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Lauren: Hello and welcome to Wanderlust, a podcast about travel. I am your host, Lauren. In each episode we'll meet a traveler, learn more about them and something they're passionate about. I hope you enjoy this journey with me.

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Lauren: Sarah is a master in avian sciences and worked with Americorp and has been a naturalist. Please welcome Sarah.

Sarah: Hello.

L: Where was your first trip? Let's say abroad.

S: My first trip abroad was after I graduated high school, the summer after that it was a present for graduation. And it was a school trip, it was arranged by a couple of teachers and we went to Switzerland, Italy, and France.

L: Oh cool!

S: mmhmm. It was pretty great.

L: ah [sighs] very jealous. What has been your best adventure?

S: I- That's a hard question. [laughs] I think my best adventure would be safari in Tanzania.

L: Although?

S: I was just going to say it was kind of an easy one. Cause we did go through a tour company and so [laughs] really most of the details were taken care of, but it was a definitely very very cool.

L: What is your favorite part of travel?

S: It would definitely be experiencing the new place, eating the food and meeting the people and seeing the landscape and the architecture and all of that. That is my favorite part.

L: What can you not travel without?

S: Something to read. Which I can often get on my phone but a lot of the times I'll have magazines or books.

L: What magazine do you usually take?

S: *Scientific American* or possibly *National Geographic*. [laughs]

L: You've worked as a naturalist in multiple capacities, what generally does a naturalist do?

S: Most of the time a naturalist is kind of a story teller, so I will— or a naturalist in general will pick some aspect they wanna teach about, some aspect of nature and it can be a particular animal or a plant or a part of the ecology of an area or some kind of natural process, any number of things and then try and engage the public with it and usually that's can be activities or like a hike or a scavenger hunt or some kind of game that draws in whatever audience you have and teaches them about whatever that particular thing is. It's a lot of fun. [laughs]

L: How do you think it changes the way you travel?

S: I think that kind of experience, it helps me to be more observant. Particularly of the natural world because that's what I'm interested in, but other things too that maybe I wouldn't notice otherwise because I know to look for it. Or I've seen something interesting in another part of the world or another place that's related or similar or the same. Something that I can related the experiences together in that way through that or whatever aspect of nature or culture or whatever it is that I'm interested in or that I've seen or notice. I think it gives me a deeper experience.

I think I notice it the most since birds are my especial interest. I definitely can relate what birds I've seen or aspects of birds I've seen. In our African safari for example there are no hummingbirds-

L: Oh!

S: In the Easter hemisphere, like that part of the world there are no hummingbirds. Where as here at home where we live in the western hemisphere there's lots of different kinds but over there there's none but there's a different group of birds that help to fill that particular niche in the ecosystem so they eat nectar and pollen and they move from flower to flower and they eat some insects too. And they have really interesting curved beaks and they have beautiful bright iridescent plumage very similar to hummingbirds and they're called sunbirds and so it was really cool to be able to watch the sunbirds and learn all about their habits and what they do relative to what I know and I'm familiar with which is humming birds.

L: You mentioned birds—

S: [laughs] yeah

L: You travel sometimes specifically for birding.

S: Oh yes.

L: How do you plan these trips?

S: I generally start with where is somewhere I haven't been or are there birds I especially want to see? Is there a particular species or a particular groups of species I've never seen that I want to see? And generally the answer is yes. There's approximately 10,000 bird species in the world and I certainly haven't seen them all. And the really fantastic thing about birds and birding is that pretty much anywhere you go there's birds and if it's a place I've never been then there's almost definitely new birds, so it's very easy [laughs] to see new different ones and to meld that with whatever else I might want to see in that part of the world. So I kind of start there and say what haven't I seen? What do I want to see again? Maybe there's cool birds and I want to go back to a similar place to see them. At that point it's— so exactly where is that in the world? Can I just go myself? Generally if it's in the US I'm just going to go there myself, I'll plan the trip myself, you know. I don't need assistance with it. There's tons of resources out there to find good places to go see whatever particular birds I want to see. I don't necessarily feel like I need a guide for that. In other countries though I'll look into guided trips. Especially if I don't speak the language and then it's [laughs] so so much easier. I mean to be able to have all of that stuff taken care of for you. The guide can show you where the birds are and they know much better. I see if there's guides, if there's trips and there almost always is and go from there.

