

# How Cornell's Young Birder Event Changed My Life

By Anna Rose

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I was ten years old when I discovered the existence of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The lab is a prestigious institution under Cornell University that is renowned in its research and conservation in ornithology. I was amazed that there was an organization solely dedicated to the conservation and study of birds. It wasn't long after that when I made up my mind: I am going to Cornell to become an ornithologist. Years passed and my ambition continued with me and my desire to visit the Cornell Lab only grew. Then, early this spring I discovered that I was one of the sixteen selected teens to attend the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Young Birders Event!

Eventually, the fateful day came and I left Ohio on July 7, 2016, and began the 500-mile drive to Ithaca, New York. That evening, my dad and I stayed in a hotel in the quaint town of Horseheads (20 miles south of Ithaca). In the morning, we visited Mark Twain's grave site and then briefly stopped at Tanglewood Nature Preserve to add a few species to my New York bird list such as Wood Thrush and Indigo Buntings. Soon after, we drove the final stretch to Ithaca where we did a quick look at Cornell's campus. Next stop, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Finally, I had made it to the Lab. I will never forget the moment I walked in through the glass doors and met Chris and Jessie, who were in charge of the Young Birders Event. I also met multiple young birders that I quickly clicked with. The rest of the evening seemed surreal. John Fitzpatrick, the director of the Lab gave a presentation on "How Birds Can Save the World." I can freely admit that it was one of the best presentations I had ever had the pleasure to hear. We were then given a quick lab tour and then it was goodbye to our parents. After formal introductions, the young birders ate dinner with the Cornell staff and their newly made friends. Later that evening, Irby Lovette let us loose into the specimens lab for a "night at the museum." We first got a peek at the specimens prep lab and then ichthyology (over 2 million specimens) collections. The Lab has over 60,000 specimens in their bird collection including tropical Tanagers, Birds of Paradise, Darwin finches, and extinct species such as the Carolina Parakeet and Ivory-billed Woodpecker. We had barely scratched the surface of the collection when Irby told us it was time to call it a night. It was hard to leave when there was so much that we left unexplored.

Early in the morning of July 8, I tried my hand at audio recording of Ovenbirds, Magnolia Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, and Veeries. Jessie Barry was coaching Madelyne (a young birder I had recently made friends with) and me to use both parabola and shotgun equipment with microphones. It was unexpectedly

difficult to keep the bird calls at exactly the right volume. After we thanked Jessie, we went birding with Chris Wood at Roy H. Park Preserve to call for some Barred Owls. Chris Wood and Marie Chappell (a young birder from Florida) gave their best renditions of Barred Owls. To everyone's delight, a "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?!?" responded from across the forest. Unfortunately, the owls never appeared but at the end of our trail we did find a small creek teeming with life. We saw minnows darting around the shallows and found a few Allegheny Dusky Salamanders underneath some rocks. We also saw more than 40 bird species that morning, a promising start to the first full day at the Young Birders Event.

When we returned to the Lab, the young birders had the opportunity to listen to stimulating presentations from the Lab's director, John Fitzpatrick, postdoctoral Alexander Lees, eBird with Tim Lenz, the Birds of Peru with Tom Schulenburg, radar technology and Nocturnal Flight Calls, and the exotic species of the Neotropic to just name a few. Each speaker represented a piece of the cutting edge in the Lab's understanding of ornithology. Before we knew it, the entire day had flown by. Chris and Jessie took us back to the ecology dorm early. We would have to survive a 4:30am alarm clock the next morning to make it to Montezuma, a National Wildlife Refuge near Lake Cayuga (north of Ithaca).

Very early on the 9th of July, the young birders packed themselves into Chris and Jessie's vans. On the way to Montezuma the young birders usual chatter was dimmed--- we could barely stay awake. When we arrived at the visitor parking lot, we were greeted by two Purple Martin apartments and behind the birds, a gorgeous rainbow. Our sleep deprivation was forgotten during a mad rush for everyone's' cameras to capture this amazing photo opportunity. We took a group photo near the martin houses and continued through Montezuma. We had some great finds including both American and Least Bitterns, Bobolinks, Virginia Rail, and Marsh Wrens. Also at the East Road and Mays Point Pool we saw more target species such as Caspian Terns, Black Terns, and Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Around 11am, the young birders left Montezuma. We checked on a nearby forested area on Armitage Road for one particular species... After lots of mobbing calls and pishing from Chris and Jessie we finally managed to coax a Cerulean Warbler into the tree above us. "Chyoo tsee!!!" The warbler called as we lured it in. The Cerulean Warbler was a lifer for me and many of my young birder friends. We had the bird in plain view for a minute or two before it darted back into its wooded home.

