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Arts & Theatre



**WORDS ON BIRDS:
AUTHOR 'EXPOSES'
FLORIDA'S FEATHERED FLIERS**

ARTS & THEATRE

Words on birds: Author 'exposes' Florida's feathered fliers

BY STEPHANIE LABAFF
Columnist

Juanita Baker, Ph.D., is proof positive of the old adage: "Birds of a feather flock together." To best illustrate her avian affinity, she has compiled a captivating book that captures the beauty of some of Florida's finest feathered friends.

"Florida Birds Exposed" is a compilation of 'Bird Photo of the Month' submissions to the Pelican Island Audubon Society from 2009 to 2019. Each is accompanied by poems and essays describing the unique attributes of the featured birds.

The book evolved out of an Introduction to Birdwatching talk and field trip Baker had given to the Indian River Photography Club a decade ago. Considered by many to be the "mother hen" of birding photography in Indian River County, Baker wanted a way to share her love of birds and photography with others – to promote the important role birds play in our lives, as well as to demonstrate the sheer joy of watching them.

Baker had taken the group to the Se-



Juanita Baker.
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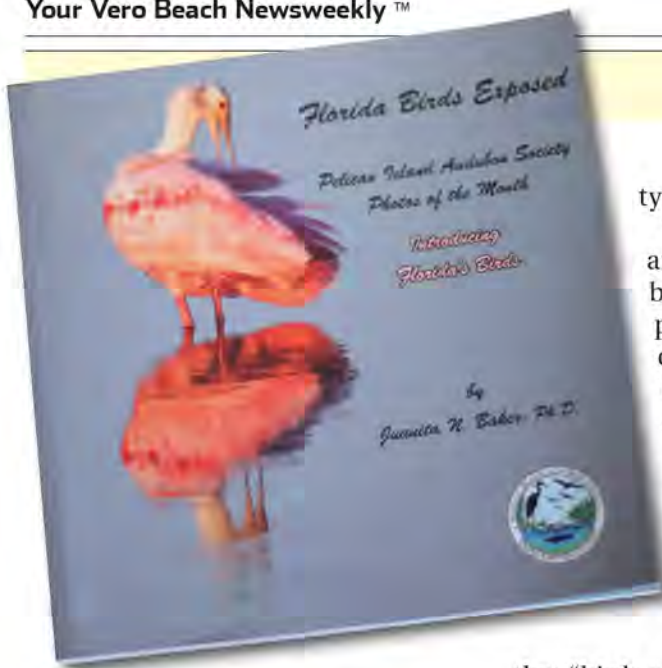
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bastian Inlet early one morning during low tide. After that field trip, Baker became inundated with photos of birds, as the photographers became more and more adept at capturing the fascinating creatures on film. It didn't take long for a little birdie to whisper in her ear that a Florida Bird Photo of the Month was in order, with photos published in the PIAS newsletter the Peligram.

"This book is important," says Baker. "We have some really wonderful birds, and everyone needs to know how precious our birds are. What's happening to the birds tells us what's happening to us. If the birds go, we will go, too. We'll be in very deep trouble. We need to pay attention to our birds."

All of the photographs in the book are of Florida birds, with a heavy influence on those photographed in Indian River County and its immediate environs.

"It's a wonderful book as a result of all 50 of the photographers' efforts," notes Baker.

Baker says that while she hadn't initially thought about writing a book, once she retired she had more time to devote to the effort. As an added bonus, birdwatching and photography are pastimes that she and husband, Richard Baker, Ph.D., president of the Pelican Island Audubon Society, enjoy doing together.

In fact, the couple previously collaborated on "Reflections of Blue Cypress: Photographs, History, and Poems of the Headwater Lake of the St. Johns River." That book pays homage to one of their favorite places to explore.

In "Florida Birds Exposed," Baker delves into what makes Florida such an attractive location for the amazingly diverse variety of birds that either call the state home or visit as snowbirds during the winter months; whether staying or just stopping over on their way further south.

She used the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's 'All About Birds' website as a resource for some of the scientific data. The book includes information such as the birds' descriptions, their habits, adaptations, diet, habitats and preferred nesting grounds. The poetry, penned by Baker, delves into the beau-

ty and character of the birds.

The commonly spotted anhingas and red-winged blackbirds, the elusive painted bunting and reddish egrets, roseate spoonbills, Florida grasshopper sparrows, wild turkeys and common yellowthroats are just some of the birds that soar through the pages.

In the foreword, Florida Park Services director Eric Draper notes that "birds excite us and stir curiosity, adventure and companionship."

"I hope people will appreciate this book and let the birds inspire them to make changes. I want them to see that these birds are really special," says Baker, who migrated to Florida from Illinois – by way of Pakistan.

"It was mosquitoes that brought us to Vero Beach," she explains. "My husband Richard is a mosquito geneticist, and that has taken us around the world. During the Vietnam War, the State Department got very interested in what diseases the troops could contract and bring back to America. So, they wanted to set up five research centers in tropical regions, and we ended up in Pakistan, where we lived for 13 years."

Today, the couple is so comfortable living among their fine-feathered friends that they built their own "nest" along the Sebastian River in a home that is somewhat akin to a treehouse. Even the unique PIAS headquarters on Oslo Road was made to look like a birdhouse.

She points to their outdoor deck, where a painted bunting had just flown to one of their bird feeders, and half-jokingly says, "That's my office."

Baker says her fascination with feathered creatures goes back much further, initially taking hold when she began collecting birds' nests as a young girl.

"As a child, I wouldn't sleep during nap time at school. Instead, I'd lie there and listen to a cardinal sing. I can still remember; it was so beautiful."

Baker credits her soaring interest in ornithology to the encouragement of an eighth-grade science teacher. Later, while spending time in India during college, she became a shutterbug, chronicling the people and animals she encountered during her travels.

She attributes her adventurous exploits to her parents, who, she explains, allowed her to fly freely – exploring nature.

"I was so interested in the world," says Baker. "I'm a curious person by nature. My mother was an artist and read philosophy. She was quite a woman; she gave me the art influence. I've loved art all my life."

Her artistic interests are varied, but

all demonstrate her passions for travel, photography and the environment. Her paintings are interspersed among numerous artifacts she has collected during extensive travels, and she is equally adept at writing prose and scientific literature.

A professor emeritus at Florida Institute of Technology, Baker holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and draws parallels between birds and humans.

"When I was going through graduate school, we learned about birds, and some of the key studies that helped enlighten us about human behavior were done on birds and rats. Behavior is what

psychology is about," says Baker.

Whether you're a serious birdwatcher [an observer interested in contributing toward the collective bird knowledge] or a twitcher [someone whose goal is to rack up the number of rare birds they have seen], "Florida Birds Exposed" is an invaluable resource.

Proceeds from book sales help support the Pelican Island Audubon Society. They can be purchased for \$29.95 at the Audubon House, the Vero Beach Book Center or online.

For more information, visit pelicanislandaudubon.org. ■

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