

Four Women Train Their Lenses on Urban Birds with Spectacular Results

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Behold, the urban bird. Never has urban birding been more relevant than in our present day, in the age of COVID-19 and mandated lockdowns among communities across the world. We birders need our fix, and we now focus on our immediate surroundings, much of it urban. But where among the bird photos out there are the ones of birds in cities?

David Lindo piqued my interest in urban bird images well before the pandemic. When interviewed by *Audubon* magazine about his most

recent title, *How to Be an Urban Birder* (2018), he shared the challenge of finding enough images of birds in cities to fill a book: “Not many people show wildlife in that setting... There’s this idea that any bird image must show it perched on the end of a twig, but that’s changing.” (tinyurl.com/Angell2018).

Indeed it is. Heather Wolf, author of *Birding at the Bridge: In Search of Every Bird on the Brooklyn Waterfront* (2016), for which Lindo wrote the foreword, is the best known among female urban



Bald Eagle. Seattle, Washington. 29 Jan 2016.
Photo © Roniq Bartanen.

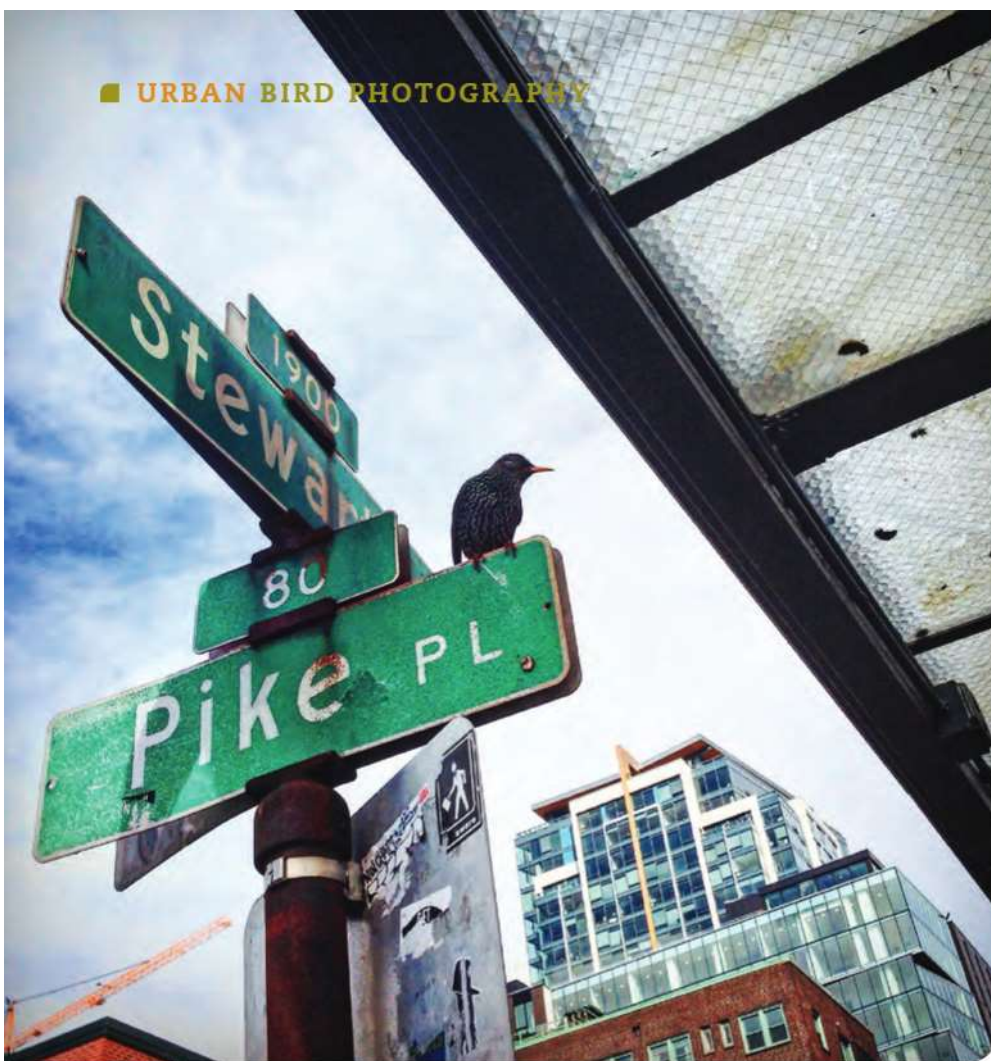
bird photographers, and the list is growing. Women are producing amazing urban bird photos. Living as we do in the social media age, I came to that realization via Instagram. Its algorithm assisted my search, suggesting I check out even more talent for each wild bird shutterbug I found. Some of the accounts didn't share their genders. Some had ambiguous user names, lacked selfies, and/or had photo captions with scant personal information. These accounts were all about the birds.