L: What do you pack that would be different for a trip that's specifically for birding?

S: More rugged gear, you know more outdoorsy kind of gear because generally speaking if you're going on a bird specific trip you're spending a lot of time outside and you're probably going to be doing at least some hiking. Generally you're probably going to be doing at least some every single day. I pack my hiking boots, I have my hiking pants, the sorts that are like water resistant and wind resistant and they zip off so they can be pants or shorts and I have my long sleeve hiking shirts that I wear to keep bugs off and the sun and I have my— I make sure I have my hats and I have, I usually take like a smaller day pack. So something that I can wear to have water and to have an extra fleece or a rain jacket or my birding book. You know that kind of thing. I would take. And most of that stuff I'm not going to be taking on just a general trip. You know. I'll still take my binoculars, but I may not take all that other stuff.

L: What's the best birding binoculars?

S: Well! There's a lot of good ones. Brand doesn't really matter. What you want to look for is magnification. There's two numbers when you buy binoculars. It's something by something and what you want is 8 or 10 to be the first number which is the magnification. Anything less than 8 and you're going to miss a lot of details on some birds. It's just not enough of a magnification. Especially for the smaller ones. Anything more than 10 usually are too heavy to hold up for a long time, like you sometimes need to do. Plus the higher the magnification the more vibration is also magnified and so you would need a tripod to get really good looks at much higher

magnification and that's not necessarily something you can really lug around when you're out hiking and looking for birds. So 8 or 10 is what you want for the first number and the second number is how big the lenses are in millimeters. It's a size versus light gathering ability basically. If they're too small then the binoculars are dark because they aren't big enough to gather enough light and if they're too big then again they get heavy. You need to balance those two factors. You want that number to be at least 3 times larger than the 1st number. Most of the time they are. It's usually not difficult to hit that target. My binoculars are 8 by 42 and they're really nice. They're a good weight for me. I can carry them easily and they're a good magnification. They let in a lot of light. Beyond that you just want to have a good quality lenses, good quality optics so you really need to look at the binoculars before you buy them because you want to make sure that there's no different colors around the very edge of the lens or the edge of your field of view when you look through the binoculars, it's not wavy or starts to get blurry. Those are signs of low quality optics. And you want to also make sure the binoculars are comfortable. That they fit your hand right. That when you're looking through them you're not straining your eyes. Like it's comfortable against your face and all those things you really have to test out with the binoculars. For birding it's that and your bird guide. Those are the only two things you really need. If you are going to spend money on it, that's where you should spend the money is the binoculars. You can get a good pair for 100-150, sometimes less than 100 if you hit a sale or just a really good deal. And a good pair will last you years and years. My pair I bought from Eagle Optics, gosh, I bought those when I was out in California, so that was like 2004 maybe? And they finally—the parts on the case where the strap attaches, those finally broke like 2018, and I couldn't actually wear them anymore. But they have a lifetime warranty, they were bought out by a different company but the company still honors that warranty so I just sent them in and they returned them to me free of charge, a new pair because they couldn't fix those.

L: You said the other most important thing is a bird book. Is there any specific brand?

S: Again this is really a matter of personal preference. There's some bird books that use pictures and some people like those better and there's some bird books that use drawings, they're illustrated. My personal favorite is Sibley guide, it's illustrated, so it's drawings and it's just lots of information and I really just like how the drawings are. They look really good and they're accurate. [laughs] So that's my personal favorite but again there's lots of them out there. It also kind of depends. Some people prefer guides that are arranged by color rather than taxonomic order.

L: What's taxonomic order?

S: Birds are grouped by their families and their relationship with other bird families and the bird orders, which is the biological classification system, so they're grouped in that way rather than—well—any other way. Usually color. I'm used to the taxonomic order so that's what I prefer because I pretty much know where everything is. But for beginners a lot of the time they like the color one.

L: How do you find the best birding spots?

