

# MOUNTAINS

## Time to try birding beyond the backyard



**Word from the Smokies**  
Aaron Searcy  
Columnist

If you found yourself paying closer attention to the natural world around you this past year, you're not alone. Months of lockdowns, layoffs, and isolation have translated into soaring popularity for simpler outdoor pastimes, including a unique growing community of "bird nerds."

Birdseed, birdhouses, and high-end binoculars have all been scarce at times in recent months, and birdwatching and wildlife identification apps like eBird and iNaturalist are flush with newly active accounts. This spring, there have been far more reported sightings of rare birds in and around Great Smoky Mountains National Park than ever before — most likely a sign of more human eyes on the skies and not a sudden profusion of Swainson's warblers or golden-crowned kinglets.

"I think this year has definitely been exceptional," said Keith Watson, a professional birding guide and former biologist with the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "There are a lot more people out there, and I'm seeing a lot of new names on the reporting forums that I use, especially eBird."

While the pandemic put a hold on some of Watson's usual birding tours this year, he says the national park offers some of the best birding opportunities in the southern United States due to its wide range of elevations and more than 800 square miles of mature and unbroken forested habitat.

"To have such large contiguous blocks of that kind of forest is really essential to the conservation of these birds, especially the northern hardwood forests and the spruce-fir forests at the higher elevations, which are hard to come by until you go much further north," said Watson. Whether it's the high-elevation spruce-fir forests or the close-canopy deciduous forests common at lower elevations, the Great Smoky Mountains have a lot to offer if you happen to be a bird.

"It's just a huge green mantle of forest below, which — to anthropomorphize a little bit — has been appealing to birds who use that kind of habitat," said Watson. "It's just got to be joyful."

Watson will present a crash course on birding in the Smokies on July 16, as part of the Science at Sugarlands speaker series hosted by park partner Discover Life in America (DLIA). Old hands at birding or those newly curious about the region's bird life are encouraged to reg-



**Guide and former biologist Keith Watson, left, leads a birding group on a tour Great Smoky Mountains National Park.**

PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM



**Red-breasted nuthatches are small, sprightly birds known for quickly hopping along trunks and branches in coniferous forests as they forage for food, often hanging upside-down.**

PROVIDED BY WARREN LYNN

ister for the free online event at [dlia.org](http://dlia.org).

"The thing about these mountains that makes them so rewarding for birding is there are a lot of northern species whose southernmost range occurs in the Smokies," said Watson. "So, if

you've got a target species you'd like to find, you can zero in on their habitat. black-capped chickadee, red crossbill, red-breasted nuthatch, Northern saw-whet owl — those are the kinds of things you know you're going to have a good chance of seeing when you're in the right habitat, and that's always easy to find in the park."

Actually laying eyes on some of those birds once you've made it to the mountains can be difficult — especially in summer. Once deciduous trees put out their foliage, visibility drops rapidly, even with the benefit of binoculars.

"In most parts of the park, people will be more likely to hear birds than see them," explained Paul Super, the park's research coordinator, "with open areas like Cades Cove and Oconaluftee being the exceptions." Even so, several areas in the park have been included on state-level birding trails for their exceptional viewing opportunities.

"We have three sections of the park in the North Carolina Birding Trail: Big Creek, Heintooga Spur Road, and Oconaluftee Visitor Center," said Super. "The park will also soon be part of the statewide North Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas, which invites volunteers to document the birds they see in eBird."

Listening to birdsong can be just as

rewarding as seeing the birds themselves, whether it's tuning into the ethereal yodel of a wood thrush or catching the syncopated hoot of a barred owl. In fact, some bird researchers rely mostly on vocalizations to identify birds and take stock of species diversity in a given area. Casual birders can use the same approach.

"At first you have to rely on sounds to locate many birds, but once you learn their songs, you can identify them and go searching through the developed canopies," said Watson. "High-elevation specialist birds tend to sing a little longer into the season than the lower-elevation birds, so you'll still find plenty from July through August if you spend some time around Newfound Gap, Clingmans Dome, or Alum Cave Trail."

Newly invested pandemic birders and the birding-curious looking to explore beyond the backyard this summer can find a printable checklist of Smokies birds online at [nps.gov/grsm](http://nps.gov/grsm).

Aaron Searcy is a publications associate for the 28,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at [smokiesinformation.org](http://smokiesinformation.org) and reach the author at [Aaron@gsmasoc.org](mailto:Aaron@gsmasoc.org).

## American Vinyl Co.'s wares highlight of South Slope bar

**Mackensy Lunsford**  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — Cheap beer, live music and records. That's the promise at American Vinyl Co.'s new South Slope space, which also is home to an audio museum and the company's main product: custom vinyl record production for professional musicians and the general public.

American Vinyl was created in 2016 by Ryan Schilling as a custom vinyl record cutting service. This year, the business moved from a quaint studio to a nearly 5,000 square foot warehouse space on lower Coxe Avenue.

The extra space is not wasted, a press release from Schilling said. The location features a newly-built bar made of 1930s

radios, behind which you'll find a rotating selection of local and affordable beers.

There's also a curated selection of used vinyl and an intimate new sound stage, which hosts live music presented by the Lonesome Station Music Series. You can even order up your own custom record while you drink your beer.

"American Vinyl can also help artists with their short-run vinyl, record pressing, or recording," Schilling said.

The vinyl maker also aims to make record production more accessible by offering a service called Vinyl To Go, which lets customers choose from a list of prerecorded songs by local and regional artists. Engineers then press a 7-inch record on the spot.

"We built the space to be a music and vinyl playground," said Schilling. "Mak-



**Vinyl retail and listening space is seen at American Vinyl Co.** PROVIDED PHOTO

ing the medium more interactive was our goal."

American Vinyl can handle traditional record production and nontraditional

recording including wedding vows, podcasts, poetry, storytelling and more. With the American Sound Truck, guests can sing into a vintage microphone and walk out with a record.

Learn more at the American Vinyl Co. grand opening, July 10, 1-8 p.m. The event includes free live-to-vinyl recording sessions in the American Sound Truck from 3-6 p.m. Live music is 6-8 p.m.

American Vinyl Co. is at 217 Coxe Ave., suite C, above Open Hearts Art Center. More at [americanvinylco.com](http://americanvinylco.com).

Mackensy Lunsford has lived in Asheville for more than 20 years, and has been a staff writer for the Asheville Citizen Times since 2012. Lunsford is a former professional line cook and one-time restaurant owner.

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