Give it up for the birds – there's no time like the present to watch and learn

Your Turn
Frances Figart
Guest columnist

"Every April, I anxiously await the return of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird," says naturalist Terry Deal. COURTESY OF WARREN LYNN

This time of year, I give up my last few hours of good sleep to get up before sunrise and go outside to watch – and listen to – birds. It may sound like a big sacrifice, but the dividends are great.

This past week, I was rewarded with a sighting of one of my favorites, the impossibly blue Indigo Bunting, which returns to our region from the south about this time. While I was watching him, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird showed up, looking for the nectar he remembered enjoying in the exact same spot last year. I rushed to prepare his sugar-water and hang out his feeder.

"Every April, I anxiously await the return of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird," says naturalist Terry Deal who lives on a mountain above 5,000 feet near Mars Hill. "I keep a record of the first day I see one and compare it with previous years. By June, there will be dozens competing for a spot at one of my feeders—which I bring in at night because, in addition to sunflower seeds, bears like sugary nectar!"

Learning the calls of the birds you like makes it easier to find them. There is a peculiar metallic squeak ("kick" or "eek") made by another beautiful migrant, the Rose-breasted Grosbeak (or RBGB as I like to say), and that's how I spotted him a few days ago. Last Sunday, my husband heard the Scarlet Tanager's distinctive "chip-burr" call. We followed the sound with our Diamondback binoculars and were amazed to see seven bright orange-red males on our property at once!

Paul Super, who lives between Clyde and Lake Junaluska, recalls finding a rare bird just by its call: "I was sleeping with my windows open on a warm spring night and in the morning heard a very loud and unfamiliar song in my backyard. It turned out to be a Mourning Warbler, of which we have only one confirmed record from the park, though they certainly migrate through this area and occasionally stick around long enough to sing."

While Great Smoky Mountains National Park has been closed, Super, who is the science director at Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center, has been keeping a list of the birds he sees from his home office.

"I think I'm up to 24, including Black-billed Cuckoo, White-eyed Vireo, Gray Catbird, and Purple Martin," he says. "I have a pair of Eastern Bluebirds coming to my sunflower hearts feeder regularly. The female goes in first while the male stands guard, before grabbing a quick bite and following her away. You can try putting out orange halves at your bird feeder (if you are in a bear-free or bear-safe situation) to attract orioles and some warblers during migration."

Bryson City poet and naturalist George Ellison says "swallows are the ballerinas of the bird world. Once they have returned from faraway places, I never tire of watching them weave their silent messages in the air over my head."

Edward Abbey claimed the only bird names you need to know are LBB and LGB – little brown bird and little grey bird. In other words, you don't have to be an expert to enjoy birding. And it's a great activity to share with family members sheltering at home.

"When my granddaughters were quarantining with me, we began to keep track of the birds at my feeder and I taught them how to look them up in a field guide," says Deal, a retired teacher. "On walks, I would point out how some birds seem to say their names like the Phoebe; tell us to 'Drink your tea' like the Towhee; or talk about how 'purty, purty' they are, like the Cardinal."

Children love to check off the birds they have identified on a checklist, draw them, or even write a story about their favorite bird. Recording bird sounds to play back later can be a great identification tool.

Sometimes, very early in the morning, I can hear the magical notes of the Wood Thrush from my bed. I don't really need to see this rather drab LBB – I'm just in awe of his song. From now through late summer, just after sunset, we will visit a nearby cemetery to hear a group of Wood Thrushes singing for about an hour. Right after they stop, the Whippoorwills begin. And that makes for the perfect end to a busy birding day!

Resources to check out:

▮ For a checklist of all the birds found in the Smokies, many of which are throughout Western North Carolina and East Tennessee, go to smokiesinformation.org/printable-resources.

▮ Binoculars, guidebooks, and other great birding resources can be found at The Compleat Naturalist in Biltmore Village or at compleatnaturalist.com.

▮ Cornell's Lab of Ornithology is world renowned: birds.cornell.edu/home/

▮ There are many great birding apps. My favorite is Sibley Birds.

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How history repeats itself

Your Turn
Trey Adcock and Ameena Batada
Guest columnists

Even with the serious threat that COVID-19 poses, including to the remaining 200 or so fluent Cherokee speakers, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) just committed $100,000 to fighting the virus in another part of the country. The Cherokee One Feather (April 28) reported that the EBCI Tribal Council, in an April 22 special session, approved the $100,000 donation to the Navajo Nation.

Principal Chief Richard G. Sneed told One Feather, "We are blessed to not have many active cases in our community, and we are blessed to have the resources necessary to share with those not as fortunate as us. The Navajo Nation needs our help, and it is our duty to provide it." The Tribal Council's actions and Chief Sneed's comments are a model of collective resistance and are indicative of communities pulling together across Indian Country.

The situation for the Diné people, or more commonly referred to Navajo, is dire. As of Tuesday afternoon, the Navajo Nation of about 357,000 had 1,833 COVID-19 cases and 59 deaths, including the tragic case of Miss Western Navajo Nation 2015-2016 Valentina Blackhorse, who was just 28 years old. Although Navajo only make up 5 percent of the Arizona state population, they make up 20 percent of the COVID-19 deaths.

By comparison, the ratio of cases in the Navajo Nation – at about 5,100 cases per million population – is higher than in 42 states in the USA. The death ratio – at about 165 deaths per million population – is higher than in 40 states. Proportionately, for every case here in Buncombe County, the Navajo Nation has 22, and for every death, the Navajo Nation has ten.

The Diné people, like many indigenous, African American, and Latinx populations in the USA, are at disproportionately higher risk of having an underlying condition that makes them more susceptible to getting seriously ill if they contract the virus.

