

BIRDING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

In 2014, I decided to keep year lists in Alabama and Louisiana—my goal was to finish in the top fifty eBirders, in terms of the number of species, in each state. In the fall of 2013, Louisiana birder Kimberly Lanka had introduced me to a part of eBird called the “Top 100,” where one can enter a country, region, state, or county, and the top one hundred list of eBirders would be displayed for that geographical location. I finished 2013 ranked sixtieth in Louisiana, tied with two other birders with 207 species, and fifty-ninth in Alabama with 118 species. I had only begun using eBird regularly in April, so I figured that the goal of finishing in the top fifty eBirders in both states was doable if I were to use eBird from the beginning of the year.

Lynn and I got off to a quick start on our Louisiana list. It was the coldest winter we’d had since moving to Louisiana, and fishing was incredibly slow. Lynn got tired of catching nothing, so she resorted to birding with me instead. The unseasonably cold temperatures remained with us into the spring. We weren’t going all out on birding, but we hit the fields, woods, or water almost every weekend. Lynn told me at one point that if she had a nickel for every time I said, “I know we’re not doing a big year, but . . .” she’d be able to go to lunch.

We planned to attend the LOS winter meeting in Lafayette at the end of January; I was excited to participate because I wanted to learn new places to bird in that area. A rare ice storm arrived the night before the Saturday morning field trips departed from Lafayette. We got up early with plenty of time to get to the departure point, but I-10 was closed between Baton Rouge and Lafayette. We jumped onto Highway 190, took “the old bridge” over the Mississippi River, and made it to Opelousas, where we turned south on I-49 to reach Lafayette. We

then came to a standstill and sat for what felt like an eternity as minutes trickled away, and we knew we weren't going to make it on time. Finally, we got an opening into the passing lane and began to move in fits and starts, later realizing we had been stuck in a stationary line of trucks more than three miles long waiting to get access to I-10. We made it to the hotel launch point an hour late and then drove around to see if we could catch up with one of the guided groups. Unsuccessful, we headed to Lacassine NWR. Despite having no guides that day and losing about three hours in bad traffic that we would have spent birding, we still picked up forty-nine species, including eleven ducks. We had racked up 123 species in Louisiana by the end of January.

In early February, armed with the recently published *A Birder's Guide to Louisiana*, by Richard Gibbons, Roger Breedlove, and Charlie Lyon, we headed for the Fort Jackson area in southeast Louisiana. We were following the new birding guide spot for spot until we reached the place where someone had reported a Tropical or Couch's Kingbird on LA-BIRD the previous day. The person didn't specify which species because it's almost impossible to distinguish between them unless the bird calls, but either way, in Louisiana that's totally a bird worth chasing. If we found it, we could always observe it and use pishing or playback¹ to see if the bird would call.

We parked on the side of Highway 23 just south of Diamond, a tiny community near Port Sulphur, Louisiana, and notorious for two fatal chemical explosions at the adjacent Shell refinery plant and an ensuing battle in which residents successfully secured resources for relocating and for addressing health impacts.² The only other car stopped in the area belonged to Louisiana birder David Muth, who was also looking for the Tropical/Couch's Kingbird. The three of us birded the spot briefly and found a couple of Western Kingbirds but not the Tropical/Couch's. David was kind enough to drive us a quarter mile down Highway 23 to where he had seen a Grasshopper Sparrow on a chain-link fence just off the highway. He brought us to the appointed spot, and there among several Savannah Sparrows the Grasshopper sat unmoving, in plain sight, framed by the diamond-shaped opening of chain-link. It was the best view I'd ever had of the typically furtive species.



David was continuing his birding to the south toward Venice, an unincorporated community of about two hundred people aptly nicknamed “the end of the world”; it is the farthest south that one can drive along the Mississippi River. He pointed us in the general direction of where he’d seen a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on roadside telephone wires in Diamond. We executed a U-turn on Highway 23 and found it within thirty minutes. Although a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is much easier to get in the late spring or summer around Turf Grass Road, the Louisiana Highway 108 loop, or Lighthouse Road, our 2012 big year adventure had taught us a lesson—if you can get a bird now, get it now. So we did.

We spent most of the April weekends on Dauphin Island, hitting a couple of fallouts, one fairly close to spectacular and the other small but still fun. There’s nothing better than looking up and watching birds in gorgeous breeding plumage drop out of the sky into the tops of trees. On April 19 we were at the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuary’s bird banding area, which is the best place in the 164-acre park to find passerines, when a flock of Indigo Buntings dropped into the woods. Collectively, they were so loud that they drowned out human voices—I

had to raise mine higher than usual to talk to Lynn and she was standing right next to me. We were searching for recently sighted Blackpoll, Bay-breasted, and Cerulean Warblers among the throng of buntings, and it got tiring to see bunting after bunting when searching for something else. We did manage to find Blackpoll and Bay-breasted Warblers, but we struck out on the cerulean. A big rain puddle sported Louisiana and Northern Waterthrushes foraging together—it was wonderful to see both side-by-side for comparison. After getting fabulously long looks at both species, Lynn declared that telling one species apart from the other was not as hard as she'd thought.

In mid-April, I tallied up our species and we were ahead of our 2012 big year pace in Louisiana (208 birds in 2014 vs. 192 in 2012) with three weeks less birding and much less effort. This fact made me feel accomplished, but of course I had a much better grasp of “what was up” with birding in Louisiana than I had had two years before. I was now armed with a community of awesome birders, the LA-BIRD listserv, eBird's frequency histograms, and the new Louisiana birding book. There was not even a Pileated Woodpecker—an easy-to-find bird—on the list yet. During our initial big year attempt in 2012, we didn't have a House Wren until almost the end of the year; in 2014 we got it on March 30 in Bayou Sauvage NWR. We never saw a Wood Thrush in 2012, but there were quite a few in the Leblanc-Landry woods of Grand Isle on April 15, 2014. We actually had the same Louisiana rarity on both lists, the White-winged Scoter. In the winter of 2013–2014, almost all the Great Lakes had ice cover for the first time in decades. The ice cover drove White-winged Scoters south in droves, and they were almost common in south Louisiana in early 2014. One male hung out for weeks at the lake behind Pennington Biomedical Research Center. We spotted another male on Lake Pontchartrain while kayaking to South Point.

