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ON THE COVER:
Beautiful breezeblocks and colorful outdoor furniture make outdoor entertaining a blast.
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Backyard birding



Popular pastime sharpens observation skills

BY JENNAH PENDLETON
STAFF WRITER | JENNAHP@LATC.COM

Poet Simon Armitage told The Guardian in 2009 that birds' ability to fly makes them "simultaneously of this world and otherworldly. And that is what poems are as well."

This may, in part, capture why humans are fascinated with these creatures and why they are the subject of one of the most popular and sustaining outdoor activities of the past couple of centuries. Birdwatching – or more properly, birding – is enjoyed by up to 60 million people nationally and even more globally. While many birders may resemble the archetypal image you may have conjured in your head (cargo vest, floppy sun hat and, of course, some big old binoculars), many of them participate primarily from their own neighborhoods in a practice colloquially known as "backyard birding."

Some may look at the experienced birders' expensive equipment, extensive knowledge of field marks and their travel backgrounds and find themselves too intimidated to get into birding, but all it takes is acting on your sense of curiosity.



A dark-eyed junco gets cozy on a Los Altos resident's door.
PHOTOS BY SHELLY BOWERS

> *"If you just have a balcony and you have potted plants on it, you're going to start getting* ***birds*** *coming within view. And that's kind of the whole concept of it – that you don't have to go someplace else to look for birds."*
>
> *– Matthew Dodder*

That's how Matthew Dodder, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, got his start. As a teen, he encountered a few birds after a snowstorm and worried about how they were faring without accessible food.

"I didn't know anything about birds, but I just suddenly became fascinated with them," he said. "And when the cardinal came to the bird seed that I had thrown out there, I just fell in love with it."

If your outdoor space contains trees, native plants or grass, there are more than likely already enough birds to observe from the comfort of your own home to begin birding. Seed feeders and nectar feeders as well as a bird bath can certainly help draw more feathered friends to the yard.

"If you just have a balcony and you have potted plants on it, or a very small bird feeder or hummingbird feeder, you're going to start getting birds coming within view," Dodder said. "And that's kind of the whole concept of it – that you don't have to go someplace else to look for birds."

SCVAS field trip leader and Los Altos resident Ann Hepenstal has made her backyard an inviting habitat for birds by including a range of native plants to attract insects and placing feeders and birdhouses out of reach of small mammals. To ensure the birds' safety, Hepenstal said she places string and sticker dots ➢





along her windows to keep birds from running into the glass. She has even constructed a DIY apparatus using an old water jug to drip water over her bird bath because many species prefer running water.

TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

To get started, Dodder recommends downloading the Merlin Bird ID and the eBird apps. Both of the free smartphone apps help identify and keep track of birds, but many birders prefer a good old-fashioned field guide – either National Geographic's or David Sibley's – which you can find at most bookstores.

"There's a lot more on-screen learning these days, but frankly," he said, "I love a good field guide."

Santa Clara County is home to a wide range of species that may visit your yard, especially if you have native plants and bird feeders. Merlin Bird ID allows you to enter a few data points such as size, color, wing shape and behavior, and the app will determine the most likely species based on your location and the time of year.

The apps can be helpful, especially to start out, but part of the satisfaction of the process is honing your observation skills. Dodder said one of the most enriching things to study is specific birds' behavior.

"There are birds that are very secretive and others which are more forthcoming," he said. "There are birds that climb up trees, there are birds that climb down trees and birds that spiral up trees. So attention or sensitivity to those behaviors is really crucial to learning, because the colors, or what we call 'field marks,' are less important in real life, I think, than these behaviors."

One of Dodder's favorite birds to observe locally is the black phoebe because of its vivacious personality.

"The black phoebe, for example, is a really animated bird that you probably have in your own driveway, and it loves any puzzles," he said. "They kind of scoot back and forth with their feet to expose invertebrates or seeds on the ground that they can eat, which is something most other sparrows don't do. So you can actually identify it just by what it's doing."



Expect to see Anna's hummingbirds, left, or house finches, right, in your bird-friendly backyard. LEFT PHOTO BY S.M. LIEU; RIGHT PHOTO BY SHELLY BOWERS

LOCAL RESOURCE

If you need more help identifying a bird or are interested in what other local birders are seeing nearby, SCVAS hosts a blog, "All Around Town," which has ballooned into a thriving community hub for local backyard birders.

