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Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Through the Lens: Lisa Myers, an avid bird-watcher who has been an instructor for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society and taught beginning birders the joys of the hobby, looks through a viewing scope at birds on Oka Ponds, which are visible from Highway 17, and part of the Los Gatos Creek Trail in Campbell.

Bird's-eye View

Oka Ponds are visited by dozens of bird species

By MARTIN NOBIDA

Hundreds of people escaping the daily grind by running, cycling or in-line skating along the tranquil, idyllic creek banks of the Los Gatos Creek Trail are missing a whole world of wildlife around them.

"People who use the trail are usually bicyclists, joggers and those walking their dogs," says Lisa Myers, a longtime Campbell resident and an avid bird-watcher whose license plate reads "BIRD2ID." "And they're always looking at their shoes, so they're not really aware of the birds overhead."

For bird-watchers, however, the trail and its environs are a treasure trove of avian wildlife, she says, as the creek and ponds are prominent stopping grounds for birds on their migratory routes.

Although bird-watching is a year-round hobby, most bird-watchers, or birders, are especially looking forward to the coming weeks, when spring and migratory fowl flying north begin to descend upon the Valley to rest and mate.

"In a few weeks, there'll be hundreds of swallows here flying around and nesting," she says, pointing out over the Oka Ponds, which are part of the Los Gatos Creek Park in Campbell.

The birds won't be hard to notice either, Myers says. The males will be all decked out in brightly colored mating plumage and they'll be vociferously crooning beautiful tunes to attract potential mates.

It'll be a feast of the senses for bird-watchers of all levels, Myers says, but not everyone will be happy with the annual courtship rituals.

"It'll also be the season when nightingale songs start waking up people in the middle of the night," she says with a smile.

Although she humbly explains that she doesn't know everything there is to know about birds, she's knowledgeable enough to serve as a teacher for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, introducing beginning birders to the joys of the hobby. She's also taught beginning bird-watching classes at the Campbell Community Center.

But besides teaching students about birds, she says she's also learned a bit about her students.

Although they all don't consider them-

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selves environmentalists, she says, most say they started birding simply because they like the outdoors. Eventually, though, through education, they begin to gain an awareness of environmental issues.

Gloria Chun Hoo, a former student of Myers' and the current director of the Campbell Historical Museum, agrees.

"I hardly considered myself a naturalist," she says, describing herself as a city girl. "I've personally become more concerned about wildlife and conservation since I started birding a few years ago."

Environmental awareness is almost inevitable for birders, Myers says, as birding and the knowledge of bird habitats go hand in hand.

"Unfortunately," she says, "with all the development going on, there is so little space left for birds that places like the ponds become magnets for all kinds of species."

The diversity and concentration, however, is a boon for those looking to glimpse wildlife in its natural setting.

Most beginning birders say they never got into birding before because they didn't think the area had beautiful birds, Myers says. Then they're surprised at the diversity of wildlife to be found on the creek.

"So often people think we don't have many pretty birds here," she says. "That is until they get their first spotting scope, and they realize they can see 40 different species in a few hours."

Although binoculars and inexpensive spotting scopes are a great introduction to the hobby, to fully appreciate the beauty of the birds, she says, enthusiasts need quality optics.

Brand-new birders go out to see birds all the time, she says. But because their optics aren't good enough to distinguish differences in color or plumage, they often cannot explain what they're looking at to their colleagues.

"Then when they see a bird through good optical equipment, it's like getting a new pair of eyes," Myers says.

Linda Sullivan, a Saratoga resident who runs a website dedicated to birding at Oka Ponds in Campbell, agrees.

"If you're going to bird, if you're really going to get into it, you need a good scope," she says, showing her \$800 Nikon scope, which she has mounted on a tripod worth nearly \$200. "This isn't the most expensive scope you can get, but it has a very clear picture and, more importantly, it's lightweight."

