

CALGARY: City of Animals

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ISBN 978-1-55238-968-3

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**counting chickadees
& reimagining
the map of calgary**

angela waldie





Grey Gull: length 8 inches

On the first day of each month, a small group of Calgarians gathers in the parking lot of Stanley Park to embark on the Elbow River Bird Survey. The meeting time varies with the season, as this walk usually starts an hour after sunrise. Gus Yaki and his wife, Aileen Pelzer, began this monthly ritual in July 1993 when they walked from Stanley Park, near their home, to the Glenmore Dam and realized a monthly survey of the birds along this route would offer valuable data on the changes in species from season to season and year to year. Like many citizen science projects, this initiative is valuable not only for the data it provides but also for the educational opportunities it offers. By guiding this walk for the past twenty-three years, Yaki and Pelzer have offered new and experienced birders the chance to learn more about the species that inspire our city.



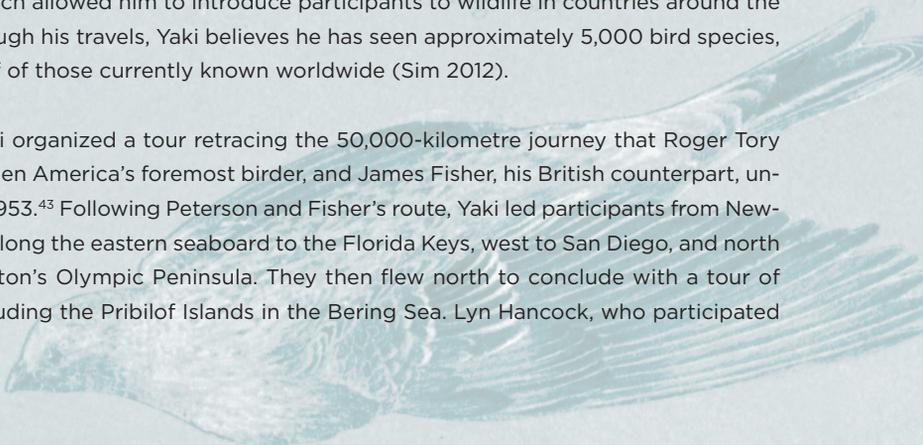
Robin red

Yaki is a lifelong naturalist whose interest in birds began on his walks to and from school near North Battleford, Saskatchewan. As he notes in an interview with Matthew Sim, he learned to identify birds at a young age:

I don't ever remember not being interested in birds and nature. One of my first teachers had a little 3 x 6 inch bird booklet. Walking almost three miles to school, I would see a bird on its nest. At school, during recess, I would thumb through this little publication to find a matching description. On the way home, I would confirm that I had correctly identified it.

This interest in birds led Yaki to create and operate a tour company, called Nature Travel Service, which allowed him to introduce participants to wildlife in countries around the world. Through his travels, Yaki believes he has seen approximately 5,000 bird species, roughly half of those currently known worldwide (Sim 2012).

In 1983, Yaki organized a tour retracing the 50,000-kilometre journey that Roger Tory Peterson, then America's foremost birder, and James Fisher, his British counterpart, undertook in 1953.⁴³ Following Peterson and Fisher's route, Yaki led participants from Newfoundland along the eastern seaboard to the Florida Keys, west to San Diego, and north to Washington's Olympic Peninsula. They then flew north to conclude with a tour of Alaska, including the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. Lyn Hancock, who participated