SCVAS is also an invaluable resource for those who might want to expand their birding practice and take to one of the county's many natural areas to see more species. In addition to several free online courses and guides, the organization often hosts group walks around the county open to birders of all levels.

A growing appreciation of birds may also inspire an interest in conservation efforts, which is another one of SCVAS' key pillars. Advocacy can start with making your yard friendly to wildlife, turning your lights off during migration periods and keeping your cat indoors, as outdoor cats kill billions of wild birds each year.

Fostering a sense of connection with nature from your home can help you find more tranquility and fulfillment in your space. Next time you see a little brown bird in your garden, take a second to pause and observe and enjoy the opportunity to welcome such sweet creatures to your space.

For more information on the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, visit scvas.org.

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BY TANYA KUCAK



A BUG'S LIFE

To attract birds, let the insects come

"Let the bugs happen," advised Lisa Myers in a presentation on attracting wild birds to your native garden.

Myers, who leads birdwatching tours and is the owner of Los Gatos Birdwatcher, discussed the topic with the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society.

Although not all birds are primarily insect eaters, virtually all birds need an abundant supply of soft-bodied insects such as caterpillars to feed their young. Native oaks, willows and hollyleaf cherry can support an especially bountiful population of caterpillars, thereby enabling songbirds to survive. Researchers have found that non-natives host only a fraction (or none!) of the caterpillars found on natives.

To maintain a healthy ecosystem in your garden that includes nesting birds, avoid using any pesticides, and make sure anyone maintaining your garden also refrains from using poisons. Before buying new plants, ask if they were treated with pesticides; some nurseries still treat all plants with neonics. Also avoid rodenticides, which can kill the hawks and owls that eat rodents.

It's important to let leaf litter collect under your trees. Many insects overwinter and shelter in fallen leaves. When you sweep autumn leaves off your garden paths, put the leaves under shrubs instead of removing them from the garden, as much as possible. Deciduous trees such as valley oak, elderberry or desert willow drop their leaves seasonally, but even evergreens such as coast live oak drop leaves throughout the year.

FOOD FORAGERS

Insect-eating birds that enjoy foraging in leaf litter include oak titmice, hermit thrushes and dark-eyed juncos. Myers said spotted towhees are shy birds that are seldom seen but often heard digging through leaf litter. Northern flickers and Bewick's wrens find insects in crevices of trees or even patio furniture. In suburban backyards, black phoebes often sit at a high point and catch insects on the wing.

For seed-eating birds such as California quail, golden crowned sparrows, chestnut-backed chickadees and house finches, let seed heads develop on grasses and perennials. Instead of deadheading as soon as grasses mature or flowers fade, let them be. Deergrass, blue grama grass, Cape Mendocino reedgrass and junegrass are especially beautiful grasses.

Nectar-eating birds such as hummingbirds and hooded orioles like trumpet-shaped flowers such as hummingbird fuchsia and sticky monkeyflower. For a year-round hummingbird buffet, also plant native currants, manzanitas and barberries for winter flowers, and native sages, ➢



Apricot mallow comes in a range of colors, from pale apricot to deep red-orange. The profuse summer-blooming flowers attract hummingbirds.
PHOTOS BY TANYA KUCAK

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penstemons, honeysuckles and mallows for spring and summer flowers.

"If hummingbirds are not coming to your feeder," Myers said, "maybe you have enough flowers."

Fruit-eating birds such as cedar waxwings travel in flocks that descend on berry-bearing natives such as toyon or twinberry. Northern mockingbirds and California thrashers are also drawn to native berries.

"Everybody loves berries," Myers said.

Aside from food, birds need water to drink and bathe in, as well as places to rest undetected in the daytime, sleep at night, hide or escape from predators and make nests.

"Refrain from extensive pruning during breeding season," Myers said, which generally runs from March to September (though Anna's hummingbird can start nesting as early as December). "People inadvertently remove nests all the time. Nests are meant to be hidden, and some are tiny."