Lynn and I did a big day just for fun on May 3. We were hampered a second time by the interstate being closed—there had been a fatal traffic accident and I-10 was closed between Baton Rouge and Lafayette. We took Highway 190 to head for Cameron Parish, but on the way we also jaunted down Louisiana 975 to see if the fishing shirt I had left at the Little Alabama Road fishing bridge in the Atchafalaya NWR was still there. The answer was a resounding no, and we were

also unsuccessful in locating Swallow-tailed Kites that often grace the road and sky along LA 975 at this time of year.

Back on Highway 190, we proceeded to Turf Grass Road, Pintail Loop at Cameron Prairie NWR, the Pool Unit at Lacassine NWR, what we nicknamed the “toxidation” pond in Cameron due to its unnatural blue-green color, the Cameron courthouse wetlands, and Peveto. We finished the day with 103 birds, including eleven new ones for our year list: Least Bittern, Purple Gallinule, Stilt Sandpiper, Black Tern, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Swainson’s Thrush, Northern Waterthrush, and Scarlet Tanager.

At the beginning of May, I decided to add up the birds on my Alabama and Louisiana lists as if they were a single list in Louisiana, as if it were a pseudo mini big year—not that I was trying for a big year; I wasn’t, truly. However, I was watching my cadence of birding and trying to gauge how much birding I needed to do to rack up species at a particular rate, while watching other eBirders in the state doing the same thing.

I knew that Alabama and Louisiana were not the same place, but I also knew that the more practice I had, the better off I’d be in the future. The Landry-Leblanc tract on Grand Isle is different than the Indian Shell Mound on Dauphin Island, but they’re both coastal chenieres (or mottes, or whatever you want to call them), and perfecting how to find a Worm-eating Warbler or a Blue-winged Warbler is going to be a similar exercise in both places. It wasn’t a 1:1 overlap; because Dauphin Island is two hundred miles to the east of Baton Rouge, some birds would be easier on Dauphin Island (Cape May Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler) whereas others would be more difficult (White-faced Ibis, Burrowing Owl), but still. If nothing else, I could use the fact that back in the day the panhandle ran all the way from Jacksonville to Baton Rouge and was once part of the same state. Okay, so it was Florida at that point. Whatever. It wasn’t a big year. But it was an exercise, a really fun one.

In mid-May, I had a work-related meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I managed to squeeze in a morning of birding at Holla Bend NWR—I added Bell’s Vireo, Alder Flycatcher, Nashville Warbler, and Least Flycatcher to my overall

year list. And again, Arkansas is not Louisiana—but the same principle applied. The latter two birds were fairly straightforward gets in Louisiana. Alder Flycatchers were not as easy, but at the tail end of August and in the first half of September, if you hold off deerflies successfully enough to spend some quality time in Peveto, or find fruiting rough-leaf dogwood at South Farm in Iberville Parish, you can find Alder Flycatchers. Bell's Vireos crept down into the northern reaches of Louisiana every year during the late spring and summer months, and if I could see the typical habitat in Arkansas and watch the bird's behavior in the bush there, I'd up my chances in Louisiana when the actual big year presented itself. Plus, I could always call Terry Davis and beg for help. I was sitting at 260 species combined in Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas on May 19—it was not a barnstorm birding kind of year, but totally respectable. And then the wheels came off the year 2014.

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It was Memorial Day weekend and we had just retrieved our boat from the shop, where it had gotten a tune-up. We had friends visiting, and we were about to take a trip to West Point, the western tip of Dauphin Island that was cut off from civilization after Hurricane Katrina split the island in half.

Lynn and I both love West Point—Lynn thinks it's great because the waters around this tip feature a dramatic shoreline drop off from two to fifteen-plus feet, and big fish hang out in that deeper water. She had pulled countless Redfish, Speckled Trout, Spanish Mackerel, White Trout, and Flounder out of that deep bowl, and she had not had a chance to cast into it since the previous October. My favorite thing is the walk to what I think of as my own personal birding pond, which is about one and a quarter miles from West Point on the Mississippi Sound (north) side. You walk and walk and walk some more, past the sand bars of gulls and terns, past the small mudflats that hold plovers, even Piping and Snowy, and past old wooden structures that at some point served some purpose that I'm not even sure of, even past those. And then you reach the pond. It is surrounded by tall scrub—something that approaches trees, but isn't quite. The

pond is about ten acres total in area—but in it and in the surrounding mudflats, you just never know what you're going to get. There are the common things you see almost every time, like Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, and Red-winged Blackbirds. But there are also Clapper Rails that walk out in the open and hang out as conspicuously as the wading birds, probably because there are no people there. Gull-billed Terns might be fishing the pond, or a Red Knot or American Oystercatcher might be in the surrounding mudflats. There are baby Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons throughout the summer; studying them side-by-side in that pond led me to the realization that with the immature birds of these species, the ones with the mostly black bills are Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and the ones with the mostly yellow bills are the Black-crowned Night-Herons. So, the trip to West Point was one we were both excited about.

We drove our boat to the launch, backed it down into the water, and loaded it with our fishing, picnic, and birding gear. When Lynn tried to start the boat, the battery was dead. Linda Lee and I did a quick run to the Ship and Shore, the general store on Dauphin Island, to pick up a new one. After putting the forty-pound battery in Lynn's hands, I proceeded to the front of the boat to relax in the sun and listen to Royal and Caspian Terns singing as they swooped over the marsh. Normally I would have been handing Lynn tools as she swapped out the battery, but our friend Megan was with us and she loves fixing things, so she was in the back of the boat helping Lynn.

I was watching Lynn as she leaned over the battery compartment when I heard a muffled explosion. Lynn jumped up and immediately dove into the water, and Megan jumped overboard half a second later. A burning noise filled the air and drew my attention from Lynn and Megan to the battery compartment, which was filled with bright orange flames. A louder burning sound ensued and I actually heard the fire travel under the back of the boat from port to starboard. A symmetric opening on the starboard side of the boat provided a view of the four-foot-high flames that blasted out of that hole toward the front of the boat. It hadn't yet occurred to my brain to move from my vantage point on the bow. Instead, I panned back to the water that Lynn and Megan had leapt into. Megan was swimming for all she was worth, out into the channel, to put distance

between herself and the boat. Lynn hadn't moved from the general vicinity in which she'd landed, about ten feet from the boat—her back was still to me and she was lolling in the water.

"Lynn!" I called, "Are you okay?"

"No, I am not okay," she said, without moving.

"Lynn!" I called again, "Are you okay?" I must not have liked what I heard the first time—I never repeat myself like that, but there's something about a critical moment that brings out one's reptilian brain.

"No, I am not okay."