S: Well local knowledge is really good. The local birders and guides like they are gonna know where the best places are. There's different ways to get into contact with local people if you've never been to a place before or don't know anybody there. The local Audubon societies or other like birding clubs can be a great way. Generally they've got some kind of webpage and you can just look up for whatever place you're going to go to: "Costa Rican Audubon" or whatever or "Costa Rican birding clubs" and something will pop up. And there's usually contact information or they might have a list of good places to go on their website. In the United States and sometimes in other countries there are birding trails. The very first one in the US was in Texas and you can usually look that up by the state as well as the country and that's essentially just a list of good places to go birding within that geographical area. There's a website called "birding pal" that lists guides that you can hire and also people who are just volunteers, that have offered their time to take people birding if they're visiting. I believe there's a small fee for that one.

L: What's your favorite birding experience?

S: Well I've had so many good ones. One of my favorites, we took a trip to the Grand Canyon and, this was some time ago, you know we were standing there on the South rim of the Grand Canyon and it's like— it doesn't really look real. It's too big and like too beautiful. It looks like it's some kind of fake painted set kind of. So we're standing there taking in this like gorgeous scenery and this like surreal place and then flying over the canyon, you know, dad and I see this bird right and of course we're like "Oh bird!" My sister was also there and she's not as big into birds so she's like "Oh, what's that" You know whatever and we're like "bird! Bird!" and we're looking and it's this California Condor flying over the Grand Canyon and a California Condor is a very highly endangered bird. There's only around 500 of them total. Both in the wild and in captivity. In the entire world. That's the population.

At the very nadir of their population there were 22, total in the world. They were all brought into captivity so that they could be protected and then captively bred and then their offspring were released and now there's— there is a wild breeding population but it's still very small and intensely managed and we weren't expecting to see it necessarily, we were just hoping because the Grand Canyon was one of those places that they had released birds into and so here was this Condor flying and they're the largest vultures in North America. They're like larger than a bald eagle. They're very big and here it's soaring over this Grand Canyon and it looks tiny [laughs] cause it's up against this huge landmark that's just enormous and here's one of the largest birds in North America that's soaring by. It was a really beautiful sight and we were so excited. My older sister was like "Oh it's a big vulture" [laughs] " but! But! It's a Condor!" Anyway it was very cool and then we went into the visitor center and we were like "Oh we saw a Condor" and you could totally tell that they must hear that all the time "Oh we saw a Condor" you know and it's just a vulture— a turkey vulture or something and we're like "no no, it really was" and we like described the white on their wings, we're like we saw the tag. Cause they're all tagged, they all have tags on their wings with a number and a color to distinguish a part and we're like "no we

saw the tag and this was the number” and they were like “Oh! Okay!” [laughs] They finally believed us.

L: You said you had a couple, tell me another one.

S: Went to Costa Rica. I’ve been once and I have to go back because I didn’t actually see one of the birds I really wanted to see called the resplendent quetzal, it’s spelled Q-U-E-T-Z-A-L, it’s the national bird of Costa Rica and they’re just beautiful iridescent green and red. They’re gorgeous. But we did see a lot of really cool birds in Costa Rica and one of the places we went was in a mountain pass, is a restaurant and they have a ton of hummingbird feeders out and so there were just scads of different hummingbirds. In Costa Rica there are many different species, many more than we see here in the US and they’re just all buzzing around, flying around. And the cool thing about hummingbirds is they don’t really care about people. Like they’re not super afraid of us so they’ll come very close, especially if you’re standing still, so we would go stand out kind of by the feeders and just stand. And you could get super close. They would come right up, they would fly all around you like you were just another tree kind of in their way to get to the feeders. And they were just in and out and flying all around and it was really cool. Oh! I have one more if you don’t mind. [laughs]

L: Yes please, please.

S: Fantastic. When we were in Costa Rica, MonteVerde rainforest preserve and there was this birds that was very unusual to see in Costa Rica called an oil bird and the reason they’re rare is they tend to stay kind of in one spot. They don’t move around like a lot of other birds. Outside of these very specific breeding areas where they are it’s difficult to see them. One of their known kind of famous breeding areas is in Trinidad. The Asa Wright Nature Centre and we went and stayed there for awhile and it was beautiful. You know, rainforest and just really gorgeous lots of cool birds. And they have a known breeding cave. So these birds breed in caves, like I said they tend to stay around their cave [laughs] so we hiked down into this valley and there’s this beautiful clear stream that’s running out of the cave. We walk up to it, and you can’t go all the way in so you don’t disturb the birds. But we went just outside of it and there was more like a crack—

L: [laughs]

S: Then a cave exactly, but you could see inside, just enough. You could see them and they had young ones in the nest and you could hear them and they sound like ghosts. They’re like really creepy sounding. Cause they’re in the dark. The guide was really super fantastic at taking pictures with a cellphone through binoculars.