The quality of the lens is only one factor that a birder needs to consider when purchasing a scope; for serious bird-watchers, weight is also a huge concern.

"Lugging around heavy equipment can be a real pain," Myers says, explaining that in classes and on walks, she can find herself hauling around a scope and tripod for 12 hours a day.

Strenuous hikes aren't enough to stop avid bird-watchers from spotting birds.

"It's really a passion to see a bird that you haven't seen before," Myers says, noting that a huge, tight-knit, well-connected community has grown up around the hobby.

Because the best time to spot birds is within the first few hours of the day, a lot of birders go into the bushes in the morning, look for birds for a few hours, and then go to work. When they spot a rare bird,



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Bird Savvy: Avid bird-watcher Lisa Myers points out a common snipe in her bird guide book after spotting one at the Oka Ponds in Campbell. The ponds are part of the Los Gatos Creek Trail Park. More than 40 different bird species fly through as they migrate north.



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Soft Landing: Canada geese are just one of 40 species of birds that fly into the Oka Ponds in Campbell as they head north. The ponds, which can be seen off Highway 17, attract many bird-watchers from throughout the area. Campbell's waterways are one of the few stopovers in the South Bay left for migrating birds.

they post the sighting on a mailing list, Myers says.

Most people will report a first sighting of the season. And a lot of people report different species that come back from migrations. But whatever and whenever they post, "within hours, bird-watchers will flock to the site to get a glimpse of it," she says.

The people who can afford to take off from work on such short notice are usually those who have already retired, she says, or those who are self-employed or unemployed.

Recently laid off from a high-tech job, Myers says she plans on dedicating a lot more of her time to birding, and that she is even considering opening a business dedicated to birders.

Linda Sullivan, a former student of Myers', is a retiree who now spends much of her time monitoring a colony of great blue herons at Vasona Park for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory.

For more than two decades, she ran an

antiques business. She sold her business, however, to pursue her passion for birding.

Five years ago, her husband bought her a bird-watching book, and she was hooked. She thought the pictures were pretty, but after she took her first birding class with Myers, she realized that looking at a picture in a book and looking at the real thing are completely different.

"It's like seeing the Mona Lisa for the first time," she says. "You see it in books countless times, and you develop an image in your mind of what it should look like in reality. But when you see it in person, you say, 'Wow, it's much smaller than I thought it would be. Or it's much larger.'"

Her experience birding, she says is not completely unlike her experience as an antiques dealer.

"As an antiques dealer, I collected antiques," she says. "As a birder, I'm collecting memories and experiences."

Birders typically create lists of all their

sightings. The most common list, she says, is the list of life birds, or the different kinds of birds that a birder has seen in a lifetime.

Sullivan has 474 life birds on her list.

But people may keep many different lists, she says. There may be a county list, for example, or a park list, a nest list or a year list.

"One guy even kept a list of birds he's seen in movies!" she says.

For most birders, compiling and listing sightings is simply a recreational activity. But for others, it's a challenge. For some, it's a competition to challenge their own skills at identifying birds. For others, it's a challenge to better others.

And for a few, it's an obsession.

In his recent book *The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature and Fowl Obsession*, author Mark Obmascik recounts the adventures of three birders who in 1998 braved mosquitoes, mountain lions and swamps in a race around North America in an attempt to break the North American birding record for how many kinds of birds spotted in one year's time.

In the end, the winner identified 745 different species of birds, this in a region that boasts fewer than 500 native species.

For most birders, however, the birding is merely a recreational pastime they pursue with as much passion, albeit with less intensity, as those competitors.

Contrary to popular conceptions, Myers says, for most birders, bird-watching isn't about spotting rare species. That's part of it, she says, but most people get into birding just to appreciate the birds that come and go with each season.

"It's like a golfer who goes golfing every four days just because he appreciates golfing," she says. "Birders appreciate the birds, wildflowers, lichens and trees."

For more information about birding and classes for birding, visit the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society website at www.scvas.org.