Stories to Save Us

Funding proposal

Reach. Teach. Engage.

BirdStory

January 2026

“BirdStory’s powerful vignettes are canaries in the coal mine, signaling tipping points ahead to help us avoid systemic risk. This is incredibly important work.”

- Frank van Gansbeke
Founder of Beyond Bretton Woods

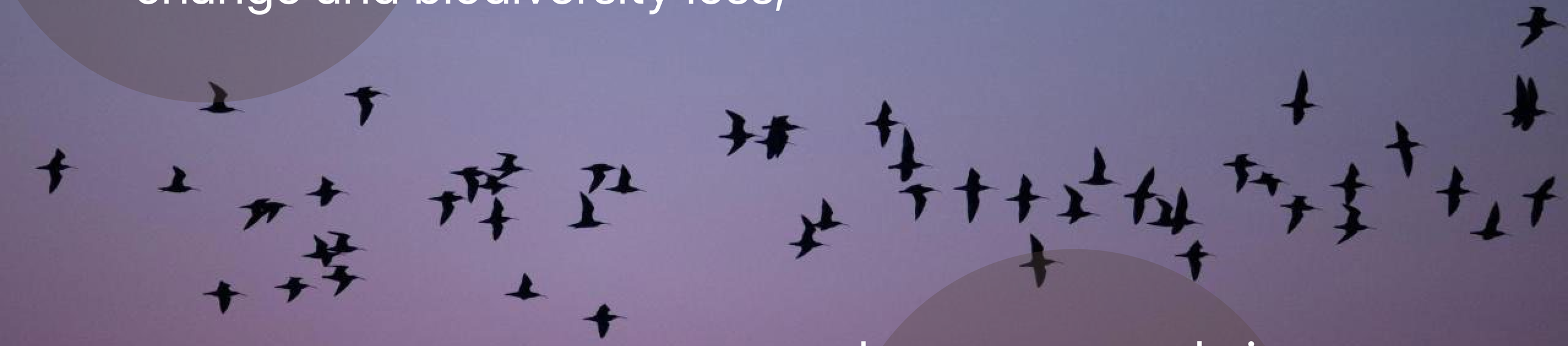
The Problem

Public failure to understand the causes and consequences of **climate change** and **biodiversity loss** is, in large part, a failure of investment in education and a result of our increasing disconnection from even our familiar, local landscapes.

We believe it's fixable

with stories...

...that **reach** a truly diverse public, **teach** about the causes and consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss,



and **engage** people in an emotional connection with our local landscapes and birds.

About BirdStory

BirdStory is a non-profit that creates and supports independent, innovative and impactful creative media to:

1. Raise awareness of the wonder and urgent plight of birds
2. Inspire action to conserve birds
3. Help us understand how their future is inextricably connected with ours at this time of urgent environmental crises.

BirdStory is founded and propelled by twice Emmy-nominated wildlife cinematographer **Matt Aeberhard** and award-winning novelist and healthcare activist **Melanie Finn**. It is supported by an extraordinary Advisory Board including J. Drew Lanham, Dana Beach, Chris Elphick, Sy Montgomery, Chris Rimmer, Carolyn Finney, Paul Webster, Rebecca Roth and Bryan Watts, and our BirdEd initiative is guided by an experienced team of educators.

BirdStory works in close collaboration with the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology**. Together, we have developed stories for priority species, and they continue to fund our shared goals to a significant degree.

“An emerging body of research on climate change education shows that educators and young people alike are hungry for opportunities to understand climate change in ways that promote flourishing. Additionally, scholarship in environmental education continues to show high levels of interest in birding and ornithology among younger generations. This project, through its **BirdEd** initiative, thus has great educational potential for it engages the intersection of these two areas: accomplishing climate change education via relationships with birds and our shared ecosystems.”

- Joe Henderson
Associate Professor of Social Sciences at University of Vermont
and a member of the BirdEd working group

I film in a lot of rural areas and so I have discussions in truck stops and diners. Everyone I've met loves wildlife and values America's wild places. But we have a problem in how the wildlife film industry commissions, produces and distributes its work - who makes it, what is says and whom it's for. BirdStory is a disruptor, we're outsiders, and we can make real inroads into communities that have either been ignored or turned-off by traditional programs. The "choir" can't be just one side of the aisle."