As she answered, she turned toward me. I watched as her face and shoulders came into view, then her arms, and as she kept turning one of her legs came up slowly toward the water's surface. Attached to her leg was a long, wide, thin sheet of something grayish-beige. It took my brain a second to figure out that I was looking at a flap of skin close to the size of a piece of plywood board that stretched from Lynn's ankle to her thigh. I do not remember moving, but all of a sudden I was on the boat adjacent to ours, which was as close as I could get to Lynn without getting into the water. I put my arm down in the water, looked her straight in the eye, and urged, "Swim."

She looked at me for a moment and then started coming toward me, slowly, but making progress. I remember trying to figure out if I should jump into the water to help her up or stay where I had better leverage—I decided on leverage. Two others came up behind me to help. Meanwhile, a guy in another boat near us started yelling, "Your boat's on fire! Your boat's on fire!"

When Lynn finally got within arm's reach and put up her hand, I grabbed it, and she immediately let go of me and said, "Don't touch my hand."

As she pulled it away, I saw yellowish gobs of skin hanging off her palms and a very deep, dark red gash in one of her fingers. I grabbed her high on the arm and started pulling up. As the people behind me grabbed on too, I yelled, "Don't touch her hands!"

Within a few seconds we had Lynn out of the water and standing on the deck. Her clothes had almost burned off. Meanwhile, the squawking guy had changed his song from "Your boat's on fire," to "Cut it loose! It's gonna blow!"

Linda had astutely gone to fetch her truck, and with a person on each side of her for support, Lynn walked to the truck and lay flat in the back seat. Megan had made her way out of the water and we loaded her into the truck bed. Within a couple of minutes we were en route for medical care, though to where we didn't know. Quick calling on Sarah's part put us at the base of the Dauphin Island bridge, where local paramedics met us while an ambulance from Mobile was dispatched.

Lynn was calm, though quaking from shock. The local paramedics didn't have fluids with them, which are critical to burns because when you lose a lot of skin, you lose your ability to retain fluid. I was in the back seat with Lynn, pouring water down her throat. She kept opening her mouth for it and repeating, "Water." The paramedics were monitoring Lynn's blood pressure, and when one paramedic announced 60/60 to the other, they both looked worried; they estimated that Lynn was burned over approximately 50 percent of her body.

It felt like a long wait for the Mobile paramedics, but they arrived like the cavalry about twenty-five minutes after we reached the bridge. They quickly loaded Lynn, as well as Megan, who had burned both her legs from knee to ankle, and told me to get in the front seat. Lynn said later that one of the most painful parts of the entire ordeal was when she was moved out of the shade of the back of the truck into the bright sun as the gurney she was strapped to was wheeled from the truck to the ambulance. We took off like a bat out of hell for the University of South Alabama Medical Center, where there was a burn unit. I was as scared as I'd ever been in my life. Just like when flight attendants on an airplane look scared, when paramedics look scared, you know you're in trouble.

I no longer remember what the ambulance driver was saying to me while he was driving, but he was shooting the breeze with the calming spirit of a man who had done this many, many times, transported a critical patient in the back while comforting a loved one riding shotgun in the front. We jammed up Highway 193 with the siren on full blast on a sunny, gorgeous day. I didn't think about it at the time, but it was such a study in contrasts: our world was a hurricane, while around us it was placid and beautiful. We got about seven miles up the road with everyone getting well out of our way, and then we came up behind a car that

didn't move over. Jeremy Hamby had to lay off the accelerator. He looked over at me, flashed me a thousand-watt smile, and said, "Look at this bozo. Watch this!"

He hit a button on the dashboard and all of a sudden the high-pitched, high-frequency siren had a companion. This second siren was lower in pitch and slower in frequency, and not nearly as loud as the first siren, but it literally created vibration. It reminded me of being at an intersection when a car with booming bass pulls up, and the way that the entire intersection vibrates when that happens. All of a sudden it was as if the ambulance was gently undulating up the road, adding an up and down motion to its forward motion, and it felt almost as if the ambulance had become the siren frequency itself, up, down, up, down, fast forward—and vibrating. The offending car moved off the road immediately, and the vibrating siren stopped.

Jeremy looked at me again, smiled, and said, "We call that the Jesus button. People who are deaf? They can feel the vibration on this thing! Every dog I pass howls at the moon when they hear this button. Notice that it only lasts for seven seconds—that's because if it stays on for twelve it can cause heart attacks with people who have atrial fibrillation; people with pacemakers could have them stop working! The good news is, no matter what, everyone gets out of the way."

Jeremy had to employ the Jesus button five or six times on his way to the hospital, and it worked like magic every time. He got up to 93 mph on I-10 and had us to the USA Medical Center in thirty-two minutes. I made this trip many times myself in the ensuing weeks, and the fastest I ever made it in was fifty.

Burn unit personnel determined that Lynn had been burned on 28 percent of her body; the burns started at the top of her arms and went all the way to her feet, mostly on the front. She had circumferential burning, which wraps around your entire body, on her lower legs and ankles. The doctors told me that with a burn on this amount of skin, chances were 100 percent that Lynn would develop at least one infection.

The first twenty-four hours after the boat accident were really tough. I thought that I was going to lose Lynn twice during this period, first due to low blood pressure, which the paramedics were able to start to address in the ambulance, and then due to a swelled airway. The body's natural response to burns is

swelling, which is good from an immunity standpoint, but a swelled airway can be fatal. Thinking that you might lose someone close to you is a horrible feeling, like you're standing on the edge of a precipice—you haven't been forced to step over it, but you're not allowed to step back from the edge either. It's a terrible kind of slow motion limbo.

The situation was also devastating because although Lynn was the only one of us in the ICU burn unit, she wasn't the only one hospitalized. Megan was in the regular burn unit for her legs, and Sarah, who had been standing in front of the other open compartment in the back of the boat when the explosion occurred, had a small burn on her foot. Thankfully she had already exited the boat before the wall of fire came through that opening. Sarah was hospitalized in the regular burn unit for a day to make sure that there weren't infections in her wound. Megan had second-degree burns all over the front of her legs, and while the doctors were concerned that she might need skin grafts, she was able to avoid them and left the hospital after four days.

I wasn't allowed to stay with Lynn in the ICU, so I crashed on the guest sofa in Megan's room. Lynn was only about thirty feet away because Megan's room was just down the hall from the ICU, but it felt like I was a world apart. I slept pretty fitfully that first night; I woke up at 1 A.M. and 4 A.M. and both times I went to the nurse's station and asked them to call the ICU to check on her. Both times, the ICU nurses relayed that Lynn was resting comfortably and her vitals were okay.

