



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 704, Interview with Chris Alleiri

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Chris.

Chris Alleiri: Thank you.

Mariann: This is a really kind of unusual interview because it's hard for us to get wildlife people because, frequently, they don't get the big picture. But I saw what you were doing, and I saw who you are. It just seems really interesting. So I'm really excited to be talking about your trajectory and about the New York City Piping Plovers.

I used to live in New York City and lived there most of my life, so they are an issue that is dear to my heart. But even though you're focused on this one specific species, and we're gonna talk a lot about the Piping Plovers, I know you started somewhat unusually with a very broad view of animals.

So I don't always start with people's vegan story, but can we start with yours? How did it start with animals, and then you went vegan, and how'd that all start?

Chris: Well, thank you so much for having me. I have this feeling right now that I want to say 17 things at once because I'm just so excited! *both laugh* I'm so excited to talk to you!

How you opened this, too. Seeing the big picture of animals. And a deep care and love, and respect of all species. That is different for the wildlife movement and for people working within wildlife and certainly for many scientists and biologists, who I call colleagues and friends.

So I think they respect my origins and my orientation, but I think also there is something at the core of wildlife biology and science, which is to remove yourself, don't name wildlife, don't get too caught up in the outcomes.

Don't get sad when a baby Piping Plover chick gets predated. But that's not me. I can't rewire myself at this point. I'm pushing 50 early next year, and for me, I think at this point, I'm getting closer to my core self of who I was as a young kid. And so I think my vegan origin story goes way back.

I was a kid in a suburb in New Jersey, and we had a swamp behind our house. I called it Beaver Swamp. I put in different pads and stone structures and all sorts of things. I am Italian, so I had to build some structures. *both chuckle* So for me, I loved, absolutely loved being outdoors and being in the mud and the dirt, and that was like my happy place.

Fast forward a few years, I started my environmental club in high school. My first memories were wanting to be a veterinarian, and so all of these things kind of lined up, but yet life happens, and I got caught up too much or worked in too many jobs with too many bosses that curiously...It was always an issue with them, but I think after like 17 bosses, my parents were like, "Maybe it's not them..." *Mariann laughs*

I think, for me, even over the last few years, and of course, there's a pandemic tie-in, right? But I really rediscovered this passion for animals relatively recently. I think it was 2016, and obviously pre-pandemic, but then the pandemic was a key moment for the NYC Plover Project.

But it goes down to one exact thing, I adopted a rescue rabbit that had been dumped in a park in New York City. His name was Bean. He was in our life from 2016 to 2020. My soulmate in life came in the form of this vegan little perfect pet.

He was a lop-eared bunny. He was a big personality, and I spent a lot of time with him. I have two tattoos- I got one tattoo of him, and it wasn't enough, so I got a second tattoo. *Mariann chuckles* I'm already thinking, "Do I need a third tattoo? Cause you have to do things in threes." *Mariann laughs*

So for me, I credit everything to Bean. I got involved through my friend Megan, who was on the board of Farm Sanctuary, got involved as a board member of Farm Sanctuary, and then I became the Board Chair.

I shortly thereafter joined the board of Wild Bird Fund, and then, most importantly, I'd been vegetarian for a long time in high school into college, and then kind of just lulled back into eating animals.

Then it was 2016 with Bean, and all these other things were happening. And I was on a tour, it was right before I joined the Board of Farm Sanctuary, actually. I was on the tour of the Acton Sanctuary in the Los Angeles area, and an intern, a young employee who was doing tours, just gave the dairy pitch, and I heard it. And after hearing the dairy pitch a few times so persuasively, I just didn't hear it, right? And I heard it there. And that was, like, I think, March of 2016.

So that's how long I've been vegan. So once you hear it, once you accept it, and bring it into your heart...For me, everything I do now is coming from this place of do no harm.

Mariann: Yeah.

Chris: Or try to do no harm across all species. And that's hard sometimes in wildlife.

Mariann: Yeah. And we'll get into those issues cuz it is hard in wildlife both because of other people who are involved and because of the issues themselves.

I love that story, though. I love a story where the vegan conversion story is based on one particular animal. Mine was Calhoun. My dog. Frequently (it's) a dog, but I like that yours is a bunny.

You also didn't just go vegan. I mean, really, becoming an activist was really part of your vegan story. It all came together for you, I guess, because of your connection to Farm Sanctuary too.

And I really love that dairy story too. I frequently tell people, or tell myself, "Sometimes people have to hear it a bunch of times. Don't worry about repeating it. It's hard news for people, and somehow it doesn't sink in. Then all of a sudden, for one reason or another, on one particular day, it gets in."