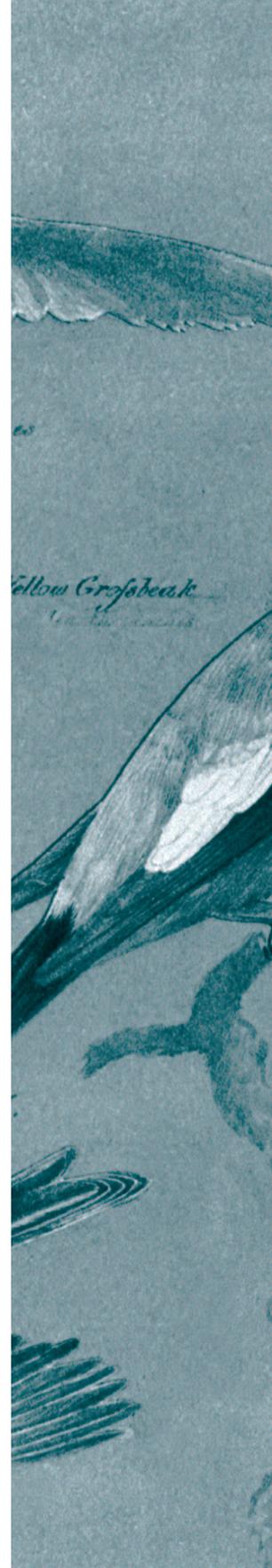


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in this journey, documented it in *Looking for the Wild* (1986). Throughout this account, she describes Yaki as a tireless and enthusiastic guide, able to quickly read the details of the landscape and communicate them to his fellow travellers. She notes, for example, that “one time he was pointing out different ducks on the water with one hand, a warbler in the bush with the other, and at the same time motioning to his guests that there was a robin’s nest in a tree above and a *Taraxacum officinale* plant on the ground” (Hancock 1986, xv). Yaki’s keen eye and encyclopedic knowledge of species make him an ideal guide, and the pleasure he takes in sharing the wonders of his immediate environment is obvious on any tour one takes with him.

While the Elbow River Bird Survey spans approximately 5 kilometres rather than 50,000, Yaki leads it with the same enthusiasm he brought to the three-month trek around North America. His purpose also remains parallel: to instill an appreciation for other species and to observe how birds are impacted by human settlement. Writing about birdwatching in New York City, Jonathan Rosen (2008) suggests that in urban areas “the only remaining wild animals in abundance that carry on in spite of human development are birds” (5). Although some Calgarians may notice the squirrels, jackrabbits, deer, and coyotes with whom we share parts of the city, Rosen’s point remains generally applicable to our urban experience. Birds are the most numerous and plentiful species we encounter in our yards, parks, and campuses, as well as on rivers and reservoirs. While many Calgarians pay little attention to such encounters and could name few of the bird species they see, others feed birds in their yards and visit natural areas in search of them. Some also seek the company of local experts, such as Yaki, to increase their knowledge of avian species.

Yaki begins each walk by asking for volunteers to keep track of the more plentiful species we will encounter, such as crows, ravens, magpies, Canada geese, mallards, robins, chickadees, and nuthatches. On a recent walk, with his characteristic playfulness, he also asked for a volunteer to count flamingos. Pelzer readily accepted this challenge, joking that these colourful lawn ornaments aren’t as plentiful as they once were. In the four times I’ve participated in this walk, I’ve spent three of them counting black-capped chickadees—those friendly and charismatic birds that sometimes fly closer to greet us





rather than flitting away. They are often heard before they are seen, and their companionable chatter prompts us to scan the nearby trees for these pulses of energy made animate. On the Elbow River Bird Survey, birds pre-empt conversation. The thread of a dropped conversation can always be picked up later, whereas the chatter of chickadees or the insistent *ank ank ank* of a red-breasted nuthatch demands immediate attention. The vocalizations of birds are often our best clue to their locations, and each call is followed by a collective effort to glimpse the elusive caller.

As Yaki's hearing has declined, he relies on participants to alert him to the audible clues the birds provide. Diane Stinson is a regular participant who has enthusiastically adopted this role. Stinson has been birding with Yaki for four years, and in that time she has learned to identify the songs and calls of a wide array of birds. As we traverse the route, I am amazed at her ability to isolate bird calls and identify their sources, a talent shared by other experienced birders who participate in this project. Their efforts are hindered in some areas, however, by construction and traffic noise. As Kathleen Dean Moore (2008) explains in her article "Silence Like Scouring Sand," human-made noise reduces viable habitat for other species by making it more difficult for them to communicate and remain alert to the dangers in their environments. For birds, vocalizations are often crucial to establishing territory and attracting mates. If males' mating calls are drowned out by noise, they will abandon potential nesting territory. The experience of trying to listen for birds in areas where traffic noise predominates reveals a hint of the challenges birds must face when trying to navigate the urban soundscape. Where the traffic of Elbow Drive rumbles across the river, I find myself straining to listen for bird calls above the constant din. If we cannot hear birds in this area, it is unlikely that they would be able to communicate with one another.

As the confluence of Elbow Drive and the Elbow River suggests, this walk includes areas to which birders would not typically be attracted. Although the route passes through a number of parks, it also includes streets where bird habitat has been fragmented by residential development. Moreover, the parks included along the route—Stanley Park, Riverdale Park, and Sandy Beach Park—do not include the large expanses of natural habitat found in areas such as the Weaselhead or Fish Creek Provincial Park. Stanley

Park, where the walk begins, is a multi-use suburban park just blocks from MacLeod Trail. It contains tennis courts and a swimming pool, and on warm days, the Elbow River Pathway through the park is filled with runners, cyclists, and dog walkers. In their midst, a group of birders carrying binoculars seems out of place, as though we are searching nostalgically for a landscape that is no longer there. It's encouraging that as we scan the slopes above the path, we find black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, blue jays, and a northern flicker. Some of these birds flit back and forth across the water, taking advantage of whatever habitat they can find in the large backyards of the houses that line the river. A beaver lodge adjacent to a stone retaining wall is further evidence of the diversity of species that continue to subsist in this populated area.

