

# The birds of summer

## A GUIDE TO OUR FINE FEATHERED FRIENDS

BY LIZ LEE



Lady Walter

Sunny skies have finally arrived in the Ocean State, which means — what else? — it's time to hang out with some birds. Instead of sharing our full-length avian itinerary — which includes a visit to the Norman Bird Sanctuary in Middletown, downloading the nine-page “Birds Recorded In RI” checklist from

ribird.org, and urging you to keep a close eye on the American Bird Association's Rhody-specific message boards (“A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is being seen at Carter Preserve in Charlestown. The bird is pale, a hint of salmon color on the flanks but it has a short, broken tail”) — we decided to keep things low-key and simply point out three bird-related places and projects worthy of your attention this summer.

Read on, feathered friends.

### FOSTER PARROTS

Lady Walter is looking good today. A photo of her in a pink and green sweater already has 125 likes on Facebook and it was only posted an hour ago. The sweater is made out of a baby sock, and it serves a purpose outside of just looking cute. Like many captive birds, she has a behavioral disorder wherein she plucks her own feathers out with her beak, and the sweater helps alleviate that. She's an old lady now, somewhere around 60 years old, and she's got arthritic feet, so she has to use her beak as a cane when she walks. It's been a hard life, but things are looking up.

Lady Walter lives in Hope Valley, on the site of what was once the largest egg and chicken farm in Rhode Island, Chickadee Farm — a place where hundreds of birds used to be slaughtered each week, and where hundreds of birds now go to be saved. When Karen Windsor

and Marc Johnson, the husband and wife team behind a nonprofit called Foster Parrots, bought the property in 2007, it had already been sitting vacant for several years. “It was a big crap-filled, rat-infested, abandoned building, and my husband walked in and said, ‘I could do something with this,’ and I said ‘Are you freakin’ kidding me?’” Karen says. That was in 2007, when they had more than 200 birds and they were still running the sanctuary out of their house.

Foster Parrots started accidentally nearly 20 years ago in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Marc owned a pottery studio to which he would bring his blue and gold Macaw, Wally. Visitors would see Wally, and occasionally ask Marc if he was interested in taking on another parrot they could no longer keep. “It turns out, people were giving me their parrots because they were very difficult pets,” Marc explains in *Parrot Confidential*, a 2013 PBS documentary about the unwanted parrot crisis in the US. “Before I knew it, I had outgrown the pottery studio and I had to figure out some way of dealing with it.”

After buying the property in Hope Valley, Marc and Karen established the New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary, about 25,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor aviaries, currently home to about 450 birds that have either been rescued from lives of neglect and abuse, given up by people who could no longer care for them, or who simply outlived their owners. Exotic birds can live up to 100

years, making them much more of a commitment than most people realize.

On a recent tour of the sanctuary, I see blue, green, and red Lorikeets, flocks of small green Quaker Parrots, Scarlet Macaws, and I listen to a few words spoken by a pearly white Cockatoo. She only says things like “hello,” and “pretty bird,” but I'm convinced she's some kind of oracle. I'm in awe of their beauty and intelligence, but Karen makes a point to tell me that what I'm looking at is a tragedy — a testament to human failure as companions. But she will also tell me that they simply don't make good pets. Parrots in the wild are highly social and seldom alone; when caged and isolated they become aggressive and overprotective of their owners, or they start self-mutilating like Lady Walter.

“The aggression happens because they're wired to establish a mate and a territory, and to have babies and defend those things,” Karen says. “And when they've been raised by humans they see you as their companions, which means that your husband or your boyfriend is toast — he's gotta go,” she explains. “Yeah, birds are not nice. They are beasts. They have to be, by design, by evolution.”

Even with such a large space, Karen says they had to turn away 500 parrots in 2013 alone. In 2012, that number topped 800.

“The birds we have now, we've promised we're going to take care of them for the rest of their lives,” she says. “So we have to last another 80 or 100 years. Failure is not an option because all of these birds depend on us.”

To find out more or to schedule a tour of the sanctuary, visit [fosterparrots.com](http://fosterparrots.com) or [facebook.com/fosterparrots](https://www.facebook.com/fosterparrots).

### IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME — THE BIRDS, THAT IS

“I have been to Lippitt Park no less than four times today to look at the light,” says Esther Solondz. She's sitting in the pale afternoon sun that floods in through the windows of her Pawtucket studio, her black pants and clogs covered in drippings of paint, epoxy, and silicon. Surrounding her is a white palace in seven parts — a currently dismantled installation, two years in the making, that will stand 15 feet tall in Lippitt Park on the east side of Providence when finished.

