



BIRD LIKE A Mother

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Photos provided by interviewees

Mariel Abreu of Miami, Florida, guided birders for a living before becoming a mom, and now sees ways tours and festivals can improve kid- and family-oriented programming..

Mother birders are a yet-unsung superpower of the birding community in North America. Mariel Abreu, Tonya Anderson, Julie Friend, Vanessa Miot, and Ariel Zane are first and foremost birders, watching and listening to birds as serious observers from their backyards or local birding hotspot. As mothers, they are natural advocates for birds and conservation, fostering their children in appreciation of nature, sharing their birding experience on social media, and attracting curiosity, engagement, and admiration from peers and passersby when in the field.

Each woman may contribute in traditional ways such as participating in FeederWatch, community science, and eBird, but it's the necessary creativity resulting from time constraints of caregiving that is both her greatest gift to the birding community and

what she may least be credited for. Mothers face challenges not only including their kids in the birding community, but in staying involved in the community as an adult, too. Earlier involvement as a non-parent is harder to maintain once small children make the scene. It's not for lack of trying on her part, and the birding community has room to be more accommodating to this distinct group of bird advocates and parents of future birders.

How and what do mother birders contribute? Read on to learn more about these five women bringing a love for wild birds to new heights by virtue of their role as mothers.

A BIRDER FIRST IN HER OWN RIGHT

"I was a birder before I knew the term for it," says Miot, a mother of three, living in Atlanta, Georgia. "My mom had a feeder attached to our

window when I was growing up and I enjoyed watching the birds come to it.” Anderson and Zane were recreational birders prior to becoming parents, too. “I used to go out once a week and stare at a bush for hours,” says Anderson, a mother of two living in Seattle, Washington. “That was my joy, that time to spend in one place with birds.”

Maryland resident Zane enjoyed long birding outings with her husband and joining seasonal bird counts with the Maryland Ornithological Society prior to the birth of her now-toddler daughter.

Abreu of Miami, Florida, also a mother of a young daughter, describes her former self as “One-hundred percent birder!” As co-owner with her husband Angel of Nature is Awesome Birding and Wildlife Tours, she led domestic and international trips in Southern Florida and the Caribbean.

Even for Bradford, Ontario, Canada, resident Frend, who began birding after becoming a mother (to a now 11-year-old boy), birding was a respite for herself while filling the time when her son was with his dad, with whom she co-parents.

Maryland resident Ariel Zane has adapted how and where she birds to accommodate her toddler daughter.



THE PASTIME EVOLVES WITH KIDS IN THE PICTURE

Frend initially birded on her own, without her son. “I’ve started to take him out more now that he’s older. If I can combine a birding destination with creepy-crawlies like turtles or bugs or frogs, then he has something to look at while I look for birds!” Her son is also impressed by large iconic birds like the snowy owls that winter in the agricultural areas near Bradford.

For Miot, her children heightened her birding game. “It was after I had kids that I intentionally went out to find birds,” she says. “I got binoculars and a field guide and took my kids with me. They have gone with me on most of my birding outings.” Like Frend, she finds spaces where there is more going on than birds. “I will make the most of playground birding.” She also suggests small parks like Woodlands Gardens in Decatur, Georgia. “It has trails my kids can walk the length of, multiple bird feeders, benches and small green spaces to sit and enjoy. It gives the feeling of a magical garden, and it’s very bird rich.”



Julie Frend initially birded on her own, but now her 11-year-old son is showing interest in the birds near their Bradford, Ontario, home.

Small green spaces are also where Abreu, Anderson, and Zane now bird; in their cases it’s their backyards. “We are restoring the yard where we rent,” says Abreu. “My daughter has watched the transformation of the space into an oasis of native plants and feeders for birds and butterflies. My birding has become passive for the most part, limited to what we can see in our yard and neighborhood.” Her location in Southern Florida means she sees a huge variety, however.

“I chase rarities a lot less,” says Anderson. “I’ve brought it to my window. I used to be skeptical of feeders but now I have them! We do feeder watches, and I don’t even use binoculars anymore; my hands are too busy with kids.”

Zane counts over 50 species of birds in her yard, where she birds with her daughter. “She has a good handful of IDs from watching birds from our breakfast nook,” she says of this domestic birding time. “If we go for birding walks now with our daughter it’s more for the walk, and the birds are part of the experience.”

