

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT IN MID-MANHATTAN AT 42ND ST & 6TH AVE

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On 25 Oct 2002, John J. Collins reported on the Metro Birding Briefs web site that he had found a Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) in Bryant Park, a small urban oasis on 42nd St. in midtown Manhattan. From this and subsequent reports from other birders, it seemed that this bird was unusually accommodating for the species and rather easily seen because of the limited vegetation in the park. I was personally excited to see this bird as this species is one I like to refer to as my "albatross." I'm sure most birders have one or more species that elude them, and in the case of the Yellow-breasted Chat, I had seen only one in my life. True to form, three brief trips to Bryant Park in the weeks following the initial posting got me only a quick sighting of the bird in flight. Thus, I was delighted to receive a last-minute call asking me to work in Bryant Park the week of 18 Nov, setting up the Holiday Market. I'm an electrician in the entertainment industry – theatre, TV, fancy weddings, special events, you name it – and among the benefits of my job is the frequent opportunity to work outdoors and to occasionally travel to new birding locales. In this instance, I was delighted to be paid for the privilege of spending a week with a Yellow-breasted Chat.

My luck with this species changed almost immediately. On day one, I found the bird perched openly at the south end of the park, next to the path we used to unload equipment. Remarkably, it seemed unfazed by the noisy forklifts. In fact, the next day I observed the bird at length while a lift rumbled but five feet away.

The job kept me working in the park for seven straight days. Thanks to my daily postings on NYSBIRDS-L, many visiting birders knew me by name, and I was hard to miss anyway, being the only birder with a brace of imposing electrical devices on his belt. Particularly thrilling was the opportunity to share this bird with my non-birding co-workers. I'm very open about my non-vocational passion, and at first my observations were greeted with some amusement. As I "pished" a Winter Wren into view, one gentleman stated in his classic Brooklyn patois, "Who knew you wuz for da' boids?!" But my colleagues quickly became excited by the diversion of a relatively flashy bird they had never seen before, nor were likely to again. They looked for pictures online, bought field guides, and phoned their spouses and children to keep them posted on the continued antics of the chat.

One of the greatest joys of birding is sharing the experience with the non-converted, and the Yellow-breasted Chat almost never failed to delight. On my final day in the park, I noticed the excitement of a pair of photographers with what looked like Hubble Space Telescopes on tripods. I radioed my colleagues, who joined the small crowd of birders in the center of the park to observe the chat hopping around some tables and chairs within a few feet of the flabbergasted crowd.

I can only speculate as to the bird's diet while in Bryant Park. I saw it pecking at fallen flower petals, and eating the remains of a fruit salad left behind by the lunchtime mob, while others observed it snacking on leftover potato chips from a nearby café. One afternoon, I watched the chat dipping its head into a piece of square steel buried in the earth as a sleeve for instructional sign posts. It was drinking deeply from rainwater captured within. The bird would drink for a few moments, raise its head to peer inquisitively at me, and determining that my proximity posed no threat, dip in again.

I was far too busy to use even my pocket binoculars to observe the bird. Even so, my close-range, naked-eye viewings, with reinforcement from some wonderful photographs passed on by Karen Fung and Carl Vornberger, lead me to believe it was almost certainly a first-year bird, most likely a female, based on the observations that the bird had a pink lower mandible, some dark feathering across the upper breast, and a relatively thin supraloral line. The age might explain the rather atypical behavior of this individual – it had not yet learned the expected anti-social characteristics we associate with the species.

I could not help but develop a sense of kinship with this bird, and one occasion encapsulated the “Chat Experience” for me. In the middle of a grueling 18-hour day, during which it rained almost constantly, I caught my breath and dried off a bit near a large power distribution module. It was dusk, and I would have been hard pressed to identify any creature more than ten feet from me, but the bird landed on the module, only five feet away, and nervously shifted about for a few seconds before flying off. I was heartened by the moment, and inspired to suffer through what turned out to be another eight hours of work. This instance, and all of those throughout the week, was remarkable not only in itself, but also in the context of the previous difficulty I had had in even spotting this species, let alone achieving such intimacy.

After completing the job on 24 Nov I visited Bryant Park a few days later without spotting my old friend. On-line reports had the bird present for a few days after that date, but gone long before the heavy snow and deep cold of early December. I can only hope that natural instincts took hold, and the wonderful Yellow-breasted Chat of Bryant Park headed comfortably south after gracing so many with its beauty under such uncharacteristic circumstances for so long.

Yellow-breasted
Chat
Bryant Park, NYC
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