If you want to attract more birds to your yard, Myers said, "think about what your yard looks like from the air." Is it mostly plants, or mostly pavement and lawn?

Aside from planting choices, "birds do not understand windows," she said. They see reflections and don't know it's a hard surface. Make large expanses of glass bird-safe with spider-web decals or the like. And "don't put mirrors in your garden," Myers advised. Lights at night disorient both birds and bugs, so switch to motion-activated lights or use yellow bulbs, and use curtains on large windows.



Hummingbirds and other nectar-eating birds are attracted to the brightly colored trumpet-shape flowers of desert willow. This deciduous tree drops its leaves in the winter, providing leaf litter for insects to shelter in and for insect-eating birds to forage in. PHOTO BY TANYA KUCAK



Beneficial insects flock to the flowers of native buckwheats. The cream-colored flowers of California buckwheat, tinged with pink in the spring, fade to rust or brown in the fall before finally going to seed. Instead of removing the flowering stems, let seed-eating birds enjoy them. PHOTO BY TANYA KUCAK

Tanya Kucak gardens organically. Email her at tanya.garden@gmail.com.



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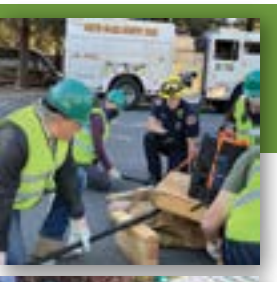
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COZY *is* KEY

A SPRING REFRESH, INSPIRED BY FINLAND WINTER

BY CELESTE RANDOLPH



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CELESTE RANDOLPH



Every spring, I find myself craving a true spring cleaning. I choose a weekend that I dedicate to auditing our home and everything in it. After sorting through each item and deciding what I want to keep and what I want to let go of, I mindfully choose what I want to add or switch out. This applies to art, furniture, books and any objects I have on display.

I'm a firm believer that one's environment impacts one's work, creativity, productivity and well-being. I make sure to devote time to a seasonal refresh because it brings fresh inspiration and lightness to my space.

I found myself, surprisingly, inspired by the cozy winter scenes of Finland to refresh my home for spring. Living out of a suitcase and staying in beautiful hotels while traveling always sparks a desire to declutter when I return home. My last trip to Europe was no exception. I returned home with fresh eyes and a desire to make small but significant changes to my space.

MINIMAL MADE COZY

Finnish design, and Nordic design more generally, is known for its seamless blend of form and function. Nothing is accidental: A stool made with local birch may double as a side table, and a sheepskin tossed over a chair adds comfort to a simple design. Steep A-frame roofs are common in Finland, not only because of their dramatic design, but more importantly because of their ability to let snow slide right off.

Nordic and Scandinavian designs are sometimes written off for feeling cold or impersonal, but this couldn't be further from the truth. These northern countries have embraced cold weather, partly through architecting wonderfully cozy spaces that act as a haven in the dark winter months.

But with function as a priority, locals keep these spaces comfortable all year long with design principles that work for both hot and cool weather. Consider switching out blanket weights on beds and couches seasonally – light and breathable linen is perfect for warmer months, while thicker, nubbier knits will keep you warm in the winter. Changing accessories seasonally, while keeping furniture and overall design consistent, means that you can refresh your space without feeling the need to change your entire home every season. ➢

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Finland's forests supply timber to countries all over the world. Finnish wood is a sustainable and necessary material in furniture produced in Finland and elsewhere. Most wood from Finland is pine, spruce or birch, all of which have both structural and decorative uses. Faux wood, like veneer, is rare in Finnish design. Finnish artisans use what is abundant in nature, taking advantage of locally available materials to craft quality objects.

Wood also lends warmth to minimal design. Interiors incorporating wood walls, panels and furniture can be simple without feeling cold. Add texture through fabrics for an earthy vibe that brings the outdoors in, even on the coldest days. The tradition of sauna is distinctly Finnish, but the contrast of cool and warm is easy to incorporate into design. If you have a fireplace – indoor or outdoor – be like the Finns and warm up after a chilly walk enjoying nature.

