

THE LINNAEAN
NEWS  **LETTER**

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STARR SAPHIR, 1939 - 2013

Long-time Linnaean Society member, Starr Saphir died on February 5 after a long battle with breast cancer. She joined the Society in 1982. This *News-Letter* devoted to and honoring Starr was compiled by Helen Hays. It presents memories of those who walked with Starr in Central Park as well as other places and learned from her during different periods in their lives. We thank everyone who contributed in writing and with pictures. Alice Deutsch, Sherry Felix, Alex Hale, Karl Holtzschue, Jeff Kimball, Judy Metzner, Keelin Miller, David Speiser, and Lloyd Spitalnik all contributed pictures which accent this issue with images recalling Starr, her walks and her favorite bird, the Cerulean Warbler.



On Wednesday, May 8 (rain date – Friday, May 10) at 7:30 am, Lenore Swenson will lead a memorial walk for Starr in Central Park. Lenore will meet people at Summit Rock. You can reach Summit Rock by going into the park at 81st Street and Central Park West and walking north, or entering the park at 83rd Street and walking south.

The first memory is from Lenore Swenson.

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I first met Starr Saphir on Monday, May 1, 1989. I had recently joined the National Audubon Society and had received a newsletter from the New York City Chapter. Among the events listed were field trips in Central Park on Mondays and Wednesdays, meeting at 7:30 am. I took the first week in May off from work for a “stay-cation”, to go on the birding trips and to visit museums and local tourist attractions.

The weather was perfect on May 1st. The Park was abloom with light pinks, dark pinks, whites, yellows, blues and purples amid a back-

drop of light green new-leaf color everywhere. I had never seen the Park so beautifully delicious. I saw 31 species of birds that day; ten warblers. I was amazed.

Wednesday was another perfect spring day. At that time I stayed toward the back of what was a very large group. At some point during the early part of the walk, Starr came over and asked me about myself. I revealed I had taken off from work to go on these trips. Later in the morning I heard Starr call out: “Make sure Lenore can see the Baltimore Oriole – she took off from work to be here.” People in the group dutifully stepped aside so I could get a good look. I was very impressed not only with Starr’s birding abilities, but with her ability to attend to the needs of individuals within the group as well as the group as a whole.

That day I did not want to leave the Park. I was enchanted, I was hooked. Little did I know then how much my life would change. And Starr was responsible.

For the next ten years I participated in as many field trips with Starr as I could – with NYC

Audubon, Linnaean Society and her own Starr Trips. After the North End of the Park was renovated in the early 1990's, Starr started leading walks there on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Four days a week she had trips in Central Park during April, May, September, and October. She had one late-start day – Tuesdays at 9:00 AM – to give people who lived further away more of a chance to get to her walks. She also added shorebird trips to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge during the month of August on Tuesdays and Saturdays. And she led trips further afield for other groups – to Montauk, New Jersey, Arizona, Alaska, Costa Rica, South America, and Africa.



However, my birding was limited to weekends and holidays, and the few weekdays during migration I could take off as personal or vacation days. Unfortunately work got in the way of my birding, so something had to go. Fortunately, I was able to take early retirement.

After I retired I made it a point to adhere to Starr's schedule, and became a regular. I always kept a list of birds seen and heard during each trip, and periodically Starr would ask me how many we had. Starr loved listing and numbers, and she made up rules and games to be played. We would try to reach a "round" number such as 45 or 50 species, or try to beat the previous day's numbers. Starr was very strong on birding ethics and constantly taught these on her trips: to stay on paths, to keep a reasonable distance from birds so as not to disturb them, to keep *pishing* to a minimum, to avoid sudden movements and hand gestures, and above all else – NEVER POINT! She could be very short with violators and frustrated when people were unable to give specific directions to a bird. Some people were put off by this; however,

the majority of those who continued with her markedly improved their skills.

Starr amazed me. She could identify little chip notes that all sounded the same to me, she could block out traffic noises, people yelling, machines humming, to detect the faintest bird song. A split-second blur of a bird would pass by far off and Starr would call it. At first I was dubious about her ability to do so, but as my skills improved, I found she was correct. And when she heard a "good" bird was spotted on the other side of the Park, she was off at a fast clip – I could barely keep up with her!

Starr was leading her group in the North Woods of Central Park on September 11, 2001. We continued blissfully birding that morning, mostly unaware of what had happened until about 11:00 am when someone was able to make a call from a pay phone.

A second horror occurred several months later when Starr was diagnosed with metastasized breast cancer. She was given only a year or two to live. Starr continued birding for eleven more years, probably more passionately than ever, if that were possible, and worked her medical treatment around her birding schedule. She was very open about her cancer, and inspired others with her courage.

Starr became a close birding buddy. Together and with others we took trips to the Adirondacks for boreal birds, to Niagara for gulls in winter, to Delaware for shorebirds and waders, to Cape May, Cape Cod, and Ohio for rarities. We both became interested in butterflies and Odonates, and once did a three-day trip to upstate New York and western Massachusetts. Although the trip was mostly rained out and we missed most of our target species, Starr was happy to get life Cobweb Skipper, Arctic Skipper, and Gray Petaltail.

Most of all, Starr loved birding the New York area. She grew up in Brooklyn and spent summers at her grandparents' house in Stony Brook, Long Island. The story she told of her initial birding experience was as follows: as a very young child she was fascinated by her grandmother's coffee-table book of John James Audubon's paintings and perused it constantly. One day when Starr was six years old and traveling to Stony Brook, her grandfather's car broke down. While waiting for the car to be fixed, Starr spotted a small bird at eye level on a tree trunk, and immediately recognized it as a Black-and-white Warbler – her first identification!

When a Pink-footed Goose showed up in Stony Brook in 2008, Starr and I went to see it. We stopped by her former house, which Starr referred to as “The Butterfly House” because of its unusual shape. While we were looking at it the current owner returned home with her six-year old son and invited us in. Starr was delighted. Then in 2010 when we went to see a Mew Gull in Brooklyn, we took a side trip to Bay Ridge to visit her former apartment building which remained much as she remembered it. So Starr got to revisit her childhood homes.