The Elbow River Bird Survey offers a unique map that diverges from how most Calgarians experience this area. In a city where the majority of residents travel by car, this walk cuts across the typical routes used to get from one place to another. While the survey route mostly follows the Elbow River Pathway, it also extends to Riverdale Avenue and a few adjoining streets where there is no public access to the river. Along this route, Yaki has become familiar with the residents who feed the birds, and he occasionally instructs us to look into a yard to see what species have come to visit their feeders. At times it seems as though we are walking through Yaki and Pelzer's extended neighbourhood. They stop to talk with residents they know or wave to others who have grown accustomed to the spectacle of birders walking through their upscale urban neighbourhood on the first morning of each month. Residents sometimes mention notable species they have recently seen, such as a great horned owl or a bobcat. Although species not seen or heard during the monthly walk cannot be added to the count, reported sightings nevertheless help to broaden our understanding of the species that occupy these neighbourhoods, particularly the nocturnal ones that we're less likely to encounter during a morning walk.

Yaki, Pelzer, and the other participants in the Elbow River Bird Survey are engaged in an act of placemaking, layering this landscape with remembered moments and adding to our collective understanding of the value of the Elbow River to avian and other species. As Yi-Fu Tuan suggests in *Space and Place* (1977), "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6).

The participants who retrace this route each month are compiling a map of shared memories. This is not a printed map or an electronic one, but rather an oral and kinesthetic map that one can best experience by participating in the walk. Yaki recalls a wintering population of wood ducks, peaking at thirty-nine individuals, which was part of a larger flock of ducks and geese attracted by an elderly couple who fed the waterfowl. Although they have since passed away and the birds no longer congregate along the river by the couple's former home, these winter flocks remain a vivid memory. Participants also share the memory of a leucistic robin⁴⁴ seen at the corner of 10th Street and Lansdowne Avenue SW. As the group of walkers shifts over time, those who have experienced unique sightings share their recollections, enlivening the journey with stories and expanding the realm of what might be seen. As we walk the pedestrian path between Lansdowne Avenue and Riverdale Park, we scan the trees for the great horned owls that have been seen here in past years. Each shadow among the branches seems momentarily animate, watching us with an air of possibility.

The map inscribed by the Elbow River Bird Survey is not limited to the route itself but is broadened by Yaki's knowledge of migration. At Sandy Beach, for example, he points out the nests of bank swallows, which winter as far south as Chile and Argentina. Even when these birds are not present, the far bank takes on a greater significance because of the life it supports in summer. Imagining the swallows' migration also heightens my understanding of the remarkable distances species travel between their breeding and wintering grounds and the importance of preserving habitat along this route. As we walk behind the fields of the Glenmore Athletic Park, Yaki points to an osprey nest atop one of the light standards. Because he watched the nest throughout the summer, he knows that the osprey pair successfully raised three young. He explains that they've likely migrated to Central or South America for the winter, but as osprey often return to the same nests, this one holds the promise of future arrivals and departures. In an age when many bird species are declining in numbers, ospreys are one of the rare good news stories. Since DDT was banned in 1972, populations of many birds of prey that were decimated by the pesticide have begun to recover. Yaki has noted a distinct increase in ospreys, bald eagles, and merlins since the Elbow River Bird Survey began.

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In spite of some positive trends, however, many bird species are currently threatened by factors such as habitat loss, climate change, disease, and the introduction of invasive species. According to the *Partners in Flight (PIF) Landbird Conservation Plan 2016*, “the two most pervasive threats to landbirds in the U.S. and Canada are habitat loss due to urbanization and habitat degradation due to changing forest conditions” (14). Birds migrating through urban areas face a wide array of dangers, including habitat fragmentation and collisions with broadcast antennae and high-rise buildings, as well as predation by raccoons, house cats, chipmunks, magpies, crows, and other species that thrive around humans (Weidensaul 2000, 338-56). As Bridget Stutchbury (2007) explains in *Silence of the Songbirds*, migrating songbirds may stop in urban areas during their nocturnal migrations, either because of poor weather or because daylight has arrived. Often exhausted from their overnight flight, songbirds will seek shelter and food wherever they alight for the day (132). As stretches of viable stopover habitat are becoming more rare in urban areas, it is increasingly difficult for these birds to find the safety and sustenance they need.