After the first twenty-four hours, I felt much better about Lynn making it—the ICU burn nurses weren't looking scared and that was good—but it was still a turbulent flight. The phone calls to Lynn's family. A fever of 103F. An MRSA infection. (I knew that methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* could kill, but when I said, "Oh my god!" in response to Sherri Raybon, the ICU burn nurse, she said, "Don't worry! We've got that totally under control, we have the antibiotic regimen set for that infection. It's *Vibrio* that we worry about in here, not MRSA. And she doesn't have *Vibrio*!")

Lynn also had a *Shewanella putrifaciens* infection. I have studied enough microbiology to know the names of typical microbes, but I'd never heard of that one—I'd never even heard of the genus *Shewanella*. Lynn was the rock star of the

hospital's infectious diseases unit because that specific infection hadn't been seen in the hospital in twelve years. *Shewanella putrifaciens* naturally occurs in the environment and breaks down fish waste—if one ever sees a dead fish with pinkish bacterial colonies on it, the microbe contained in those colonies is *S. putrifaciens*. When Lynn dove into the water, she landed right next to a fish-cleaning station, so it made sense that she had this infection. I remained nervous through her two-hour skin graft surgery, during which 8 percent of Lynn's healthy skin was harvested to help heal the most burned parts of her body. After surgery I worried about "red man syndrome," an allergic reaction that Lynn developed in response to taking the antibiotic Vancomycin, which turned her unburned skin into a tapestry of angry reds and pinks.

Some moments were not turbulent, though. Some were downright funny. Lynn's sister, Eve, flew down from Ohio for moral support, and one evening the three of us were in near hysterics in the ICU. Lynn had managed to regain her typical sense of humor and was talking about drinking her margarita and sucking on her bong. The lemon-lime Gatorade that she was ordered to drink almost constantly resembled a margarita, and she had been given an incentive spirometer, a device that one blows into to help maintain lung capacity so that a patient won't develop pneumonia during an extended hospital stay. Lynn's exaggerated actions of drinking the Gatorade and blowing into the spirometer had Eve and me laughing like crazy. Days later, I was sitting next to Lynn in the ICU when Sherri came into the room looking uncharacteristically awkward. She stood at the foot of Lynn's bed, looking a little like a metronome as she rocked back and forth. Sherri said, "I am really sorry to tell you this, but it is the law in the state of Alabama and I have to follow it. Some of the medicines you're about to take would be harmful to a fetus. If you are under the age of sixty-five, you must have a pregnancy test." After a moment of stunned silence, Lynn and I simultaneously burst out laughing. Sherri relaxed, again looking like the confident nurse she was. She smiled and said, "Now, if that test comes back positive, I am not going to be the one walking in here to tell y'all—I will have the doctor do that."

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The boat explosion was just a moment, slow and fast at the same time, and honestly, not a very dramatic one. When I conjure a mental image of “boat explosion,” I think of what one usually sees in the movies, with fire forty feet high and debris spewing in every direction. The initial explosion sounded to me more like our boat burped and then proceeded to breathe fire like a dragon for several minutes. I had no idea that Lynn had caught on fire in the moment immediately following the explosion. She told me later that she dove before she was even thinking. “Hot” registered, and she was already diving. I didn’t know that Megan was burned, or Sarah either.

This initially understated moment became a sharp demarcation point in my life. It’s the kind of huge event that divides time “before event x and after event x,” like before Hurricane Katrina and after Hurricane Katrina. For me, it was the first of that type since Katrina, except this moment hit closer to home. Instead of being a community-wide event that affected me and everyone around me, everyone around me was going on with their normal lives while I felt like I was standing there holding the bag and wondering what had happened.

I realized at some point that in the immediate aftermath of the explosion everyone communicated using words with two syllables or less—and that I didn’t hear a Caspian or Royal Tern, or any other bird call, from the moment I heard the explosion. As events unfolded after the accident, I found myself in different rooms of an emotional house of sorts. First there was fear of loss, then survivor guilt, because Megan was burned instead of me. There were haunting thoughts about the cause of the accident—whose fault was it? That was Lynn’s greatest fear, that the accident was her fault. There was the room where the rug was pulled out from under me as I tried to find a little routine in my days. Morning coffee was the hardest part of my day because I was used to brewing coffee for the two of us, and then we’d sit around, sip coffee, and shoot the breeze each morning before starting the day’s activities. I wasn’t allowed into the ICU until 8 A.M. (10 A.M. on Sundays), and I wasn’t allowed to bring any food or drink. Further, Lynn wasn’t allowed to drink coffee, so instead I sat at what I came to think of as my own hospital cafeteria table, with coffee brewed by someone else. This particular table had the best vantage point of the roof, where pigeons enjoyed

hanging out within my line of sight. That was my new morning routine until I could enter the ICU. I often felt like I was in a safe room with my thoughts and feelings, a windowless room with soundproof walls and soft paneling. It was a comfortable place to be.

The boat accident felt like someone pressed a great big Jesus button on my life and on Lynn's. It shook up everything, and while it certainly wasn't a conscious decision, the accident made me examine every aspect of my life. After spending some time in the rooms of my emotional house, I realized that there was not a single thing I would change—and in that way, the experience was positive. I realized that life was hard at one hundred feet, and would be for the short term, but up at ten thousand feet things were really okay. Lynn would recover. We were lucky and blessed in so many ways: the burn unit was fairly close to the accident scene; when Lynn dove into the water just after the explosion, she didn't hit her head on the bottom; we had health and boat insurance; Lynn received superior medical care at the USA Medical Center burn unit; we had so many people, friends and family, who rallied around us; the leaky fuel tank that caused the accident was not our fault.

The hospital saga ended on June 4, when I drove Lynn to our house in Baton Rouge. The last thing medical personnel told Lynn as she left the hospital was that she was a super healer. They explained that a small percentage of the population has the ability to heal very quickly and that Lynn was among this select group; she made it out of the hospital twice as fast as expected. They explained that research on super healers was in its nascent stages but has shown that the structure of their cellular mitochondria is different from what the rest of us have. I always knew that Lynn was superhuman—now I knew that it had a cellular basis.

Lynn's getting well enough to leave the hospital was a big step, but just the first step, in a long recovery process. Going home was wonderful but also a challenge, because during our favorite season of the year Lynn was banished to the indoors except at night. She wasn't allowed to get into the water until her wounds completely closed up. And while being active was encouraged by the doctors, the injuries forced Lynn to move slowly and for short distances.