- Matt Aeberhard
BirdStory founder, Director and Cinematographer.

BirdStory's Strategy: reach, teach, engage

Climate change and biodiversity loss are not just environmental catastrophes but **threat multipliers**. Strategically educating a broad public about these issues is a social imperative, particularly at this time of division and isolation. **Information is not instruction**. Information supports good decision-making. To be an effective informer, **BirdStory values authenticity, creativity, science and collaboration**.

As a non-profit with 100% control of our IP, we craft our media content from concept to delivery as an "evergreen" product to **reach, teach and engage** across political, economic and educational divides. We have shaped our narrative approach through **American birds** that connect viewers to familiar, local **American landscapes**. We have created our ambitious vision for "vascular" **grassroots distribution** to feed into existing networks, including **our education systems at the high school and undergraduate levels**. We're forging alliances with **community and civic groups** like Rotary, and with **hunting and fishing** organizations, as well as engaging a **veritable army of passionate birders**.

BirdStory is an information multiplier. With the shuttering of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the **narrowing of options and algorithms** in the commercial wildlife film industry, there's a **massive void to be filled** not only to perpetuate the flow of reliable information, but to send a message - one the birds themselves might make - of persistence and resilience, and of **valiant, connective presence in every single community**.

BirdStory's Current Media Output:

BirdStory
Stories to Save Us

THE SERIES: **Stories to Save Us** inverts the traditional making-of format, front-loading research and filmmaking process. Through eight 40-minute episodes, we introduce audiences to fresh perspectives on eight birds in familiar landscapes and discretely, effectively educate about climate change and ecology.

BirdStory
Birds of America

THE FILM: **Birds of America** re-shapes the sequences gathered and shared in the series into a visually stunning, artistically provocative feature film that inspires but also invents a new way of depicting wildlife at this time of Anthropogenic impact, of practical optimism and restoration.

BirdStory
BirdShorts

BirdShorts: 3-5 minute creative shorts exploring the diminishment and restoration of birds and their habitats. **The Black Rail's Tale** is a collaboration by J. Drew Lanham and animator Lynn Tomlinson, funded by Cornell and the Schumann Foundation.

Stories to Save Us: the Series

Working with the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology** and key academics, educators and scientists these eight crafted narratives spur the individual attitude shifts that underpin **deep learning**, drive policy change and ignite locally led **solutions to climate change impacts** and biodiversity loss.

Through our **BirdEd** initiative, **we bring the series into high schools and undergraduate classrooms** where it engages students in ecology and hands-on local learning. Through **BirdGuides**, we provide conservation and community organizations with opportunity for **post-screening conversations, reflections and connection** to local landscapes and birds.

Our eight selected birds face **Anthropogenic challenges that mirror our own human struggle** and we unpack their stories through the filmmaking process itself.

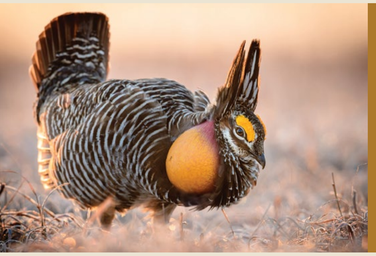
Going **behind the scenes with researchers**, we illuminate intriguing historical and current human impacts in landscapes, and **explore the cultural and economic values** we've imposed on the natural world.

While **shadowing the crew in the field** as we film the birds, we arrive at not only an appreciation of unheralded bird species, but an understanding of the place we call America, those familiar places we so often misinterpret and overlook: our **backyards, our suburbs, prairies, cities and wilderness**.

Eight Birds, Eight Stories FOR RELEASE 2025-2027

Please click the birds below to link to species summaries.

