



“A bird arrives,  
and changes everything.”

**Exactly!** I think to myself, on hearing these words from Ira Glass in This American Life’s “Spark Bird” episode. I had already met my Spark Bird and learned what the term meant.

*“The bird that sets alight a lasting love for all things avian.” - Bill Wiser, plough.com*

Enter, the **Yellow-winged Cacique** - my Spark Bird! At first, I didn’t know its name or even what it looked like. I just knew that some kind of bird was visiting the guest room door every morning in a house Steve and I were renting on Oaxaca’s coast, alighting on the door handle and alternately tapping on the glass and squawking loudly. Each time I tried to sneak into the room to catch a glimpse, it would quickly fly off, leaving me with a flash of black and bright yellow.



We soon set up a camera and the next morning, caught this wonderful, comical activity on video. The Yellow-winged Cacique is a common bird on the west coast of Mexico and I began spotting them everywhere. And hearing them! They can be quite noisy and their vocabulary fascinates. Mornings, they are one of the first birds we hear. Sometimes a flock will appear at our bird bath and take turns splashing, harassing each other, showing their muppet-like floppy crests.

They build beautifully crafted, long pendulous nests that hang from palm trees, or swing precariously from power lines. Once Steve and I found one in our garden. It had fallen from a tall palm on a windy day. We picked it up and heard the tiny squawking of two baby Caciques inside! We hung the nest up from a bamboo pole as high as we could and were relieved and delighted when the parents showed up a day later and rescued the babies.

Being musicians, it’s almost impossible for us not to hear rhythm and melody everywhere. Birds are nature’s musicians. We feel a kinship! Bird noises are an almost constant soundtrack here in southern Mexico.

It might be the closest thing to living in an aviary. As the sun appears, you hear the orchestra warm up. The first sound is the rhythmic tapping of the Pale-billed Woodpecker. He has a little drumroll that starts things off. Ba-dap-ba-ba. It actually sounds more like a woodblock. Then the Rufous-naped Wrens join in, like a staccato fanfare, cascading one after the other. Someone seems to be flying in circles around the house, letting out a high pitched whistle as they pass, creating a doppler effect. Is it the Orange-breasted Bunting? Is it just one?

Or perhaps a caravan, heading off to.....wherever it is they go?  
These are the things I think about as I come to in the morning.

The soft sporadic tones of the Altamira Orioles. Brash, screechy biker gangs of White-throated Magpie Jays, and the piercing call of the Great Kiskadee (which always sounds to me like it's telling someone off - probably the Jays). Then a Thrush will arrive to steal the show, with the most diatonic song of all. A lilting melody that feels to me like 6/8 time - groovy and so musical. Whatever I'm doing, at any time of day, when that Thrush starts up I drop everything and dance along to its song. I literally turn all my attention to this bird. And this is really what I'm getting at. These birds have the power to completely transport me.

### ❖ Who is making THAT sound? ❖

It's exhilarating to hear a call or song we haven't heard before. Steve and I will go to great lengths to identify a new cast member joining the troupe. Some are elusive. The Citreoline Trogon, with its accelerating bouncing ball-bearing call, was initially very tricky to locate. And though they're usually spotted alone, we recently found ourselves under a tree with a whole flock of them calling to each other! It was a thrill to be among so many gathered together!

We once climbed up to the roof of a condo we were renting to try and discover who was making a most peculiar sound in the middle of the night. We crept around the building in the dark, and finally located the bird, which was actually far down on the grass, bouncing around and making that beautiful flourish-y fluttery trill as it foraged. It was a Pauraque, which is a type of night jar, part of the Whippoorwill family, and we were beyond pleased to have found the source!



## “ Is it the Orange-breasted Bunting? ”







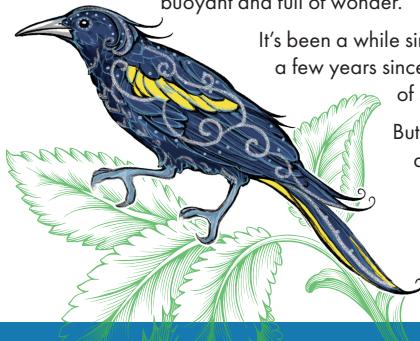
Of course, I've always been aware of birds and enjoyed them. The haunting call of a Loon during summers at the cottage in Ontario. Dramatic silhouette of a Great Blue Heron at the lake's shore. Chickadees' onomatopoeic chitchatting. A vivid red Cardinal spotted against the snow. The fat, fast-food stealing Ring-billed and Herring Gulls down at the beach in Toronto where I grew up - always fun to watch. And Canada Geese - possibly entertaining, definitely terrifying. Breathtaking Flamingos seen for the first time in Florida - and Pelicans!

But this ordinary appreciation has grown into a passion and a thirst to learn more about these magical creatures.

I don't belong to any birder groups or get up at the crack of dawn to go birding. I don't have a list. Maybe one day! But I can say that birds are a huge part of my life. In this wonderfully biodiverse part of the world, the birds are always present and endlessly amusing. I feel so lucky whenever I get the chance to see one close to me. Or when one chooses to nest in a nearby tree. I'm infinitely fascinated and curious.

### When that Cacique tapped on my window, I felt a spark.

Not just a budding bird obsession, but the curiosity and desire to see what life would be like if I spent more time in this place that makes me feel so buoyant and full of wonder.



It's been a while since I made a record...  
a few years since I felt the urge to pull a collection  
of songs together in this way.

But the birds - a constant source of joy  
and inspiration - have reignited my spark.  
For that I'm full of gratefulness.

Emilie-Claire