Starr’s enthusiasm and passion for birding was contagious and inspiring. My life was totally changed for the better after meeting her. There was before birding and after birding, before Starr and after Starr. I have trouble even remembering how I lived my life before May 1, 1989. I am extremely fortunate and blessed to have had the time with her that I did. I learned so much from her.

Starr has said that she would love to keep on birding forever, but “nobody gets the chance to find that out.” But knowing Starr, who knows?

**Lenore Swenson**

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Any birder in Central Park for more than two minutes would have known Starr Saphir, and the reason is: she was always there! Travel down any path in The Ramble, or near Belvedere Castle, or down at the lake – and there would be Starr with one of her groups.

To tell you the truth, sometimes it could be a bit frustrating as I would stroll along the Gill, or stop at the Azalea Pond, and see a few interesting migrants. But – half-an-hour later – I would come upon Starr and her entourage coming from the Gill or the Azalea Pond, and she would cheerfully announce they had just spotted a Mourning Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher, or Philadelphia Vireo. Which – of course – I had not.

It always amazed me that Starr would turn up almost everywhere, despite her illness. I remember once traveling out to Mt. Loretto, out on Staten

Island – and there was Starr. She had come all that way with friends to look for a reported Buff-breasted Sandpiper, the same reason I was there.

Starr also had a biting wit, the kind I refer to as “wry commentary.” I remember being with her at Point Lookout, a town which in recent years has made it more difficult (through restrictive parking and access) to bird Jones Inlet, which historically has had some incredible species. We were probably trespassing, but I told Starr I would smile at the local residents who were giving us the eye. And Starr remarked, with an amazing combination of humor and sarcasm: “I’ve been smiling at these people for twenty years!”

To say Starr was a decent birder would be an understatement. I remember being on a Linnaean trip to Jones Beach, for which she was the leader. It was a ghastly cold morning with high winds slamming us in the face, but we managed to reach the jetty at the edge of Jones Inlet, where usually there are Purple Sandpipers and sometimes Harlequin Ducks. These are to be expected. But, Starr identified an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull sitting on the jetty. I don’t know how she found it as I had scanned all the gulls on that jetty, and had noted nothing unusual.

But, my most memorable encounter with Starr had nothing at all to do with birding. Six or seven years ago, while in Central Park, I happened to overhear Starr say, “Before I die I would love to have eggplant parmesan”. At the time, I wondered why she just didn’t go out to a nice Italian restaurant and order some. Starr set me straight by telling me breast cancer thrives better in an acidic environment and, of course, the tomatoes used to create eggplant parmesan had a lot of acidity. She was very careful with her diet. I told another birder, Rhoda

Bauch, what Starr had said and added I could make a good eggplant parmesan. Rather generously, Rhoda invited Starr and me to her apartment for dinner. The deal was Rhoda would supply Italian bread and salad, and I would make



the eggplant parmesan. It was a fun and interesting evening. Even though I had seen Starr many times in the past, it was usually when she was breezing by with her group, so we really hadn't any time to talk for more than a minute or two. The eggplant evening was when I really got to know her better.

After the meal was over and Starr and I were walking together to the subway, Starr suddenly said, "That was the best eggplant parmesan I ever had." Those unexpected few words of gratitude made all my work in preparing the dish worthwhile. I was glad then, and have continued to be very glad that I made that eggplant dish for Starr.

I saw Starr many times after that while birding in Central Park. We never spoke about that evening at Rhoda's again. But, I sensed the sharing of that dinner had made us come together a little closer as people.

Most of us know Starr Saphir was the real "Starr" of the recently-released film *Birders: The Central Park Effect*. I think it a fitting late-in-life tribute to a courageous and remarkable woman.

Richard ZainEldeen

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I've been going on Starr's walks for the past ten years, since returning to NY after a multi-year absence. I'd been birding for a number of years, but not with the intensity I found with Starr and the group of devotees that accompanied her in Central Park. I knew about her illness almost from the beginning. Whenever my husband and I traveled (on birding trips, of course), I always tried to find a tee shirt I thought she might like. My favorite one (I think it was hers, as well) was the light-footed Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris levipes*), from southern California where extraordinary efforts are being made to save this bird. It fit her slight frame perfectly.

About five years ago, in the fall, I was at Cape May on a cold, windy, rainy day. Looking for birds was virtually impossible. Keeping warm, with layers of clothes and hot coffee was the most one could hope for. I took the opportunity to go to the observatory and find a shirt for Starr. Then we drove over to the wet, deserted parking lot at the hawk watch. There, counting hawks, as always, was Pete Dunne. I went over and asked him if he could sign the shirt for Starr. He was more than happy to do it. It read something like: "You are an inspiration to us all. Pete Dunne".

I gave it to Starr when I got back. She seemed delighted to have it, vowing never to wash the shirt.

**Judy Metzner**

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My favorite memory of Starr is of a birding day last spring when my father drove a group of five of us: Starr, Lenore, myself and my friend Anya, up to Sterling Forest to see a pair of Mississippi Kites that were potentially breeding in the park.

In fact, the last phone conversation I had with Starr, the week before she was hospitalized, was reminiscing about this day, and I wanted to share this memory in particular not only because it was one of Starr's favorites but because it really highlighted three aspects of Starr that were how she was able to give so much to so many people and why I loved her so much.

The first aspect may seem trivial, but meant the world to me. After we had seen one of the Mississippi Kites – a decent, yet backlit view – we decided to drive up to Ironwood Drive for some other birds. I was debating with Anya what name from *The Lord of the Rings* we should give the kite and, while most birders would dismiss either the nerdiness or the unscientific aspects of this conversation – Starr embraced it. When Starr began to mentor me at the age eleven, she really allowed me to embrace my nerdiness both in my love of birds and my passion for fantasy and science-fiction. Being a geek is currently a huge part of my identity and it is really largely due to Starr's enormous influence on my life: she may have occasionally rolled her eyes, but she really encouraged me to keep making lists of characters from television shows and which birds they would be or to keep giving inspirational speeches from *The Lord of the Rings* to her good-luck bobble head (which she had named Samwise in my honor). She laughed and accepted that the kite that we had seen was now officially named Curufin.

