

The search for nature in times of crisis and beyond

June 15 2020, by Daniella Simari



A chirping sparrow sits in a tree in New York City. Credit: Keith Michael

As a fellow hiker took a picture of the extremely faint Manhattan skyline stretched out beyond an inlet of the Long Island Sound, I thought about how financially privileged we were to be there. I had paid \$27 for

a round-trip ticket to the Marshland Conservancy in Rye, Westchester County. This was way back on a crisp Sunday in February 2020, before New Yorkers realized that the coronavirus was a tangible threat to any city other than Wuhan, China. The Marshlands Conservancy is a wildlife sanctuary spanning 147 acres. We walked along the sanctuary's three-mile trail to see and hear as many birds as we possibly could in the few short hours we had there.

The Marshlands' harbor was surrounded by large and lavish houses with a median property value of over \$1 million, according to results of a 2017 survey from Data U.S.. Rye residents had a median income of \$173,591 in the same year. Those homeowners could afford a gorgeously unfolding natural landscape, seemingly untouched by man. But what about the bottom 40 percent of Americans? How can people living paycheck-to-paycheck reap the [mental and physical health benefits](#) of nature—and especially now, in the time of COVID-19?

Our February hike through the Marshlands was one of Keith Michael's urban WILD! tours, typically hosted twice every weekend. They were day excursions that explored locations around the New York City metropolitan area, considered to be off the beaten path, from Staten Island to Valhalla in Westchester County. Due to social distancing measures implemented to combat COVID-19, Michael's tours have been canceled for the foreseeable future.

"I haven't been doing any of my outings since the middle of March—I just canceled everything," said Michael. "I probably could have done some version of going to places safely, but I'd be much more comfortable doing it on my own; even though I've made the decision not to do that, mostly for health reasons. I've been healthy and would like to reduce the risk."

Michael is a 63-year-old dance production coordinator with the Julliard

School and lives in the West Village. "I actually started doing the nature birding scene as an antidote to the intensity and stress of my job-job a way to refresh myself," he revealed. This year would have been his fifth summer leading nature walks.

Michael's prices range from an early bird special of \$10 per tour, to a \$50 six-month pass, to a \$90 annual pass to join him on as many tours as possible. Lunch and public transportation tickets are not covered by the fee.

Kay Fan, a 64-year-old personal assistant for the elderly, said that Michael's urban wildlife tours were a worthwhile expense for her, as they allowed her to get out of her small apartment that lacks a pretty view or terrace.

Fan said that although she considered the tours themselves affordable, "The expense comes when we go out of the city and can't use a MetroCard. It's the travel that can be expensive." On some outings, she said she takes advantage of the Staten Island ferry, which is free. But the expenses add up when relying on the Metro-North to escape the city.

If Fan doesn't make it a priority to go outside every day, especially during COVID-19, her mental health is impacted. She said, "I've been out pretty much every day. It's hard to explain, because I live in a small apartment, I don't have a good view, I don't have a terrace... I feel so trapped. ... I would be more content to stay put if I had a backyard to stay in, or a garden to hang out in"

Enjoying greenery, even just grasses and shrubs, can lead to positive health outcomes. One [2008 study](#) published by the American Society for Horticulture Science found that placing a plant in a recovering patient's hospital room increases how quickly they heal. In a similar vein, statistics published by the University of Washington state that public

housing buildings with high amounts of vegetation had 52 percent fewer total crimes than public housing buildings with low amounts of vegetation.

Fan misses Michael's tours. When she does leave her cramped West Village apartment now, she sometimes walks "all the way from the Village to Battery Park and back, and that's a little over three miles." She worries about runners who don't wear masks and groups of people who aren't practicing social distancing, but her desire to get outside supersedes all else. Fan has managed to make do with the nature right outside her front door, and Michael has recently discovered the same.

"I've made it a project to just stay in the neighborhood. Since this is something I never get to do, it's actually quite an exciting adventure to get to stay home and in my neighborhood at this time of the year," said Michael. March through May is the busiest time of year for Julliard's productions, and Michael has typically spent every waking hour of those months coordinating productions in dark theaters for the past 23 years. Seeing as all productions are canceled this year, he has time to spend enjoying the springtime outside. He is most excited about seeing the sparrows passing through New York City during their spring migration.

"At this time, it's emphasized to me that there's a lot going on where you are," said Michael. "There's a lot to pay attention to if you just do."

During this time of crisis as well as the times before, wildlife has always been just outside the doors of urbanites and suburbanites around the world—we just need to take a closer look. Emma Marris in her [2016 TEDTalk](#) defined nature as "...anywhere where life thrives. Anywhere where there are multiple species together. Anywhere that's green and blue and thriving and filled with life and growing," rather than a collection of organisms, pure and untouched by man. Under a less rigid definition, appreciating "nature" can be satisfied in many ways.

Michael stressed that, "One of my 'things' has been urban nature, and everywhere I go are places that anyone can go. It doesn't take membership."

His biggest expense for the tours was transportation. He typically relied on his Unlimited Ride MetroCard, which costs \$127.00 every 30 days according to the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority. For longer trips that require travel on public transportation other than the subway, Michael and his followers have to shell out at least \$27 for a roundtrip train ride on the Metro-North.

While the price to leave the city may be too high a hurdle for some New Yorkers, others have fled to second homes outside the city. In Fan's West Village neighborhood, many residents fled the city as soon as social distance measures took effect. "When I walk alone on my block, I would say that only half of the lights are on," she said. "They have packages, the rent statement is shoved in the door."

Fan doesn't let her situation dim her drive for exploration, and neither does Michael. In the last two months, Michael has recorded seeing 55 species of birds around his neighborhood. He calls it "a little bit of a guilty silver lining"—"guilty" because some of his friends have lost loved ones while he has enjoyed being home. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has recorded a total of 24,348 confirmed and probable deaths caused by coronavirus in New York City as of June 9, 2020.

With the emotional turmoil endured by the city's residents, visiting nature, even if it means sitting on the curb underneath an urban street tree, should not be considered a guilty pleasure.

Studies have found that [enjoying nature is linked to improved impulse control](#) and management of major life issues. This could be important at

a time when the U.S. is experiencing its [highest rate of unemployment since the Great Depression](#) in the 1930s. Coupled with isolation, there are many fatalities that can occur beyond those from the virus. The U.S. could see upwards of [77,000 deaths related to substance abuse or suicide](#), according to data from the *National Bureau of Economic Research* and the medical journal *The Lancet*.

My family has already been impacted by a friend's suicide. I fear for how many other lives may be lost if we cannot flatten the curve of coronavirus cases quickly enough.

I am grateful to have gone on Michael's tours, which act as a gateway to relishing the urban wildlife that surrounds us every day. For now and the foreseeable future, I will continue to enjoy the nature just outside my doorstep—hearing the birds chirping, feeling a cool breeze on my face, and smelling the comforting scent of wet pavement after a spring shower. In a time when the future remains hazy and uncertain, I am taking life one neighborhood walk at a time.

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