



Birds of a feather: Gina Nichol draws an albatross crowd in the waters off New Zealand.

Eagle Eye

Expert birdwatcher can't wait to get back to guiding wildlife enthusiasts around the world.

BY TODD MCLEISH

On a boat trip looking for seabirds off southern New Zealand, Gina Nichol kept a close eye on the boat's captain as the seas got rough and the weather deteriorated. She was leading a tour of nature lovers from around the world, and she knew from experience that if the captain looked confident, her clients would feel safe, regardless of the conditions.

"At one point the captain threw out some chum to attract the birds, and it was clear he was totally comfortable with the situation," says Nichol, the founder of Sunrise Birding, a wildlife tour company in Cos Cob. "And then we got drenched by an unexpected rogue wave."

It's one of hundreds of adventures the native of northwest Connecticut has had in her 15 years

helping travelers see some of the world's most spectacular wildlife.

"Despite the drenching, it was still an exciting adventure getting up close and personal with albatrosses and seeing them in their space," she says. "That's what I love most."

Seeing rare wildlife — especially birds — has been Nichol's life's work since she started her tour company in 2005. She has led trips to dozens of countries and seen thousands of species of birds in that time. This year alone, she scouted sites in Belize for a future tour and led trips to Japan, Costa Rica and Texas before the pandemic struck and canceled most of her tours for the rest of the year, though she still hopes to lead a group to Jamaica in December.

"We go all over the world, and we listen to

COURTESY OF GINA NICHOL



Into the wild: Some of the many birds spotted on Nichol's wildlife trips (from top), a Steller's sea eagle in Hokkaido, Japan; a scarlet-rumped trogon in Borneo; Hyacinth macaws, the world's largest parrots, in the Pantanal region of Brazil; and a white-tailed eagle in Finland.

Flight plan

Sunrise Birding has tours scheduled through 2022. Here's a look at the lineup, which is subject to change based on the pandemic and travel restrictions.

- Jamaica — Dec. 3-9
 - Serbia — Jan. 11-19, 2021
 - Costa Rica — Jan. 31-Feb. 6, March 27-April 2, 2021
 - Japan — Feb. 5-15, 2021
 - Guatemala — Feb. 13-19, 2021
 - Argentina — Feb. 13-28, Oct. 12-31, 2021
 - Texas — Feb. 13-21, 2021
 - Morocco — March 21-31, 2021
 - Lesvos, Greece — April 16-23, 2021
 - Spain — April 21-May 5, 2021
 - Colombia — May 2021
 - Bulgaria — May 5-14, 2021
 - Finland — May 22-28, 2021
 - Mongolia — June 5-18, 2021
 - Galápagos Islands — July 25-Aug. 1, 2021
 - Pantanal (Brazil) — August 2021, July 2022
 - Borneo — Aug. 29-Sept. 12, 2021
 - Bolivia — October 2021
 - Chile — Oct. 9-19, Nov. 7-18, 2021
 - New Zealand — Nov. 9-29
 - Honduras — Feb. 19-27, 2022
- For more information, go to sunrisebirding.com



our clients and try to go to the places they're interested in going," she says. "Their bucket lists are often places like New Zealand, Japan, Finland and Borneo."

Nichol followed in her father's footsteps by taking an early interest in nature. She studied environmental education at Cornell University, then worked several wildlife-related jobs before becoming program director for the Greenwich Audubon Center. It was then that she led her first nature tours, first to the Pacific Northwest and then to Greenland, Iceland and Baja California.

"By that time, I was hooked on wildlife travel," she says. During 12 years as a science teacher at Greenwich Academy, she began organizing small nature tours for friends and eventually started Sunrise Birding. "It started with a core group of Connecticut birders who followed me around the world, and it expanded from there. Now I've got clients in Norway, Canada, Spain, England, all over."

Her clients are a mix of serious birders looking for particular target species and those with a general interest in wildlife and a love of

adventurous travel. She employs six other guides with expertise leading birding tours to various parts of the world — plus her husband, appropriately named Steve Bird — and she hires local guides in every country they visit to support local conservation.

"We don't have the knowledge of someone who goes out into the field in those countries every day," Nichol says. "We're really good at learning the birds, finding them, pointing them out, and backing up our local guides."

While she says it's difficult to identify a favorite birdwatching destination, Nichol especially loves visiting Brazil's Pantanal region, the world's largest tropical wetland where she can reliably find hyacinth macaws — the largest parrot in the world — along with jaguars, giant otters, anteaters and hundreds of species of birds during a 10-day trip.

"It's like you're on a South American safari," she says of the Pantanal, which boasts the greatest concentration of wildlife on the continent, even more than the Amazon rainforest to the north. "And I love our tour of the Greek island of Lesvos for spring migration. It's my second home."

It's even more difficult for her to select her favorite bird. Hummingbirds are high on the list, she says, "but I really love owls. They're so interesting and mysterious and unique. It's hard to pick just one species, though, because all birds are quite fascinating. Whatever I'm looking at now is my favorite."

When she's not leading a tour, Nichol is birding around Connecticut every day near her Branford home. She especially likes Hammonasset Beach State Park for shorebirds, saltmarsh birds and owls, or Chatfield Hollow State Park in Killingworth for forest birds. And this spring — the first time in a decade she was home for the whole month of April — she made daily visits to Lake Saltonstall, in southern New Haven County, to observe a growing family of great horned owls.

As she tries to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the founding of Sunrise Birding during a time when the travel industry has been shut down due to the pandemic, Nichol is looking ahead to offering new tours to Bolivia, Mongolia and Morocco next year while also hosting birding workshops and giving bird-related lectures around southern New England.

"I really like sharing the experience of seeing something unique or seeing a spectacle, like when we saw 150 sea eagles on the ice in Japan," Nichol says. "I like watching people enjoy the spectacle and get in touch with their inner child, their inner curiosity, and their love of nature." ■

