Kid’s-Eye View: Young Birders’ Challenge!

by Elias Markee-Ratner

Thirteen-year-old Elias Markee-Ratner, current President of NYSOA’s NYS Young Birders Club, came up with a great idea to inspire fellow members. Each month, he suggests specific birding tasks that they can choose from and then come back and share their experiences via the club’s mailing list. Here is Elias’s call to action for July 2023, along with his Mourning Warbler poster that he later shared with the group:

A Quick Reminder On What The Monthly Challenges Are:

Every month, I send out a few different non-competitive birding challenges for everyone to complete. They have something for every skill level and can be done anywhere. Once you complete one or if you had a fun time doing them, it’s time to share your experiences and any tips through the club’s listserv!

July’s Challenges:

1. Create Your Own Guide/Infographic!

To complete this challenge, make a guide or poster (digitally or on paper) about a bird or group of birds you love. I’m working on two right now and it’s a lot of fun. As an extra challenge, try using your own photos to create it! [Check out Elias’s Mourning Warbler poster in this newsletter!]

2. Sign Up For A Priority Block Or Block Near You For The New York Breeding Bird Atlas!

While we did do an atlas-related challenge for June, it’s so important that the New York Breeding Bird Atlas has all priority blocks completed. If there isn’t an available priority block near you, all atlas data helps and taking on a non-priority block is still very important. Atlasing is a lot of fun and NYSYBC’s camping trip was an instance of atlasing at its best: exploring new areas with great birds and witnessing remarkable behaviors in both common and unusual species.

Since atlasing is a significant time commitment extending well beyond this month (or even this year), just helping out in an incomplete priority block or participating in the atlas is a great way to complete this challenge.

Here are some resources to help you get started:
- Create an eBird account: ebird.org/home
- Participate in NYBBA: ebird.org/atlasny/home
- Basic info on NYBBA: ebird.org/atlasny/about/atlas-essentials
- Sign up for a priority block: lab.nynhp.org/bba/

3. Find Three New Bird Behaviors!

For this challenge, the goal is to find three behaviors you have never witnessed birds doing before. When there isn’t much bird diversity around (like during July), watching the common birds that we often overlook is a great opportunity to learn more. Stepping away from the intensity and the constant pursuit of rarities is rewarding.


While there are tons of amazing birding spots that are heavily birded, we all know of places that don’t get enough attention but have amazing birds. It’s always good to have more awareness about these locations, especially when they are accessible.

5. Visit A New Birding Location Near You!

It’s always a wonderful experience to try birding somewhere for the first time, whether it is a spot that is famous for birding or a totally unknown spot. This can be anywhere from right around the corner to miles away and is a great opportunity to change things up during a season when prime birding is hard to come by. To find a new location, visit ebird.org/explore.

NYSYBC is a special project of NYSOA. For more information, visit nysyoungbirders.org.
Mourning Warblers in NY

These skulky, secretive warblers are a challenge to find. However, a single glimpse can make hours of effort worth it. This guide will give you the facts and tips you need to find this amazing bird.

1. Get to Know Its Range
Knowing a general area and season is the best way to begin. Of course, the more specific, the better. Mourning Warblers migrate in late May and again from late August through September. They are on their breeding grounds during June and July.

- breeding
- scarce
- migrant

Mourning Warblers breed as far south as the Catskills and are hard-to-detect migrants around the state.

2. Learn Its Behaviors and Identification
Mourning Warblers are VERY secretive. The best way to find them is typically to hear their distinctive song or call. They typically forage deep within the vegetation and only occasionally pop up (especially when agitated). During the breeding season, males are most conspicuous while singing and birds often give their distinctive loud, smacking chip note from an exposed perch when agitated. Their song is a loud “churry-churry-churry-choo-choo-choo.”

3. Learn About Its Habitat
Mourning Warblers are not too picky during migration. They favor shrubby tangles and weedy fields. On occasion, if they can’t find suitable habitat, they may show up in trees or in the open. During the breeding season, they can be a little picky. They tend to be found in early-successional or disturbed forests (typically next to older forests), meaning that the forest is just starting to grow back in. This creates a lot of dense vegetation for Mourning Warblers.

4. Watch for Reports
The best way to increase your odds of encountering a Mourning Warbler is to sign up for eBird alerts and join local bird messaging groups (like WhatsApp and GroupMe).

Fun Facts!
- Mourning Warblers usually nest on the ground in dense vegetation.
- Mourning Warblers can benefit from humans because they nest in disturbed habitats.
- Mourning Warblers winter in southern Central America and in northern South America.
- Despite being common, very little is known about the lives of Mourning Warblers because they are so secretive.
- Mourning Warblers have a western counterpart called the MacGillivray’s Warbler, which is an ultra-rare bird in the East.