According to the Office of Minority Health, Native American adults are nearly 3 times as likely as their White counterparts to have diabetes, 1.5 times as likely to have heart disease, and 1.3 times as likely to have asthma.

Many social and other determinants, such as economic instability and lack of adequate quality health care, contribute to disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19 on the reservation. For example, about 30 percent of homes on the Navajo Nation do not have running water, which is essential for taking appropriate precautions. Many families also live in multigenerational households, making it difficult to quarantine and keep safe elders.

The current situation reminds us of how history repeats itself. In the 1500s, Indigenous populations of the Americas were devastated by smallpox, influenza and other viral diseases to which they had not been exposed previously. Many estimates suggest upwards of a 90-95% population loss across the Americas following the European invasion. During the 1918 pandemic and the 2009 H1N1 outbreak Indigenous populations died at a higher rate.

Much of the risk and devastation has been the result of discriminatory policies and treatment by the government. Currently, though most state and local governments have received federal funding to fight COVID-19, the designated $8 billion dollars of the recently passed federal CARES Act has not reached Tribal Governments. One reason for the holdup was the inclusion of for-profit Alaska Native Corporations, with collective revenues of over $10.5 billion in 2018. Just last week, the Navajo Nation joined with 10 other tribes in a lawsuit against the US Treasury Department over the inclusion of these Corporations, of which there are over 200. The complexity of this issue highlights the various ways in which collective vigilance is necessary to maintain and uphold basic human rights, including the federal government's trust responsibility to tribal nations.

When interviewed by National Public Radio, President Nez of Navajo Nation reflected the hopefulness that others around the country share in these trying times. He said that, "We're encouraging our elders to share their stories, the stories of our culture, our tradition, and our language, so that our young people don't remember this time as a scary moment."

We all can learn from the collective actions of the EBCI and other Indigenous communities. We can learn about how they have resisted, persisted, and thrived despite numerous challenges. We can learn about how even in times of great challenge, we can find enough to share with others in and outside our communities. And, at this time in particular, we can learn more deeply about our interdependence, and how we can secure a more healthy future through our actions today.

For readers interested in contributing to relief efforts in the Navajo Nation, we encourage you to donate at: www.navajohopisolidarity.org.

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Asheville's housing failure

Your Turn
Simon Betsalel
Guest columnist

COVID-19 will no doubt change the development landscape ... But before Asheville starts to tout projects like this as economic development, it needs to take responsibility for providing for its residents.

In the past decade Asheville has been shortsighted in its growth and has underserved its citizens. While the City touts it development as a blended approach for providing opportunities to all income levels, The RAD Lofts are yet another example of how the municipal government is failing to provide attainable housing for all income levels.

To be clear, I want Asheville to grow and I am not anti-development. I appreciate that the RAD Lofts project has been struggling for years to overcome financial hurdles and bureaucratic red tape. But the pitfalls of a high risk/high reward profession are irrelevant to the fact that this style of development is not good for Asheville.

A 2019 study showed 46.1 percent of Buncombe County renters are cost burdened, and 19.4 percent are paying more than half of their income on housing every single month. RAD Lofts brings over 200 unaffordable apartments and amenities to a changing neighborhood, and continues to strengthen the narrative that the New Asheville is not for everyone.

Originally, RAD Lofts was a development proposal to be proud of. In 2016 the developer secured government subsidies by agreeing to limit rents and to cap their increase for 10 years. The entire proposal had some level of rent control. The plan was for 95 percent of units to be priced for those making the area median income, "workforce housing", and 5 percent priced for those making 80 percent of area median income, "affordable housing". (The fact that "affordable housing" is used as an almost derogatory term for people making perfectly decent wages is troubling on its own, deserving of a separate conversation).

In January of this year the RADS Lofts developer scrapped the deal. Now only 10% of units will be rent regulated and "affordable." The development will accept federal housing vouchers and will give $200,000 to housing programs, a see-through gesture that will do little to address the real issues at hand. The council voted on March 24 (during a national pandemic) to approve the project, 4 to 3.

"The project before you is a mediocre project at best," one woman said during during public comments, and Councilperson Young, a dissenting vote, said, "I'm not going to vote to gentrify my own community." Those two quotes are New Asheville in a nutshell. Our city's growth has been at the expense of those who live here.

The Asheville represented by RAD Lofts is one that I don't recognize.

The developer boasts that the building's metal awnings honor the site's former Dave Steel fabrication facility, and that its "signature" branding evokes a retro 1950's Las Vegas. As an Asheville native, I expect more than generic mixed used design and imagery of an American tourist trap to mark a 90-year local business legacy. We can make a profit and we can entice new residents, but we can never regain a sense of ownership and pride in our communities once it is lost.

Ironically, the developer sees himself as a pioneer. He has described his struggle to secure financing as a "David and Goliath" situation. While playing the role of the underdog he has turned a blind eye to the truth – it's the River Arts District's existing residents that are outnumbered in this fight.

Sadly, it is not by accident that New Asheville continues to provide community benefit only for wealthy newcomers. The River Arts District River Transportation Improvement Plan is the largest capital improvement project in Asheville's history, spearheaded by the Tourism Development Authority. It was envisioned to drive investments exactly like this into our communities. Not for the use and enjoyment of Asheville's citizens, but for visitors built literally at our expense.

COVID-19 will no doubt change the development landscape, and we have yet to see how it will effect our world long term. But before Asheville starts to tout projects like this as economic development, it needs to take responsibility for providing for its residents. Asheville has gained national recognition as a great place to visit, but let's work on making it a great place to live. This starts with taking a closer look at RAD Lofts, and making wiser choices to ensure affordability and livability for our communities.

Simon Betsalel is an Asheville native who currently works in economic development for the City of New York. He has a degree in civil engineering from NC State University and is working toward a master's in urban planning from the Pratt Institute.