GOWANUS FIELD GUIDE

BIRDS

GOWANUS FIELD GUIDE

2020 EDITION

Photographs, Illustrations, Text:
Lauren Salas-Schumann, Joanne Zhao
Lauren Bergholm, Ken Chaya, Matthew Cumbie,
Adelia Honeywood, Tom Stephenson

Editing:
Adelia Honeywood, Tom Stephenson, Joanne Zhao

Project Direction:
Diana Gruberg, Christine Petro

Layout Design:
Christine Facella, Lauren Salas-Schumann, Joanne Zhao

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ANAS PLATYRHYNCHOS
• Mallard

Family: Anatidae
Native to: North America, Eurasia
Habitat: Lakes, ponds

Size: large duck, 18-27” in length
Diet and nesting: Eats underwater plants, seeds, and food given by humans. During mating they eat worms, insect larvae, snails, and during migration they eat seeds and grains. Deposits greenish eggs in a nest made of grass and down hidden close to shore.
Behavior: Eats from the surface of the water; rarely dives. Tends to like ponds where they group with other mallards and similar duck species and become accustomed to humans feeding them in cities. Several males may court the same female.
Other: They are the most numerous duck species in the world and are very agile flyers. Some flocks have reached remote islands where they have evolved into new species like the mottled duck.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around April and September, paddling in the canal.
**ARDEA HERODIUS**  
*Great Blue Heron*

**Family:** Ardeidae  
**Native to:** North America  
**Habitat:** Shorelines, marshes, swamps, ponds  

**Size:** Tall, long legs, 33-54” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Mainly fish, frogs, turtles, snakes, insects, birds, and rodents. Breeds in colonies, usually in trees above ground or water. Nest is composed of large sticks built by females but gathered by males.  
**Behavior:** When preying on fish, they remain stealthy and still, in order to insure a successful catch. When going for the catch, they are lightning fast.  
**Other:** They can hunt both day and night.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around September near canal.
BRANTA CANADENSIS
• Canada Goose

Family: Anatidae
Native to: North America
Habitat: Close to lakes, rivers, ponds, any public or private bodies of water

Size: Waterbird, small, 22-26” tall; large, 35-45” in length
Diet and nesting: Feed by dabbling in water, grazing on lawns and fields, or picking grains on the ground. Deposit whitish eggs, nesting on the ground close to water bodies using moss, grass and down.
Behavior: Move in flocks and fly across the sky usually forming a V-shape both at night and during the day. Females incubate the nest and keep the same mate year-round.
Other: Experts have identified at least one subspecies of Canada goose, now its own species, Cackling Goose. They look very much alike and can be challenging to distinguish, but Cackling is smaller and has a differently shaped head and bill.
Gowanus: Can be spotted along the canal around April during mating season. Little goslings can also be spotted following parents.
BUTEO JAMAICENSIS
• Red-Tailed Hawk

Family: Accipitridae
Native to: North and Central America
Habitat: Open country

Size: Large bulky hawk, 18-25” in length. 4’ wingspan.
Diet and nesting: Eats mostly small mammals like mice, rats, or rabbit, birds like starlings, and snakes and carrion. Deposits white eggs with brown spots in a nest built by both sexes, usually on a tree, and made of sticks, bark shreds, and vegetation.
Behavior: Soars around open areas looking for prey. Once a prey is sighted, they dive in slowly, extending their legs. Can get aggressive while protecting their territory from intruders. Mating pairs will usually stay together until one of them dies.
Other: Pale Male is a famous red-tailed hawk nesting on a 5th Avenue building near Central Park since 1990 and has established a long lineage of city dwelling red-tailed hawks.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around November.
CARDINALIS CARDINALIS
• Northern Cardinal

Family: Cardinalidae
Native to: Eastern to Central to South North America
Habitat: Backyards, parks, woodlots, forest edges

Size: Songbird, 8-9” in length
Diet and nesting: Eats mainly seeds, some insects during breeding season, and from bird feeders in winter. Deposits pale green eggs with red-brown spots in a nest made of twigs, leaves and plant fibers.
Behavior: Heard singing year-round, unlike most other songbirds who sing mainly during spring. Cardinals are very aggressive when defending their territory.
Other: Their name comes from the Roman Catholic cardinals who wore red robes.
CHAETURA PELAGICA
• Chimney Swift

