

Press Release



Secret Lives of Common Birds

by Marie Read

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About the Book

This fall, birds all around us will be building shelters, searching for mates, and foraging for food. Throughout the year, birds offer fascinating glimpses into how they survive and interact with one another. But how often do we take the time to observe our feathered neighbors? *Secret Lives of Common Birds* (Houghton Mifflin, September 12, 2005), by Marie Read, explores the world of bird behavior from the backyard and local parks to nearby ponds and woodlands.

Marie Read, a renowned wildlife photographer and writer, has a knack for capturing the most intimate, often dramatic, moments in the activities of birds. Her stunningly beautiful pictures of birds in action are paired with engaging and informative descriptions, divided into the four seasons. These include:

- SPRING

Spring Melodies — All About Birdsong
Sitting Pretty — How and Where to Build a Nest

- SUMMER

New Arrivals — Baby Birds Are Born
Catching Some Rays — Birds Sun Themselves Too

- AUTUMN

Bad Hair Day — A Change in Feathers
Stashing a Cache — Food Storage Begins

- WINTER

Cool Facts About Cold Feet — How Birds Keep Warm
Popsicles and Snow Cones — Thirsty Birds

The difference between noticing and missing the nature around us is a little time, a relaxed mind, and some curiosity. Read's vibrant photos and lighthearted writing style give birdwatchers, gardeners, and nature enthusiasts a window into the secret lives of common birds.

About the Author

Marie Read is an acclaimed wildlife photographer whose photographs are regularly featured in numerous magazines, including *BBC Wildlife (UK)*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Discover*, and *Natural History*, as well as in Audubon, Sierra Club, and World Wildlife Fund calendars. She is also a nature writer, and her articles have appeared in *Birder's World* and *Women in the Outdoors*, among other publications.

Read is the coauthor, with Lang Elliott, of one previous book, *Common Birds and Their Songs*, which features her glorious photos and a companion CD of bird songs. A birdwatcher since childhood, she has traveled throughout the world to photograph birds. After working for eight years as a graphics researcher and publications editor at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Read is now a full-time photographer. She lives in Freeville, New York.

A Conversation with Marie Read

How do you take these photos of birds? Some of them seem so remarkably close!

There are many aspects to getting good behavior shots of birds on film. Most important is that the birds have to be relaxed enough that they will behave normally and not be scared away. This means the photographer must either disguise herself in some way or use a long telephoto lens to remain at a distance; in many cases, she has to do both.

Many of the shots in my book were taken from a blind, often one that remained in place over a number of days, even weeks, so that the birds could become accustomed to it. This was the case, for example, in the shot of Wild Turkey displaying (page 13), and Yellow Warbler nest building (page 22). Some of the shots, especially those of nesting birds, were taken using a remote camera setup so that I could trip the shutter at a distance (Red-eyed Vireos, page 33; American Goldfinch nesting, page 52), thereby minimizing my disturbance at the nest.

Most of the photos were taken using a 500 mm lens, often with a 1.4X teleconverter added to give a final focal length of 700 mm.

Certain shots took a great deal of time and effort. For the nesting Baltimore Oriole (page 27), we built a scaffold to reach the nest high in a tree. We did the construction in stages to ensure that the birds weren't upset by all the activity. Then I spent nearly two weeks perched on top of the scaffold in a blind, from which I was able to watch and photograph the birds' family life from hatch to fledge as the summer progressed.

Is it tough to determine when and where you'll find the birds?

This is a big part of successful bird photography. I spend a considerable amount of time visiting promising areas and watching to see what is going on. And I know from experience what times of year certain activities are going to take place. When I see birds coming to an area predictably, I may put a blind there. That is how I photographed the American Goldfinch female gathering nest material. That's a behavior that occurs during a relatively short window of time in late summer.

I rely on friends to tell me about potential subjects too. The nesting Killdeers, with their chicks (pages 46 and 91), for instance, were at a local firehouse where a friend volunteered. They'd made their nest right next to the horseshoe pit. I also do a lot of photography in my backyard, which is wonderfully overgrown and full of birds. I have bird feeders, many kinds of wild plants and fruiting shrubs planted for bird food, and small pools and a stream where birds drink and bathe.

