Alumni

The Fashion Entrepreneur Fighting for New York’s Wild Birds

Through Bird Collective and NYC Bird Alliance, Angela Co ’05GSAPP conserves and champions the region’s feathered residents.

By
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Angela Co in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. (Len Small)

In 2016, Angela Co ’05GSAPP was living in Brooklyn and working as an architecture professor when she had a life-changing experience involving a set of binoculars. Her husband’s aunt, a bird-watcher, “took us birding in New Jersey, and it really grabbed

hold of me," she recalls. "I had no idea so many birds could be seen here. Looking at a field guide and getting a sense of what might arrive was thrilling."

Since catching the birding bug, Co has managed to turn that avian enthusiasm into a full-time career. The New Jersey trip inspired her to join a local bird-watching group, where she met graphic designer Tina Alleva. In 2019, they cofounded Bird Collective, a brand of apparel and accessories featuring original artwork of birds found in the region — owls, loons, warblers, and more. The online retailer, which donates a portion of its proceeds to conservation, has generated nearly $150,000 for groups like American Bird Conservancy and HawkWatch International. "We want to raise awareness about native birds in North America and the shocking fact that we've lost so many — approximately 25 percent of the total population over the past fifty years," Co says.

A licensed architect who grew up in Los Angeles before attending grad school at Columbia, Co left her faculty post at Syracuse University in 2022. But her design background continues to inform her advocacy work. "Cities aren't just for people," says Co, who also serves on the board of directors for NYC Bird Alliance (formerly NYC Audubon), a conservation nonprofit. "A whole host of wildlife has continued to live in or pass through this area since the last ice age. There are so many things that people can do to make the city safer for birds, and design is a part of this."

One of those things is constructing more crash-resistant buildings. "Birds can't see glass," notes Co. To reduce collisions, NYC Bird Alliance successfully advocated for Local Law 15, a city mandate that requires new buildings to use bird-friendly facade materials — patterned glass, for example — up to 75 feet high. The law went into effect in 2021. Earlier this year, when a Eurasian eagle-owl named Flaco, who had escaped from the Central Park Zoo, died after crashing into a building, the cause gained extra resonance among New Yorkers. "Flaco really raised awareness about some of the human-caused threats that birds face," says Co.



Apparel from Bird Collective.

While the perils of urban development are out of most civilians' control, there are smaller ways to help our feathered neighbors, says Co, like turning off lights at night (birds are attracted to artificial light) and supervising pets. "Cats are one of the biggest killers of birds. They're amazing companions, but they're not part of our native ecology." As for dogs, it's important to keep them leashed in wooded areas of parks: "Dogs can destroy the very little habitat birds have in the city."

Co acknowledges that birding culture is having a moment, one that Bird Collective is meeting. "Birding exploded during the pandemic and became more mainstream," she says. And as the chair of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility at NYC Bird Alliance, Co is eager to bust the stereotype that birding is only for retirees. "Anyone can bird at any age or level. There aren't a lot of barriers to start."

For the bird-curious, Co recommends starting out by listening. "Birds make a lot of sounds. Start noting where you see birds, what they look like, and how they are behaving." Those who want an enhanced experience should get hold of binoculars ("to see the rich colors and detail") and a field guide, download a birding app, or join

a guided walk. While urban oases like Central Park are great for scoping out native and migrating species, Co says that “one of the best places in the city, hands down, is the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. It has habitats for forest birds, brackish birds, saltwater birds, freshwater birds, wading birds, and birds of prey.”

Whether out in Jamaica Bay or in her local Prospect Park, Co believes there is more to birding than observing an elusive animal. “Birds tune us in to the seasons, because they come through at different times, and they link us to faraway places,” she says. “I think birds are a really incredible way to connect with something much bigger than ourselves.”

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