Family: Apodidae
Native to: North Eastern to Central America to North Western South America
Habitat: Chimneys, partly enclosed vertical surfaces, caves

Size: Small, sparrow-sized, 4-5” in length. Long and narrow curved wings, identified by distinct silhouette and flight style.
Diet and nesting: Feeds while in flight on airborne insects and insects on tips of branches. Whitish eggs, they nest in chimneys and caves using small twigs attached to walls with their saliva.
Behavior: Airborne birds, they only come down when roosting or in the nest. Perform courtships in the air; pairing with one mate for the season. Those not finding a mate will form large flocks and some of them may help another pair rear their young.
Other: Chimney swifts can’t perch on branches or the ground. They can only fly or hang by their claws.
Gowanus: Can be spotted flying oer Gowanus area during Spring, Summer, and early Fall.
COLUMBA LIVIA
• Rock Pigeon

**Family:** Columbidae  
**Native to:** Europe  
**Habitat:** Towns, cities, farmlands, rocky cliffs

**Size:** Larger than mourning dove, 13” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Eats mainly seeds and fruits, and will eat leftover food from humans, such as bread or trash. Deposits white eggs in a nest built by the female on a building, bridge, or cliff, made with sticks and debris brought by the male.  
**Behavior:** Social birds, they gather in flocks, walking around and pecking on the ground for food. They will fly up if disturbed but will come back down shortly after.  
**Other:** Very good navigators, pigeons can always find their way home by using the earth’s magnetic field as well as their senses and the sun’s position. Pigeons were used as early as the Romans to carry messages during times of war.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted throughout the seasons, especially in April and between August and October.
CORVUS BRACHYRHYNCHOS
• American Crow

Family: Corvidae
Native to: North America
Habitat: Fields, open woodlands, forests

Size: Large, stocky, long legged, 17-18" in length
Diet and nesting: Omnivorous, mostly eating seeds, grains, fruits, berries and small animals like mice and earthworms. Deposits green eggs in a nest made of twigs and sticks, feathers, grass and roots, usually in a tree.
Behavior: Intelligent and great problem-solvers, they can form in roosts of thousands and often feed on discarded food. They can be aggressive and chase after larger birds.
Other: If taken in while young, they can learn to mimic the human voice.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September.
**CORVUS OSSIFRAGUS**

• Fish Crow

**Family:** Corvida

**Native to:** Northeastern to Southeast United States

**Habitat:** Coastal freshwater, by lakes, parks, landfills, and cities close to water body

**Size:** Smaller than American crow, 15 1/2" in length

**Diet and nesting:** Omnivorous, eats grains, insects, lizards, fruits, carrion, trash, and eggs from other waterbird’s nests, turtle eggs, marine invertebrates and dead fish. Deposits light bluish-green eggs in a nest built by the female and made of sticks, soil, bark, hair and pine needles.

**Behavior:** Social, intelligent birds, assembling in flocks of hundreds during migration and winter, and by pairs during mating season. Young like to play with materials. If American and fish crow start to dispute, the fish crow gives in due to its slightly smaller size.

**Other:** Two mates will often preen each other on the backs of their heads.

**Gowanus:** Can be spotted during warmer months near the canal.
CYANOCITTA CRISTATA
• Blue Jay

Family: Corvidae
Native to: Eastern North America
Habitat: Forest edges, woods, cities, parks, near oak trees

Size: Large crested songbird, larger than robins, smaller than crows, 12” in length
Diet and nesting: Omnivorous, eating insects, nuts, seeds and grains. Eggs brown-spotted greenish, nesting made of sticks, grass and hardwood or conifer branches.
Behavior: Social birds, they mate throughout their life, keeping the same partner for a year. Females incubate while males provide food. They communicate vocally and with their crest which they raise when alarmed or excited.
Other: They can bury seeds and acorn and don’t always retrieve them, making these birds great tree planters.
EMPIDONAX MINIMUS
• Least Flycatcher

Family: Tyrannidae
Native to: North America
Habitat: Orchards, open woods, shade trees, mixed forests

