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Bird Watching

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BACKCHAT

A quick chat with...
**Belgian stand-up
 comedian and birder
 Begijn Le Bleu**



What first sparked your interest in birdwatching, and when?

My father encouraged me to watch birds when I was a child. We lived near a forest and that made things easier. After a while, I got a pair of binoculars and convinced the boy next door to wander through nature on Wednesday afternoon. I still remember going to the River Scheldt near Antwerp with my father on a dull Sunday. There, I saw Avocets for the first time. Wonderful birds! It became the best Sunday ever. Since then, I'm fascinated by shorebirds: at times easy to see, but also hard to identify.

Who was your birdwatching inspiration or mentor?

My father brought me to a bird hide somewhere in Holland to meet a birder, named Johan. He was obsessed with birds and even slept in the hide whenever he could. Later he wrote down his observations in a book called 'Avifauna-guide'. He gave me a copy and that motivated me to learn the birds' names by heart. A few years later, I was shocked to hear he had died. They told me he was a troubled man. I didn't know him well but sometimes I think about him and how the birds must have comforted him.

Do you bird alone or with a friend?

I always bird alone because I work during the weekends. It makes identifying birds much more difficult, but it's worthwhile because it

takes more effort and you learn more.

Your dream bird to see?

White Gyrfalcon (and anything else I haven't seen, yet!)

Your favourite birding spot?

The Drowned Land of Saeftinghe, an estuary on the border of Holland and Belgium. There's always something happening there, but mostly I watch Marsh Harriers. Their flight is great, it's like they hang on a wire. I could watch them for ages.

Your classic birder's lunch, grabbed from the petrol station shop?

A flask of coffee and a lunchbox with some sandwiches I made with a sleepy head (and chocolate. Lots of chocolate).

Lesser Black-backed Gull or Herring Gull

Herring Gull. Beautiful 'bandits'. They look so intimidating.

Favourite bird song or call?

Wren. What a powerful, beautiful song for such a small bird. And, of course, the Black Kite's quivering voice.

The best bird you've seen?

A Montagu's Harrier drifted past me on the beach in Batumi, Georgia. It was surrounded by angry wagtails. I had never seen a harrier so close. Breathtaking.

Birdwatching's biggest myth or misconception?

Not every birder wants to identify birds and compete with

other birders' knowledge. Sometimes, they just want fresh air and if a bird comes along, then great.

Identifying gulls – nightmare or a nice day out?

Depends on my mood and the amount of time I have spare. Gull-expert and author Klaus Malling Olsen gave me some great tips: Start with looking at the colour of the legs and the beak. But when I see juvenile gulls I often give up, but it's never a nightmare for me. You can simply watch and enjoy.

Your favourite bird joke?

What do two gigantic sparrows say when they perch next to each other? 'CHIIIRRRRP!!'

How do we encourage young people to watch birds?

Every bird has its own story, as explained by Dominic Couzens in my podcast Tweet! Tweet! – they adapt to their circumstances but life is a struggle. Getting to know their story is fascinating.

Greenfinch or Goldfinch?

Greenfinch. Beautiful but also aggressive birds on the feeder. They have strong-looking beaks and the males have this remarkable green and yellow in their plumage.

A birding or conservation issue you feel strongly about?

I hope farmers will see the need to cultivate sections of land without the use of so many herbicides and insecticides. Farmland bird populations across Europe are declining rapidly. It's a sad story in Belgium, where farmers are almost obliged to produce

intensively because of low prices achieved for their harvest.

A place you'd love to go birding?

I hope to visit Scotland. I was very jealous when some non-birding friends visited and described what could only have been a Red Grouse.

The bird that annoys you most?

Cetti's Warbler. Its song is so loud but still it manages to hide in the reeds.

Bogey bird that still eludes you?

Osprey. I've seen it a couple of times from afar but not close enough to admire its features.

The bird book you'd never be without?

Collins. What a masterpiece.

Why do you love birdwatching, in three words?

Look – listen – presence.

Advice for birders taking part in #My200BirdYear?

'Hurry up slowly'. By that, I mean don't forget to stop and admire the birds.

About Begijn

■ Listen to the podcast: birdnerd.be

“I'M FASCINATED BY SHOREBIRDS: AT TIMES EASY TO SEE, BUT ALSO HARD TO IDENTIFY”

ILLUSTRATIONS: LAUREN NICHOLSON