MOTHERS OUT BIRDING WITH KIDS EVOKE CURIOSITY FROM THE COMMUNITY

“People stop me and tell me it’s cool that I’m sharing birds with my kids,” says Miot. She’s also introduced other mothers and kids to birding while on playdates, though the introduction hasn’t led to subsequent bird-specific meetups. “I wish there were a group of mother birders to go out with!” she says.

Frend says other birders take an interest in her son when she brings him birding, bolstering his confidence. Even when the potential for disaster happens, most people have been nice. “My son once walked in front of a guy with a \$20K lens, trying to get a shot of a prothonotary warbler,” she says. “I’m sure my son messed up his shot! The guy was very sweet and forgiving.”

But sometimes the observer’s comments of a mother-led birding outing can result in feeling patronized. “When you’re (a mother) out there with your kid, people assume you’re there to enrich your kid versus birding for yourself and your kid is with you,” says Zane. “People make assumptions about a mother birding with kids that they wouldn’t make about a father birding with kids.”

And among adult birders, there is the admitted aversion to the distraction that kids might bring to a birding site. Kids are often not welcome in traditional birding settings, where quiet is valued. “I’ve only had a person object once to my son being there,” says Frend. “Someone told him he was being too energetic, so I hustled him off.”

THE BIRDING COMMUNITY CAN MAKE SPACE FOR CAREGIVERS

Mother birders feel the frustrations and limitations of being out of the more vigorous birding fray and long for the kind of participation that might still include them. But even access with children is hard to come by in organized birding circles like festivals, committee memberships, and community science. Festivals might not have family programming, committees might meet at times of day more convenient for those without caregiving duties, and community science projects may have specific age requirements for participation.

Abreu speaks to her past work in the industry. “Before becoming a mom, I guided birders for a living, and also worked at birding festivals around the country. I was often asked to organize

and lead trips for kids, mostly because I was younger than the demographic that attended and organized these festivals.”

She observed the kid-and-family oriented trips did not carry the same visibility as the more competitive photo/big name bird leader birding trips that generated the festival income. “Sadly, since the family trips were normally free to join, they were cut from the program or were afterthoughts,” she says. “Festivals could improve kids programming, (by) having parents involved in the planning of the trips. This is vital for the success of a much-needed segment of the birding festival circuit—future birders.”

As volunteers in birding community science, mothers sometimes have to resort to waiting for the kids to be otherwise occupied in order to participate. Single mother Frend surveys for the Breeding Bird Atlas in her province, getting up before work to listen for eastern screech owls. She couldn’t have done this when her son was small. “I wouldn’t drag my son out so early in the morning,” she says. “Now that he is old enough to be home alone sleeping, I can do this.”

“These are hard problems to solve,” says Zane. “The ideal is to expand our view of birders beyond white, male, able-bodied people.”

Left: Tonya Anderson chases rarities a lot less since becoming a mother of two, but she appreciates her Seattle, Washington, backyard so much more.

Right: Vanessa Miot of Atlanta, Georgia, a birder since childhood, says motherhood has heightened her birding game.



“I was a birder before I knew the term for it.”



Maríel Abreu birds primarily at home, where she has restored their yard into an oasis of native plants and feeders for birds and butterflies.

Understand that birding can be experienced in ways outside of an early morning walk, for instance. The folks planning often don't have small children, and they are not thinking about what might be easy for families to join. At least now we are having the conversation."

MOTHERS INSPIRE A NEW WAY TO BIRD

These mothers are birding on their terms, putting their stakes in the ground, and the birding community is starting to pay attention. "Seattle Audubon Society was very receptive of me joining on bird surveys with my daughter in a carrier when she was really little," says Anderson. "She would stay quiet for the five-minute blocks, peeking out or sleeping from her perch on me."

Abreu's bird-friendly garden restoration resulted in an invitation to write an article for the American Birding Association's *Birding* magazine about her process. "Having retreated from the greater birding community because of motherhood, being immunocompromised, and now the pandemic, I can see how I want to be involved differently than before," she says. "Maybe this garden restoration article will inspire another mother to create her own oasis."

Miot shares her family birding outings on her Instagram @withvanessamiot, showcasing the possibility and appeal of birding as a parent with her kids. Her accessible visual representation of birding like a mother speaks for each of the mothers in this story. Individually they are creating innovative ways to bird within the structure of their role as mother in a pastime that has room to grow. 



Bryony Angell writes and birds from western Washington state. Birding culture is her beat; read more of her work at bryonyangell.com.