Size: Small, compact, round head, 4.5-6” in length
Diet and nesting: Mainly insects, ants, beetles, caterpillars, and spiders. Sometimes a few berries. Nest location usually in small or deciduous sapling trees. Nests are built by female with grass, twigs, and plant fibers.
Behavior: During breeding season, they like to group together in clusters. During summer, they sing constantly.
Fun fact: No time is wasted with least flycatchers. They can find mates, build nests, lay eggs, and raise their young to be independent in the matter of 58 days.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September near canal.
**LARUS ARGENTATUS**

- *Herring Gull*

**Family:** Laridae  
**Native to:** North America  
**Habitat:** Coasts, large reservoirs, lakes, major rivers

**Size:** 23-26” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Omnivorous, preying on fish, marine invertebrates, insects, trash, and smaller birds, young and eggs of other gulls. Nests in colonies, depositing spotted olive-brown eggs in a nest made of seaweed, dead grass on the ground or on cliffs.  
**Behavior:** Congregational scavengers, they live near food sources and fly around open shoreline, landfills and fishing boats to pick up scraps or steal the meal from another bird.  
**Other:** They like freshwater but will drink salt water if needed and are equipped with a gland that filters the salt out to avoid dehydration, and expels it through their nostrils.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around September.

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![Herring Gull](image-url)
LARUS DELAWARENSIS
• Ring-Billed Gull

**Family:** Laridae  
**Native to:** North America  
**Habitat:** Coastal waters, urban, suburban, agricultural areas, reservoirs, ponds, landfills

**Size:** Medium-sized gull, smaller than a herring gull, 18-20” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Omnivorous, eating fish, rodents, insects, grains and leftovers from humans. Has learned to eat out of fast food restaurant bins. Deposits spotted buff or olive-colored eggs in a hole in the ground that can be lined with grasses or debris.  
**Behavior:** Social and opportunistic feeders, they can group in flocks of hundreds flying in circles or walking on the ground or shallow water looking for food. They can fly as fast as 40 miles per hour.  
**Other:** A small percentage of a colony is female-only-couples whose eggs are fertilized by a male and lay “superclutches” of 5-7 eggs. Traditional, male-female couples only have 2-4 eggs.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around September.
**LARUS MARinus**

- *Great Black-Backed Gull*

**Family:** Laridae  
**Native to:** Northeastern America  
**Habitat:** Atlantic coast and inland on Great Lakes

**Size:** World’s largest gull, 30” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Omnivorous, they prey on almost everything smaller than themselves, including small ducks, petrels, shellfish, fish and eggs and young of other gulls. Olive colored eggs with brown speckles, deposited in a ground nest made of grass.  
**Behavior:** Opportunists, they go around fishing boats and landfills to pick up leftovers and chase away other birds to steal their catches. They breed away from busy sites, preferring abandoned piers and small islands.  
**Other:** During winter, younger gulls tend to go fishing around humpback whales who bring fish with them as they ascend to the surface.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted flying over the canal on their way to larger bodies of water.
LEUCOPHAEUS ATRICILLA
• Laughing Gull

Family: Laridae
Native to: Atlantic coast, Central America, Northern South America
Habitat: Coast, shorelines

Size: Medium-sized gull, long-winged and legged, 15-17” in length
Diet and nesting: Omnivorous, eating mainly land and marine invertebrates, berries, trash, and stolen or caught food from fishing boats or other species. Deposits olive-brown eggs with dark speckles in nest made of grass, weeds and stems, on top of sand or salt marshes.
Behavior: Congregates around parking lots, sandy beaches, and muddy areas. Their distinct loud, high-pitched voice sounds like demented laughter.
Other: The species number has been in decline due to destruction of coastal marshes and an increasing herring gull population targeting their eggs and young.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September.
MIMUS POLYGLOTTOS
• Northern Mockingbird

Family: Mimidae  
Native to: USA, Mexico  
Habitat: Forest edges, parks, towns, suburbs, open land

