

SPRING PROGRAM PREVIEW



Jared Del Rosso

# The Lonesome Whip-poor-will: The Untold Story of America's Most Iconic Bird

Jared Del Rosso  
Monday, April 29, 2024  
7 p.m. MDT

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For DFO's April program, cultural sociologist and DFO member **Jared Del Rosso** will explore the largely untold story of his favorite bird, the Whip-poor-will. An almost mystical icon of early American culture, the species figured prominently in the seasonal lives of a largely still agrarian-oriented land.

*The Lonesome Whip-poor-will: the Untold Story of America's Most Iconic Bird* explores its place in the natural and cultural landscapes of America. The story is not only about the species itself, but also about us and how we understand changing relationships among birds, the natural world, and our own lives.

For centuries, Americans in the eastern US eagerly awaited the return of Eastern Whip-poor-wills to their breeding grounds. The song of the first returning bird meant an end to frost and the true beginning of spring. Local newspapers reported on the arrival of the birds, farmers began to plant frost-sensitive plants, and children knew they could go barefoot outside again. That first song was also said to predict the length of people's lives, grant wishes, cure backaches, and even guarantee wealth.

As ordinary folk listened for the bird, American musicians, poets, and writers made the Whip-poor-will a legend. Country singers transformed the birds into icons of lonesomeness and rural life. Poets and nature writers wondered about the species' strange, menacing name. Horror writers spun Whip-poor-wills into the stuff of nightmares.

But with time, says Del Rosso, something has changed. Since the 1970s, Eastern Whip-poor-will numbers have fallen by more than two-thirds. Fewer Americans encounter them regularly. Birders must work harder to add the species to their yearly checklists. Now the singers wax nostalgic, and naturalists pen eulogies. The birds went from unfamiliar to obscure. Today, they're on the brink of forgotten.

Del Rosso, who teaches at the University of Denver, is writing a book on Whip-poor-wills for New York University Press's "Animals in Context" series. He is also an avid birder and has led trips with Denver Field Ornithologists and the High Line Canal Conservancy. He's especially interested in nightjars (the greater family that includes Whip-poor-wills) and is counting the days until this year's return of nighthawks and poorwills to Colorado. His writing about birds and birding has appeared in this newsletter and on the Center for Humans & Nature's blog. For more on his upcoming book, visit his webpage at [lonesomewhippoorwill.com](http://lonesomewhippoorwill.com).



Top:  
**Eastern Whip-poor-will**  
Tom Murray via Flickr

Bottom:  
**Poorwills painting by Alexander Wilson**  
American Ornithology