

FINAL REPORT TO THE BLAKE-NUTTALL FUND  
EXPLORE BIRDS: LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN PUBLIC SPACES OF NYC  
2017-2018

Submitted Nov 30, 2018

In October 2017, the Uni Project in partnership with Washington Square Park Eco Projects received a \$1,500 grant from the Blake-Nuttall Fund towards the development of a program that would offer New Yorkers a pop-up learning environment focused on birds. The plan was to deploy this program to various public spaces across New York City as a way to expand opportunities for people of all ages to learn about birds, and forge stronger connections between urban New Yorkers with the world of birds around them.

The Uni Project is a nonprofit that creates programs for public spaces across New York City—pop-up reading rooms, open-air drawing studios, and more. Washington Square Park (WSP) Eco Projects is an environmental education, advocacy, and research collaborative led by Georgia Silvera Seamans. Both organizations had collaborated on programs, exhibits, and activities in public space since 2016.



The program we've created, called EXPLORE BIRDS, offers New Yorkers a hands-on exhibit station focused on birds in the outdoor public spaces of the city where both people and live birds can be found. The program's centerpiece is museum-quality bird study-skins—a Red-tailed Hawk (male), two European Starlings, a Northern Flicker (male), two American Kestrels (male and female), and a Rock Pigeon—drawn from the collection of Washington Square Park Eco Projects. (WSP Eco Projects has a permit to possess study-skins for educational purposes, and Georgia herself has prepared these skins alongside



scientists at New York's Museum of Natural History.) The bird skins are displayed in acrylic trays or boxes on custom-made carts or pedestals within easy reach for people to handle and explore. Other elements of the exhibit include: specimens in jars such as loose feathers; binoculars, microscopes and magnifying glasses; a "listening station" featuring songs of common birds (with a companion book); pens and watercolor supplies along with instructions for biological drawing and clipboards; a bird-matching memory game; and a collection of books about birds. The purchase of these materials was made possible in part with funding from the Blake-Nuttall Fund grant. Labels and other printed material allow people to have a self-guided experience and prompt people to explore materials deeper (e.g., an illustrated card identifying some of the most common "Birds you can see in the park"). Portable benches provide a place to sit while sketching, reading or listening. Most importantly, the program offers Georgia herself, a trained ecologist, to demonstrate how to handle the birds, provide people with information, and answer questions. Other support is provided by Uni Project staff and volunteers.

Through September 1, 2018, we were able to offer the program eight times in various parks, plazas, and street festivals across New York City (three times in 2017, and five times through Sep 1 in 2018). Then, beginning in September 2018, we incorporated the program into our EXPLORE program that had thus far been primarily focused trees and bugs. This move ensured that the program would now have a dedicated cart of its own that would enable it to reach many more locations across the city. We were then able to offer the program another nine times at parks and street festivals throughout the fall.



Locations have thus far included Washington Square Park (where we deployed five times), a street festival in the Lower Manhattan neighborhood of Two Bridges, Sara D. Roosevelt Park in Chinatown (where we deployed seven times), Union Square Park, a street festival called Red Hook Walks on Van Brunt Street in Brooklyn, a plaza called Albee Square on Fulton Street in Downtown Brooklyn, and a park called Jacob H. Schiff Playground in West Harlem. Those who have benefitted are New Yorkers of all backgrounds and ages. In addition, Georgia deployed a table-top version of the program at several science-focused events, namely, the World Science Festival in NYC in Washington Square Park (in May), the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Citizen Science Expo in Washington DC (in

June), as well as in a community garden and library, both in NYC's East Village. The program operated for about four hours in each location.

The experience for New Yorkers has been transformative. Many do not realize at first that the study skin birds displayed—with their beautiful, iridescent feathers and delicate features—are the very same birds as those that can be found throughout the city. For example, when a live Starling was pointed out to a group of children after exploring our study-skins in a downtown Brooklyn plaza, they exclaimed, “no way!” and ran to look for live birds, pointing them out to others to get a closer look. (The live birds on the plaza had been essentially invisible until the kids had encountered the study skin of the Starling.) Common questions have to do with how the birds die, and how much they weigh (the study skins are stuffed with cotton so appear surprisingly light to people.) The level of interest is very high. Each time, Georgia has talked to passersby who stop for about four hours straight, and she has heard New Yorkers’ own stories of their experiences with birds in their neighborhoods. We believe that such unique and memorable experiences will provide a stepping stone or a pipeline to birding and more ornithological knowledge in urban environments in the future.

Now that the program has been launched, we plan to continue to deepen the experience—for example, by adding new bird study-skins from Georgia’s growing collection, and by using our pop-up environment to make on-site recordings of New Yorkers’ bird stories which Georgia then may make available as a podcast. And now that the program has a cart of its own as part of our EXPLORE program, we will be able to implement the EXPLORE BIRDS component many more times all across New York City in the coming months and years.

For more images of the program in action this past fall, see: <https://www.theuniprject.org/2018/09/16/open-air-science-exhibit-explore-nyc-begins-residency-in-chinatown/>



### **LOOK CLOSELY AND TOUCH**

**Birds that have died are sometimes salvaged and prepared as “study skins.” A study skin is a research tool used by museums to learn about changes in birds morphology over time. These were donated by the American Museum of Natural History. To make a study skin, the internal components of the bird are removed, leaving the skin, feathers, bill and legs, and then cotton is used to recreate the natural shape of the bird. No chemicals are used.**

- **Can you identify all the colors in a starling’s feather?**
- **A live European Starling weighs between 60 and 90 grams. Hold a study skin. Can you guess its weight?**

(Signage used at EXPLORE BIRDS)

**EUROPEAN STARLING** is the common name for the birds displayed here. The Latin name is *Sturnus vulgaris*. In the United States, the first individuals of the species were released in 1890 in Central Park by Eugene Schieffelin, the chairman of the American Acclimatization Society, who wanted to introduce all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays to North America.

**HOW DID THESE BIRDS DIE?** New York City is located in the Atlantic Flyway, a major migration route for birds. Many species stopover to rest and eat during fall and spring migration. Although cities provide many benefits for birds, the ways we design and manage our cities do lead to bird deaths. For example, birds collide with tall, glass buildings. Raptors die from eating rodents that have been baited with poison traps. Birds also die from natural causes.

(Signage used at EXPLORE BIRDS)