TEXTURE IS EVERYTHING

Texture and quality are connected – the highest-quality local woods and materials will produce the most interesting and longest-lasting pieces for your home. In Finland, sheepskin and even reindeer hide are widely available from responsible sources. These textures are similar to what we're seeing worldwide in design; chenille, velvet, Berber fleece and boucle add cozy texture without feeling heavy. Quartzite countertops feel more organic and natural than man-made materials. Leather brings earthiness and is easy to clean. ➢



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European design is far from monolithic; rich browns, oranges and reds, along with earthy rugs and tassels, are influenced by northern Africa.

LIGHT MINDFULLY

Limited light in the winter months means that interior lighting is vital. Picture windows frame stunning forest views, and it helps that homes legally can't be higher than the surrounding forest. If you're designing from the ground up, consider a nod to the Finns by framing your favorite views with a single-pane window. This will bring nature into your home and keep your spirits high, no matter the conditions outside.

Sconces and hooded pendant lights are popular, along with ceramic pendant lights. These options allow you to filter light and avoid harsh overhead lighting. They also give you more control over lighting your spaces throughout the day, depending on the light outside.

Finland is consistently rated one of the happiest countries in the world. This is no surprise when you consider the Finns' attention to detail, emphasis on quality and willingness to embrace the unique joys of every season. As we transition from winter into spring, there's no better time to audit your space and refresh for what's ahead.

✳

Celeste Randolph is an interior designer in Los Altos. For more information, visit celesterandolphdesigns.com.



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PATIO POTENTIAL

TIPS FOR TRANSFORMING OUTDOOR LIVING SPACES

BY SHERRY SCOTT

Q: Looking forward to sunnier days and warmer weather, what are the current designs to best use outdoor spaces and expand those at-home entertaining options?

A: This year the warmer months will be especially welcomed! To take advantage of the fresh air and longer days, conceive of any size outdoor space – even a balcony – as a way to add onto your interior space. Covered or not, these are outdoor rooms. It is common to be able to accommodate more people outside than indoors. Here is a breakdown of the fun possibilities.

• When family or friends arrive, the first thing that comes to mind is to offer them a beverage – soft, hard or both. One of the best ways to allow a guest to feel comfortable and to kick off a party or a visit is to gather around the bar. These beverage stations can easily fit into a small space with a 15-inch-wide ice maker, under-counter refrigerator, under-counter wine keeper, small sink and even a beverage dispenser. A single tap can hold either beer or nitro cold brew coffee. A double tap can hold one keg of each. Add an outdoor TV screen or two or more to create that go-to vibe.

• Food prep and presentation has become the main attraction as options continue to grow for outdoor appliances. Professional appliances for indoor kitchens have become the benchmark for the outdoor kitchen. In addition to electric, wood- and charcoal-burning grills and smokers of all sizes, there are side burners, flat tops (like Teppanyaki grills), ovens, pizza ovens and warming drawers to keep the temperatures perfect. A new option for outdoor cooking is an invisible induction cooktop. It is safer around young children, energy efficient and offers a sleek aesthetic.

• Covered spaces, even if they are open design, will help to delineate an area and can house heaters for extending the outdoor time. They can support certain types of lighting and ceiling fans. Other options for outdoor rooms are fully enclosed ceilings supported by one or more walls. Columns can support the ceiling to evoke the feeling of a room without enclosing it. Sliding doors offer a respite from higher winds and rain while providing the feeling of being outdoors. A simple hammock with a cover for shade creates an instant feeling of relaxation – even when only looking at it. Walls can be partial or be breeze blocks for a level of privacy while allowing for air movement.

• Fire features such as fireplaces and fire pits can be built-in or freestanding. They can have a gas connection or use an alcohol-based fuel in a burner kit. A seating arrangement located around a fire feature is a nice way to bookend the initial gathering around the bar with the end-of-the-day around the fire. ➢







Outdoor kitchen amenities such as grills, food prep islands and refrigeration/ warming drawers can make for easy summer meals with guests.
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Try dreaming of all of the things you would like to do in your outdoor garden or on your patio, terrace or pool deck. When you write that story as a concept for activities, you can start to define what your design priorities are, broken down into those various functions. As your mom may have told you, "Go out and play."