The second reason why this day will always hold a special place in my memory is, as she did on every birding day, Starr displayed over and over again her boundless generosity. She was the kind of person who wasn't just willing to share but, as she was with so many things, Starr was insistent that she share as much as she humanly could with every single person she came into contact with. Anya and our friend Matt, who had

driven up in a separate car, had never seen a Golden-winged Warbler, so Starr was determined to fix that. Sure enough, only a few meters up the Ironwood trail, Starr picked out a male Golden-wing with the combination of luck and birding skill that made Starr seem a magician. As we were heading back down the trail, a dragonfly flew past and perched in front of me. Dragonflies used to be something I completely dismissed along with butterflies and all other insects, but Starr's passion for all aspects of nature was catching. I eagerly drank in every word she said on her walks, so when she ID'd insects, I garnered an appreciation for them as well. For two years running, she gave me guides to insect identification for my birthday and I started learning them. By last spring, I had gotten to a point where I was able to identify the dragonfly as a spiketail species and, with Starr's help, narrowed the ID down as my life Arrowhead Spiketail. The fact I have a dragonfly life list is something I entirely owe to Starr's patience and generosity in teaching me about odonates (even when I was the type of person to stand next to her on an enormous lawn and described the small, green damselfly's location as "on the broken blade of grass").

Another side to Starr's generosity was her concept of "owing" birds. Whenever we were on a walk in the park and she was only able to get a few people a glimpse of the Common Yellowthroat as it skittered away, she would loudly announce "I owe you guys a yellowthroat." She took these debts very seriously and, while she obviously couldn't control the birds, she did everything humanly possible (and sometimes beyond what was possible for any other human) to get everyone on her walks as many birds as she could.

Therefore, when later that day, Starr, my father and Lenore had a pair of Black-billed Cuckoos, which, at that point, were a life bird for me, she was determined I would see these birds, even though Anya and I had wandered three-quarters of a mile up the trail and were engaged in a sword fight with sticks. Starr sent my father running up the trail to announce breathlessly "Black-billed Cuckoos". As soon as we got to the place where Starr and Lenore were standing, I immediately recognized Starr's facial expression as the silent intensity only Starr was capable of when there was a potential great bird concealed nearby. When she saw me, Starr's face fell into complete and utter devastation and she said, although I could hear the concern in her voice, "We are going to get you on

these birds." Two or three minutes later, as I was watching a Black-billed Cuckoo eat an enormous caterpillar, I think Starr's joy outshone mine in a way that was unique to her.

After we had gotten our fill of these spectacular birds, we decided to drive back to the Visitor Center since it looked like it was threatening to rain and we wanted to have a picnic in a sheltered area. We sat outside under the roof and spread out our lunches, watching the heavy rain until it began to pass. Then, as even the light drizzle was beginning to pass, one of the two Mississippi Kites flew in and landed on one of the bare trees, giving us amazingly non-backlit scope views. As we watched, the kite started calling and her mate flew in, circled around once, and then mated with her. As we were appreciating how lucky we had been to actually see this pair of Mississippi Kites actively mating, the female started calling again, rather plaintively and the male circled back around and landed at the foot of the branch. Slowly, he began to shuffle up the branch towards his mate and, when he was finally situated as close to her on the branch as he could be, he slowly leaned in and they bumped their beaks together in what looked exactly like a human kiss.



Starr was one of the best naturalists I have ever known. She knew almost everything there was to know about most bird species and their behavior and she was always open to learning more. Therefore, though she knew objectively this action was a way the kites cemented the pair bond, Starr's way of birding came from the heart, so she just couldn't resist anthropomorphizing the pair along with the rest of us, cooing over the obvious display of love between the two birds. She later confessed to me this was one of her favorite bird-

ing memories because it was the most adorable behavior she had ever seen.

Though Starr had a life list of 750-or-so in the ABA area, she still was able to get just as excited over the behavior of a species she had seen hundreds of times as she was over a successful twitch of a rare bird. She was so determined the people on her walks not only got long lists of species but really got the same kind of intimate experiences with the birds and their personalities as she had been lucky enough to have. On one fall walk, for example, she was just as excited everyone was able to have a really close view of a feeding Black-throated Green Warbler as she was that a few members of her walk had glimpsed a rare Clay-colored Sparrow.

Then, of course, there is one more reason why this day is such a strong memory of Starr: Our final birding stop of the day was at Laurel Lake, the last chance at Cerulean Warbler. Sure enough, Starr's talent (and Samwise's good-luck) found us a singing male and his mate pretty low down in a couple of trees. It was one of the best views of a Cerulean Starr had had in years and that was without a doubt her favorite bird.



And, naturally, what was birding in upstate New York without ice cream? On the drive back to the city, we stopped at a local shop at the side of the road and scrolled through my photographs

of the kissing kites, discussing their complete adorableness over fresh blueberry ice cream – Starr's favorite flavor.

Finally, I would like to say that, apart from my parents, Starr was the most important person in my life and I cannot begin to express how grateful I am for her mentorship and how honored I feel she was willing to share so much of her time and experience with me. Thank you so much, Starr, and I will always love you.

Alex Hale

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Fallout conditions made May 2, 2012 a great, albeit wet, morning to be in Central Park. After six hours of birding, a quick estimate had us around sixty-eight birds for the day, including twenty warblers, two flycatchers, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Lincoln's Sparrow. Starr wanted us to have seventy – she always went for the round number, and to willingly fall short would be an admission of defeat! Hearing a Song Sparrow got us one bird closer. By then the rain had started coming down more heavily and, with the temperature around fifty, I was chilled.