A swallow perched on a chain link fence. A Killdeer in an industrial lot. These ordinary, beautiful, and intimate portraits belied patience, solitude, repetition, and opportunity. Somehow, I suspected these photographers were women.

And it turns out they are women. Not only that, among them they share many habits, motivations, and even jobs (two of them work in libraries!). Corvida Raven, Melissa McLeod, Rebecca Fenning Marschall, and Roniq Bar-

tanen live in Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles County, and Seattle, respectively. And as Millennials and Gen X-ers, they represent the next generation of birders. Corvida is a Black birder and Rebecca is a young mother.

Their stories and experiences of birding are similar. Three started birding while already established as amateur photographers. Two became birders through a friend's introduction, while the other two started birding as a form of solitary meditation.



TOP: European Starling. Seattle, Washington.
14 Mar 2016. Photo © Roniq Bartanen.

BOTTOM: European Starlings. Seattle, Washington.
14 Jan 2016. Photo © Roniq Bartanen.



All credit photography for making them better birders.

“Taking photos helped strengthen my ability to visually ID birds over time,” says Corvida, speaking for the group in emphasizing that her camera is the single most effective tool in both evolving into a birder and in gaining birding confidence. Plus, a camera adds credibility.

“Photography makes me accountable,” Melissa says. “No one believed me when I said I saw Bald Eagles in Detroit. But with a photo, they would.”

All four have built a community through birding, both online and off. Melissa has a dedicated following on Instagram and organizes occasional meetups in Detroit. Rebecca is locally famous among Los Angeles birders for spotting a rarity (a Red-flanked Bluetail) at her worksite. Roniq volunteers as a bird guide for her local Audubon chapter and blogs about city birding. Corvida connects with other birders through birdwalks when she travels to nearby cities such as Miami; more recently, her birding world expanded exponentially after participating in the first-ever Black Birders Week. Occurring May 31 to June 5, 2020, the event was organized by “BlackAFinSTEM,” a group of Black scientists and naturalists on Twitter.

“In light of recent events with fellow birder, Christian Cooper, I’ve [met] a number of Black birders, women and men, which has been a very fulfilling evolution in my birding journey,” Corvida says.

We lucky birders benefit from the images these women produce of birds literally in their backyards.



