



COURTNEY ELLIS

*Foreword by* KAY WARREN

---

# LOOKING UP

---

A BIRDER'S  
GUIDE TO  
HOPE  
THROUGH  
GRIEF



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Looking Up* by Courtney Ellis.  
Copyright © 2024 by Courtney Ellis.  
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.  
[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).



I

---

LOOKING UP

BIRDING

---

*You could do worse than to  
spend your days staring at blue jays.*

JULIE ZICKEFOOSE

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN BIRDING, my husband, Daryl, regarded the entire enterprise with a kind of perplexed, gentle bewilderment. In our fourteen years of marriage and preceding five years of friendship-that-blossomed-into-dating, I'd never once mentioned birds. I never really even noticed them. Then, near the end of my thirties, as sudden and unexpected as a flash of lightning on a cloudless night, the birding began. I imagine this could be annoying.

We'd be in the middle of a conversation, laying out ministry strategy or parenting logistics, sitting together with our coffee in the backyard, and I'd look up and gasp.

“What?”

“Oh my gosh, Daryl, it’s a kinglet. Ruby-crowned, I think. Just . . . hold that thought. I’m going to get my field guide.”

He bore with the hiking and the bird-identification apps, the growing stack of birding books, and all the feeders I hung in the backyard. He bought me binoculars for Christmas and put our three kids to bed by himself night after night during the annual spring migrations with nary a complaint. Still, I suspect a small part of him thought I might be using the hobby as a convenient escape from the daily grind of domestic life. Surely a person who’d previously shown absolutely no interest in them couldn’t get that into *birds*.

Then came a month of wildfires, the air near our Southern California home too choked with smoke for easy breathing, much less hikes into the hills. Our backyard birds sheltered, their songs clipped and short, their behavior agitated. My own mood darkened with the ominous orange sky that turned our neighborhood Martian, the fine ash that blanketed our cars. We plodded on together, air purifiers running on high in our bedrooms, outdoor activities canceled or moved inside. We did okay, Daryl and the kids and me, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was less than whole.

“I see now that you need your birds,” Daryl told me. “I don’t understand why, but I see that you do.”

I don’t always understand why, either. I never needed birds before. But now I do.



Birding is a switch that flips. Amateurs and ornithologists alike can point to a particular bird that turned the light on for them. We call it a “spark bird,” the bird that changes everything forever. It may not end up being a person’s favorite bird, or even a very noteworthy or beautiful or rare one, but it is a watershed. There is a before and an after, and nothing is the same ever again.

“You have a phoebe!” my friend Michelle gestured to our backyard string lights, where a small black-and-white songbird perched, flicking its tail up and down. I studied the bird for a few moments, the tuft of black feathers atop its head, its bright black eyes and tiny black beak, its white front and quick, jerky movements. I didn’t yet know the words for most of what I was seeing—that the tuft of feathers was a *crest*, the bird itself a type of *flycatcher*. I didn’t know the importance of precision when describing a bird: the phoebe didn’t have a white front, it had a white *belly*. I didn’t know it was called a *black* phoebe, distinguishable in color and size from the eastern and Say’s varieties.

What I did know, in those very first moments, was that this little bird had unexpectedly captivated me. For a moment the volume turned down on my shouting to-do list and clamoring young children and creaky house projects and pinging work emails, and it was just me and this bird. A moment in time. A breath. Delight.

In that moment, I looked up.



Birds are invisible to us, until they aren’t. Or perhaps they aren’t invisible, not exactly. They are simply a background to the rest of life, the more immediate, louder bits. Perhaps we remember the gull that stole our cookie or the swans that paddled across a lake we frequented as children. Maybe we watched pigeons from our apartment window or fed leftover lunch crumbs to sparrows on our school playground. But mostly birds were not really a *thing*.

And then, one day, out of nowhere, the spark.