Lynn and I tend to have one speed: run. The accident caused us to stop, at least for a while, and then to ramp up a little at a time. Lynn couldn't go outside to fish or swim or see birds, so instead we birded from the inside out—literally in part, but also figuratively. For example, I'd never seen Brown Thrasher babies play. I watched out the window as one parachuted to the ground, where it face- and body-planted in the sand and remained there, unmoving. Is it dead, I thought to myself? Do I need to go check on the little thing? At that moment, a sibling followed the same vertical trajectory, landing feet first mere inches from the planted bird. In response, the planted bird jumped up and started playing with its sibling. The two ran long-legged and wide-eyed in figure eights around the yard. I'd never seen anything like it.

I watched Northern Cardinals feeding Brown-headed Cowbird babies at the neighbors' bird feeders. The immature cowbirds were almost as big as the adult cardinals. They were aggressive rascals with huge beaks and mouths and an attitude to go with it. They stalked the adult cardinals, demanding food, and the adults worked overtime to provide it. The baby cardinals were getting a little seed once in a while from their parents but had to do most of the work on their own. I had never noticed how pretty an immature cardinal is; the males are a patchwork of brownish-grays and bright reds.

The Red-bellied Woodpecker that our neighbors had nicknamed Woody frequented the feeders just like the cardinals, thrashers, cowbirds, and finches, but once in a while it would come to the eaves and hang upside down to look at us on the porch. It actually seemed to check in to see how we were doing. One day, a White-winged Dove showed up—in all the years I'd been observing those feeders, I'd never seen one visit. Before the accident, we were content to listen to the neighbors regale us with stories about the birds that frequented the feeder, but we never sat to watch ourselves. But now watching the feeders from inside the house was the only thing we could do—and so we did it, with vigor.

The accident reminded me that at any time the unthinkable can happen and life can change dramatically. Of course I knew that, but when you live through a situation with a Jesus button, it adds an element of experience that changes your understanding of that intellectual concept forever. The accident scooped

something out from under me that has never quite come back. At the same time, I gained something—I wouldn't call it confidence or even wisdom, but the knowledge that I can make it through a tough time okay.

The accident reminded me to live day-to-day and to connect with the things and people I love, because both helped me make the hard shifts necessary to navigate the situation. I love birds and love to run all over creation to see them, but I don't have to run to get joy from birds. It's still one love, even if circumstance prevents me from pursuing that one love in the way I like best. I can derive as much joy from watching pigeons perform a strut show on the hospital roof at the USA Medical Center as I can from executing a 60-0 deceleration at Four Magic Miles on Highway 82 in the hopes that I just spotted the rare but present Ferruginous Hawk instead of a Red-tailed, on a day where I rack up 250 miles on the truck. So: Dance in the fields of the Shreveport airport like Terry Davis. Decorate every plant and tree in your yard with red creamer caps to attract hummingbirds like Donna and Steve. Push to get into the eBird top one hundred in a completely different state, like Kimberly Lanka did when her father-in-law was sick and her family spent time in Illinois as his life wound toward completion. Or bond over watching Scissor-tailed Flycatchers on the wires, like Marty's parents.

* * * * *

Our first post-accident birding trip occurred during the evening of July 10. Lynn insisted on driving us the hour north to Cat Island NWR to look for Wood Storks. "Because that's what I do, I drive you to places to bird," she said.

Cat Island is open only part of the year because at times the Mississippi River floods it to the point that the road through the refuge is not navigable. (Before visiting there, one should always check that the Mississippi River water level datum in St. Francisville is under eighteen feet.) The Cypress-Tupelo swamp and bottomland hardwood forest habitats at Cat Island accommodate some good bird diversity. There's one main road in and out of the refuge, with a number of places to pull over or turn around; the entrance and exit are paved,

but the road throughout the refuge is dirt and is slightly elevated compared to the surrounding swamp and trees, sort of like a mini-levee.

Years ago, on a visit to Cat Island, I birded and then parked myself in a chair next to our truck to read while Lynn and some of our friends were fishing for bass and bream in their kayaks. I'd gotten engrossed in my book and came out of it to realize that the water had flooded the banks and was beginning to cover the road. The water level had increased several inches in about twenty minutes and was lapping against the bottom of my chair. I yelled like a banshee to get everyone out of the kayaks, into the truck, and out of the refuge ASAP. As we made our way out of the refuge on the main road, crawfish were crossing the road by the thousands. We managed to avoid hitting them, although we would have been pulled over for suspected drunk driving had a police officer witnessed our weaving. We were all laughing because the crawfish were hysterical—each stood its ground as the truck rolled toward it, fearless with raised claws, each appearing to say to our truck in crawfish-speak, “Don’t mess with me, I’ll make you sorry!”

During our current trip, the only thing that Lynn could do was bird out the window. She was too weak to do more than that. She was still wrapped up in bandages from the top of her shoulders to her feet, and it was very hot and humid in the July heat, with a heat index of over 100 even though it was early evening. Still, she didn’t complain—and I was reminded for the thousandth time that Lynn is quite a trouper. We entered the refuge, and at the first bend on the main road, standing in the mud at the water’s edge, was a Solitary Sandpiper, doing its herky-jerky, “You’re not going to come any closer to me, are you?” dance and sporting a bright white eye ring.

A tenth of a mile up the road, a warbler call cut through the din of egret and heron chucks and grunts, sending a chill up my spine. It was a call I knew, but I couldn’t believe I was hearing it. I got out to scan the tops of the trees to follow the calls and realized after a minute or two that there were two birds, and they were singing back and forth. Lynn pulled up the Cerulean Warbler on her iPhone and we huddled together, quietly playing the bird’s song inside the truck to see if my thoughts regarding the call were correct.³ At that point my heart almost stopped, because the birds calling were exactly what I thought they were: two

Cerulean Warblers hurling songs back and forth between treetops about fifty feet apart. To my knowledge, the Cerulean Warbler had no business being in Cat Island NWR in the dead of a south Louisiana summer. So I waited. And I watched. And eventually one catapulted out of a tree, dipped down to about twenty feet off the ground, flew right over my head, then ascended again to land on the top of another tree across the road and across the muddy ditch—and I clearly saw cerulean blue when it dipped down toward me. Lynn was able to get a glimpse of the bird while hanging out the driver’s side window with her binoculars. Two Cerulean Warblers. In July. Who knew?

