

## Elizabeth Cherry, *For the Birds: Protecting Wildlife with the Naturalist Gaze*

Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019. For order info, click [here](#).

### Overall

This book provides a thoughtful, thorough, and illuminating look into the experiences of birders and their development of what Cherry terms *the naturalist gaze*. The naturalist gaze allows birders to see themselves as part of a large, complex ecosystem in a unique way. Birders develop this perspective through guided walks and reading field guides as well as natural histories of birds and the environment. The naturalist gaze emphasizes careful observation, informed identification, and peer verification, which makes birders well situated to help conduct citizen science projects. The birders, with their naturalist gaze, provide a model for thinking about the learned expertise citizens can provide during citizen science projects. The case of birders also provides a counter to the often-cited concern put forward by professional scientist about data reliability in these projects. This book is highly engaging and it would fit well in any undergraduate or graduate course that considers the expansive possibilities of citizen science.

### Author

Elizabeth Cherry is an associate professor of sociology at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. She is also the author of *Culture and Activism: Animal Rights in France and the United States*. Her areas of expertise include social movements and collective behavior, environmental sociology, and the intersections of animals and society.

### Research methods

Cherry uses an ethnographic approach to study the experiences of birders and their development of what she titles the *naturalist gaze*. For three years, Cherry attended free, public birding walks given by three local Audubon organizations in the New York metropolitan area and the lower Hudson River Valley region of New York. Additionally, Cherry attended Audubon chapters' monthly nature programs and a variety of events such as the Christmas Bird Count, the National Audubon Convention, the World Series of Birding, and National Audubon's annual meeting. Finally, Cherry conducted 30 in-depth interviews with birders across the country to learn more about their motivations for birding.

### Context

While most of the participant observation data is collected in the New York metropolitan area, Cherry also considers the role of the National Audubon Society in birding across the country. Named after the naturalist John James Audubon, the first "Audubon Society" was founded in 1886 by George Bird Grinnell. In the 1880s and the 1890s, the killing of birds for the feather

trade devastated bird populations. Originally, the women who founded local chapters of the Audubon Society came together to oppose the use of birds for fashion. Today, the Audubon Society continues to advocate for birds and has grown into one of the largest conservation organizations in the United States. Birders continue to take the conservation mission of Audubon seriously and advocate for structural changes through Audubon's lobbying efforts. Additionally, birders frequently employ the National Audubon Society's motto of "connecting people with nature" when talking about the importance of protecting the environment.

## The Naturalist Gaze

Cherry explores the ways in which birding as a hobby encourages participants to develop a naturalist gaze. This affects the way that birders understand the world around them and their relationship to the broader ecosystem.

- *naturalist gaze*: As birders develop a naturalist gaze, they gain a systematic understanding of humans' and wild animals' intertwined places in a shared ecosystem. This learned perspective then informs birders' environmental advocacy in the form of citizen science projects and wildlife conservation.
- *How it is developed*: The lessons novice birders learn on guided nature walks helps them develop their naturalist gaze. Birders develop this naturalist gaze by participating in bird walks and learning how to bird, by reading field guides, and by reading natural histories of birds and the environment. Bird walk leaders encourage novice birders to pay close attention to their surroundings and cultivate processes of identifying birds through an informed understanding of bird behavior, diet, and habitat. Because of this, birders learn how to pay attention to small, minute details that people typically ignore. It is important to note that scientific research on birds and the environment informs the naturalist gaze.
- *How it is different from other ways of looking at animals*: The naturalist gaze is different from other types of gazes people use to watch animals because birders learn to appreciate healthy wild birds in their natural habitat, with minimal human intervention. This difference helps birders understand power relations in watching wildlife. Birders center the needs of the birds, often at the expense of their own experience, which differentiates the naturalist gaze from other ways of looking at animals.
- *How the naturalist gaze can be useful outside of birding*: In developing the naturalist gaze, birders become well equipped to assist professional scientists in data collection. The naturalist gaze prioritizes careful observation, informed identification, and peer verification. All of these elements of the naturalist gaze indicate that birders cultivate the tools they need to be expert data collectors. Birders learn to identify birds by studying field guides and scientific research on birds, which is an especially important element of the naturalist gaze for Citizens Science.