Perhaps you have a spark bird of your own, a Great Egret or Black Rail or Indigo Bunting, a tall, spindly flamingo or a tiny, buzzy hummingbird. Maybe you’re contemplating putting this book down because you were expecting to read about hope and

grief and here I am, yammering on about birds, which is not what you signed up for. But here's the thing: illumination is inscribed on every page of creation. "Chanting aloft in the pine-tops," wrote the poet Robert Service, "The wind has a lesson to teach."<sup>1</sup>

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes that "we do not grieve" like those "who have no hope" for "we believe that Jesus died and rose again."<sup>2</sup> These holy reminders come to us through Scripture, but that is not their only place of speech. The natural world pulses with the heartbeat of God, and birds are a unique avenue into this understanding.

*Look at the birds,* Jesus tells the crowds up on the mountainside, and one by one, the people look up.<sup>3</sup> And Jesus begins to show each soul its dignity and value and worth.

In the book of Exodus, Moses is hard at work herding his father-in-law Jethro's sheep.<sup>4</sup> Anyone who has worked for an in-law knows that the pressure is on to do the job well. As Moses and his sheep meander through the wilderness, Moses' eyes are tuned, on the lookout for pitfalls and predators. He's hoping to spot a lush patch of grass or two, when his attention is diverted by a strange sight.

There, over in the chaparral, is a bush aflame. Small fires are not unusual in this parched land of heat and scrub, but Moses is drawn closer by a realization: this bush is burning, yet it is not consumed. The fire does not spread, nor does it go out. It burns and burns and burns.

*Take off your shoes,* comes a voice, *for the ground upon which you stand is holy.*

There is a before and an after. There is a spark and a burning. In this moment, Moses is set upon a path from which he will never return, a journey that will have its end decades beyond and hundreds of miles away from this small patch of holy ground.

Rare are the moments in our lives where we can point to a before and an after. There are graduations and marriages and births, accidents and illnesses and deaths, but mostly there are long strings of ordinary days, one after the other after the other. We wake and sleep, we eat and work, we play and rest. Everything is pretty much the same, until it isn't.

After the burning bush, Moses will face months of wrangling with the great Pharaoh of Egypt. There will be a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire and a miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. This will be followed by decades of wandering in the wilderness. A few transcendent moments will give way to forty years of slogging obedience.

Yet God will plant reminders of his presence along this arduous journey. Bread from heaven. Water from a stone. Quail to nourish the body. God will speak to Moses. God will appear to him. God will continue to guide. Even in the slog, there is hope.

Many years before Moses, God pulled Abraham from his tents in the dead of night and called him to the edge of his camp.<sup>5</sup>

*Look up*, God told Abraham. *Look at the stars.*

In the Gospels, Jesus sees the fear and anxiety of the crowds and points them heavenward, too.

*Look at the birds*, says Jesus. *Are not you worth more than many sparrows?*

Every year or so Daryl and the kids and I take a whale watching tour from a marina near our home. Inevitably, a tourist or two will get seasick, even in calm waters. Then the captain will tell them to keep their eyes on the horizon. It's turned into a spiritual metaphor for me: the boat will go up and down, up and down, up and down our whole life long, but if we keep our eyes up, we can catch a glimpse of salvation.



I'm not a professional birder, or even an impressive amateur one. I feel the need to mention this at the outset because I'm no ornithologist or biologist or expert in the ways of the avian world. This will not be a field guide to the birds of Southern California or an extensive exploration of ecology or even a Big Year type chronicle of the species I've encountered. At least one chapter will describe a bird I've never even seen in person. My only qualifications for the birdy parts of this book are a deep fascination with all things avian and an even deeper love. I *love* birds.

