

## *The Language of Watching*, Rachel Simmons

In my current body of work, *The Language of Watching*, I investigate our relationship with nature through the subculture of birdwatching. There are fascinating social, cultural & political perspectives embedded in historical birdwatching field guides, and in the contemporary practice of birdwatching. Through *Bird Song Broadsides*, I contemplate bird song mnemonics, the phrases created to help birders remember & identify bird song. These little catch phrases reveal much about the values & perspectives of the birdwatchers who wrote them and their intended audience. While authors of historical guides assumed their audience to be fairly homogenous—mainly white, male & Christian—authors of contemporary bird guides use more universally understood phonetic mnemonics. This linguistic shift reflects our ever-evolving attitudes towards nature as an extension of our social systems.

Using printmaking processes such as letterpress, screen printing and cyanotype, I create text-images, inviting consideration of the sound & shape of the language used to describe bird song. Through letterpress, I can feel the individual weight of metal and wooden letters and more carefully contemplate the expressive potential of typography. I chose the color & translucency of the ink, the typefaces and texture of the paper to create an overall concept for each sound-based text-image. Typefaces from the 1800's and the blocky, repeating pattern underneath suggest the current timeline in human evolution moving towards where more of us than ever live in urban environments, but also reminds us that we interact with nature every day through our encounters with birds.

*FLOCK* is a socially engaged project in which draws connections between subculture of birdwatching and our broader cultural values through collaborative, community dialogue & printmaking. It provides an innovative model for reflecting on our relationship with nature. *FLOCK* has grown since 2015 to include over 200 collaborators at three separate locations. It's essential components are birdwatching, a discussion of our perceptions of birds through the language contained in historical field guides and hands-on collaborative relief printmaking. Since 2015, I have exhibited the prints that emerge from *FLOCK* as an installation in a print studio, a nature center, a museum and a science center. In each iteration, *FLOCK* has expanded awareness of my unique practice. Viewers can fill out surveys about their favorite birds as they experience a "flock" of bird prints installed all over the walls and on wires overhead. The silhouettes, colors and patterns in these prints emerge from my discussions with participants & are inspired by the urban environments in which many interact with birds. Though the physical prints are one outcome of this project, but I value the collaborative making & discussion experience even more than the prints themselves, perceiving the prints as artifacts of this process. This comes from my genuine interest in getting to know people through how they see nature— a process which helps me understand my own relationship with nature.