Saltmarsh Sparrow: salt marshes, human values and sea level rise



Greater Prairie Chicken: cowboys, heterogeneity, climate change

Whimbrel: Atlantic Flyway and international protections, connections, and climate change

Northern Gannet: Northern coasts, fish stocks and warming waters

Whip-poor-will: woods, pesticides, “lawnification,” loss of sound

Cahow: oceans and the fragile persistence of plenty, mystery, and climate changee

Peregrine Falcon: cities and suburbs, migrant species, the myth of adaptation

Ivory Gull: The Arctic, loss of ice and extinction due to climate change

BirdEd

With its filmmaking format, **Stories to Save Us** is uniquely positioned to engage students who might otherwise tune out, particularly to crucial issues like climate change while adhering to Next Generation Science Standards. Shaped and shepherded by a working group of expert educators, **BirdEd** poses complicated questions about the value of human development and the value of nature. It challenges students with artistic and ecological concepts; it makes the big scary issues tangible, personal and relatable. **BirdEd** ecourages links between science teachers and the humanities, as well as local resources, including conservation organizations for field trips, in-class discussion and haptic learning.

The BirdEd Working Group: **Alan Giese**, **Bill Church**, **Anthony Wilson**, **Joe Henderson** and **Christine Girtain**

LINK TO The Saltmarsh Sparrow: Sample Lesson Plan

BirdGuides

BirdGuides are strategically designed to support organizations and groups hosting specific **Stories to Save Us** screenings with post-viewing discussions.

BirdGuides prioritize the viewer's personal and internal experience of a landscape or bird, and encourage reflection rather than the regurgitation of facts or imposition of specific direction to action.

BirdGuides are flexible, offering an array of prompts and questions for hosts to select, depending on identified needs. The format also provides hosts with qualitative and quantitative feedback and assessment data to support further engagement if planned.

BirdGuides offer localized analogs for featured birds. For instance, in Vermont, groups can discuss the impacts of brush-hogging and changing rainfall patterns on bobolinks and how "no-mow May" might be better implemented as "cut after the first frost."

Plan of Action

We are building on **two foundational years** and start-up funding of $120K during which we've **produced the proof-of-concept** Stories to Save Us episode on the Saltmarsh Sparrow, researched **the most efficient means of distribution**, and then begun building **our outreach strategy**. At every stage, we've considered how and who to reach, teach and engage. Our Plan of Action **maintains our momentum**, scales up and out, and amplifies our creative and educational intention.

- Produce **seven more episodes** of the series **Stories to Save Us** timed for sequential release, 2026-2028;
- Produce a **slate** of highly-shareable creative **BirdShorts**, 2025-2028.
- Contemporaneously film seven more sequences for the feature film, **Birds of America**, for 2028 release; in 2027, begin marketing campaign for this film.
- Develop Next Generation Science Standards modules **BirdEd**, 2025-2030.
- Develop **BirdGuides**, 2025-2030
- Hire an **Impact Producer** to build out the **extensive distribution network** of nonprofits, community and rec groups and education outlets.
- Consider the **long-term vision for BirdStory**: from 2028, revising, as needed, **Stories to Save Us**, **BirdEd** and **BirdGuide** materials every year through 2030; and begin to look at other bird stories to continue generating material through 2030.

"At a recent screening for the Saltmarsh Sparrow we had 35 high school students participating in Audubon CT's Wildlife Guard program. The students were very engaged with the film! Many of their responses centered around the idea that we should focus more on what we can do for nature, rather than what nature can do for us. They were especially moved by the final scene, which seemed to leave a strong emotional impact. One of the nature center staff mentioned that the film's narrative approach made it more impactful than if it had focused solely on the science of salt marshes and the saltmarsh sparrow."

– Jennifer Cristiano, Community Engagement Coordinator, Connecticut Audubon

Why Birds?

Because their stories can save us. **Birds tell us everything we need to know** about what is happening in a landscape. **They are sensors of environmental change**, showing us the problems in our own localities - and also signifying when restoration and mitigation are effective. **They have an unmatched capacity to enthrall**: birding is the fastest growing hobby in the US, with younger people driving the trend. Birds ground us in our communities - the species we see out of our windows; and with their migrations, **birds also weave us together as a nation and a world**. Their stories can save us.

Why Stories?