A quarter mile up the road from the ceruleans, we spotted six Wood Storks camped out on the top of two cypress trees that almost grew together thirty feet off the ground. Between the Wood Stork’s large, prehistoric looks and the shapes of the trees, I almost felt like I was in the African savannah. I put the scope on the storks to view them in spectacular detail as the sun lit up their features in the sweet light that occurs during the hour before sundown. Score! It was a good thing we got the Wood Storks then and there, because we didn’t see any more during the trip, and when we turned around a few miles up the road and drove back out of the refuge, the storks had moved from their original location. At the turnaround point in the refuge, three male Painted Buntings were singing up a storm, painting the town blue, red, and green as they perched in the open, sounding a bit like they were rehearsing for the “knockout rounds” in the TV competition show *The Voice*. I exited the truck to better view them but was immediately attacked by large mosquitos, which reminded me of the Louisiana joke about the mosquito being the state bird.

Our short evening trip to Cat Island NWR was fabulous because now we had our wheels back under us. We even stopped in St. Francisville on the way home to have dinner at the Magnolia Café. It felt so good to start taking back normal, even if a little at a time.

At some point during those seemingly long summer days indoors, I remembered my top fifty eBird lists in Louisiana and Alabama. It felt like a long time since I’d visited them, but when I looked we were well within the top fifty for each state and in thirteenth and fourteenth place in the state of Alabama. I am

not sure what took hold of me, but I decided that it might be fun to recalibrate. Could we shoot for a top ten eBird finish in Alabama? Lynn said sure, why not? This challenge gave me something to do, namely, to determine which trip(s) we could make within Alabama and when, to put our list over the top. I eventually settled on a late year trip to Wheeler NWR, in the northern reaches of the state, to give Lynn as much time as possible to recover.

We birded occasionally later in the summer and into the fall as Lynn continued to build her strength and endurance. A late August trip to Turf Grass Road was notable, not for the species diversity, but for the numbers of birds we saw: we had over twenty Scissor-tailed Flycatchers on the wires and in the grass, and a flock of ninety Buff-breasted Sandpipers out on one of the turfgrass fields. I'd never seen so many of either species at once. We added a species here and there in Alabama in the fall to keep our eBird rank in the low teens. For example, in late September a Merlin flew overhead while Lynn fished near the Bayou La Batre boat launch. Magnolia Warblers are easier to get on Dauphin Island in the fall than the spring, and we scored one in the Shell Mound in early October. We saw our first ever for Dauphin Island Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched in tall grass at Fort Gaines on October 4.

On November 2, we headed out to the West End beach on Dauphin Island. Given the magnitude and direction of the winds we were experiencing that day, Lynn thought that if she fished on the Gulf of Mexico side of the beach, it would be the best fishing she could do on the island. She set up at a cut on the beach and proceeded to catch whiting after whiting. That particular fish species told her that winter was here. The day before, I'd observed a small flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers while walking—a sure a sign of winter for me.

After watching Lynn fish for a while, I headed for the large mudflat about three-quarters of a mile away from the West End beach parking lot. In the late summer, this flat teems with thousands of birds, but once you hit fall and winter the numbers are much reduced, though there is usually decent species variety. I wanted to see what was present. It was very quiet out on the West End beach that day; we were the only people, save for a lone fisherman sitting atop his cooler adjacent to the parking lot. There is something special about the beach

in the wintertime—it's not austere, but very quiet. The 15–20 mph steady north wind did lend “noise” to what otherwise would have been absolute silence.

The beach was also very quiet with respect to birds—which led me to thinking that, as had been expressed on LA-BIRD, this fall was exceptionally slow as a season for migratory birds. I'd seen a couple of hawk kettles; there had been a redstart here, a Magnolia Warbler there, a nice Nashville Warbler on Lighthouse Road, a few Black-throated Green Warblers and Prairie Warblers, but nothing spectacular. As I was thinking this, a butterfly fluttered over my head and landed in some nearby beach grass. Unlike the fall birding migration, the butterfly migration had been, well, awesome. I am no lepidopterist, but I can appreciate butterflies, and they had been absolutely everywhere. And that's good. I actually uttered out loud the words “And that's good.” That's probably weird (and the weird part is not a news flash to me), but out in the middle of nowhere, with no one around, it seems okay to say things out loud for emphasis once in a while, and I did.

I am not sure if it was in response to my utterance or my approaching footsteps, but all of a sudden the sound of wing flaps cut through the windblown beach grass. Up out of the sea grass, not fifteen feet away, rose a Short-eared Owl. I'd never seen a Short-eared Owl before, but I knew exactly what it was right away. It's the confidence that comes from wistfully studying a bird countless times with the hope that on some wonderful day you will actually see it. I saw its mottled brown wings as it took off, and its clock-like face; the bird changed direction a couple of times, showcasing beautiful shades of brown with cream-colored underwings. It was so long-winged for an owl that the bird reminded me of the bats in the animated children's movie *Hotel Transylvania*. I watched the owl until it landed, about a quarter mile up the beach, again in some beach grass.

I took off for Lynn, whose back was to me and who was oblivious of what felt like high drama for me. I was in permanent, fully developed goose bump thrill mode and maintaining a dead sprint, which felt fast to me. But when you're approaching fifty, feeling fast and actually being fast are two different things. I was screaming Lynn's name and realized that my mouth was starting to hurt—

and I realized that it was hurting because I was smiling ear to ear, as hard as I could, without even trying. Finally, on my fourth exalted yell, she turned around. "Short-eared Owl!" I bellowed.

Not many things will make Lynn Hathaway put down a fishing pole on a day when she can hook a Redfish, but the Short-eared Owl was one of them. She reeled in her line, stuck her pole in its holder, grabbed her binoculars, and followed me along the beach to where I thought I had seen the owl land. Just as I thought perhaps I was wrong and had misjudged the distance or location, the owl launched from the ground again and flew low at first, and then high into the sky, eventually joining a Caspian Tern and continuing on west: a two-minute show. I was like my mom on the Sprague's Pipits in the field at the King Ranch: *I got it!* I am absolutely enamored with that bird, number 470 on my life list.

On Friday evening, December 5, we departed Baton Rouge for Wheeler NWR. I was like a kid in a candy store; I had used eBird frequency histograms to figure out our probability of seeing birds that we needed to add to our Alabama list, and I'd determined that we could see as many as twenty-six birds, including two I'd never seen before, Lapland Longspur and Horned Lark. I also knew that eight new birds would break us into the top ten in Alabama, but that we ought to try to get as many as possible over that threshold because other birders were going to be birding the rest of the year to try to increase their year totals as well, and we wanted some cushion for this end-of-year rallying.

