

Book Review

Birder on Berry Lane by Robert Tougias

Birder on Berry Lane  
Three Acres, Twelve Months, Thousands of Birds  
by Robert Tougias  
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(international distribution by Penguin Random House)  
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An Avian Paradise in an Eastern Connecticut Backyard

Book review by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Birder on Berry Lane may appear at first glance to be merely a How-To book, but it is equally a Why-To book. It presents both the how and why to look for birds. More than just a backyard field guide, it is also equal parts a naturalist’s memoir and a reverie about life. Robert Tougias merges the keen eye of a naturalist with the golden pen of a poet and the soulful wisdom of a philosopher.

Think Bob Grindle’s monthly column, “Looking Up,” here in *Neighbors*. On the surface about astronomy, Grindle’s gazing into the firmament of the night sky serves as his springboard for his musings about the meaning of life. What stargazing after sunset inspires in Grindle, birdwatching before sunrise inspires in Tougias. From the chapter titled, “June,” the month with the longest days and the earliest sunrises: “The new day unveils beauty and experience. It holds the revelations of nature, which, by simply living here and going about my business, catches me by utter surprise, enabling me to see interesting new things. I simply have to look, during each new day, and it will be shown to me.”

This book will spark wonderment in the natural world that can be found right under your nose. No need to travel far from your home. There is nothing magical or remarkable about Tougias’ own home in Colchester, Connecticut. His neighborhood is suburban subdivisioswn Americana dotted with a cherished few remaining tracts of forest. His front yard borders his neighbors’ front yards left and right. His three-acre backyard merges with a small woodland that runs parallel to the asphalt barrier of Connecticut Route 2. Only one-quarter of a mile away from the parkway, his home is buffered from its motorized hum by two other suburban homes and their yards. Yet, Tougias has discovered an avian paradise around his home. Surely you, too, can wing it right in your own backyard or nearby park. Should you already find joy in the winged and feathered fauna near at hand, Tougias will deepen your appreciation. If birding is a sport, this book is a game changer. And potentially for some readers, a life changer.

To sample’s the author’s writings, you’ll find a Look Inside on Amazon only for the Kindle, not for the underpriced hardbound book, so make sure you’re viewing the Kindle eBook. You’ll also find on the publisher’s website a downloadable PDF of the same Introduction and Chapter One found on Amazon. For more than just those two chapters, you can Search for the monthly columns that Tougias has contributed since 2015 to Southeastern Connecticut’s daily newspaper, *The Day*.

But wait! In order to keep you and me on the same page, right here are a few excerpts in their order of appearance, beginning with the first chapter, “January.” “Birds are the visible, audible expressions of the pulse of life that teems all around us. ... I see a small piece of the sky fallen from the ether. It is a bluebird. ... I count five robins working the lawn. ... With each chilly gust, brown leaves dance across the lawn. ... The catbird’s tail twitched in nervous curiosity, and its eyes burned bright with intelligence. ... The robin’s song is rich, pure, and without imperfection. I lie in bed listening. The song is loud, as if the bird’s breast is my pillow.” These sparkling gems are excerpted from less than the first half of the book, so less than halfway through the year. Each chapter chronicles the backyard birds of each month of the year, like a Birds of the Month Club, so twelve chapters in all.

Tougias has condensed his lifetime of birding into a single year. Thoreau did the same when he compressed his two years while residing at Walden Pond into a single year in his magnum opus, *Walden*. Same as Edward Abbey did with his experiences as a park ranger for two years in Utah compressed into one year in his cult classic, *Desert Solitaire*. You’ve got that right, I indeed do elevate *Birder on Berry Lane* onto the same high perch with *Walden* and with *Desert Solitaire*. Tougias glorifies suburban backyard birding to the same heroic stature as a yearlong hermitage on a mountaintop or a monthlong backpacking hike in the wilderness. The little wilderness that is left.