"**Stories are how we make sense of the world**," says Anthony Wilson, Professor of English Writing Studies at LaGrange College and author of Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture. "For thousands of years we had story and so when we're trying to understand something- **how does this affect me?** - we turn to story. Science delivers data but this doesn't always make sense to the average person, it doesn't help me make sense of my feelings or shape the choices I need to make. **Science absolutely needs story**."

Our first episode, The Saltmarsh Sparrow was released in July, 2025.

Watch it HERE

"The Saltmarsh Sparrow is something so beautifully filmed and told with such devastating emotional depth that you hardly notice you're getting a science lesson. You don't just walk away and forget it."

– A juror at the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival

BirdStory is already hard at work:

Coreen Weilminster, Education Coordinator, **Maryland Department of Natural Resources** says: "A chef's kiss to this project. I love how it weaves history, art, landscape, **climate science**, filmmaking and birds into one powerful story. I love **sharing this with educators**."

The Massachusetts-based **Trustees of the Reservation** have committed to using the Saltmarsh Sparrow episode as **a crucial outreach tool** - a way to engage donors, members, local groups and community organizations.

At **The Nature Conservancy in Kansas**, an active partner in developing the story for the Greater Prairie Chicken episode, Great Plains Grasslands Strategy Director Brian Obermeyer says: "This will be an **exceptional tool** to reach the ranching community, educate about **carbon sequestration**, and combat misinformation about supposed regenerative grazing."

Outcomes: 2026

By year's end - and with concerted effort - we expect to see widespread use of the **Saltmarsh Sparrow** episode throughout the eastern seaboard as a tool for organizations and other collaborating partners doing concerted community outreach such as the **Atlantic Coast Joint Venture** and by **community groups** like Rotary, holding screenings with discussions framed by **BirdGuides**.

Concurrently, we will be building out **BirdEd**, through a network of organizations like the **North American Association for Environmental Education** and a myriad of state-level scholastic organizations to reach students at the high school, 2yr and 4yr undergrad level. We are particularly interested in **balancing the tech-ed push** in science education and encouraging **local connection** to landscapes with field trips.

Uptake should **cross social, economic and political lines** - not be siloed in places and by organizations already well-served by information and resources. Both **BirdGuides** and **BirdEd** provide us with **feedback** clearly showing geographic usage, as well as reception and impact.

This **impact work dovetails** into the production and release in 2026 of the Whimbrel, Northern Gannet and Greater Prairie Chicken episodes; we will be **building anticipation** for these lessons and screenings, and **generating new networks**, with a focus in the midwest. This expansion, in turn, **lays the groundwork** for the four remaining birds, coming on-line in 2027.

Outcomes: 2027 and beyond

We expect the first year of distribution, 2026, to be the most intense, as we introduce multiple outlets to the series, and that **positive feedback drives further distribution** and interest in other birds. With increased awareness and public profile, distribution should get easier in 2027 even as it broadens, both nationally and within the **capillaries of communities** and individual schools.

We intend to **link** certain episodes to conservation initiatives. **Stories to Save Us** broadens the scope of outreach, beyond, say, the tried-and-true catchment of Audubon. Our goal is not necessarily to usher viewers into any organizational fold but to **generate individual and communal attitude shifts** that result in policy change at all levels - including local select boards and county planning boards. This was where **Rachel Carson** had impact too.

With particular birds, we **complement the Cornell Lab's tightly focused media** which is created for policy-makers; by reaching the broad public, we augment their impact, **creating greater awareness of issues** and therefore support for policy changes.

By the end of 2027, we will begin marketing the film, **Birds of America**, which weaves together the sequences filmed in **Stories to Save Us**. This effort both exploits the network in place and provides **fresh enthusiasm for an inspirational, provocative film** about American birds in American landscapes, **to be released in the summer of 2028**.

Good morning Melanie,

My name is Andrea García, and I am the environmental literacy specialist for Maryland Coastal Bays Program, located on Maryland's eastern shore. I attended the Mid-Atlantic Climate Change Education conference this past summer, where we saw a screening of the Salt Marsh Sparrow documentary, as part of the Stories To Save Us series.