After birding for the rest of the morning, we stopped for a while at Wolffys Restaurant to grab some lunch. The conversation between my friends and me was hardly what I'd call normal for a group of teens. It was full of stories about twitching across the states, recent changes in the order of bird taxonomy, and

of course, about what seemed to be everyone's favorite bird, the motmot. After lunch was over, we visited Lott Farm, an open field used as a local county fairgrounds. We were searching for the Upland Sandpiper, a bird who had been recently seen in some of the fields. Unfortunately, though, not a single bird was seen. Just when the young birders had almost given up, Jessie Barry pointed out the window of her van. "Upland Sandpiper!" All at once, we leaped out of the two vans with scopes and cameras ready. We saw four Upland Sandpipers after that and everyone had great views.

After a successful day of birding, we were dead tired again as we made our way back to the Lab. There was also an air of sadness surrounding us. This would be our last evening at the Lab. The friends I had only known for a couple days felt like I had already known for years. I had made incredible connections with people all over the United States and Canada, not to mention that one person came from England, and another from Brazil. That evening, just as things were winding down, representatives from Zeiss that helped sponsor the event had a surprise for us. They gave every young birder a brand new pair of Terra ED 8x42 binoculars. We couldn't believe our eyes. For a young birder, this was one of the most incredible gifts that anyone could give you.

After Chris and Jessie delivered us back to the Ecology Dorm, we weren't quite ready to let go of our last day at Cornell. Instead, we stayed up (maybe a little longer than we should have) and socialized in the dorm lobby. I had a mini ping-pong tournament with Andrew Barndt, shared eBird checklists with Claire Wayner, and Marky Mutchler impressed me with her incredible artwork. All in all, it was an incredible way to end an incredible day.

After an early rise and breakfast in the Ecology Dorm, the young birders left on their final field trip. It was a cold and miserable day, and rain was continually threatening us in the early morning. We checked out a location with one of the only Henslow's Sparrow reports in the state. We heard a Henslow from afar but unfortunately had no sighting of it. Under gray skies, we birded Lindsey Parson Biodiversity Reserve. The trail stretched a few miles into a mixed habitat of open fields, forest, and wetland. We saw some notable species like Common Yellowthroats, Prairie Warblers, Purple Finches, and Field Sparrows. Just about when we were our farthest from the start of the trail, the sky opened up and it began to pour. Everyone ran for cover and after the worst of the storm had passed, we slowly trudged back up the trail in moderate rain. When we finally made it back to the van, everyone was soaked to the skin. Fortunately, though, no cameras or other optics were damaged during the storm. Since it was still eight in the morning, we went back to the dorms briefly to put on a new change of clothes and then we were back out again.

At Yellow Barn State Forest, our birding attempts were a little more fruitful. We heard Swamp Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos singing and also had some close-up views of Prairie Warblers and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. At a different location, we saw a Mourning warbler skulking in the brush. It was a lifer for many of us young birders. Afterwards, we walked a short while down a dirt (or mud since it was raining) road where dozens of Red Eft, a type of newt, were sprawled across the path because of the recent rain. There were so many efts that Calen Randall and I began joking and said that we should start eNewt after eBird. We saw a couple of juvenile Eastern Towhees, Song Sparrows, and a pair of Scarlet Tanagers. Eventually we turned back, and the final field trip at the Young Birders Event was over.

We made it back to the lab around noon for a few last presentations. Jessie Barry introduced us to the Merlin App, an application that aids beginning birders in identification. Next, Ian Davies, the eBird guy, gave us a short presentation on “eBird Tips and Tricks”. It gave us an idea of where eBird’s next advances would be. Steve Branson and Grant Horn also gave us some exclusive sneak peeks on the Cornell Lab’s recent advances in computer vision. When the technology is fully developed, the computer will automatically be able to identify birds in any decent photograph. The Holy Grail is that all three applications; eBird, the Merlin App, and Computer Vision; can be combined into one huge database.

The hour I had been dreading for the last few days had come; two o’clock. The young birders exchanged contact information and goodbyes. Parents arrived and immediately some of the young birders were rushed off to the airport to catch their flights home. I said final somber goodbyes to my friends. Before I knew it, my dad and I were the only ones left at the Lab. He asked me how the event was and I truthfully told him, “It was the most influential experience in my entire life.”

When I left the Lab that day, I didn’t feel as sad as I thought I would. During the Young Birders Event, I felt like I was home and surrounded by people who had the same drive and motivation as I did. Instead, I was confident now that I would be back at the Lab to fulfill my dream. The Cornell Young Birder Event confirmed what I knew all along, I will be an ornithologist, there, at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology someday. *Watch out Cornell... here I come.*

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I am eternally grateful to the Central New Mexico Audubon Society for funding my tuition for the Cornell Lab Young Birders Event. Without their intervention, I would have never been able to attend this incredible experience. I would also like to thank Chris Wood and Jessie Barry for putting on such an incredible event, you have forever changed the lives of sixteen young birders this summer.