Starr was not dressed any more warmly, but she actually suggested birding Strawberry Fields again on the way out of the Park! We quickly agreed this was not a prudent idea, and decided to call it a day. Starr and Lenore performed a careful recount under subway shelter and found we had indeed reached the target of seventy.

Starr had elected to take an extended break from chemotherapy so she could lead her walks during the spring and enjoy birding the way she always had – passionately. She was literally risking her life in order to bird with us.

Here was a seventy-two-year-old woman beset by a host of physical infirmities – a bad back, a pronounced limp, and painful arthritis – along with metastatic cancer, brilliantly leading us for six hours in the cold rain across the hills of Central Park, seeing and hearing everything, patiently and deftly guiding all members of the group with her words alone (never pointing), and wanting to go on longer still, simply so that we could observe more birds. Starr always knew how to inspire.

**David Barrett**

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We will always remember Starr, not only for the wonderful mornings we spent together, but especially because we met on a Starr walk.

Without Starr there would be no Margaret and Sid.

**Sid Schwager
Margaret MacCary**

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Will there really be spring without Starr Saphir in Central Park? Stars light up the night, but Starr lit up every corner of the Park as she looked for birds and identified them, usually with a group of admiring birders in tow. Starr was quick herself like a bird, never pausing long if a spot began to feel “not birdy.” She was famous for turning up large numbers of species, but I loved her emphasis on the “good look.” To me, under Starr’s tutelage, the special species of the day is always matched by the special good look of the day. Remember the morning we surprised Pale Male taking his bath in one of the Ramble’s streams – and how he just continued as if we weren’t there? That was an especially good look, although all of the morning’s birders had seen Pale Male many times.

Starr liked the rarities of course, but she had an interest in the common birds too. She always had the air of someone just out and about, looking here and there for whatever birds might turn up. Whoever did, she knew all about them – their best ID clues, their nesting habits, their diet, their look-



alikes, their migration and distribution, and the status of their population. She had thought about it all. In the field, Starr was not particularly interested in plants and trees and bushes; birds were the important thing. By example, we learned that birding is not a trifling hobby.

Starr was so staunch in her knowledge and her willingness to share; I cannot imagine her leaving us. I will always expect to see her in the Park. She won’t see me; she will be intent on watching some bird.

**Janice Dunham**

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I speak mostly with my camera but I did know Starr for over fifteen years and though most of our conversations revolved around birds and what was seen for the day, Starr always made a point of asking how my daughters were doing. Every time!!!

I guess she liked that they were very young birders in the making!

David Speiser

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During the spring and fall migrations Starr Saphir leads park bird walks that are noted for their extraordinary sightings. Birds that others would die for – Starr’s group has two or three of them on a single walk. (Serious birders don’t see birds, for some reason. They have them.) On May 10, 1993, Starr’s summary in the Bird Register (always signed with the symbol of a star) included the hard-to-find Kentucky Warbler; her group had it just west of the Maintenance Meadow. Then, near the Upper Lobe, a Least Flycatcher, a very tricky bird to identify, darted out. Starr identified it by its faint call: *Che-bek!* Then the group ran across three Scarlet Tanagers north of the Azalea Pond. Oops, as Starr often adds in her Register entry, I

forgot to mention the Cerulean Warbler on Cherry Hill, another dream warbler.

The rest of the year Starr pursues birds in various exotic spots on this continent and most of the others. Her ornithological skills and her not inconsequential personal gifts combine to make her a most successful walk and tour leader; her walks are always crowded, her tours generally filled to capacity, and she manages to support herself through these activities.

An actress before birding took over her life, Starr's a good-looking woman. These days, dressed in her usual uniform of snug blue jeans, sports shirt, and a canvas vest with multiple pockets, her Zeiss 10X40s around her neck and her hair in a single long braid, she looks younger than her age of fifty something. She's an enthusiastic, highly energetic, impassioned birder; when she thinks there's a Connecticut Warbler lurking in the underbrush nearby, she is like one possessed. She's also famous for her puns, swift and inexorable. One year, when she heard that Pale Male had caught an escaped parrot, she uttered one of her most famous (or infamous) quips: "That was merely an a-parrot-if." If there is such a thing as a preconscious mind, that subterranean stream of words, names, snatches of songs, associations, rhymes, and images said to influence poets, punsters, and Freudian slippers (it flows somewhere between the surface of consciousness and the depths of the unconscious), Starr's is less a stream than a rushing, overflowing torrent.

On the morning of March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Starr was leading a walk for the New York City Audubon Society. At Bow Bridge, one of the most beautiful of the park's bridges, the group paused to admire the view. Standing on the bridge and facing east, you can see the Fifth Avenue skyline; turn the other way and Central Park West is revealed. That's when Starr and her Audubon walkers had one of their great sightings.

"We were about to cross the bridge," she related a few days later, "when suddenly I see a Red-tail with a stick in his mouth flying over Fifth Avenue. It looked like a male – small. I watched it land on the northern edge of what I call the wedding-cake two-tiered building (subsequently dubbed the Octagonal Building by hawk watchers). It landed, and suddenly another, bigger hawk appeared right in front of him. We're all watching like, well, hawks, to see what was going to happen. He flew off his perch, still holding the stick. Then they did something quite balletic

which I've seen red-tails do before. They circled around each other as in a dance. They did this for a few moments, circling and soaring, and then they both landed on a building two blocks to the south. The one they now say is the nest building."

There was a barely perceptible pause that made my ears perk up: Attention, pun coming. "It was an absolutely raptorous moment," she said, and waited another infinitesimal moment. I laughed. "If this is really a red-tail nest," she continued, "it will be the third species of hawk nesting in Manhattan. So far there's Peregrine Falcons and kestrels. Both of these, of course, are known to nest on buildings. A few years ago I had a kestrel nesting on a courtyard ledge of my own apartment house in Washington Heights. But Red-tailed Hawks ..."

For once Starr Saphir was struck speechless.