[both laugh]

S: You could tell he had a whole lot of practice with this. So he took a picture with my phone and they have the red eyes, you know from the reflection of the light and so it was all very spooky.

L: [laughs]

S: But very very cool, cause these birds come out at night and they're called oil birds because they eat almost entirely fruit. Which is kind of unusual. There's plenty of birds that eat fruit, but they'll eat other things as well. And they eat a lot of avocado which is very oily and so they themselves are very oily because of that. They have like a high oil content and so that's why they're called oil birds. And their young take a very long time, relatively speaking, to reach adulthood because their diet is kind of limited in things like protein and so it takes them a while to get enough of that to become adults. Pretty interesting ecology, pretty interesting natural history. But it also makes them vulnerable, right, because they stick close to these caves, they take a long time to grow up, so any kind of disturbance to that area is going to disturb their breeding and it's not easy for them to recover their population because their young take so long to grow up. I don't know if they're officially listed as endangered or possibly threatened but there's not as many as there used to be definitely. Part of the reason why it was such a big deal to see that one in Costa Rica.

L: There are a lot of different birds that I feel like you see throughout the world. For some reason I thought it was just gulls, pigeons, and corvids, but I read that house sparrows are actually the most common bird in the world.

S: Well that's because they've been introduced well outside of their range in other places. They're native to Eurasia and like Africa but somebody brought them over to North America and was like "this will be great " There was some guy who thought it would be a good idea to introduce all of the birds in Shakespear into New York. So he went to Central Park and released a bunch of different birds and the house sparrow might've been a part of that effort. [laughs] like that's how the European starling came to North America.

L: Is that how we also got pigeons? Cause I heard pigeons aren't technically

S: Correct, they're native to Europe. They're called rock doves or rock pigeons and they're native habitat is cliffs and like cliff sides and stuff like that. So they were introduced as well. Cities, skyscrapers, they're enough like cliffs [laughs] that they can survive although a number of them, it's not just these wild pigeons that were introduced, there's also domesticated like homing pigeons have also either been released or escaped and they end up creating flocks in the cities. They're not really wild. They don't do so great actually in cities, their food is really limited and they get terrible parasites and diseases. Like with a feral dog or cat, that's not the best situation for them.

L: What are pigeons supposed to eat?

S: Bread is not the best thing [laughs] for birds. Like water fowl and stuff it's not super nutritious and if they fill up on it then they're not getting what they actually need. Birds like sparrows and cardinals and stuff, they have big thick beaks, they can crack open like sunflower seeds hulls and stuff like that and that's fine for them. Pigeons cannot do that. They're not going to be eating that food. They're gonna have stuff like millet. Doves and pigeons like millet which is a smaller seed that is much easier for them to crack open. Like grain is better too, like dried corn, sorghum, stuff like that and they feed on the ground. But you want to be careful. A lot of extra seed on the ground is gonna attract mice.

L: What are some bird misconceptions?

S: So in the spring, you find a baby bird on the ground the myth is "Don't touch it because then the parents will smell you on it and they won't feed the baby anymore" complete myth. We don't really know a ton about bird sense of smell, some birds do have a really good sense of smell but we don't know if it's true for all birds, or not, and even if it is it doesn't matter if you touch their babies. Put them back in the nest. If you can find it. Now you maybe can't find the nest. But if you know where it is, put the baby back in it. The parents don't care if they can even smell you on it or not. They will continue to feed their baby. If the baby has feathers, maybe just up off the ground, away from ground predators like cats or dogs or rats. It can just go up in a bush or like a low tree branch because a lot of babies leave the nest before they're completely ready to fly. It's called branching. They just come out of the nest but they're still in the vicinity and the parents are still around, they're still feeding the baby.

L: Would you like to go to the quiz?