Sherry Scott is a Certified Interior Designer, professional member of the American Society of Interior Designers and proprietor of Sherry Scott Design, 169 Main St., Los Altos. To submit a question or design conundrum, email design@sherryscottdesign.com.

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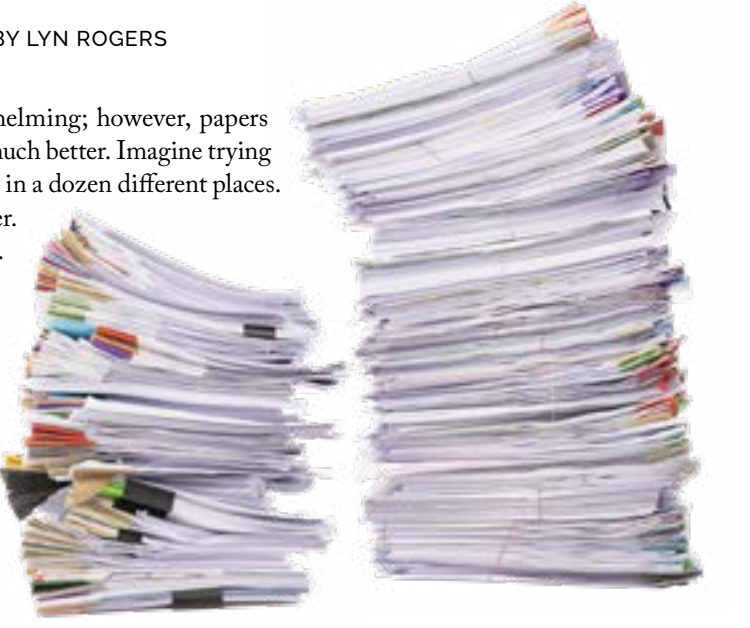
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SORTING SYSTEM

How to eliminate those pesky paper piles

BY LYN ROGERS



We can all agree that paper piles are overwhelming; however, papers shoved into random boxes and files are not much better. Imagine trying to find important legal documents scattered in a dozen different places.

Following are some tips for getting rid of the clutter.

Gather several letter-sized bins from a dollar store. They should all be the same size and height. Make sure they're not shallow. Label them according to your personal files – for example, car, financial, health, home, legal, school, taxes, etc. Line them up on your kitchen table and quickly sort your piles of papers into the appropriate bin. Don't look at dates yet – that comes later.

You also will need two boxes or bags next to you for recycling and for shredding. You can decide whether your extraneous papers go into these ➢

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bags now or after the next step, but don't overthink your decisions. Remember, we are making quick decisions in order to eliminate the paper piles.

Once all papers are sorted, start with the most critical category for you. Now is the time to check the dates and subcategories. Is this a water bill from 40 years ago or a car repair receipt for a car you sold 10 years ago? Those should go into the shred bag. Only keep items that are essential for your life now, such as the latest bill that shows that prior invoices are paid in full. The latest oil change receipt can be added to the file and prior ones shredded.

Decide with your accountant what types of receipts make sense to keep based on your personal situation each year. File those in a separate file folder behind this year's tax documents. If you have a lot, a small, lidded bin may make more sense for you.

Extraneous papers include privacy policies, interpreter services, marketing for other services they offer, ads, expired coupons and form letters. If you are getting mailings from companies you aren't interested in, go online and ask them to remove your name. This will lessen the number of papers that come into the home.

Once everything is sorted, decide how you wish to file them. You could choose green hanging files for financial, blue for school and red for medical, for example. Within those, if needed, can be manila folders for subcategories.

If you decide to become more of a minimalist, consider investing in a scanner so you can keep all of your important documents online in folders. Remember to back everything up. Also, autopaying invoices that are identical each month, such as the mortgage or streaming service, will ensure that far less paperwork will be sent to you.

Some minimalists prefer e-cards rather than paper ones, or heartfelt greetings via email or text. You can save these special sentiments in a separate folder online, to be read over and over again. The plus for this is that they won't be misplaced or accidentally torn.

Paper piles can be eliminated from your home and office with just a little effort and consistently making quick decisions on where they belong. ❊

Los Altos Hills resident Lyn Rogers, a professional organizer, is owner and CEO of Lyn At Your Service. For more information, visit LynAtYourService.com.



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