We reached Wheeler at mid-morning the next day. We parked at the visitor's center, and as soon as we got out of the car I immediately heard the high-pitched, three-note call of the Golden-crowned Kinglet. We quickly observed several of the small gray birds featuring a wide, yellow crown stripe in the trees in the parking lot. Score! We edged one species closer to the top ten.

The visitor's center sported a line of windows at the back of the building. A half dozen seed feeders were adorned with Purple and House Finches, and Blue Jays. The Purple Finches were new for the year, and the docents told us that occasionally Pine Siskins were being seen at the feeders. We waited a while for them to show up and kept checking back during the next couple of days, but we were never able to add them to our year list. After fully exploring the visitor's

center, we headed out the back of the building and traversed a short, curvy, tree-lined path to the wildlife observation tower. A White-breasted Nuthatch was among the birds along the path, which made us plus three on our year list before we even reached the tower.

The tower was everything I'd read about and then some. It was a two-story building with floor-to-ceiling glass windows on both stories, mostly out the back of the building. The second floor sported glass across multiple walls that enabled us to see at least 120 degrees worth of a panorama. The observation tower was heated, and because heat rises, the second floor was downright cozy and a welcome break from the 50 degree and somewhat windy outdoor environs. Numerous speakers dotted the upper wall-to-ceiling boundary of the second floor, and through them a cacophony of bird sounds filled the room. When I stepped to the glass, I saw low rolling hills covered with grass and dirt, a couple of large ponds, and trees as a distant boundary around most of the area. I also saw birds everywhere—the ponds were loaded with ducks, and the land sported additional ducks, tons of geese, and more Sandhill Cranes than I'd ever seen at once. It was thrilling—plus there were new Alabama year list species out there. I just needed to locate them.

I was getting out my notebook to start my eBird counts when a woman walked up to me and introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Nicole Weaver,” she said. “I’m here every day, and you’re new.” I told her that it was my first time visiting and that I was extremely impressed with the bird diversity and density. She proceeded to tell me everything about the place. I’m guessing that Nicole was somewhere in her eighties. She looked a little like a conductor as she talked about Wheeler while pointing and gesturing. I was impressed with the way that she did this while holding a pair of absolutely massive binoculars in her hands—she slung them around like a champ. When she took a breath after about ninety seconds of monologue, I couldn’t help myself.

“What power are those?” I asked. “They’re 10s,” she said, and I was shocked at the size of them. She showed them to me and they were 10 x 50s,⁴ which made a little more sense, but still—they were gargantuan. “I’ve had them since the ‘80s!” she said proudly. I decided that there was no point in telling her that op-

tics are smaller and lighter now, I'm sure she's heard it a hundred times. People tell me the same thing about my 12 x 36s, but I plan to hold on to my relatively heavy binoculars until my hands can't take the weight anymore—I really like the extra magnification. I drifted back into Nicole's recital.

"I come here every day to check all the birds present. I was here in the year 2000, when the first Sandhill Crane showed up. He stayed all winter and then went out and told his friends how great Wheeler is and the next year we had ten, then fifty the year after that, then a thousand. Today, there are sixteen thousand cranes on this refuge! Look at that pond! American Wigeon, Mallards, look at that huge flock of Gadwall, and see the Northern Shovelers over there? There are all kinds of ducks out there!"

When you are lucky enough to encounter a birder as enthusiastic as Nicole, you roll out all your questions, so I began asking about birds we needed to add to our list that were good possibilities in Wheeler. I asked if there were any American Black Ducks in the area. "No," she said with concern, "They used to come here a lot, year round! They do nest here at the pond in the summertime, but I haven't seen any in a while."

"How about Wood Ducks?"

"No again, they're in the same situation as the American Black Duck," she answered. "I am worried about them because they don't seem to come around here anymore."

"Do you have any Greater White-fronted Geese out here?"

"Yes," she said triumphantly, pointing out a flock in the distance, "they're all hanging out right there." I observed over one hundred and mentally added another plus one to our year list.

"Do you know where I can get a Horned Lark in the refuge? I know that they hang out on agricultural fields and we drove by some as we pulled up to the visitor's center, but I don't know if those particular ag fields are a good spot to find them. I'm guessing that some ag fields are better than others—do you know?" Nicole looked at me like I had three eyes. "I'm not a *birder*!" she exclaimed. My confusion must have been evident, as she'd just given me species histories of numerous Wheeler birds. "I'm a *ponder*," she continued. "I just bird

the pond. There are no Horned Larks at the pond, so I have no idea where to find them.”

Nicole said her goodbyes, and Lynn and I proceeded to count all the bird species at the pond. We estimated three thousand Sandhill Cranes out the window, and like white needles in a gray haystack, we observed two Whooping Cranes in residence among the Sandhills. There were five duck species, and well over one hundred of several of them.

When we left the visitor’s center and wildlife observation pond area, we had added eight birds to our year list. We were on the cusp of the top ten with much of the day to go, and the entire next day to bird as well. Later that day, as the sun set, we added American Pipit and Horned Lark to our year list on a dusty agricultural field at the Beaverdam Peninsula Tower. I’m sure that the name of this site has significance, but there was no beaver dam anywhere in eyeshot and the land didn’t appear to be a peninsula in any way, shape, or form. However, I was elated—I ran around the elevated wooden structure with my arms in the air after observing fifteen Horned Larks playing with each other in the field. Their pale wings are notable, but were even more so in the setting sun.

All in all, we left the refuge with thirteen new species for the year, including the American Black Duck and Wood Duck, which we managed to locate in other parts of Wheeler. This bird total was enough to put us in eighth and ninth place in Alabama. During this two-day birding extravaganza, we hiked about six miles and put a good three hundred miles on the truck (Wheeler is a big place). Lynn hiked every step of the way and drove us every mile of the trip, because it’s what she does, she takes me places to see birds, even if she’s still wearing compression⁵ on her legs and hand, even if she’s not yet 100 percent recovered. This trip put me at 287 bird species for the year (Lynn was at 284) using the pseudo big year formula. When adding up birds in Louisiana and Alabama for both of us, and Arkansas for me, with that Wheeler trip we both eclipsed our 2012 big year total of 280 bird species. We still had three weeks to go to the end of the year, and with the accident, we had done much less birding than in 2012. We were clearly better birders than we’d been just two years before.

