

that no people on earth have such abundance cause for thanksgiving as we have."

There are plenty of reasons to be dour if a person makes up their mind to be dour. There are wars and rumors of wars across the globe. Government statistics about "growth" and The Economy can offer pronouncements from on high as to whether the times should be classified as good or bad. If you cannot find a suitable reason to be angry, a manufactured social media outrage is always just around the corner. And yet, just like every other era in the arc of human history, there are ample reasons to be thankful and optimistic if a person only chooses to do so. In fact, I would say that opportunity abounds!

What is that opportunity? If one subscribes to a particular view of the world, then you know the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Therein lies

all the opportunity and the reasons to be thankful.

If we love God, then we must rightly love everything created by Him. The whole world is before us to be loved, cherished, and stewarded as if we are called by God to do so. Spoiler alert: we are! If we love our neighbor, then we must love people. That includes all people, no matter how much they do or do not think/look/act/live like us.

Living out these commandments is adequately and uncomfortably summed up by 20th century Christian social activist Dorothy Day, who said, *"I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."* Read that one more time and let it sink in.

Rightly living out these commandments is a full-time, 24/7/365 pursuit. As it should be! None of us will ever master this art during our life. The success is in the journey, not in the competition of the race.

As I prepare myself for the Thanksgiving holiday, I am thankful to have the opportunity to live out these commandments. In turning my mental focus accordingly, the meaningless things of the world fall away and become just that, meaningless things. This is counterintuitive to so much of what has been thrust upon us in our lifetime, but it is a healthy and refreshing perspective to pursue.

I am thankful for you, readers! I appreciate that you join me on this weekly mental journey. I hope you will also join me in considering the two greatest commandments and being thankful for the opportunity to live them out.

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Counting on Christmas

By Pam LeBlanc

I'm sloshing through a marshy field in Matagorda County, along the Texas coast, a pair of binoculars dangling around my neck and cold raindrops pelting my bright blue jacket.

A hundred yards away, ornithologist Rich Kostecke points toward a cluster of what looks to me like a group of white footballs on stilts. I slap a mosquito off my arm and take

a closer look: egrets.

We've just ticked off another species in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which takes place across the country between December 14 and January 5. The event got its start on Christmas Day in 1900. Instead of holding a hunting competition, as was popular at the time, an ornithologist and Audubon Society officer named Frank Chapman came up with a less destructive alternative:

Count—but don't shoot—the birds.

The idea caught on. Today, tens of thousands of birders participate in counts in all 50 states and in 20 countries. During the 2021–22 count, they logged almost 43 million birds at more than 2,000 sites.

I'm new to birding, but I love tromping around outdoors, and I could spend all day watching wildlife. Besides, it feels good to contribute to science, and this annual count provides data that sheds light on long-term avian trends.

But joining the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve count is especially exciting. The plot where I'm birding—a circular area with a 15-mile diameter—almost always records more species than any other area in the country.

The Matagorda County count began 30 years ago when Brent Ortego, then a biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and Jim Bergan, formerly of the Nature Conservancy, realized they could position a count circle that would incorporate a bit of the Gulf of Mexico, a stretch of coastline and some land along the Colorado River. Much of the 176-square-mile plot is on private land, but it also includes the Nature Conservancy's Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve and the neighboring Mad Island Marsh Wildlife Management Area.

It's fertile territory for birding. "A lot of habitats come together here—coastal prairie, marshes, bay and forest," says Kostecke, who heads the small team to which I've been assigned for the count.

Under the bird count guidelines, teams tally all the species they see during a single calendar day. You don't need any special training or certification to participate, but only birds spotted by knowledgeable birders figure into the official total. Still, newbies like me typically can participate if there's room.

"It's a repeated count at the same time, year after year, so we're getting a snapshot across the nation over that time

period," Kostecke says.

In a typical year, birders here log about 230 species during the count. But today's stormy weather doesn't bode well.

About 100 birders are participating in the count this year. Last night we lined up for bowls of chili and hot cornbread and talked strategy.

One group would watch for yellow-headed blackbirds. Another would head out at night, hoping to flush out tiny yellow rails and black rails in the darkness. The circle was divided into 16 sectors, with groups assigned to each one. We knew the weather would be a challenge because, like humans, birds hunker down in the rain.

"We may have to work harder to get them out," says Ortego, the official compiler for the event.

The count officially begins at midnight. I'm tucked inside my camper van then, but a hardy group of birders heads into the night to look for owls and other nocturnal birds.

I meet my team—Kostecke, along with ecologist Charlotte Reemts, her husband and their two daughters—early the next morning, which dawns gloomy and damp.

We pile into two cars then head down a gravel road, stopping periodically to scan the surroundings.

Within 20 minutes, Kostecke has already logged 10 species. He doubles that when we reach a lake, and his list grows further when we hike into the brush and eventually reach the marsh. I love birding but definitely do not know my birds, so I leave the identification to the experts.

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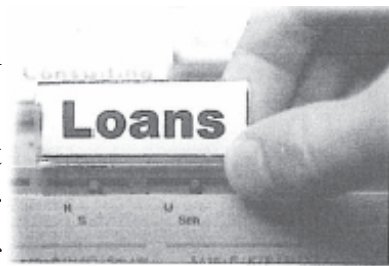
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