**Marie Winn** [from *Red-tails in Love* (1998)]

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Starr made me a birder. We had just joined the National Audubon Society which automatically made us members of NYC Audubon. We received the newsletter and my husband, Alan, said: "You need a hobby, here's this woman who leads bird walks in Central Park. Go." It was a lovely May morning and I met Starr at 81st and CPW with a tiny pair of binoculars. She showed me so many wonderful birds and knew so much about them, I was hooked. Starr had a wonderful way of getting one on the bird. It wasn't just, "It is over there, look in the tree." She would specify exactly where the bird was so that everyone saw it and would track it down again if it was missed. Starr's ability to locate and find birds was amazing. She knew their pedigree, plumages and habitat, etc. She loved teaching people about birds and birding and kept her fees low so everyone could afford to go with her. Once she was sick, she exhibited tremendous determination to keep going and not to complain about her constant pain. I will miss her and always be grateful for the gift of birding.

Irene C. Warshauer

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I ended up in Starr's Beginning Birding workshop in the fall of 2002 almost by accident. A friend told me she was taking the course and I said, "Oh, I'll go with you. I have nothing else to do." My daughter was away in college, a time-



consuming volunteer job was ending, and I indeed had a lot of hours that needed to be filled. The irony was that while my friend enjoyed the workshop, I was the one who got hooked. And, I never had a free hour again.

The field trip with Starr in Central Park was amazing; kinglets and warblers seemingly zipped by faster than the eye could see. But, Starr could see every single one. I also remember she spotted a Vesper Sparrow on that walk. She told every birder we met about it; my introduction to both the thrill of the rarity and the collegiality of the birding community.

More important than identification of species were the principles Starr set down for birding: how important it was to look at the bird, observe it. We were encouraged to take notes, discouraged from consulting a field guide in the field. Several months after the workshop, I was sitting by the East Pond at Jamaica Bay WR, looking at my field guide, when I saw Starr approaching with a couple of other birders. I quickly put my field guide down, hiding it behind my back. "I saw that," she said with a very slight smile, before getting down to the business of scanning the pond. I birded with Starr far less than I would have liked since that time, but sometimes when I saw her she would be with another beginning birding group and she would introduce me as one of her success stories. That was always an honor. I learned from the best.

**Donna Schulman**

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I knew and admired Starr for over fifteen years. We met in 1997, shortly after I married Marylee Bomboy and moved to New York City. I had never birded before and Marylee introduced me to birding via early morning walks with Starr (we lived on the Upper West Side, five minutes from Central Park). That fall we took her wonderful birding course at New York City Audubon and became avid birders.

Following retirement in 2000, I started photographing birds, and in the fall of 2001 I shyly asked Starr if she would like to see some of my images. "Of course," she said, and soon I was giving her copies of my slides to use in her teaching.

Her enthusiasm and support greatly encouraged me to continue bird photography. She introduced me to the 11th Street Bird Club where I made several slide presentations and developed further confidence in my "new career."

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was on a walk with Starr in the North End of Central Park. We heard rumors and silence, but only around noon did we learn definitely what had happened. No one who was there will forget that day.

In 2003, I moved to digital photography and Marylee and I moved to Northampton, MA. We kept in contact with Starr and in June 2004 she



visited us for a weekend. We went birding and we found our life Cerulean Warbler on Mount Holyoke where they nest, just a few miles from Northampton. It was her favorite warbler (as witnessed by her email address) and we were thrilled to see it with her. She also gave us a Massachusetts bird list which we still use.

Time passed, but we continued in touch and tried to go on one of her walks whenever we were in New York. We talked with her in early January this year just before we went away for the winter. She admitted she hadn't been birding in a while, but "maybe this weekend" she said. She sounded tired and we were concerned about her. All too soon thereafter, we learned of her hospitalization and then of her death. We miss her very much. She was very special and we feel so fortunate to have known her.

John Van de Graaff

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Thanks to Starr, I got hooked on the birds and the birders. It was her crisp descriptions of field marks, songs, calls and flight behaviors that most impressed me. Through her verbal instructions, she helped me to hone my ability to locate birds in the trees, the sky or on the ground. I remember clearly her statement that if I first learned the key points in identifying robins, it would make it easier to identify many other birds.

**Edith Goren**

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I birded with Starr for fourteen years, starting on September 11, 1998, and enjoyed every minute. I used to request birds, and it took her two years at the beginning to find me a Red-breasted Nuthatch, the first of many. She was superb at birding by ear, as well as by sight, and was a delightful punster. To me, she was the “pigtailed pisher.” A highlight was joining her for her 20th anniversary in Central Park on October 26, 2004. I made a Shutterfly book of that walk and others in May of 2007, entitled *Some Days in the Park with Starr*. It included several of her favorite sayings, such as: “Hearing a B.T. Blue”, “Trying to re-find the Hooded”, “I owe you a Warbling Vireo” and “That’s better than a kick in the head.” My personal record with her was 77 species, including 22 warblers, on the morning of May 2, 2011. On October 31, 2007, on a dare from Starr, I wore my Dracula costume on our morning walk, resulting in a photo of Dracula biting Starr on the neck. I will miss her very much. But, in her memory, as Starr would say: “Let’s go birding!”

Karl Holtzschue



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After my boyfriend died, I discovered my new interest, bird watching, filled the lonely weekend hours with quiet walks in a natural setting. Among the various leaders who offered guided bird walks in Central Park, I was soon captivated by Starr Saphir. As I followed the group along Central Park’s North End or through the Ramble, I learned to recognize the birds that pass through New York City on their spring and fall migrations. With Starr’s skillful teaching I absorbed basic facts about different species and the individuals we watched with no apparent effort.

Seasons passed and I had become one of those who followed Starr along her favorite trails several days a week. I hosted several of her workshops at my apartment and Starr recognized that my companion Willy held a similar place to that in which she held her own cat. In later seasons, on each walk during the quiet moments when we passed from one location to another, I was one of those acquaintances who shared a few private moments. Starr and I chatted about our pet’s latest adventures. For a cat lover, each day brings enough material for unlimited conversation. We cherished our old cats until they died and discussed the difficulties in adapting to the ways of a new pet while a younger animal took over our apartments.