Roniq Bartanen

51 • Seattle, Washington

Tour Guide and Vessel
Crew at Argosy Cruises

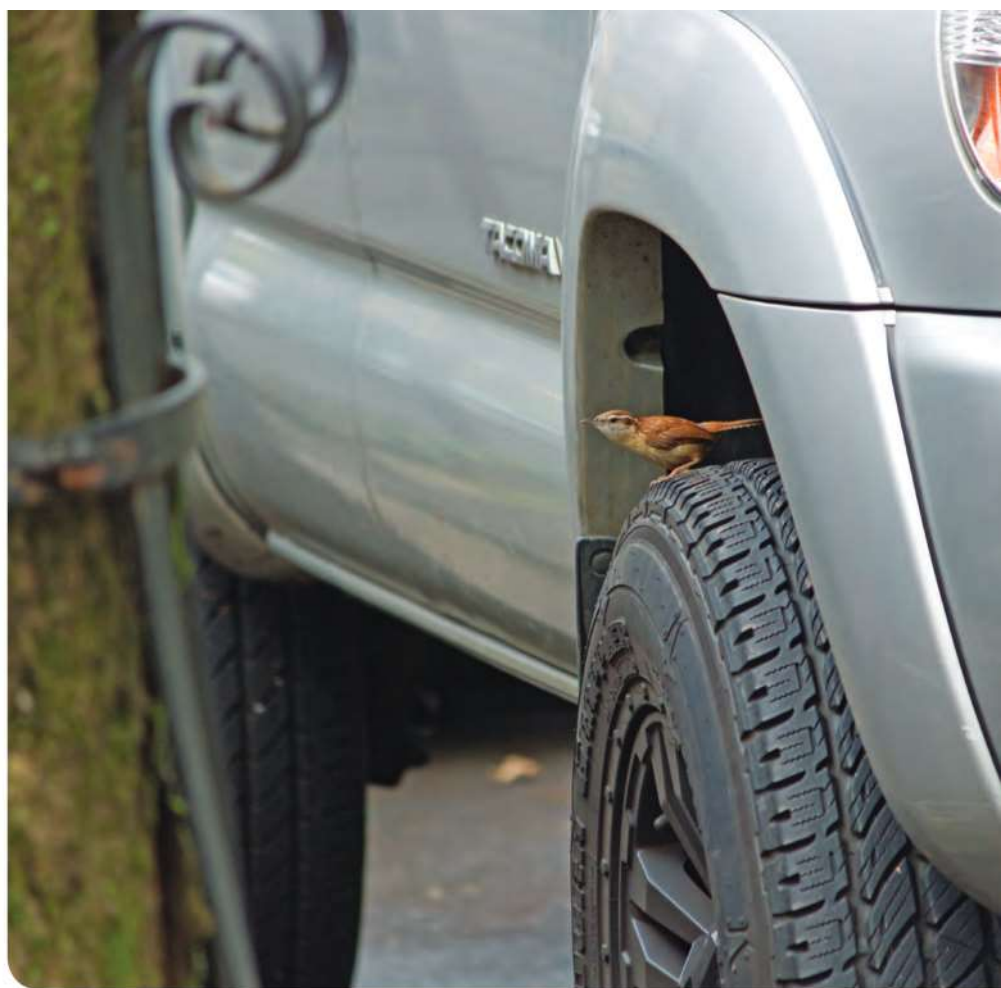
Instagram: @she_Birds

What equipment do you use? • Sony A6300 DSLR and iPhone; eBird.

What's your favorite place in your city to photograph birds and why? • Green Lake Park is a favorite because it's less than a mile from my home, and I can get there by bike, bus, or walking. It's also the first urban spot I started birding. Because it's so popular (with people), the birds seem to be used to having humans around, making it a great place for close views. Seattle Audubon's Birdweb database documents more than 170 species of birds identified there.

What is your most memorable bird photo op, and do you have a photo of it? • I was at work on the boat, and we were coming into dock. I was on the first deck, getting ready to let the guests off, when a Brown Pelican flew in front of the window. The guests were as excited as I was to see it. Brown Pelicans are not common in Puget Sound, let alone on the central waterfront of downtown Seattle. That one stayed around for about two weeks that July 2018, though I never did get a photo of it.

What else should we know about you that makes you stand out and/or influences your birding practice? • My birding practice is definitely influenced by living in the city and



being car-free for almost six years. Many birding spots I frequent are accessible by bike, bus, walking, or ferry. I think of this as *mindful* or *green* birding. I write about bus-accessible urban birding spots on my blog and always include public transportation information to people who attend my bird walks.

TOP: Carolina Wren. Atlanta, Georgia.
2 Mar 2020. Photo © Corvida Raven.

BOTTOM: Egyptian Geese. Greynolds
Park, Miami, Florida. 5 Oct 2019.
Photo © Corvida Raven.