Why? Because birds are amazing. Their biodiversity alone astounds. There are hummingbirds that can perch on a strand of hair and pigeons the size of turkeys and cassowaries that could kill an adult man with a kick. Birds come in every color imaginable: black and white, pink and blue, iridescent greens and purples, translucent silver, spotted red. There are birds that can hear sound where we only recognize silence and birds whose songs are so complex they cannot be parsed by the human ear. There are birds that thrive in temperatures that would quickly freeze or practically cook a human. There are birds that clean up the dead. Some birds can mimic human voices; others sing hundreds of unique songs. Exquisitely beautiful birds give image to the Platonic ideal of perfection, while others look doodled by toddlers. (Who thought to place the eye of a Wilson's Snipe *there*?) There are birds with twelve-foot wingspans and at least one species without wings at all. (To be fair, that one has been extinct for over five hundred years. Poor Moa.) While the world's loudest bird can match the decibel level of a jet engine, the quietest one flies so softly its wingbeats are imperceptible to all but our most sophisticated microphones.

Even the names of birds are a delight: Fairy Wren, Elf Owl, Diabolical Nightjar, Bananaquit, Honeycreeper, Handsome Fruit-eater, Cinnamon Teal, Predicted Antwren, Spectacled Tyrant. Their



collectives get even better: it's a drumming of grouse, a kettle of hawks, a lamentation of swans, a gatling of woodpeckers. Penguins come in huddles. Ravens? Conspiracies. Swallows? A gulp, of course. If you get tired of a squabble of gulls, you may be ready for a charm of finches. If a scream of swifts isn't your thing, perhaps I could interest you in a scold of jays instead?

Beyond the etymological pleasures, much of the culture itself around birding is a joy. I love the gentle nerdiness of so many bird people, their pocket-covered pants, their silly hats, their sturdy shoes, their nicknamed binoculars. (These are "bins," for those of you who are uninitiated.) I love the intense, competitive birders and the whispering introverts. I love the casual birders and the obsessives, too. I love birding's codes of ethics and ecotourism, its whimsy and wonder, its Bird of the Year, its conferences and conventions.

Beyond all of this, and perhaps most importantly, I love that birding itself is an exercise in delight, wonder, and gratitude. It teaches me to pay attention, and attention, I think, is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. What it means to extend and receive love. The more I fall in love with birds, the more I grow to love the whole of creation, standing in awe of the one who spun it all into being.

Maybe birds aren't your jam. That's okay. You can pay loving attention to whatever it is that allures you—a soul-bending jazz lick or the frost on your ski goggles or the artful crackles in a warm sourdough boule. Maybe it's children or grandchildren or rose bushes or nuclear physics or lacrosse or knitting or choir or finding the perfect skipping stone at every beach you encounter.

This story is about birds, yes, but even more than that it is about paying attention to grief as an avenue toward hope. The birds are secondary, in a way. They are my spark, but they need not be yours. What they offer to us is a particular window into what it means

to be human: that to be alive is to grieve. To keep being alive is to hope.

To do either is to follow Wendell Berry's sage advice of continuing to be joyful, though we've considered all the facts. That is the heart of looking up.



It was the poet Mary Oliver who wrote that much of the task of being human is to pay attention, be amazed, and share about it. Fascination and curiosity are spiritual practices. Early in my parenting, my mother—an amateur artist—taught me to invite my children to tell me about their artwork rather than asking them, “What is it?” or worse yet, *guessing*. Nothing deflates a child like an adult saying, “Oh, what a beautiful dog!” when, in fact, the child has drawn Santa Claus.

The Psalms are a wonderful companion for learning this type of curiosity. We want prescription and command, *do this* and *don't do that*. We want a label beneath the drawing saying, “This is Santa Claus, not a dog.” But the Psalms are metaphor and mystery, emotion and image, poetry and prayer. We can't kill them and pin them to a card, like Eustace Clarence Scrubb's beetles. They live and breathe and unsettle us. This is good. God intends it.

In his poem “What I Wish You'd Heard,” David Wright describes his angst as a college professor when he tells his students to choose research topics they can live with for ten weeks.

They chose the way we all do  
 the most for the least  
 Plastic bottles marked SODA

What he wants is to go back in time and tell them a different story:

Choose something you would hate  
That will wake you up like a root beneath your sleeping bag  
when you pitched your tent at the most breathtaking spot,  
not the flattest<sup>6</sup>

We think we need answers, clarity, ease, comfort. Yet God is so often that root beneath our sleeping bag, waking us with an ache. Inviting us to look up.



