Wild Warner hadn’t stopped more building and paving in Warner Park, maybe the sandhill cranes wouldn’t return every year. They need those huge green stretches to dance in. We all need them. Are there any potential crane dance floors in your community? Great. Get your buddy, go to the nearest park-dance floor and start dancing. If people ask what you’re doing — educate them. Teach them a few steps or the crickety-crack call! And while you’re in that park — find a hill and roll down it!



EXPLORE

Listen to a Child

When I began attending public meetings in Madison, Wisconsin, I immediately noticed that children were never among the attendees and never on any city commissions or committees. And yet, children have so much to say about our planet and all the marvelous creatures we share it with. The only time in five years that I saw kids in public meetings was when we began organizing to protect the geese; some of the kids in my program testified on the birds’ behalf and also on behalf of the largest trees. Are there any youth representatives on government bodies where you live? Is there a youth representative on your local school board? Where can you hear children’s voices in your community? Do you hear children’s voices in local media? Search newspaper and radio archives for interviews with children.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Raise Children's Voices

Start by doing short interviews with your own children, and the children of your best friends and close neighbors. If their parents give permission, — ask the child if, how, and where they would like that interview shared. Send all recordings to their parents, first, so they have approval.

Transcribe the interviews verbatim. Print them out, send a copy to all parents and kids. There is tremendous power in seeing your voice in print for the first time, and hopefully, some of the children will begin to sense their power when they hold that transcript of their own thoughts and opinions in their hands. Analyze your own copies with your buddy. What were the kids most passionate about? Talk to them, again, along with their parents to explore how they can follow-up on the issue dearest to their hearts. Encourage them to write a poem or song about it (this is a great way for anyone who is shy or feeling stuck to muster their courage). Ask them to teach you how to recite their poem or sing their song. Ask if they'd like to go to a city council or commission meeting with you to speak. Tell them you'll stand beside them. If they don't want to go to a public meeting, ask if they'd come to a private meeting with the mayor or your city council. If they are too shy to do this, — ask if they'd like to write a letter, instead, or make a YouTube op-ed video to send to the mayor or city council. Whether or not they want to go to a meeting, *you* ask for that meeting with your representatives. Tell your mayor or councilor about your interview project and what the children have to say. Give them a summary document of the interviews. Suggest that city authorities immediately appoint a child to every committee and commission.

At a national and international level, you can also help raise children's voices by supporting organizations like [Our Children's Trust](#), a wild flock of bellowing bitterns-on-steroids. This 15-year-old nonprofit public interest law firm empowers young people by helping them sue governments to protect their constitutional rights to life, safety, and prosperity — none of which is possible without a stable, healthy climate and planet. The firm won two historic cases against the states of [Montana](#) and [Hawaii](#) and has brought cases against the other 48 states. In Our Children's Trust's latest landmark federal case filed in May of 2025, [Lighthiser V. Trump](#), 22 young people aged seven to 25 from Oregon, Montana, Hawaii, Florida, and California are suing the Trump administration for executive orders that promote fossil fuels, undermine climate science and hurt public health, especially children's health.

“As I speak, my rights to life and liberty are being violated. As I speak, more and more greenhouse gases are getting trapped in our atmosphere. As I speak, my health and safety is put in further jeopardy.” said [lead plaintiff Eva Lighthiser](#), a 19-year-old from Montana who grew up with coal trains spewing coal dust throughout her town.

CHAPTER 9

The Great Geese Wars



BE THE BIRD!

You'll need your whole family or several pals to do this exercise. The bigger your flock, the better. Go to a field or park with open green space. I take my bird-mentor students to a park or school field once a semester to do this. They are always surprised at how much they learn about geese and how smart these huge avians are.

You know from reading this chapter that those beautiful V flight formations are more than just haiku in the sky (pgs. 209-210). The feathered chevrons are an ingenious way to save energy — as much as 30 percent — which allows that flock to fly 70 percent farther. NASA calls this geese strategy, “Follow the leader and save fuel.” The lead goose creates a wake of air behind it, just like a boat in the water. Each goose flapping behind the leader benefits from the air lift created by the goose ahead of it. The US military began studying and emulating these geese flight patterns over two decades ago. The geese V formation is also a smart leadership model to help human organizations avoid activist burnout. Geese keep switching their leaders so no one bird gets too worn out.

Time to fly like a goose! Get your flock members into a V and choose the first leader. Tell them you are going to fly in V formation for at least 15 minutes (someone should keep track of time). Discuss how you will smoothly switch leaders without slowing down, while flapping and honking. Now begin running, flapping, and honking in formation. Switch leaders every few minutes while still flying and running. Afterwards, sit in a circle and share. How did it feel to be a goose? How did it feel to be the leader? Was it easy to fly in a V? How did you rotate leaders without stopping or slowing down?



EXPLORE

A Walk through Time and Culture

Visit your nearest park for five days in a row at the same time of day. Study the humans. Who is there every day? Say hello. Sit down on a bench with them. This is how I met Sandy and Jan, two of my best park buddies and teachers. It started with “Good morning!” Ask parkgoers about the animals who live in the park. Which one is their favorite? Do they have a favorite tree? Ask how the park makes them feel and what this place means to them. Ask how this place and its more-than-human residents have changed over time. Tell them about your homing-work and share how you feel about neighborhood greenspaces.



