

Then he scratched his head with those comical yellow toes, and continued looking mildly at me with his hair all askew. He was like some rumpled old avuncular family friend, and I just fell in love with him. And told him so."

Julie, who lives in Lyons, wondered, however, if she could change her mind and say her favorite all-time bird is the Pileated Woodpecker. "Do I have to have really seen one for it to count," asked Julie, who is still looking for that bird to add to her life list. Sure. Why not? A birder's prerogative is to change her mind regarding her favorite bird.

She's in good company because Craig Thayer of Cook County has also claimed the Pileated Woodpecker as his favorite all-time bird.

No matter how many times some birders are asked, they will always name the same favorite avian species because seeing that bird instills childhood memories.

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*...about a Black-crowned Night-Heron*

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Bernie Wiltshire of Heyworth near Bloomington chose Barn Swallow because "I grew up with a very healthy population in my grandfather's barn. These birds are so graceful in flight! I also saw them on many occasions really making life difficult for the stray cats, which were also plentiful around the barn. Alas, the barn has since succumbed to a very windy night, so the population really took a nosedive after that. But they will always be my favorite!"

The barn is gone, but Barn Swallows still fly! Do these two facts reflect the permanence and transient aspects of life?

Karen Land of Batavia, grew up in Algonquin in the 1950s at a time when the city was still considered rural. "The first bird I was aware of and would track and watch seasonally was the Great Blue Heron," Karen recalled. "We had several that fished in the ponds and creek near my home." The herons kept "the then 6-year-old, me, entertained for years. I even had names for them but had no way to tell them apart. I would just name them in the order I saw them each day."

Linda Macunovich of Westmont considers the Bald Eagle her favorite Illinois bird. "My husband and I have gone on an eagle trip to the Mississippi every winter for the past four years and they keep drawing us back. The majesty and mystique surrounding them doesn't diminish."

Two birders shared painful stories about losing someone they love, and finding a way to remember them through the birds they love.

"A dear friend of mine passed away from cancer in the spring of 1997," said Peter Weber. "We had worked together and enjoyed each others' company for about twelve years. The morning he succumbed to the insidious disease, I had my first Eastern Bluebird visit my yard."

"Despite my efforts to attract Eastern Bluebirds to my nest boxes for almost three years, I had been denied the beauty of flashing blue and orange. The sad day that Ed passed away was sunny, bright, and beautiful, made even more so by the appearance of both a male and a female bluebird. They were only around for about an hour that day, and didn't reappear until the spring of 1998 (when they successfully raised a family in my Peterson Box)."

"I'd always enjoyed the Eastern Bluebird's beauty. Until this day, however, I wasn't sure which bird was my favorite. That little flash of blue and orange will forever bring me a special feeling of warmth and hope."

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*...about the Common Nighthawk*

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The same is true for an Illinois birder named Mary Alice when she sees the Common Nighthawk. "My father taught me how to bird, and this was the first non-common bird that he taught me how to identify. Every time I see them, I can't help but think of him. He died of Lou Gehrig's disease seven years ago and when I see the nighthawks again in the fall, I picture his spirit flying overhead and imagine that he's watching over me."

Mary Alice's short poignant story reminds us that although birding can be scientific, competitive, frustrating, rewarding, and challenging; it can also be a way for us to cope with loss and rejoice in living.

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