

B is for Bufflehead

The Story behind B is for Bufflehead

When I was looking for a way to use my photography to help introduce my daughter to the wonders of nature, a friend suggested creating an ABC photo book. My first thought was “aren’t there enough of those already?”

After some thought and a little research, my wife and I decided to create an ABC book that would introduce kids to the birds of North America. We wanted to engage little ones without intimidating them, so choosing the right birds to include was essential.

We started with a target list of silly sounding names and funny looking birds. We then added birds that had interesting stories to tell. We had no choice for the letters U, X, and Z, as only one species occurs in North America for each of them. We also wanted to use birds with descriptive names that could help teach concepts, instead of birds named for obscure ornithologists of years gone by. Once we had the target list, a quick comparison to my portfolio showed I had a lot of work to do. However, I didn’t realize how daunting the task at hand would turn out to be or how long it would take to finish it.

Fortunately, locating many of the birds I needed to complete the alphabet was simplified by the birding listservs on the internet. The people on Minnesota’s “mnbird” listserv helped me track down the Upland Sandpiper. To help me improve my loon images, one gentleman even volunteered to be my loon guide for a day. The folks on Arizona and New Mexico’s “BIRDWG05” listserv pointed me to potential spots for Zone-tailed Hawks. The people on Mt. Diablo Audubon’s “EBB Sightings” listserv patiently helped me find targeted birds in my own area.

The most trying bird in my quest was by far the Xantus’s Murrelet. These little guys spend most of the year out at sea and only come to two small islands off the coast of Southern California to breed. To make things even more difficult, they leave their nest burrows before dawn and return after dusk. Therefore, the only way to find them is on the open ocean, not an easy task considering they are less than ten inches beak to tail. After two seasons of failed attempts to photograph one, I was rewarded on a pelagic trip hosted by the Los Angeles Audubon Society. Ironically, they weren’t even supposed to be seen on that particular trip. So after two years of chasing birds around the country, I had finally completed the photography.

The book is designed to be easily adapted to each child’s level. The photos, letters, and names are perfect for the earliest learners. The accompanying text is intended to intrigue young children

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The Story behind B is for Bufflehead (continued)

with a few fun facts about each bird. For older kids (and adults), I've provided a section that offers more detailed information on each species, including range, habitat, and feeding preferences. For fun, I've also included a section of baby birds and interesting images for a who's who challenge.

Throughout the process of creating this book, my knowledge and appreciation of birds has grown tremendously. I've also succeeded in exposing our little one to their marvels. I'll never forget the experience of trying to photograph with her sitting on my lap, squealing with delight as each new bird approached. I hope that her enjoyment of our feathered friends will last her a lifetime and that B is for Bufflehead will inspire other future bird lovers to get outside and enjoy the wonderful world of birds.

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