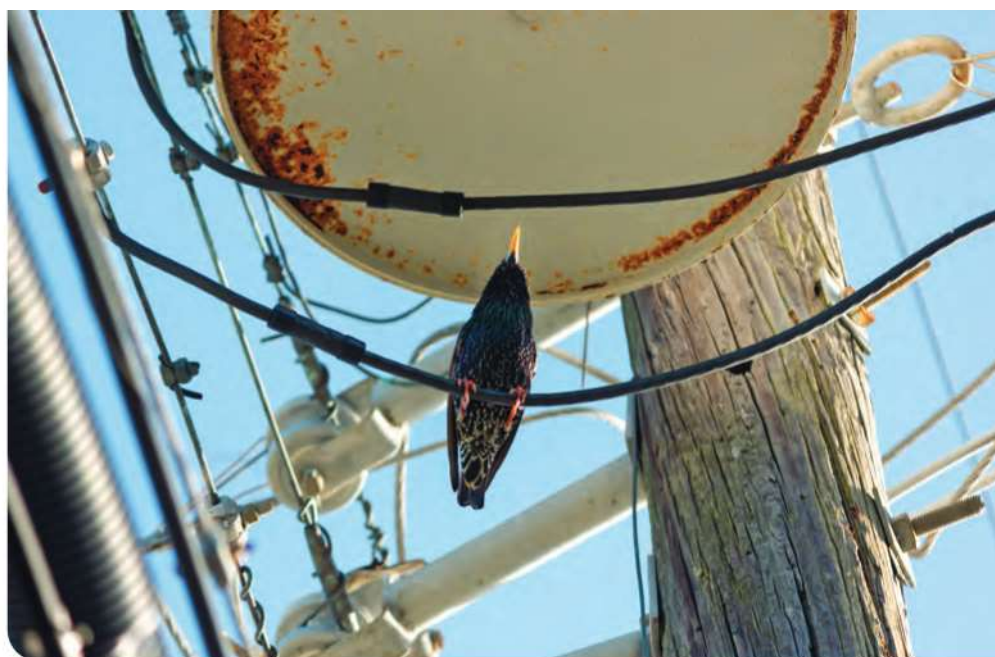
Thinking about how I can get to a birding spot using fewer resources is something I reflect on, and this practice is as important to me as my impact on the bird and its habitat while I'm there.



Corvida Raven 32 • Atlanta, Georgia

Founder of SheGeeks.net and A Third Place, and Cofounder and Tech Lead of Remix SOL.

Instagram: @birdingwhileblack



What equipment do you use? • Nikon Monarch 5 binoculars courtesy of Nikon; a Canon T2i with a 55250-mm lens for photography; and eBird, Merlin, and other Android apps for help identifying birds.