Take a moment and look out a window. If you wait for a few moments, you're likely to see a bird (unless you're reading this on an airplane). What do you notice about it? Don't tell me it's *just* a pigeon or a sparrow or a crow. Don't discount a Canada Goose. Watch it. Look at it. See it.

There. You're a birder.

You can go as far down that path as you like—nearly everyone looks dorkishly dapper in a khaki vest—but really, birding is as straightforward as breathing. People can make it competitive or joyless, as they can most anything, but at its heart, birding is simply paying attention, holding still, and opening up to the wonder of natural spaces. It's cultivating mindfulness around creation. It's being present, right where we are, with what God has placed before us. Rowan Williams describes contemplative prayer as practicing awareness, “a little bit like that of a bird watcher.” He continues: “The experienced bird watcher, sitting still, poised, alert, not tense or fussy, knows that this is the kind of place where something extraordinary suddenly bursts into view.”<sup>7</sup>

To me, birding is a spiritual practice. After all, as Williams describes, awareness is at the heart of all contemplative practice. I find that birding tethers me to vital rhythms in the tending of my

soul, to prayer and the study of Scripture and the love of neighbor alongside the care of creation. It helps uncouple me from legalism and performance—I can tally the birds I see like I used to mark down the passages of Scripture I read and studied, but unlike a book I can pull down from my shelf whenever I please, each bird that enters my gaze is here for a finite length of time, unpredictable and fleeting, a transient gift of delight.

To bird is to learn how to wait in stillness. To bird is to learn how to see.

Our church has a little prayer garden behind one of our worship spaces, pebbled pavers winding their way around lavender plants and ornamental grasses and a stone cross. One year, on Good Friday, I stood there watching the sun set, taking a moment in stillness before leading evening worship and—I'll just be honest—introverting after a long week of hectic ministry. In the golden beams of twilight, I watched a Mourning Dove alight on the cross, its pink feet curled over the edge, its feathers smooth and pale. I wondered what birds witnessed Jesus in the garden on the night he was betrayed.

As I watched the dove—a symbol of peace and baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit—it suddenly hit me how little I really knew. There I was, one person among billions, standing in a California garden, dressed in a black robe and preparing to testify to wisdom from beyond the grave that had been handed down in ancient texts written in foreign tongues. I realized at that moment I had nothing of my own to offer—I could not possibly be clever enough or charismatic enough or competent enough to convince anyone of anything. Horror and then fear and then blessed relief washed over me. I was not up to the task because the task was not humanly possible. God would have to show up and teach all of us how to see.



The older I get, the more I can see the wisdom of my elders. As a teenager I already knew everything. (Most teenagers do.) The words of my parents and grandparents washed over me like water off a duck's back—constantly there, but never soaking in.

My maternal grandparents lived less than an hour away from the northern Wisconsin town in which my sisters and I were raised. Most weeks we'd see them at least once—they'd bring us chocolate-frosted cake donuts from the green-roofed bakery just off the highway and we'd eat them on stools around the breakfast table, or else we'd drive over to their little lake house for dinner, winding down their gravel road with our mouths watering in readiness for the chicken and baked potatoes Grandpa cooked on his old charcoal grill.

My grandfather strung feeders across their backyard, waging war with the gray squirrels intent on stealing the seeds he intended for his chickadees and goldfinches.

"We had an oriole yesterday," he'd tell me. "I saw three robins."

"Mmm," I'd respond, searching his shelves for Archie comics. "Cool."

My grandfather was a man of few words and fewer pleasantries. He made Calvin Coolidge look chatty. But he did love animals and would talk more about them than anything else.

I recognize now what he was saying to me in his bird reports. A kind of deeper, subtler way of speaking. A language unrecognizable until a person has suffered a great deal.

He was telling me he loved me.

This book is my way of doing the same.

**BUY THE BOOK!**

[ivpress.com/looking-up](http://ivpress.com/looking-up)