

EXCERPT



Looking Up A Birder's Guide to Hope Through Grief

April 9, 2024 | \$18, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0716-7

In this meditation on birding as a practice of hope, Courtney Ellis weaves together stories from her own life, including the death of her grandfather, with reflections on birds of many kinds. By "looking up to the birds," Ellis found the beauty of these creatures calling her out of her darkness into the light and hope of God's promises.

To Bird is to Learn How to Wait in Stillness

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

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 astonishes. 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 twelvefoot 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.

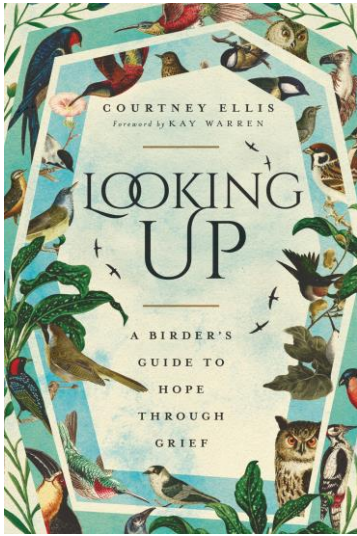


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"This is pastoral imagination at its finest, and with a sacramental flair. In the midst of sorrow and grief, Courtney Ellis has us literally looking up to the birds all around us, then looking higher still at the Creator who reveals things about himself and what it means to be his people through these winged creatures."

Glenn Packiam, lead pastor of Rockharbor Church and author of *The Resilient Pastor*

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.

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 in his book *Being Disciples*: "The experienced birdwatcher, sitting still, poised, alert, not tense or fussy, knows that this is the kind of place where something extraordinary suddenly bursts into view."

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.

—adapted from chapter 1, "Looking Up: Birding"



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Courtney Ellis is a pastor at the Presbyterian Church of the Master in Mission Viejo, California. She is the author of several books, including *Happy Now* and *Present*. She also hosts *The Thing with Feathers*, a podcast about birds and hope.

A Way Toward Hope in a Season of Grief

What has deepened your faith and enlivened your spiritual life and how did that practice prompt you to write this book?

Courtney Ellis: The hope nature has given me in times of great sorrow, particularly the practice of birding (birdwatching), and how the natural world's connection to God has deepened my faith and enlivened my spiritual life. It was a story I had to share, and an invitation I wanted to extend to anyone who's felt staleness in their spiritual practices, a sense of grief or loss, or a desire to ground their faith more deeply.

What is the main idea behind the book *Looking Up*?

Courtney: Hope is a gift sewn into the fabric of creation—our invitation is to look up! The book is a gentle invitation through storytelling, Scripture exposition, memoir, and scientific discovery, to the spiritual practice of hope. What's distinctive about it is it isn't a "how to" or a prescription, instead it's story-driven and bird-driven. Readers will make discoveries as they go, which naturally build into a "delight radar" of sorts, helping eyes open to the hope and beauty God has gifted all around.

Is this a book only about birds and only for birders?

Courtney: It's for birders but also for nonbirders. The birds are the catalyst for my own journey into deeper spiritual practices, but I invite nonbirders (and those who are bird-ambivalent) to ponder what it is that might take them deeper. It is a gentle invitation toward faith for all.

What are some of your favorite quotes from the book?

Courtney: I have a couple to share:

- "If we keep our eyes up, we can catch a glimpse of salvation."
- "To me, birding is a spiritual practice, and awareness is at the heart of all contemplative practice."

What main things do you want your readers to take away from your book?

Courtney: I want them to give themselves permission to explore: to go deeper in their spiritual practices, ask God difficult questions, and sit with their hard feelings, knowing that God will be there all the while. I want them to know that birding is for everyone—it's as easy as looking out the window! I would love for them to find their way toward hope, especially if they're struggling with a season of grief. I want them to discover the God who doesn't always give us the answers but can help us sit with our questions. I want them to go outside (or, if mobility is an issue, to look outside!) regularly, discovering God's beauty and goodness in each leaf and feather.



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