I had started birding at an age when retirement was the next step. It was easy to wait for other birders to spot and identify the birds we met on our walks. The time came when I knew I had to walk alone to push my knowledge further. Starr’s illness became more severe and I occasionally joined her group to remember the pleasure of walking and learning about birds. With Starr’s passing, I will miss the companionship and a friend with whom to share my everyday stories.

**Sandra Maury**

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I started bird walking in Central Park in 1968 with Farida Wiley, soon to be followed by Starr the moment she began; also Steve Quinn, John Bull, whoever was leading Audubon or Linnaean. I went daily during the two months of spring and fall migration with these wonderful leaders. I also attended Cape May for several years with trips or courses led by Pete Dunne. It is hard, with such wonderful leaders, to pick out the one thing I remember Starr for.

She has seen such a fantastic total of bird species! I have seen not as many but have seen them on all seven continents and loved every moment of my many trips.

I would say that, compared to all these other brilliant leaders, Starr had a “unique” way of expressing herself when she got particularly excited. Unfortunately, I had to stop walking sixteen years ago after I had complete hip replacement operations on both hips – I could no longer walk as fast as the groups. So now I just sit quietly with my walker in Central Park and wait for the birds to come to me.

I hope you will choose a spot in Central Park for Starr’s celebration that I will be able to get to on my walker. I did like and admire Starr so very much.

Stella Hardee

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Though, I’m sure, Starr depended, at some level, on the fees she charged for her bird walks, she certainly wasn’t out in Central Park following birds for the money or to get rich. She reveled in introducing people to the wonder that is birding. She wanted those with her to experience the same deep and profound connection with the larger natural world that watching birds facilitates. She reaped far greater riches in leading her walks than any financial gain or even the joys experienced by those she guided. When Starr was engaged with a bird and her calling to connect others to it, it was then that she was fully alive and you could see it. There was great meaning to her life in those moments. She was fully alive in those moments and you knew it because she was oblivious to all but the focus of her attention – the bird and her mission to share, not just the bird, but her own sense of wonder and gratitude for THAT particular bird, with all those around her who were primed by her and ready to receive her gift. And what a gift that was! That’s what sustained her and gave her bird walks meaning.

She was, indeed, a guiding “Starr” for all of us who have sought birds in Central Park for one reason or another.

**Steve Quinn**

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Went for the spring ritual, which I’ve missed near through the current migration season, of

going for a long bird walk in Central Park. You’d think after going almost every spring for twenty years I’d have a modicum of bird identification skills, and could find my way out of the park, but the answer is no on both counts. But as long as I have someone to lead me and help me spot and identify the birdies, I’m happy as can be. And if I hang with the group through nearly the entire walk (I’m talking minimum of five to six hours, folks), we eventually emerge from the Ramble, and I usually end up near enough to Strawberry Fields that I can get to the subway without panicking. I’m doing ok with breeding-plumage males, but beyond that, I need help – to me, they’re all “little brown birds”.

On the subway at 6:30 am, which is packed with sleepy people off to work, while I’m going to burn in hell because I’m goin’ to the Park instead. (Generally, my guilt recedes with the sighting of the first warbler.) Being devoid of small talk, and intimidated somewhat by the expert level of all the other birders on the walk, I try not to get to the mustering point, 81st and Central Park West, too long before the walk starts, so I can just start walking and looking up. But leader Starr is welcoming and friendly to all comers. I recognized nearly every person in the group from past years, and I know most of their names! But they don’t know mine. The birding leader is still the same, this very amazing birder, Starr Saphir, who is an itinerant naturalist and bird leader, whose treks I found through the New York City Audubon Society. Her patter is such fun to listen to: “Up in this tree with the big dead snag in the center, at about one o’clock, is that Northern Parula, oops, going left, going lefter, is everybody seeing this bird?” If the bird flies off too soon, she always says, “I owe you that bird.” She can hear the softest call notes from fifty yards, and can identify the fastest, drabbest streak flying past in nothing flat. She’s a wonder.

“You shoulda been here yesterday” applies to more than just garden-looking; I missed an all-time Starr record walk on Saturday, 81 species-walk lasted eight hours! I didn’t go to the Berkshires, so I coulda shoulda woulda, really, I almost thought about going, but damn, I stayed in bed.

Today’s walk was 62 species, not all seen by me, but I only missed a few. Highlights for me: Cedar Waxwings, Indigo Bunting, Downies going in and out of their nesting hole, and the gorgeous Black-throated Blue Warbler. Also a wonderful Eastern Kingbird, and a bunch of turtles sunning

themselves by the pond. Two of my fave warblers were not seen today by us, Blackburnian and Canada. And will I ever see a Belted Kingfisher?

The bird news of yesterday and today is a Cerulean Warbler, a beautiful blue streaky thing, is in a tree on 89th Street between Columbus and Amsterdam. It's a rarity in the Park, and here it is out in the big bad streets! If I were a true birder, I'd get up tomorrow am and go up and try to see it. But I can't, bad me.

After the walk, I got home and had a favorite ritual moment – going through my old Peterson's and marking what I'd seen ... the notations go back to 1989. Like I said, by now I oughta be better at this ... I can identify a Common Yellowthroat, yes, but not a Nashville, no matter how much I study the warbler pix in the books. And I still can't get used to Sibley, though Starr said again today it's the best bird guide there is. I totally believe her; she's the expert in my book, more than Sibley or Peterson.

What does it all mean? Probably nothing. I like seeing pretty birdies is all. Starr makes it possible, even for slow learners like me. We're watching the decline of so many bird species, but in greening Central Park, for a few hours, the abundance brings nothing but joy.