My organization recently came into a grant focused on the importance of saltmarsh ecosystems, and we are hosting school-based education programs as well as community programs around this topic. I thought your documentary would be an excellent segue into the discussion of saltmarsh ecosystems and their threats.

When you get a chance, can you please let me know if hosting a screening of the Saltmarsh Sparrow documentary is possible? We are interested in hosting a follow-up panel discussion as well, if you are interested and able to attend.

I'm happy to discuss more details over the phone or Zoom if that is easier.

Thank you for your consideration,
Andrea

Andrea García
Environmental Literacy Specialist
Maryland Coastal Bays Program

Stories to Save Us are beautiful,
profound,
truthful,
and educational.

They **reach**, **teach** and **engage**.

REACH:

- **Science teachers** and their **students** aged 14-22, nationwide through organizations like the **North American Association for Environmental Education** and a myriad of state-level scholastic organizations through **BirdEd**.
- **Key conservation organizations and collaborations** like the **Atlantic Coast Joint Venture** mounting outreach campaigns to reach tens of thousands on the eastern seaboard. **BirdStories** to continue generating material through 2030.
- Through our main partner, the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology** and their alliances, key policy makers and their constituents.
- Through community clubs like **Rotary and Lions**, angling clubs, ranching groups, gardeners, naturalists and hunters, to reach tens of thousands who make or affect the **land use decisions** in our gardens, parks and public lands.
- Thousands of **birding clubs**, millions of **birders** - who become envoys in their own communities for pro-bird land use.
- Through **foundations and think tanks** supporting climate change, natural capital and Nature Positive education and action.

TEACH:

- **Stories to Save Us:** Content designed to educate about ecology, climate change, history, culture and filmmaking — and, of course, the birds that weave together communities and nations.

- **BirdShorts:** Presenting fresh perspectives and illuminating unheralded 3-5 minute stories in unexpected mediums and easily shared on social media and in the classroom.

- **BirdEd:** Following the model of 3-D learning central to the Next Generation Science Standards, these curricula use **Stories to Save Us** as the centerpiece around which to present core conservation and climate change content.

- **BirdStory's website and social media:** Providing resource links to academic research; "How I got that shot" instruction videos by Matt; "sciency" shorts crafted from B-roll; and podcasts created from interview outtakes.

ENGAGE:

- **Matt Aeberhard**, the key wildlife filmmaker, is an effective, politically neutral messenger: David Attenborough meets Bear Grylls.
- The **filmmaking process** pulls in people who aren't interested in birds, resist climate change messaging and don't trust science.
- Our **BirdStory** website and localized meet-the-filmmaker events foster **personal connection** to the film crew.
- Our content sparks **emotional response** to **climate change**, **biodiversity loss** and the **communal power of restoration**.
- Our **stories** provide accurate information **without obvious bias** or agenda.
- **BirdGuides** are designed for post-screening discussions to **promote reflection** and **community connection**. Screenings bring people together and to their landscapes.

Emulating Rachel Carson and Silent Spring

BirdStory's grassroots distribution for the **Stories to Save Us** series, **BirdEd** and **BirdGuides** aim to ignite conversations and curiosity in new and diverse audiences just as Carson did.

She thrilled at Silent Spring's distribution through the Book of the Month Club in 1962 "...to carry it to farms and hamlets all over that country that doesn't know what a bookstore looks like."

The book was shared at kitchen tables and diner counters, country fairs and hardware stores in the heartland. Carson explained the science of DDT's impact in a way everyone could understand.

She combined this science with deeply personal observations that echoed what people were already seeing and experiencing all around them but lacked the ability to interpret. She told a story people connected to and they moved forward, communally, to demand action and implement solutions.

Why we need your support

The **deep, societal shifts** we're aiming for are hard to quantify. In some cases, we can anticipate direct correlations, as with our policy specific work with Cornell, as well as the public engagement feedback we get from screenings, teachers and students.

We recognize that the mechanisms for proving "success" are often traps that prevent organizations from trying **novel approaches** - just as algorithms and profit trap commercial impact film endeavors.