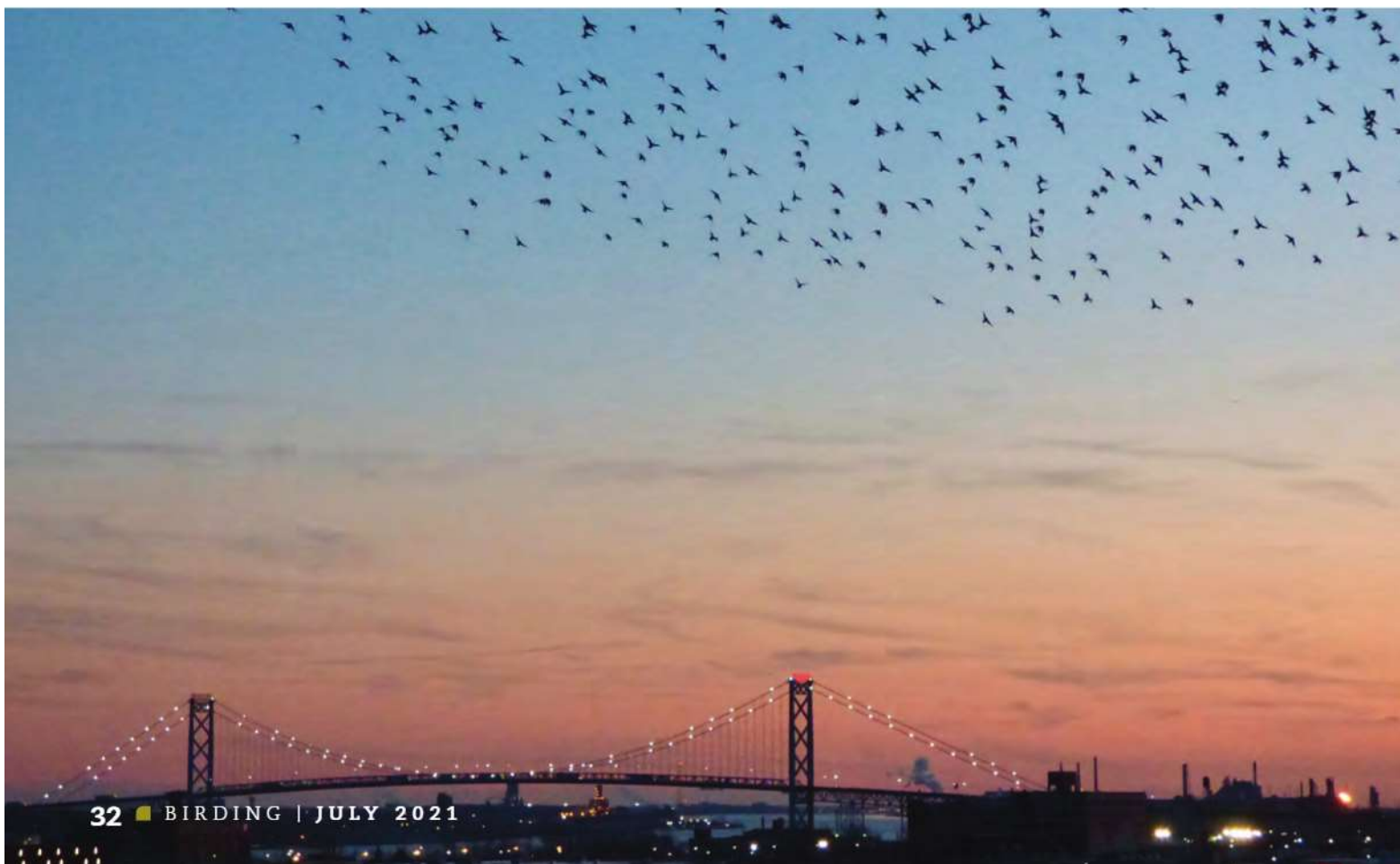
What's your favorite place in your city to photograph birds and why? • Piedmont Park and in residential areas, mainly my own neighborhood. Parks bring out such a diverse array of birds, and I experience the seasonal migrations and rotations of birds in the

city. I'm limited by where my feet and public transit can take me, which limits where I experience new birds and new environments.

But even in my own apartment, I hear bird

TOP: European Starling. Miami, Florida.
27 Nov 2019. Photo © Corvida Raven.

BOTTOM: European Starlings.
Downtown Detroit, Michigan.
14 Feb 2020. Photo © Melissa McLeod.



song all day long: Carolina Wrens, mockingbirds, and catbirds. I've had a greater awareness of the environment and my surroundings since picking up a camera and birding.

What is your most memorable bird photo op, and do you have a photo of it? • I love a photo I took of Egyptian Geese flying near some condos in my hometown of Miami. It was an unexpected, but wonderful life bird moment, and the picture was icing on the cake.

What else should we know about you that makes you stand out and/or influences your birding practice? • My background is

in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math), and I have a tech blog, SheGeeks.net, where I talk about tech in plain English. Given my background in technology, I use apps on my smartphone to help me identify birds when birding.



Melissa McLeod
33 • Detroit, Michigan

Children's Department Specialist
at a Public Library

Instagram: @feral_detroit

RIGHT: Killdeer. North Corktown,
Detroit, Michigan. 2 May 2020.
Photo © Melissa McLeod.

BOTTOM: Snow Bunting. Belle Isle Park,
Detroit, Michigan. 11 Feb 2018.
Photo © Melissa McLeod.



What equipment do you use? • Nikon Prostaff 10 × 42 binoculars, Panasonic Lumix fz70, and Canon Rebel T7/Sigma 100–400 mm. It's not *National Geographic*-level equipment! I want it to be accessible; that you can use a \$200 camera and still get great photos.