When we read books, three separate time spans coexist at once. First is the month when Tougias was writing, second what month he was writing about, and third what month during which you are reading the book. Ideally, you could savor each monthly chapter by reading it contemporaneous month-by-month with your own month of the year, thereby stretching your reading the book over the course of an entire year. This might provide you with new clues to experiencing the seasons and to seeing each season’s emblematic birdlife. But who of us possesses such patience and persistence? I must confess, not I, who can never eat only half a box of raisins, but must devour the whole dang thing. So rather than taking twelve months to read the book, I read it in twelve days. I can’t say that I couldn’t put the book down. I can say that when I was not

reading the book, I often found myself thinking about it. Go ahead, call me birdbrained.

For example, the thought-provoking “May” chapter about the seasonal miracle of migration boggled my mind for hours. Many experiments and hypotheses have attempted to unravel migration’s mysteries. Tougais even tossed around some of the theories that have been proven unfounded. About one disproven theory in particular, he concluded, “This theory had many dead ends.” That theories can have dead ends left me wondering for hours about his theory about dead-end theories.

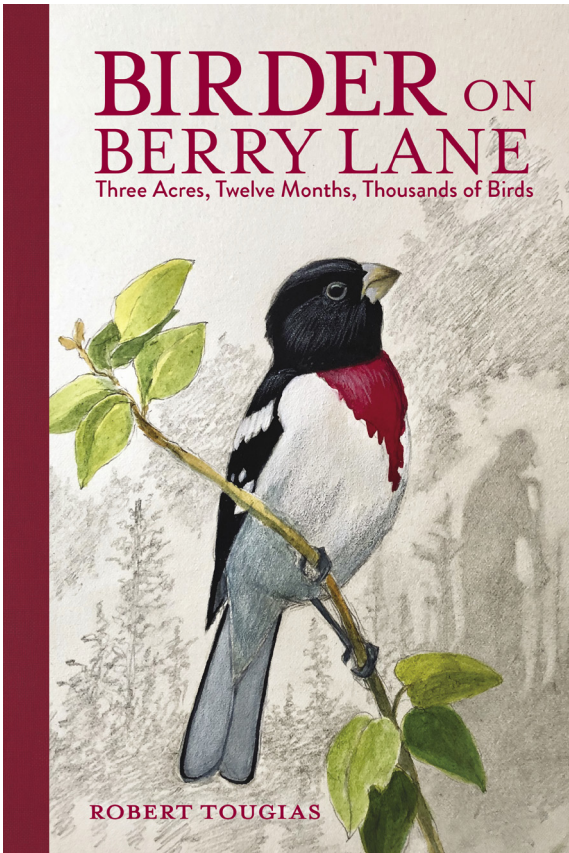
A few rare passages did descend into tedium, as when the author observes the weather, an aspect of daily life more appropriate for the here-and-now of a weekly column than for a timeless book. For instance, when he gave an account of his efforts to dig out his

car after a blizzard, he lost me somewhere in a snowdrift. But elsewhere, as when he reminisces about his childhood or about his own child’s childhood, those memories deftly serve as seamless transitions into discussions of the birds of the month. His reminiscences are infrequent and are recounted only in relationship to the birds. The subject of the book remains the wondrous lives of birds, not the life of the author. Thus, *Birder on Berry Lane* is sorely mistitled. Rather, it more appropriately should have been titled, *Birdlife on Berry Lane*.

Dare I find fault in this extraordinary birder and his avian lifestyle? All right, I dare. In order to stand sentry over his flocks, the author hosts several birdfeeders in his front and backyard. Many compelling reasons for abstaining from unnaturally inflating the numbers of wild birds visiting one’s own yard have already been well documented elsewhere. To those I add that, in gathering those birds all around him, he is depriving his human neighbors of the joy of viewing birds in their own yards.

The Resources bibliography provides a select list for further reading (and listening!) about birdlife. Glaringly missing among the field guides are the definitive Sibley books. Still, do not be dissuaded by my two picayune grumblings about one misplaced word in the title and one omission on the closing pages. Deserving of a much wider readership than just the ardent fans of the author’s newspaper columns, this book is heavenly conceived and eloquently written.

Mark Mathew Braunstein’s previous book reviews have appeared in *Natural Health*, *Animals Agenda*, and *Vegetarian Times*. A nature photographer and author of five books and countless magazine articles, reprints of his articles about wildlife can be found at [www.MarkBraunstein.Org/wildlife](http://www.MarkBraunstein.Org/wildlife)



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