In addition to species that migrate through cities, numerous species continue to breed in urban areas as long as sufficient habitat remains. However, since they began the Elbow River Bird Survey, Yaki and Pelzer have noticed the complete disappearance of some fifteen species that commonly bred along the route, including the Cooper’s hawk, American kestrel, western wood-pewee, eastern kingbird, least flycatcher, ruby-crowned kinglet, song sparrow, Lincoln’s sparrow, and Baltimore oriole. Yaki attributes their disappearance partly to the changing vegetation in the Elbow River Valley. Native plant species have increasingly been replaced by non-native species, which, as he explains, “have left all their bio-controls behind—their pathogens, parasites and predators” and which thrive as a result (personal communication). Not only do non-native species fail to support the insect populations that provide food for baby birds, they also tend to outcompete native species. A lack of food and increasingly fragmented habitat makes it difficult for birds to successfully raise young, resulting in the local extirpation of multiple species.

This bird walk is also a plant walk, as Yaki’s knowledge of botany rivals his understanding of birds. As we leave Stanley Park, he points out Calgary’s only black walnut tree. He

also notes in October that the trees whose leaves remain green are non-native, attuned to habitats where winter arrives later. On one hand, this distinction may simply result in more varied foliage, but Yaki is a strong advocate for the importance of maintaining native species to support native bird populations. Along Riverdale Drive, he notes a bristlecone pine and tells us of one in Nevada that is 5,700 years old. “Just imagine holding your limbs out for 5,700 years,” he quips, holding out his arms. “I can’t even hold mine out for 57 seconds.” He points out a prominent burl in one tree and when I ask him whether it could cause the tree to die, he tells me, “probably not. It’s been that way as long as I’ve known it.” Although his verb choice in this statement may be accidental, it captures Yaki’s relationship to the species he encounters along this walk. He *knows* them, not merely in the sense of knowing they are there, or being able to identify them, but as he might greet a friend he sees from time to time. They are residents of this neighbourhood just as the homeowners are.

Walking with Yaki reminds me of reading Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1989), as he cultivates an attention to the natural world that rivals Leopold’s descriptions of the lands surrounding his Wisconsin farm. Of the non-descript flower draba, Leopold writes:

He who hopes for spring with upturned eye never sees so small a thing as Draba. He who despairs of spring with downcast eye steps on it, unknowing. He who searches for spring with his knees in the mud finds it, in abundance. (26)

Yaki searches for every season “with his knees in the mud,” metaphorically at least, and generously shares his passion with whomever will follow. As we ascend from Sandy Beach to the last stretch of the walk, he points out, in spring, the pasqueflowers that are the first to bloom on a south-facing slope. Like Leopold, he notes the arrivals and departures of all species that characterize his home place, and the records he compiles from year to year provide a valuable archive of shifting patterns. As climate change threatens to disrupt the carefully tuned relationships on which many species rely, the records and reflections of citizen scientists will be increasingly valuable in pointing out subtle changes in the seasons.

Snow bird, Length 6 1/2

Snow bird

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The Elbow River Bird Survey ends at the Glenmore Dam, where various species of grebes, ducks, geese, or phalaropes can sometimes be seen. Although the walkers will return to the parking lot at the Sandy Beach dog park at 50th Avenue SW, where they have coordinated vehicles to transport participants back to Stanley Park, Yaki explains that no birds can be counted on the return unless they are from a species not yet seen that day. This ensures that the same birds are not counted twice. At the dam, the count ends with a collaborative list, a roll call of sorts, as Yaki records the birds seen and the number of individuals of each. As he calls out the species' names, each participant contributes the number of the species he or she has been assigned to count. This feels to me like a celebration of the diversity of species that have greeted us along the journey, a testament to those that continue to exist alongside us, in spite of noise pollution, the introduction of invasive species, and loss of habitat.

On each of the walks in which I've participated, the number of species recorded is far greater than what I would have identified alone, which emphasizes the importance of spending time with experienced birders. This number is lower, however, than the diversity of species Yaki has encountered here in the past, revealing that even the most observant birders cannot spot birds that no longer frequent this area. As I leave the group at the dam to continue on to my home in Lakeview, I walk with a heightened appreciation of the species that surround me. Walking along Glenmore Trail north of Rockyview Hospital, I am keenly aware that there are areas of the city where little exists but pavement, cars, and noise. A short distance from this thoroughfare, however, bird calls resume, and on recent walks home I have seen a bald eagle, flickers, robins, magpies, and chickadees. Sometimes I find myself absent-mindedly counting these natural companions before I realize this month's count is over. Although the data Yaki gathers provides an invaluable archive, I believe that the greatest benefit of his project is the awareness he cultivates. The Elbow River Bird Survey confirms that we have the privilege to share a city with species such as bald eagles, Townsend's solitaires, and yellow warblers. By encouraging us to listen to the avian voices that persist in urban areas, Yaki inspires us to advocate for those species that remain among us.

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illustrations throughout article:

Painting of winter birds at Cumberland House. 1819-1820, Glenbow Archives, NA-132-2 & NA-132-3, Calgary, AB.