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L: "Bring me" on BuzzFeed. We're going to do the "pack a suitcase and we'll tell you where to vacation in Europe" by Kristin Harris of BuzzFeed staff and this is apparently a part of the BuzzFeed quiz party. Oh, we're gonna pick your outfit. We've got jeans, a floral top, with like only one shoulder strap and some flat tan shoes. Blue fancy shoes, jeans and a blue collared shirt. A white collared shirt without sleeves, red shoes, a black skirt and a straw bag. Blue jean shorts and a white and blue striped shirt. A black leather jacket with a white shirt underneath it, forest

green colored pants and some black and white spotted flats. Black Vans (chucks), a plaid shirt and blue jeans.

S: Okay, honestly we're going with the plaid.

L: Okay.

S: That would be the most likely thing, like I'm going to be walking around. I couldn't walk around a city or look for birds in any of that stuff.

L: Pick a pair of shoes. This is going to be a problem for you because there's two different types of like sandal/flip flops.

S: Yeah that is a problem for me.

L: We've got sandals where it crosses over the top of your foot, they're yellow. A blue pair of chucks but it's like baby blue. Brown dress shoes. Red running shoes. Black high heels or pink and white flip flops, striped with green for the part that goes between your toes.

S: Well I've already got those chucks so—

L: [laughs]

S: I'm going to go with the yellow sandals.

L: Okay.

S: I like to take a pair of sandals with me everywhere. I think the only time I haven't is when I went to like Minnesota in January. [laughs] I didn't pack a pair of sandals then.

L: Pick a vacation essential. I think we already know the answer to this one. A book, a pair of sunglasses, headphones to go with your phone, a hat that says "eat, beach, sleep" a professional style camera, or city guides that say "city map".

S: Of course you take sunglasses with you, like why would you not take sunglasses with you on any trip ever?

L: So are you picking sunglasses?

S: [sighs] well I don't know.

[both laugh]

S: It almost feels like that's like deodorant, why would you not take that? I'm gonna go with the book. Because it's an essential for me, even though I would take these other things also.

L: Okay so you're going to go somewhere I'm pretty sure you've already been. You got Lugano Switzerland. If you want to be in awe of the alps but also have a Mediterranean lake vibe, Lugano is the perfect spot. The southern Swiss city is nestled next to Italy. So you can dine on your favorite pasta dishes. Have you been to Lugano? I know you've been to Switzerland.

S: No, I have been to Switzerland, but we did not go to Lugano. I'd be down with that [laughs] the alps are beautiful. I like Switzerland a lot.

L: So what is your dream trip?

S: Oh no!

[both laugh]

S: Well there's a lot of places I really wanna go, but I will say that one of those places that's near the top of my would love to go here list is the Galapagos Islands.

L: So what in the Galapagos Islands makes you want to go there the most?

S: It is this— beautiful— just such an interesting and really rich biological area. That has this fascinating history and there's so many different neat animals. Like I— aside of the really cool birds I'd love to see a marine iguana.

L: What is a marine iguana?

S: It's an ocean going iguana. They don't usually do that.

[both laugh]

S: But there in the Galapagos they do. Which is just really cool. Sort of think— okay— you know in the *Godzilla* remake in like, the one with Mathew Broderick in like— whenever that was, early 2000's or late 1990's? Whatever. The whole premise is that Godzilla is an iguana that has been irradiated and has grown into this giant thing. Think that but not a giant monster.

L: [laughs]

S: Just an actual regular sized iguana which are still big but not take over New York and nest in Madison Square garden big, just a regular one that swims in the ocean. It's very very cool. You know and it's just beautiful there. I would want to snorkel and just go to the different islands and see all the different things and it would be such a neat place to go.

L: That's very cool. Do you have anything you'd like to promote?

S: No.

[both laugh]

S: Just say be careful, be kind in your travel whether that's with the culture you're visiting or with the animals and the environment around you. Just be aware of your impact and do what you can to make sure it's a positive one.

L: Well thank you very much for being here Sarah.

S: Thank you so much for having me, it was really fun.

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Have you gone birding? What birds did you see? Let me know on twitter @wanderlustpod. Until Next time dear travelers. Thank you for listening.

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