Kassie Schwan (from blog *The Clueless Gardener*)

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I first heard of Starr Saphir and her Central Park bird walks years ago when I was working long hours that prevented me from going on the

early morning walks during the week. Then, “9/11” happened, and I found myself unemployed. After six months of unsuccessful job hunting, I decided it was time to find something to cheer myself on weekdays. I went on my first walk with Starr and her regulars in April of 2002. I cheered up and started a new career as a teacher, and even married my longtime partner, Jean-Paul in 2007. I still remember how, on the first walk that fall, Starr remarked that getting married seemed to have sharpened my identification skills! I will always remember her for her sharp wit, phenomenal knowledge of nature and the world, and her courage in the face of illness.

Each year, Starr remained strong despite her illness, and inspired me to disregard minor discomforts and complaints – if she could fight against cancer so hard, who was I to complain? During the fall of 2012, Starr was becoming weaker, but she kept showing up to greet us each Saturday morning. She was even able to start some of the walks, and left us with the leadership of a designated assistant if she felt too weak to continue. On the last Saturday walk of the season, October 27, she greeted us at her bench at the West 103<sup>rd</sup> Street entrance, with her traditional bag of Halloween candy.

At the end of every spring and fall season, I always knew it might be the last time we'd see her. While waiting out and then witnessing the local devastation of Sandy's arrival, I had plenty of time to accept that most likely this would indeed be the last time I would see her.

Now, I focus on the many thrilling memories of people met and birds seen (or not) on those walks.

Many of the species we found in the park were life species for me, but I strongly remember my life Bald Eagle. It was a juvenile perched atop the former Flower Fifth Avenue

building, where it competed for my attention with a Blackburnian Warbler in a tree by the French Garden. I also remember the birdwatchers from all walks of life: teachers, computer people,

musicians, photographers, etc., etc. I remember one May day when our walk had people from five different continents: Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America.

Then there were the birds I just missed, such as American Woodcocks, American Pipits, and Cerulean Warblers. There were precious few of them, but those few always seemed to disappear into the foliage before I could get my binoculars on them. I did get my life American Woodcock at last out at Laurel Hill in New Jersey, and my life American Pipits flew into a bush right in front of me up in Canada one summer. My life Cerulean Warbler had to wait until this past fall when Starr found one far away in a tall tree across the Harlem Meer.

The rarest life birds seemed to be the ones that just walked, jumped, or flew right in front of us. The first time this happened was years ago on a hot September day, when we were walking back to the Pool. A Connecticut Warbler just happened to walk out of the bushes and onto our path, then fly across the park drive. It continued to be visible for a few minutes until it disappeared into its choice of foliage. For years, Starr always referred to that little group as the “people who saw the Connecticut Warbler that day.”

Even more astounding was the sudden surprise of the Sedge Wren that jumped out of the fence and into my binoculars in October 2009. Someone thought they’d seen a Marsh Wren flitting about in some thick bushes in a Great Hill garden. Alex and I had our binoculars trained on a spot behind the fence where movement had been detected. Suddenly, the “Marsh Wren” literally jumped into our binoculars as it appeared on the fence. We called Starr over to confirm that it was a Marsh Wren, and Starr got very excited, as it turned out to be the “THE” Sedge Wren. I still have a photo of that bird by Lloyd Spitalnik hanging prominently on the bulletin board over my computer.

Starr will be sorely missed by many besides me, but her spirit as well as everything she taught us, will remain with all of us who experienced her bird walks every spring and fall in Central Park.

**Mary Picard**

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Like many of us, I’ve known Starr for years through encounters in Central Park and other birding spots around the area. I was lucky enough

to be able to spend additional time with her when I interviewed her for my film *Birders: The Central Park Effect*. During those sessions she was, as always, forthright and insightful, with her passion for birds and birding coming through every moment. And always game for the task of another shoot. She even agreed to brave the slippery ice and come out in the snowy Park to demonstrate how birding was a year-round activity.



Starr touched literally thousands of people through her thirty years of teaching birding and leading walks through Central Park and other places. But Starr’s influence will not end there, as I have witnessed with the couple of dozen times I’ve presented the film to audiences here in the Northeast, as well as California, Texas, Florida and other states. At every screening, someone comments on Starr – extolling her wisdom, marveling at her endurance or being moved by her commitment and dedication to birding. Fortunately, she lived long enough to see the finished film and to understand her legacy will live on. She will be missed but never forgotten.

Jeff Kimball

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Once when on a Starr trip in Central Park, Starr found an Eastern Wood Peewee in a tree. She explained to us the Eastern Wood-Peewee most always perches with its wings apart; Empids keep their wings closed when perched. Starr would impart such useful information with such ease. I always look for the wing position when observing these flycatchers as well as other features. Thank you, Starr.

**Anne Lazarus**

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“Is anybody here new to birding?”, “she asked, as I reluctantly raised my hand, knowing my small opera glasses would give me away, whether I admitted my ignorance or not. Starr welcomed me and then sought me out during the walk that day, making sure I saw the birds the others saw. When I was not able to locate a particular bird, she insisted she “owed me” the next one. She won me over, and my first look at a Scarlet Tanager hooked me.

Although I never developed into anything resembling a knowledgeable birder, I valued the chance to get to know her. She had a sharp wit and an absolutely uncanny ability to find birds. One day, some well-known birders joined us on a walk and as we all peered into a woody patch, nobody able to find any bird whatsoever, Starr pointed out a Wood Thrush perched motionless right in front of us. When she couldn’t find the bird, she accused it of sitting behind a big leaf and throwing its voice. Her enthusiasm for birds and her knowledge of them was seemingly limitless, and she was eager to share what she knew with others.

Even as her illness progressed, her voice was strong and her stamina impressive. She lived for many years beyond what was originally predicted for her, which she credited to the support of the birding community, her strong body built up from years of walking for hours through the park, and, of course, the birds, which held endless fascination for her. I will miss her.

Sally Anderson

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I was sorry to read about Starr’s recent passing, but knew her days were really numbered near the end.



Since I have been birding in Central Park for over forty years, I had seen Starr in the Park and also at Jamaica Bay innumerable times. We knew each other well and were also pleased to be able to share experiences and sightings. We basically started birding regularly in Central Park pretty much at the same time, but of course she ended up doing almost nothing else for the following many years.