“It's very important to me that the light comes through this at different parts of the day,” Solondz continues, referring to the clear, stalactite-like formations that cover the structure's steel frame and the translucent thread-line that runs through it. When all seven parts of the piece are fitted together and installed, the finished product will be the “The Hummingbird Palace.”

Imagine a web-like palace with white stalactites and stalagmites, coated in a clear, drippy substance that catches and reflects the light at every possible angle. It looks sort of like a castle made of sugar. Now imagine a tangle of Morning Glories, Trumpet Honeysuckle, and other flowering vines planted at the base of the castle, gradually climbing and changing the structure itself while attracting hummingbirds in the process. The palace will also be equipped with 10 hummingbird feeders to be regularly filled by community volunteers. The end result will look sort of like the skeleton of a wedding cake, appearing delicate and almost weightless, yet rooted in the ground.

Two summers ago, Solondz built a much different version of the project out of wood and various recycled materials in the backyard of her summer home. This led her to start imagining a more sophisticated design. She spent the next year building small-scale models of the project, riffing on the idea of the ethereal palace, and exhibited them in 2013 at Gallery NAGA in Boston, in a show entitled “The Slow Vast Heave of Matter That Just Floats In

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This peregrine falcon is the "new ruler" of downtown Providence

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the World." In a review of the exhibit, *Boston Globe* critic Cate McQuaid wrote, "Imagine if she could create a structure, large enough to walk inside, of wire, and dewdrops, and decay."

Now Solondz has done exactly that, and she's keeping her fingers crossed that the birds will come. This won't be the first time she's collaborated with hummingbirds; she says she used to lure them into her studio with a feeder, and they would eat, and the sugar water would dribble out of their mouths onto the drawings she was making.

But most of us aren't lucky enough to have such regular encounters with these elusive birds, and it's this elusiveness, says Solondz, that makes the project so exciting. "If people actually get to experience a hummingbird through all of this, I think that would be awesome," she says.

An opening reception for *The Hummingbird Palace* will be held in Lippitt Park (at the intersection of Hope Street and Blackstone Boulevard) on June 26 from 4 to 6:30 pm.

#### THE URBAN BIRDER

The view from Peter Green's downtown Providence loft is dramatic. One east-facing window offers a view of Kennedy Plaza, where he says he regularly witnesses drug deals, sexual solicitations, and the occasional public defecation. An adjacent window offers a great view of the Superman Building, where a different kind of drama plays out on a daily basis. This one is a family drama, and Green has gotten to know the family pretty well. He tells me stories of domestic violence, absentee mothers, hungry babies; he's even photographed the parents having sex. Actually, he's been photographing them from his window and the street below since 2006. This may sound invasive, but the family doesn't seem to mind — probably because they're too busy mauling seagulls in mid-air and flying at speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour. Such is the life of a Peregrine Falcon.

Green is a graphic designer who came to Providence eight years ago and moved into a sixth-floor loft in DOWncity. He works

from home, and the exceptional view from his desk gives him the opportunity to notice things he may have otherwise overlooked, like the Red-tailed Hawk lacerating a pigeon in Burnside Park, the American Kestrel (a small falcon) who sometimes hangs out in the eaves of the Peerless Building, and of course, that family of Peregrines whose nest sits at the very top of 111 Westminster Street, making them the building's only current occupants.

Since then, photographing urban raptors has kind of become his thing. Green's photos have been featured in *The Providence Journal*, in exhibits at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island (ASRI), and on the American Kestrel Partnership website. The images are remarkable because they offer a rare opportunity to see these birds up-close, but also because Green often captures the birds in such close proximity to humans completely unaware of their presence.

"It's definitely something I'm passionate about," says Green as he shows me several large-scale prints of his work — a falcon, a snowy owl, a hawk. "I never used to get up early. Now I wake up at seven a.m. just to go out walking around the city looking for these things."

Luckily, all of Green's hard work has paid off. He's developed relationships with local conservation groups like the Born to be Wild Nature Center in Bradford, RI, where he volunteers to help rehabilitate injured birds and, in turn, gets to photograph them close-up. His work with ASRI comes with its perks as well. On May 25 he traveled to the very top of the Superman Building to photograph new members of the Peregrine family on bird banding day.

"It's my favorite day of the year," Green says. ©

To see more of Green's photos, visit [providenceraptors.com](http://providenceraptors.com). Also, insider tip: to catch a glimpse of the Peregrines from the street, stand just outside of Au Bon Pain on Westminster and look for a box towards the left side of the top of the Superman Building — this is where they nest. Or simply visit the Audubon Society's website and check out the Providence Peregrine webcam, streaming live 24 hours a day: [asri.org](http://asri.org).