What's your favorite place in your city to photograph birds and why? • Belle Isle, which is hands down one of the best places for birding in our city. It's one of the last regional wet mesic flatwoods habitats. I also bird industrial areas, such as the Rouge River near the Ford River Rouge Complex, and Delray and Oakwood Heights. Delray is home to Zug Island, and Oakwood Heights used to be a neighborhood but is now mostly a Marathon Petroleum refinery.

I'm drawn to industrial areas because industry plays such a part of Detroit's history, and I enjoy documenting what life remains where the landscape has been so marred by industry.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Buena Vista Park, Burbank, California. 16 Mar 2019.
Photo © Rebecca Fenning Marschall.

What is your most memorable bird photo op, and do you have a photo of it? • I know European Starlings are trash birds, but last winter we had them doing murmurations, and I got a photograph of them from a casino parking lot, against the evening sky. Unfortunately, you can also see the casino! I also saw a Snowy Owl on a lightpost less than a mile from where I grew up. I was only able to capture a cell phone photo in the dark with raining ice! I saw this owl on the same light post about five times over two winters, but never in daylight.

What else should we know about you that makes you stand out and/or influences your birding practice? • I rarely chase birds (unless they're spotted on Belle Isle—my patch). A majority of my sightings and photos happened organically. I rarely go out with a target bird or with a photo opportunity in mind.

Another thing I believe makes me stand out is that I try to situate birds and my experience birding in their whole context, both social and environmental. Birds don't exist in a vacuum. Whenever I can, I try to tell a wider story rather than zooming in as close as possible for a photo.



Rebecca Fenning Marschall
39 • San Fernando Valley/
Los Angeles, California
 Manuscripts and Archives Librarian
Instagram: @biophilia_archive

What equipment do you use? • Currently, Canon T6s and Canon EF 100–400 mm f/4.5–5.6 L USM; also eBird and iNaturalist. Though I do try to take “good” or interesting photos when I can, iNat has also taught me that any photograph can be useful or meaningful.



What's your favorite place in your city to photograph birds and why? • I like photographing birds along the Los Angeles River, especially where the concrete channel is topped by a fence—the rustier, the better. Though birding quieter and more natural places can be the most peaceful, meditative birding experiences, photographing the juxtaposition of birds and abject human-made structures hits a personally satisfying sweet spot.

I am pleased with the photos I take at Buena Vista Park in Burbank, where the fencing is rusty barbed wire and chain link that runs along a wide bridle path. I'm able to get oblique angles of perched swallows and songbirds on this horrible-looking fence. Photographing abandoned buildings and sidewalk furniture were the hallmarks of my film-photographer days, and I was probably born to retire to the Salton Sea and photograph shorebirds on top of rusty mattress springs.

What is your most memorable bird photo op, and do you have a photo of it? • I'd gone out for a work lunch break and left my camera inside. In one area of the grounds, I kept flushing a bird out of the shrubs. At first, I thought it was a warbler—until I saw its tail and realized it was something weirder than that. I retrieved my camera and took several shots of what turned out to be a Red-flanked Bluetail, which stuck around for several months and attracted about 1,200 birders.

The impact this bird (and my first mediocre but identifiable photos of it) had on my birding life is amazing. I met a larger group of birders than I knew previously—an incredible gift for a shy librarian. On two occasions,

I even had other birders I didn't know ask to take selfies with me! Figuring out an ID for "Lil Bluey" off the back of my camera at my work desk is something I will never forget.

What else should we know about you that makes you stand out and/or influences your birding practice? • I'm a mother of small children, and I work a full-time job, so I mostly have to bird when I can fit it in, and

I don't often have time to go farther afield to some of the most productive hotspots in Los Angeles County. Since 2018, I've concentrated on birding within a five-mile radius of my house. I don't refuse to leave my five-mile radius to bird, but making a conscious choice to focus takes some sting out of having to skip twitches that are simply too far away—and that means most twitches, as Los Angeles is a large county. 🌍



TOP: Pine Warbler. Sherman Oaks, California. 2 Feb 2018. Photo © Rebecca Fenning Marschall.

BOTTOM: Red-flanked Bluetail. William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California. 20 Mar 2019. Photo © Rebecca Fenning Marschall.