She was able to confide in me in private at the beginning of her battle with breast cancer as she knew of my personal interest in the diagnoses of that disease as a practicing radiologist. In fact, when it became clear that she would have to undergo

chemotherapy, it was through my intervention that she ended up in the hands of one of the very best MDs in that field (who was not taking any new patients at the time).

**Claude Bloch**

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Friends and I used to bird with Starr in Central Park years ago. I remember, with joy, all the trips and courses I took with Starr. Starr got me started seriously birding and keeping lists. I learned how to keep a list in my head for weeks of birds I see on a particular day. Starr’s descriptions of birds, some of them very funny, help me to remember them. “Cedar Waxwings may be religious, though I am not; they are constantly davening or genuflecting as they fly.” The Cedar Waxwing’s flight is interspersed with short glides when the wings are held against the body, giving the bird an undulating flight path.

Sherry Felix

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I met Starr June 1, 2006. I was a new birder, and was immediately taken by her quickness, energy and love of lists – a kindred spirit in many ways. I remember Starr best in terms of the birds we saw and enjoyed so much together.

On October 7, 2006, we were birding up in the north end of the Park, close to the Wildflower Meadow. Everyone in the group was looking east at a small flock of migrants. I wandered a bit off to the side, drawn by an interesting bird, the color of mahogany with a large bill. I knew I had never seen this bird, but it wasn't a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, the closest thing I could think of. Starr, in her usual hyper-alert way, noticed me looking.

“Do you have something there?”

“I'm not sure”

“Oh my God – it's a Blue Grosbeak!”

I recall the excitement in her voice when she called everyone over to get good looks. Her hands were shaking as she called a friend to post the sighting. From that day forward, she called me a good spotter. I don't know that I ever merited such a title, but her words always made me feel good.

from Cherry Hill over to the location, but it was one heck of a fast walk. What we came upon was a quintessential New York moment. The bird was showing beautifully – very un-Kentucky-like not far from the John Lennon Imagine memorial. Lined up along the pathway were dozens of photographers and birders, all with optics and cameras trained on the bird. To one side was a man in a business suit reading a newspaper. To the other side was a young woman in a bikini, soaking up the spring sun. Starr walked up and down the line of birders, ensuring the folks on her walk could see the bird well and remarking about how extraordinary the view of such a skulker was.

On December 5, 2007, Starr, Lenore Swenson, Sandra Maury and I drove out to Montauk. Starr was doing a New York big year and needed a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. One had been sighted near a farm outside of town, so the chase was on. Arriving at the reported spot – a suburban cul-de-sac, there was no sign of the bird. We walked around the neighborhood a bit, but still no bird. Starr was worried it was gone, but I thought we should check the postings to see if anyone had

seen it earlier in the day. Back then, I didn't have the luxury of an iPhone or the like, and went back to the car to start up my PC. As I fumbled around, I noticed a bird fly in and perch in a nearby tree. I started walking towards the tree, and there was Starr walking from the other side. Apparently, we'd both had the same impulse – and her happiness was evident as the flycatcher posed for us both. After we all got looks, the trip didn't end there – Starr spotted a Little Gull at the pier (a lifer for me) and re-found a Pink-footed Goose (another lifer). It was a journey of good birds, good birders and good cheer.



On May 7, 2007, one of her spring migration walks was winding down. A passing birder ran up to Starr with the news a Kentucky Warbler had been seen in Strawberry fields. I won't say we ran

On March 22, 2009, Starr, Lenore, Susan Schultz and I decided to chase a Green-tailed Towhee in Collingswood, NJ. Although Starr had seen the towhee out west many times, it would be

a state bird for her. We left in the dark – well before dawn, arriving at the private home before most people think of getting up on a Saturday. We tiptoed around to the back of the house, and waited. It was probably about half an hour before birds started to come to the various feeders, but sure enough, the towhee popped up and began scratching away at the leaf litter in quite the animated fashion. Always eager to share, Starr later pointed out a Carolina Chickadee – a lifer for Susan – adding to her delight. We stopped at DeKorte Park on the way home, unwilling to close out our lists for the day, and finally made it back home that evening, sated.

On January 13, 2012, Starr, Lenore and I made a trip out Union Township, NJ to try for the Common Chaffinch. Starr and Lenore had tried earlier in the month and dipped on the bird. It would be a lifer for all of us, if accepted as wild. I was still reeling from the after-effects of an amazing birding trip to India – but there’s nothing like a good bird to make all of one’s ailments fade away! The homeowner had graciously allowed visitors to come and view the bird – providing no one came up to the house before 7:00 am. We arrived slightly before the hour amidst light snow and waited for the clock to tick down. I could tell Starr was itching to go, and finally about five minutes to seven, she said she’d start walking up the driveway, as it would take her more time than Lenore and I. We followed shortly, and found spots on the back porch to wait. A number of other birders were there as well – and we all scanned the yard, hoping for a glimpse. Again, luck was with us, because the bird showed at the far end of the yard, and then came in to a feeder for a closer look. By this time, I was done in by “Delhi belly” and I went to wait in the car, leaving Lenore and Starr to enjoy as much time with the bird as they needed. We drove back to New York, completely happy with our “new” bird. Even though the chaffinch was eventually not accepted as wild, it didn’t matter – because we still saw a gorgeous little finch, and we saw it together.

On September 17, 2012, I joined one of Starr’s Monday morning fall migration walks. It was a wonderful day with lots of warblers, vireos, even a Rufous Hummingbird. When we reached Azalea Pond, Starr announced she would not be staying for her usual “sit”. I didn’t know that was going to be the last time I would see her, but watching her blue bandana fade off to the west, something in me wanted to run after her and walk

her out. I don’t know what held me back, other than that I’m sure she would have quickly seen through any excuse I could have come up with. Even then, I saw her as a strong, proud woman – and I’m glad that’s the way it will always be. I thank her for all she taught me about birds, lists and life, and for the 54 species we saw that day – “a good number”, she would have said.

**Keelin Miller**



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