Size: Medium-sized songbird, about the size of a robin, 9-11” in length  
Diet and nesting: Omnivores, they eat insects in summer and mainly berries and fruit in fall and winter. Deposits blue-green eggs with brown spots in a nest made of sticks and weed stems, usually in bushes or small trees.  
Behavior: Showy birds, they like to perch on higher vegetation, fences or wires. They usually are alone or in pairs and are territorial birds that will sometimes attack their own reflection in windows or mirrors and can injure or kill themselves doing so.  
Other: They like to imitate other birds’ songs, and birders have recorded 36 different species songs from one Mockingbird in Massachusetts. They often sing very loudly all night long.  
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September.
NYCTICORAX NYCTICORAX
• Black-Crowned Night Heron

Family: Ardeidae  
Native to: North America  
Habitat: Marshes, ponds, rivers, canals

Size: Stocky, thick necks, short legs, 22-26” in length  
Diet and nesting: Mainly fish, crustaceans, snakes, clams, and rodents. Breeds in colonies and females build nests usually with sticks. Nest locations vary from very low on the ground to very high in the trees.  
Behavior: During the day, they seem sluggish, slow, and usually huddled in groups. Once dusk arrives, they become more active looking for food.  
Other: At one month old, they will leave the nest but cannot fly until they are six weeks old. During that time, they navigate through fields and vegetation on foot and look for food in the night.  
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September.
NYCTANASSA VIOLACEA
• Yellow-Crowned Night Heron

**Family:** Ardeidae  
**Native to:** Latin America, North America  
**Habitat:** Salt marshes, coastal wetlands, mangroves, swamps

**Size:** Slim, long-necked, long legs, 22-27 in” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Eats crustaceans, crabs, crayfish, fish, and insects. Nest location is normally in trees and composed of sticks, leaves, and small twigs.  
**Behavior:** When stalking prey, they walk slowly and are alone. Usually in shallow water.  
**Other:** For those along the Atlantic Coast, their breeding season is dependent on when crabs emerge in the Spring.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around September near canal.
PASSER DOMESTICUS
• House Sparrow

**Family:** Passeridae  
**Native to:** Eurasia, North Africa and Middle East  
**Habitat:** All across North, central and south America, cities, parks, yards, countryside

**Size:** Small, 5-6½” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Eats grains and seeds, as well as leftover food from humans and insects in summer, which are also fed to their young. Deposits white eggs in a nest made of grass, feathers, paper, string and striped debris in a manmade or natural hollow.  
**Behavior:** Social birds, hopping around in flocks, they like to dustbathe on the ground or bath in puddles. In flocks, males appear to dominate females in fall and winter, but females take over during spring and summer.  
**Other:** After a few of them were introduced in Central Park in 1850, they spread across North America, competing against native species for food and nest sites.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted throughout the seasons, especially in April and September.
PHALACROCORAX AURITUS
• Double-Crested Cormorant

Family: Phalacrocoracidae
Native to: North America
Habitat: Freshwater coastal area, lakes

Size: Large waterbird, 30-35” in length
Diet and nesting: Feeds on small fish. Chalky pale blue-green eggs. Nests in colonies. The male will gather materials for the nest, combining sticks or seaweed and other debris found around the site, while the female builds it.
Behavior: Their heavy bodies float low on the water, and they dive under water to feed. After feeding, they stand on rocks, floating surfaces, tree limbs, and docks to dry their open wings because they lack the oils that protect most waterbirds. Usually fly in flocks, forming a “V” shape.
Other: If a pebble is found in a nest, it will be taken care of as if an egg.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around September.
**PICOIDES PUBESCENS**

*Downy Woodpecker*

**Family:** Picidae  
**Native to:** North America  
**Habitat:** Woodlands, parks, gardens, vacant lots

**Size:** Sparrow-sized, 6” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Primarily insectivores, eating mainly beetle larvae from inside tree bark, as well as berries, acorns and grains. White eggs are deposited in a hole in a tree which is lined with wood chips.  
**Behavior:** Going up and down trees, supported by their strong tail feathers. Rising and falling flying style. During spring and summer, males make a lot of noise by calling and drumming on the loudest tree in their territory.  
**Other:** Smallest and most abundant woodpecker in the Eastern region of North America.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted feeding on phragmites and other wetland plants around the canal. They prefer mature trees to create nesting holes because of its softer wood.
STURNUS VULGARIS
• European Starling

