

A sales associate approached. “There’s also a sample set, if you wanted to get all of them.”

“There is?” Robinson exclaimed. “Why would you tell me that?”

Candles rung up and bagged, Robinson drifted to another display: a nightstand stacked with books and a canary-yellow alarm clock. “A friend of mine said that I have to stop using my phone as an alarm,” she said. “So I can have twenty minutes in the morning without being, like, Twitter, New York Times, breaking news.”

The associate went to the back to look for one of the clocks. She returned empty-handed. “We’re all sold out,” she said. The floor model was not for sale. “We also have some other ones,” she added, “but they’re not as fun.”

Robinson nodded. “Thanks for having my back, boo.”

—Sheila Yasmin Marikar

BRAVE NEW WORLD BIRDLIFE



Heather Wolf earned a degree in sociology at U.C.L.A., then spent six years playing electric bass in a travelling band. She earned a master’s degree in information science, moved to Brooklyn, and worked as a software developer for a company based in Manhattan. She founded JuggleFit, which promotes physical fitness and mindfulness through juggling, and she taught Harry Connick, Jr., on television, to juggle colored scarves. In 2006, she moved to Pensacola, earned another master’s degree, in computer science, and spent five years working on a Web site for the Navy. One day, as she was walking to the beach on a path among the dunes, she was attacked, more or less, by a bird. “It was mostly white, and it looked a little like a gull,” she said recently. “When I got home, I looked it up and learned that it was a least tern and that least terns aggressively defend their nests, which are just scrapes in the sand.” She hadn’t thought about birds very often before that moment; afterward, she thought about them all the time.

In 2012, she moved back to New York and decided to document every bird species in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Four years later, she published “Birding at the Bridge,” a two-hundred-and-seventy-nine-page book that’s partly a bird guide, partly a memoir, and partly a triumph of nature photography. That same year, she was hired to do what has turned out to be her dream job (so far): Web development for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Late one afternoon this summer, Wolf took a walk in what’s now her principal birding “patch,” the transformed East River piers that constitute Brooklyn Bridge Park. (She and her boyfriend, who is also both a software developer and a birder, live near Red Hook, not far from Pier 6.) “I call this the Dark Forest,” she said, on a shaded path that was maybe two hundred yards from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. “There’s a black-crowned night heron that often hangs out here, in this sumac—and there it is.” A large, hunched bird with a long bill was perched on a branch, camouflaged by foliage. A young man and woman stopped, and the man asked Wolf what she was looking at. “Wow!” he said. “How did you even see that?”

A bird with bright-orange markings flew down and began splashing in a shallow pond below the sumac. “That’s a male American redstart—a migrating warbler,” Wolf said. “You can see that his tail is fanned out and flicking, and one theory is that they do that to scare insects, which they then eat.” She took



Heather Wolf

a few pictures with a Canon D.S.L.R., to which she had attached a telephoto lens. “Let’s use Merlin,” she said, referring to Cornell’s free bird-identification app. She plugged in a photo, and information on the redstart popped up.

Merlin can also identify birds by sound. “At this time of year, most birds aren’t singing a lot, because they don’t have to attract mates or defend territory,” Wolf said. Even so, an especially noisy bird was clearly audible among the leaves nearby, and a Merlin utility called Sound ID nailed it: a gray catbird. “An interesting fact about Merlin is that it identifies birdsong visually, rather than from audio signals,” she continued. When the app records a bird call, it generates a spectrogram, which looks like a tracing made by a seismograph during an earthquake. Different species’ spectrograms aren’t as individual as fingerprints, but almost. Sound ID is powered by an artificial-intelligence algorithm that bird-identification experts and lab staff have trained by feeding it thousands of spectrograms submitted by birders (through ebird.org, one of the lab’s sites) and annotated by bird-sound experts. “Right now, there are four hundred and fifty-eight species that Merlin can identify by sound,” Wolf said. “Something we’re going to be working on soon is training the app on urban environments. The more sound recordings we have with helicopters in the background, the better Merlin is going to do in identifying these birds.”

This past spring, Wolf had numerous opportunities to listen to, watch, and photograph a family of common ravens, which had nested under the American flag near the top of one of the Brooklyn Bridge towers. “They had the best view in New York,” she said, “and they were fun to watch because they would sometimes fly upside down and do rolls—usually a half-roll, but on rare occasions a full or even a double.” Ravens look like crows, but they’re bigger and have thicker bills, and their tails are more wedge-shaped. They also make a sound that Merlin identifies easily: a croak, rather than a caw. “Ravens sound like frogs,” Wolf said. “So, if you hear a frog flying above you, look up.”

—David Owen