We returned to Dauphin Island for the holidays, and in the few days between

Christmas and New Year's we planned a couple more trips to points north to see if we could squeeze out a few more species. I was hovering in tenth place in Alabama, and Lynn was one species behind me in eleventh; a birder named Damien Simbeck was in the mix too, and the three of us were neck and neck. We ran up to the University of South Alabama campus in Mobile to see if we could get an Anhinga and a Barred Owl. We got the Anhinga at the wetlands in the back of the campus, but not the owl. We also visited Old St. Stephens Historical Park. Its tiny visitor's center featured a parking space right in front of the check-in shack that had a sign that read "LSU football parking." We thankfully knew better than to park in that spot, and the caretaker, who came out to greet us, said that his wife put the sign up so that she'd always have a proper spot to park in. He noted our Louisiana license plate and dared us to park in it, but we circled out of the lot and managed to add a Wild Turkey and a Fox Sparrow to our list as we hiked the trails in the park. On December 29, I had 243 bird species in Alabama and Lynn had 242. I just hoped that would be enough.

On December 31, I went running and decided to take a few trails at the Shell Mound to discover what there was to see and hear. I hadn't been birding in the Shell Mound for weeks because it just didn't have the targets we needed to continue to build our state list. As Lynn said, there hadn't been a Red-breasted Nuthatch or Brown Creeper spotted in the entire state in the last thirty days, and if those species were going to be spotted, likely it would be in the northern part of the state. So we'd been frequenting the golf course, looking for Scaly-breasted Munia instead. When I turned onto Iberville Street, I saw a single car parked in the Shell Mound parking lot. It had Mississippi plates and a hummingbird on the plate too—a birder. I wanted to find this person and tell them about the awesome birds I'd been seeing in case they wanted to go find them too. I ran through most of the trails in the mound before I found the lady at the oldest tree in the park.

"Good morning," I said, "what have you found in the Shell Mound today?"

"I've seen a kinglet," she declared with a huge smile.

"I'm a birder myself," I said, and "I've been on Dauphin Island for the past week. The Shell Mound is slow right now, but I can tell you about some of the awesome birds I've seen and where to see them, if you want to know."

“Sure,” she said.

So I told her about the golf course—she knew exactly where to park on Her-
nando Street and how to access the dunes to reach its eastern border. I told her
about the houses adjacent to the golf course and how at the second house, in the
grassy area in the back, Scaly-breasted Munias had been seen by birders several
times in the last couple of weeks. She smiled widely, “Oh, I’ve never seen one of
those.”

“Me either,” I said, “and I keep striking out on finding them, but yesterday af-
ternoon I was out there and I saw a Western Kingbird. If you go to flag six, there
are three leafless trees adjacent to the green, and the kingbird was hanging out
in those trees.” Then I told her about west end beach and the three adult and
three immature gannets I’d seen yesterday.

“They’re so beautiful, aren’t they?” she said.

“Indeed,” I replied.

I started to describe other places when she said, “I haven’t seen many ducks,
do you know where I can see ducks?”

“Sure—keep going on the east end of the golf course and you’ll run straight
into a little pond. Yesterday the pond had Redheads, Mallard and Mottled Ducks,
Ring-necked Ducks, and Lesser Scaup.”

She nodded, then said, “My hip has been bothering me, I’m not sure why. I’m
doing physical therapy and hoping that it will help. I’ve been doing what I can—I
like to walk two to three miles a day and I like to get out and bird, but I just can’t
bird the way I’m used to. I don’t think I can make it up that dune. I’m seventy-
seven years old and I do what I can do.”

“I am sorry,” I said, and I really meant it. I felt like I could relate, given every-
thing that had happened earlier in the year.

“Well, I’m taking turmeric, and that helps. That’s a natural anti-inflammatory.
I’m refusing to take the Mobic my silly doctor prescribed.”

“I can understand that,” I laughed, and then asked, “What’s your name?”

“Mary Pickard. I’m Walter Anderson’s daughter. I guess I have a famous
pedigree.”

“Wow!” I said, “My mom *loves* Walter’s art and goes to the museum in Ocean Springs all the time.”

“Well that’s wonderful. What’s your mom’s name?”

“Kathleen Rogers,” I replied proudly, “and I’m Marybeth Lima. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she said, and then asked, “You really think there’s nothing to see in here?”

“Well, there’s the usual: cardinals, Blue Jays, Carolina Wrens, and mocking-birds.”

She looked me straight in the eye and said, “Well, what else could you ask for?”

I looked straight back at her and said, “You’re absolutely right about that.”

We said our goodbyes and she turned back along the trail near the old tree and kept birding. What a perfect bookend to 2014. I was reminded once again that it’s so important to do what you love in whatever capacity you can do it. To troop on despite adversity. And to appreciate whatever flies across your path. What more can you ask for, truly.

* * * * *

I finished 2014 in ninth place on the Alabama bird list with 243 bird species, and Lynn finished in tenth place with 242 species. I had Lesser Yellowlegs, American Golden-Plover, and Black Tern that Lynn didn’t, and in the spring she saw a Dickcissel and a Swainson’s Warbler that I missed. Damien Simbeck came in at eleventh place with 238 species. Lynn and I finished tied for thirty-third place in the state of Louisiana, with the same 255 bird species.

Our boat needed two rounds of repairs before she was seaworthy, and the fiberglass on the inside storage cabin of the center console where the electronics blew out remains stippled and discolored. Lynn feels a kinship to the boat. “We both have scars to show from the accident,” she says. The two of us took the boat for her first spin post-accident on March 25, 2016. We shared a look and a gulp as Lynn turned the key in the ignition while moored in the same slip in which

the explosion occurred; we both relaxed when *Sweet Olive* started right up and vibrated strongly and comfortably as usual. Lynn drove us to West Point, where I observed migrating Eastern Kingbirds coming in from the Gulf and landing on tall grasses swaying in 10–15 mph north winds. *Sweet Olive* is still going strong today, as is Lynn, who made a 100 percent recovery from the burns.

Though Lynn says she has post-traumatic stress disorder every time she has to change a battery, she has had occasion to change car and boat batteries several times since and hasn't let fear stop her, though she does sniff the area to ensure that there is no leaking gasoline (a smart thing to do and highly recommended for anyone changing a battery).

Mary Pickard recovered from her hip injury and reports that she is “much more spry” now that she's in her eighties.