How did you get your start in photographing birds?

Ever since I was a small child in England, I've had a love of nature, particularly of birds. It wasn't until the early 1980s, though, that I developed a deep fascination with animal behavior and the desire to discover why animals do the things they do. It began when I was a field research assistant working as part of a team of biologists in Kenya, East Africa, studying the social behavior of certain birds called White-fronted Bee-eaters. These fascinating birds have a complex social life, living in family groups within huge colonies. We spent many hours watching them and documenting their lives. During this time I sharpened my observation skills and began to take an intense interest in wildlife photography.

As a wildlife photographer, I've always wanted more of a challenge than simply obtaining animal portraits. In photography, as in my intellectual interests, what excites me is animal behavior. In my photographs I strive to combine some interesting activity with birds' beauty — photos that tell a story.

How did the idea for the book originate?

A few years ago I began dreaming of producing a book of photographs of well-known birds going about their lives. I wanted to show people the intimate glimpses of bird behavior that they normally don't notice, even though the birds themselves are easily recognized and widespread. Humans were once much more in tune with the natural world; everyone was a naturalist in some respect. Most people have lost that connection to nature. By showing people that birds' lives are driven by the same forces as our own, I want to help them gain a better understanding of and appreciation for the birds around us.

Did you learn anything new in writing this book?

The area where I live, around Ithaca, New York — home of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology — has a long history of bird research. I'm lucky to count among my friends and colleagues many bird enthusiasts, from backyard watchers to serious birders to professional ornithologists. The knowledge base here is astounding. We enthusiastically share our observations of birds in social gatherings, bird club meetings, and Internet chat groups. I'm

always learning something new!

What are some of your favorite bird behaviors?

Courtship displays are fascinating to watch. Because their function is to draw attention to the male bird, they are often very bizarre. I spent a number of years photographing the courtship displays of certain Central American birds called manakins. They're brightly colored, tiny creatures. Some species make loud snapping sounds with their wings as they jump around a little display arena. Others pirouette to and fro showing off their colorful plumage. Still others display as a team, cartwheeling over and over each other, as the female watches.

Do you have a favorite birding season?

There's always something to watch in every season, but in terms of the most going on I would say spring, because that is when birds are gearing up to nest so they are in their brightest plumage and performing lots of cool behaviors.

As an ornithologist, many times I have witnessed an unusual bird behavior or been astonished by a bird's beauty. And each time, I have muttered to myself, "if only I had a photograph of that." Author and photographer Marie Read has captured those moments and more in her new book, *Secret Lives of Common Birds: Enjoying Bird Behavior Through the Seasons*. With over 80 photographs, nearly every turn of the 95 pages made me exclaim to anyone within earshot, "Wow, you have to see this." My favorite photo is of a black-capped chickadee sipping from an icicle. The image received a Nature's Best Highly An introduction to the world of bird behavior, *Secret Lives of Common Birds* explores many of the most important tasks in the lives of the familiar birds that enrich our lives. Wildlife photographer Marie Read has a knack for capturing the most intimate, often dramatic moments in the activities of birds. In this book, her beautiful photographs of birds in action are paired with engaging and informative descriptions of behaviors that anyone might observe in the backyard or at a local park, pond, or woodland. Her lighthearted writing style is a delight as the reader travels through the seasons of *Though I picked up Secret Lives of Common Birds* assuming that the accompanying text would be shallow and forced, I was pleasantly mistaken. In fact, I learned quite a bit from this book. Ms. Read describes the life cycles of her subjects, describing all different facets of bird behavior through the seasons from creating new life in the spring to struggling for survival in winter. Ultimately, *Secret Lives of Common Birds* is an enjoyable read. Beginning bird watchers may like it best, but even those of us intimately acquainted with our local avifauna are likely to learn something. Best of all, t