As Sabine Meyer, Director of Photography at the National Audubon Society observes, "Our social media department gets credit for clicks and likes - but **it's the image people are responding to.** And we have no way of knowing how a viewer perceives that image or how they might change because it. And yet that's the important part."

BirdStory's real impact will be in **the ways people understand climate change** and how, as the voters of today and tomorrow they **engage with their local communities** and environments. This will greatly benefit the birds - and us.

Fundraising goals

Secure $700,000 to $1 million in early 2026 to **complete field- and post-production of three more Stories to Save Us**: Whimbrel, Prairie Chicken and Gannet; to hire an Impact Producer; to hire consultants to create **BirdGuides** and **BirdEd**. This complements substantial, on-going **support given by the Cornell Lab** to cover field production costs of approximately $500k.

Secure $1.5 million by 2027 by leveraging our 2026 media and proof-of-impact to **complete production for the remaining four birds:** Whip-poor-will, Cahow, Peregrine and Ivory Gull; and to ensure scalability of **BirdEd** and **BirdGuides**.

Secure post production funds to complete the feature film, **Birds of America**, for release in 2028.

Beyond 2028: Develop a long-term model for **sustaining bird-centric storytelling,** including international versions of **Stories to Save Us**. Ensure continued audiene and partner engagement and impact reporting. Establish a center for enduring, conservation-driven filmmaking, storytelling and education.

Matt Aeberhard
Director and Cinematographer

Who We Are:

BirdStory co-founder **Matt Aeberhard** is one of the world's leading wildlife filmmakers — an award-winning director and twice-Emmy nominated cinematographer with more than three decades of experience in the world's wildest places, beginning on the Serengeti as a protégé of Hugo Van Lawick, to work for the BBC's Our Planet and Perfect Planet series, Dancing with the Birds for Netflix, and The Crimson Wing for Disney. His work behind the lens renders the natural world with unforgettable artistry and nuance. Sir David Attenborough described some of Matt's work as "awe-inspiring, one of the most memorable sequences I've seen."

BirdStory co-founder **Melanie Finn** is the award-winning author of four novels, including The Gloaming, A New York Times Notable Book of the Year, and The Hare, shortlisted for the New England Book Award and winner of the Vermont Book Award. She worked with Matt creating and producing The Crimson Wing for Disney in remote Lake Natron, Tanzania, where she co-founded Natron Healthcare to bring sustainable care and health education to two marginalized Masai communities. As the writer and producer of Stories to Save Us, she is particularly interested in unpacking how we invent landscapes as mythological spaces and how this impacts the ways we exploit and restore them.

BirdStory partner **Andy Johnson** is a seasoned field ornithologist, award-winning documentary filmmaker, and conservation policy strategist, currently working for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Center for Conservation Media. His work has spanned academic research, uncovering the migratory pathways and stopover ecology of arctic-breeding shorebirds, and strategic conservation storytelling from India and China, through the New World tropics and coastal United States, to remote stretches of the Bering Sea and Canadian subarctic.

Harri Bailey is a Producer/Director with over a decade of experience working in science and natural history documentaries for the BBC, National Geographic, PBS and Netflix. With an emphasis on field production, she has led crews across frozen lakes in the Arctic and through peat swamps in Borneo. She first experienced the joy of birding in New York's Central Park four years ago and has since turned her attention to bird stories through productions such as the multi award-winning 3D IMAX film Wings Over Water and field work with Matt for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. She co-founded the Feminist Bird Club's Jersey City chapter in 2021 with a mission to promote diversity, inclusion and access to the natural world and connect people to their neighborhood's wild spaces.

From left: Writer and Producer Melanie Finn; Producer Andy Johnson; Field Producer Harri Bailey

“The birds are telling us a story; they’re telling us there’s an ecological catastrophe coming towards us. Birds can inspire us to think differently about how we’re looking after the planet. That’s why I’m so excited about BirdStory.”

- Ian Owens
Executive Director, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

NABT
National Association of Biology Teachers

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

NERRA
National Estuarine Research Reserve ASSOCIATION

Tiny Seed
You Plant the Seed We Help it Grow

BirdStory

For more information please visit: **www.birdstory.org** or contact **melanie@birdstory.org**