Later walk through this park to search for statues, commemorative plaques or benches. Whose culture is honored in this park? And whose culture and history has been ignored? I didn't even think of these questions until I began studying the geese and their environmental history in Madison and Warner Park. Fossil studies showed that geese had been in the region at least 12,000 years, and then I learned about the presence of ancient geese mounds, some still crumbling right under our feet, all of which helped me see what should have been obvious: that people and geese had been living in Warner Park for thousands of years before Europeans invaded. And yet, the only statue in the park was a replica of the statue of liberty. There wasn't a single line anywhere acknowledging the indigenous inhabitants of the region, former and present. And nothing to honor the many cultures of immigrant families living around the park today.

This week you are going to take a walk or bike ride or a drive to research your community's indigenous past and present (if you already know this history, skip to the next graph). Before you get out and pedal around, google "land acknowledgements," and your city or town's name. Cities across the country now have land acknowledgements. Whose ancestral lands are you walking on? Whose history has been buried and destroyed?



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Raise Children's Voices

Search local and state university course catalogues for classes on indigenous history and culture. Email the professors and ask for their syllabi or a reading list. Invite them for a coffee! Peruse online local media archives and local library websites for articles. Have there been any local efforts to right these wrongs? If there is a local group working on this, go to a meeting or event and just listen and learn.

Here's a story about a former star student of mine working to honor indigenous culture with the help of our feathered friends. Haley Scott is a BIPOC Bronx-based bird guide who birds "with an indigenous perspective." An enrolled member of the state-recognized Unkechaug Indian Nation and half-Jamaican, Haley leads birding tours in NYC, where avians help her educate the public about her culture and the region's history. She is also a member of the NYC Bird Alliance and NYC's Feminist Bird Club. Haley is writing a book about her birding journey while she helps resurrect indigenous names for the birds of New York.

The Birder's Gaze



BE THE BIRD!

Feed Someone You Love

The avian star of this chapter is the eastern bluebird, a feathered comeback kid if there ever was one. Bluebirds are living proof that our species *can* do the right thing. Eastern bluebird numbers plummeted in the twentieth century by nearly 90% because of habitat loss: these birds need holes to nest in; they can't carve their own holes like a woodpecker. But in the past 50 years, thousands of volunteers nationwide helped bluebirds by installing and monitoring tiny birdhouses. Today, there are over 23 million breeding bluebirds on the planet because of this hammer-and-nail advocacy.

Many species feed their mates, including ours. Bluebird mate feeding or courtship feeding is easy to observe if you buy mealworms and leave them around your birdhouses or feeders. Watch [this video](#) of bluebird romance.

Now be a bluebird. Feed something yummy to your mate or best friend. If you're trying to attract a mate, practice flapping your wings like the bluebirds in the video.



EXPLORE

Walk a Bluebird Trail

Are there bluebirds in your community? Google "bluebird trail" and your community's name and you may find a trail map. Contact the bluebird manager and ask them to take you on a walk. As you stroll through a beautiful meadow or golf course or park and restore your soul, you may also see baby bluebirds and learn how their parents take care of them.

If there are no bluebirds, your community must have a different avian comeback kid because almost every bird is a comeback kid. Contact your local birding group and find out which species people worked hard to protect and brought back from the brink. Maybe it's ospreys or ducks in a local marsh. Maybe a local conservation or birding group gives tours of that place. If they don't — go anyway and sniff around. Take a picnic. Take pictures of the flying miracles. Is this local comeback kid story well-known? We hear so many environmental horror stories. We need to know about the success stories that are singing, flapping and soaring all around us. If people had done nothing a century ago, we wouldn't be surrounded by all these gorgeous, inspiring creatures.



Birds are flying evidence of a massive social shift and a collective awakening. Hope is contagious. We need these stories now more than ever. So find one. And the next time someone starts telling you the bad news — tell them your comeback kid story.



FLEX YOUR CITIZENSHIP MUSCLES

Advocate for Justice

This chapter on bluebirds and racism in the great outdoors was the hardest chapter to write. I threw out at least four drafts. Without my agent, diligent editors and friends of color who carefully read the drafts and helped me — I could never have written it. As a white person who has been doing anti-racism work for nearly three decades, I was still afraid I would get it wrong. And I am sure that I did get some of it wrong. But given the current White-House McCarthyite attacks on D.E.I., I believe it is more important than ever to keep trying and keep learning. That's why I love conservation biologist Drew Lanham's quote in the epigraph: "Seeing beauty and advocating for justice are not mutually exclusive acts." I think the bluebird is also the perfect feathered example of this epigraph. Dr. Lanham, also the author of "[Rules for the Black Birdwatcher](#)", is warning white birders that it's not enough for us to just ooh and aah over feathered beauty. He's reminding us that we must also see the ugliness, especially our country's racist history. Because seeing is the first step towards action. And if we can help birds — why can't we stand up for each other? Dr. Lanham's message is even more urgent now, during this time of an all-out assault on efforts to end racism.

So yes — take a beautiful bluebird walk. Then go home and use [the databases](#) listed in the book (pg. 241) to research police brutality in your community. Find out if your community has a police oversight commission. Get your buddy and use the homing-work questions from Chapter seven to attend and analyze a police commission meeting. Good people everywhere are working for police reform. *You* can become part of the solution.

There are people working to educate about and eradicate racism at many levels in our country and in all kinds of institutions: school districts, universities, corporations, churches, non-profits, local businesses and charities. There are also prominent national groups that have been working for justice for decades such as [the Equal Justice Initiative](#), [the Southern Poverty Law Center](#), [NAACP](#), [Justice in Motion](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), and the [ACLU](#). Join one of these flocks. And join a local group. Keep educating yourself and keep flapping your wings. This is a mighty murmuration that is not going away despite a temporary backlash.



NOTE TO READERS

The remaining two chapters of this guide and the appendices will be published on [this website](#) in October, 2025.