**Family:** Sturnidae  
**Native to:** Europe  
**Habitat:** Cities, towns, suburbs, countryside close to humans

**Size:** Smaller than a robin, 7-8 1/2” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Eats primarily insects and invertebrates when available, but also grains, fruits, berries, seeds and garbage. Pale blue eggs. Nest in holes in a tree or a building cavity is made of twigs, grass, debris, plant materials and feathers built by the male prior to mating. Both male and female incubate the eggs. Gang up to drive off native woodpeckers, chickadees and other hole nesters.  
**Behavior:** Highly competitive against native species, aggressive and loud, they can assemble in flocks of tens of thousands of birds.  
**Other:** One-hundred birds were imported from Europe and freed in Central Park by Shakespeare enthusiasts in 1890 and have spread across North America ever since.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around April, May, and October.
**TURDUS MIGRATORIUS**  
*American Robin*

**Family:** Turdidae  
**Native to:** Northern to central America  
**Habitat:** Garden, yards, parks, lawns, fields, pastures, tundras, woodlands

**Size:** Larger songbird, long legged, 9-11” in length  
**Diet and nesting:** Mostly eat earthworms in the morning and berries later in the day. Deposit blue-green eggs in a nest made of mud, covered with grass and reinforced with more grass and twigs.  
**Behavior:** Stand in open fields or around them. During fall and winter season, they gather in roosts or on trees to eat berries.  
**Other:** Roosts can get as big as a quarter million birds.  
**Gowanus:** Can be spotted around February and May near the Salt Lot.
ZENAIDA MACROURA
• Mourning Dove

Family: Columbidae
Native to: North and Central America
Habitat: Open country, woodland edges, dispersed trees

Size: Small headed, 12” in length with long pointed tail.
Diet and nesting: Eats mainly seeds, grains, nuts, and sometimes grasses, and berries. Can eat up to 20% of their body weight. Deposits white eggs in a nest made of sticks and twigs, usually on bushes or tall trees. In cities, they can nest on window ledges or even air conditioners.
Behavior: Mainly ground foragers. Pairing mates preen each other’s neck or peck each other’s beaks as a sign of their union.
Other: In certain states, the birds are hunted for game, while in other states they are protected as songbirds. Their cooing is often described as sounding ghost-like.
Gowanus: Can be spotted around April.
CITATIONS & CREDITS

AMERICAN CROW
Photograph: Lauren Bergholm and Matthew Cumbie
Text: Lauren Salas-Schumann
Layout: Lauren Salas-Schumann

AMERICAN ROBIN
Photograph: Lauren Bergholm and Matthew Cumbie
Text: Lauren Salas-Schumann
Layout: Lauren Salas-Schumann

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON
Photograph: Tom Stephenson
Text: Joanne Zhao
Layout: Joanne Zhao

BLUE JAY
Photograph: Lauren Bergholm and Matthew Cumbie
Text: Lauren Salas-Schumann
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CANADA GOOSE
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CHIMNEY SWIFT
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DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT
Photograph: Ken Chaya
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DOWNY WOODPECKER
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EUROPEAN STARLING
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FISH CROW
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GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL
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GREAT BLUE HERON
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HERRING GULL
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HOUSE SPARROW
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LAUGHING GULL
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LEAST FLYCATCHER
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MALLARD
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MOURNING DOVE
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NORTHERN CARDINAL
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RING-BILLED GULL
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ROCK PIGEON
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Layout: Jordan Heiden

Gowanus Field Guide: Birds
Gowanus Canal Conservancy
YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

Photograph: Ken Chaya
Text: Joanne Zhao
Layout: Joanne Zhao

SOURCES

Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "All About Birds". allaboutbirds.org
OTHER GOWANUS SPECIES
to be included in future editions

Anas rubripes, American Black Duck
Ardea alba, Great Egret
Dumetella carolinensis, Gray Catbird
Falco peregrinus, Peregrine Falcon
Falco sparverius, American Kestrel
Haemorhous mexicanus, House Finch
Hirundo rustica, Barn Swallow
Megaceryle alcyon, Belted Kingfisher