

PATCH BIRDING—HUDSON YARDS

Alan Drogin

drogin@earthlink.net

Hudson Yards. Not a court, school, stock, grave, or back, but a rail yard. Six ground-level blocks of Manhattan. At the terminus, 30 train tracks abutting a heliport and the Hudson River wrapped by the High Line “Spur” flanked by two parking lots. The city covered the remaining ground-level access tunnels with streets propped two stories high, and then the developers built a vertical empire on top of that to keep everyone looking up and away from its namesake.

In early spring, I was among the first wave of employees to occupy its flagship skyscraper, the Warner Media building. One stairway, three escalators, and two elevator banks create a two-way, vertigo-inducing commute from the depths of the No. 7 subway line all the way up to my 41st-floor office, with a view of the “vessel” and “yard.”

So how is the birding? Well, among the wafer-thin, jet-engine-cooled islands of manicured gardens, tree rows, and small fountained pools scattered about the grey sea of pedestrian pavement, I find the ubiquitous immigrant House Sparrows and European Starlings, joined by Feral Pigeons, White-Throated Sparrows, and Gray Catbirds. These are the typical urban scavengers of the detritus of human lunch breaks. During spring migration, I observed a few additional species braving the nearby Bella Abzug Park. On my first foray I was thrilled to spy three skulking Swamp Sparrows. By the time migration got into full swing I occasionally sighted Common Yellowthroats, Ovenbirds, pairs of Eastern Towhees, and a secretive Hermit Thrush. But by June, when the gardens had sprouted sunflowers, lilies and busy food tents and trucks, the White-Throated Sparrows and even the Catbirds had disappeared.

From my office aerie, I can observe two high-tech green rooftops, one of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center and the other, of the lesser-known U.S. Parcel Post Building. As spring turned to summer, hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls were replaced by the beefier Herring Gulls and then the addition of their toddling, fluffy grey young. (A flock of Barn Swallows briefly joined the gulls a few evenings in early May to dive-bomb Eleventh Avenue.) I’ve looked up from my lunch on the 35th floor cafeteria and seen through the big windows an Osprey, Peregrine, and Black-backed Gull fly by. Silent crows occasionally hang around the corner of 37th Street and 9th Avenue.

In spite of the human attempt to create an artificial landscape to share with nature, the migrating species predominantly seek out abandoned garbage-strewn and overgrown tangles of weeds below-street-level. That’s where the train tracks run diagonally northward, exposed intermittently until they finally disappear beneath the Midtown Tunnel ramp. The first exposure is an inaccessible “field” at the northeast corner of 35th Street and Eleventh Avenue—the largest plot of

grass outside of the green roofs—and it's home to a pair of American Robins and the only Song Sparrow I sighted.

The next exposure emerges north of the Bella Abzug Park at 36th Street—a luscious bank of wild trees and weeds sloping up steeply from the tracks to a broken concrete lot occupied by a vacated auto-body shop covered in vines. On the other side of the tracks are a couple of muddy pools. Standing in the shade of a sidewalk tree containing an abandoned bird feeder, I look in through a chain-link fence at this inaccessible mess, for this is my favorite birding patch. I have even seen a skunk twice, and one evening at dusk, a raccoon scrambled before me under broken concrete slabs.

From this patch I reported four more warblers—Black-and-white, Black-throated Blue, Redstart, and in late spring—a Mourning. The surviving trees have been visited by a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a Northern Flicker. I've also heard the beautiful songs of the Northern Cardinal and Baltimore Oriole.

Entering the hot summer doldrums last week, I took a stroll in the evening coolness to my patch and heard the faint song of a House Finch. After a little pishing, I saw a female House Finch fly out onto an open branch, followed by a male. That made it 30 species for Hudson Yards so far. I wish the possibly nesting couple well.