## Citizen Science and the Naturalist Gaze

- *citizen science*: generally speaking, citizen science is a scientific research project that relies on the public to do the majority of the data collection. In most cases, professional scientists design the project and then ask citizens for help in gathering the data. By opening up the data collection process to citizens, professional scientists are able to collect more data over larger areas and for longer periods of time than if they were to do it all themselves.
- *Examples of citizen science among birders*:
  - *Cornell Lab of Ornithology*: One of the most respected graduate program in ornithology, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology became a self-supporting research institution after World War II. In 1962, it began its own magazine, *Living Bird*, and in the 1980s, it started its own citizen science projects. The Cornell Lab now hosts over 600 citizen science projects related to a variety of environmental conservation projects.
  - *Christmas Bird Count*: Sponsored by the National Audubon Society, the Christmas Bird Count remains one of the largest and longest-running citizen science projects in the world. First put on in 1900, the Christmas Bird Count started as an alternative to traditional Christmas Day hunting competitions. Today, teams of birders across the country set out at the same time, on the same, day to compile an annual, nationwide census of bird's populations and ranges. This data has been carefully compiled by birders for over a century.
  - *eBird*: an online data repository where birders record the numbers and types of bird species they see while out birding. eBird can be downloaded as an app, and many birders record their "list" on eBird each time they go birding. This has created an enormous data set.
- *spillover*: because the naturalist gaze prioritizes the health and well-being of wildlife in its natural habitat, birders are often drawn to citizen science projects that help with other wildlife conservation efforts.
- *validity*: Cherry reports that both birders and professional scientists are concerned about the validity of data collected by citizen scientists.
  - she encourages both parties to consider that studies have shown the data collected by citizen scientists is valid and reliable. Additionally, Cherry draws attention to the birders naturalist gaze, which prioritizes careful observation, informed identification, and peer verification and makes birders well equipped to collect valid data. She concludes by claiming that for citizen science to be more useful

for wildlife conservation, professional scientists who use citizen science data need to be more vocal about the utility, validity, and reliability of such data.

## Birding as a Conservation Movement

- *observation to action*: as birders become more involved in birding and move from novice to expert birders, they begin to shift from only looking at birds to taking action on behalf of birds. According to Cherry, the naturalist gaze culminates in birders engaging in advocacy for environmental and wildlife conservation.
- *activist legacy*: the popular stereotype of birders as quiet and only interested in observation misses the history of advocacy of the Audubon Society and the ways in which birders continue to carry on this legacy and by engaging in advocacy at interpersonal, local, state, and national levels.
- the National Audubon Society sponsors citizen science projects that count and monitor bird populations, and it uses these data in its advocacy and lobbying campaigns. In addition to the citizen science projects, the National Audubon Society has additional conservation efforts:
  - *“bird-friendly communities”*: this initiative encourages individuals and communities to plant native plants, build bird-friendly buildings, and build nest boxes for birds.
  - *adventure camps*: throughout the United States, the Audubon society provides educational camps about bird and climate issues. These camps aim to teach children to appreciate and protect birds and the environment.
  - *international partnerships*: the National Audubon Society in the United States partners with other countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean, on conservation projects, and on ecotourism.
- *lifestyle movement*: at the individual level, birders engaged in a variety of conservation practices in their everyday lifestyles. Birders turn their naturalist gaze back on themselves, making changes in their own lifestyles to become more sustainable. For this reason, Cherry defines birding as a lifestyle movement. Lifestyle movements describe social movements that encourage people to make changes in their everyday lifestyles and consumption choices.

## In conclusion

This is a thoughtful and illuminating exploration of birding and the development of the naturalist gaze. Through careful cultivation and practice, birders develop a way of looking at birds, in combination with people and other elements of an ecosystem, that creates a comprehensive perspective on birds in their natural settings. Especially through their work with citizen science and conservation advocacy, birders provide an interesting case to explore the ways in which professionals and lay people can work together to solve problems, collect data, and manage ecosystem health. Cherry calls for broader acceptance of the data collected in citizen science projects from scientists *and* citizens.

Reviewed by Ann Ward, managing editor of **CivicGreen**

Last revised: 10/28/20