Chris: Yeah.

Mariann: Never hesitate to keep saying it. All right, so that gives us a little of the overall background, but how did you go from farm animals to endangered species? Or a particular endangered species? Which is not most people's trajectory.

Chris: No, it's not. And I'll tell you, like, I have a lot of friends across the animal rights world, and I have a deep amount of respect for a lot of groups.

I think I am more constitutionally fit to be a founder and to be a doer and an activist and working in the trenches. And why I love the work we're doing with NYC Plover Project is that we have a singular mission. We have one terrain, which is the city of New York. Specifically, it's Queens, specifically, it's the Rockaway Peninsula.

And huge props to all of the friends and folks that I've met across that movement. Like it's overwhelming, and you oftentimes don't see the movement or the change, like the kind of, "I'm having an impact," right?

Mariann: Yeah.

Chris: And you don't see better impact than the ambassadors at places like Farm Sanctuary and Woodstock and Catskill and all that...Lovin' Arms and so many wonderful places that I've been over the years.

But I think for me, I don't know that I loved being a board member of an organization. I wouldn't take back any of those experiences because they all were formative.

But I think for me, at the end of the day, this came from my parents. My mom's still with us. My dad is no longer with us. My dad plays a big part in my story because he was really into birds, and he really was into shorebirds.

And we grew up at the beach in southern New Jersey, had a house there for many decades, and shorebirds was my dad's thing. Specifically, he loved Piping Plovers.

Other times of the year, he would count osprey nests and things like that. And we all thought he was completely nuts. And birders, for me, have always been like wackos with binoculars in the bushes. You're like, "What are they looking at?" And here I am, not only that wacko but even more so because (of) starting this group. But I guess my heart was open to the possibility of doing this work.

Listen, going vegan as an Italian, my name ends in a vowel... like the pull of mozzarella is really strong. But for me, it wasn't about a diet. It's not about going plant-based.

My parents were always like, you do. If you see something you want changed, you have to do it and put it into place because if not, you're just complaining. And right before the pandemic, I live in Brooklyn, and in the Brooklyn Bridge

Park, there was a vagrant bird, which is a bird that's kind of off-path for migration.

And it was a female Painted Bunting, and she was like bright yellow. She looked like a little canary. I was involved with Wild Bird Fund already, and I had heard through friends that this bird was there, and I couldn't believe it. And it made me just think, "Oh my gosh! Like, what? How did this bird get here? Will she be able to get back on her path?" And all of these things.

I had more questions than answers, and I think a few weeks later, the whole world changed, and I had binoculars, but I kind of barely picked them up. But one day, I went on a Citi Bike to Prospect Park, and I discovered warblers, and I discovered all these birds that were passing through in March and April of 2020. And they saved my life.

My friend Kara said, "You're like the one person I know who thrived during the pandemic because of birds." And I think, I wouldn't quite say thrived, but it did definitely get me through. And I was out at the beach a month later, April, and I was out at Fort Childen, and it was the first time in my life I had seen a Piping Plover up close.

And then I saw dogs off-leash. I saw people up on the dunes. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that I had seen this. You know, I'd heard about this endangered species on the beach where I grew up. I first saw a Piping Plover when I was something like eight or nine years old that had, you know, in hindsight, just been listed under the Endangered Species Act.

But it was somebody in a federal uniform with the National Wildlife Refuge System that took the time to speak to me as a person, and I was always a little scientific young kid that like had a lot of questions. But he took the time to show me this bird, and I saw it, and it was like teeny tiny at the end of this, what I thought was a telescope, but it was a scope that birders use, and I couldn't believe it.

But then, all these years later, to see this bird...Birders like to talk about like their spark bird. And I hadn't realized that I had this spark bird, and it was the Piping Plover. So for me, like, to see this bird up close. The Piping Plover, sort of seemingly left to fend for itself on the beach, really stuck with me.

And then the first year, 2020 to 2021, I got some names at the National Park Service and New York City Parks. And I was taking photographs, and I was just like sending all these emails and like FOIA requests and all these things.

And it was just like it was getting nowhere, and I could see I was being extremely annoying. And I think that one of the people that I had reached out to at the National Park Service, I think she realized I wasn't going anywhere. And it was like a year to the day almost...It was March of 2021, and I was out at the beach again, and I saw the same thing.

And so I was like, "What are you gonna do about it? There is no 'they should.' We shouldn't 'should' all over the place," right? "But there is no 'they' here that 'they' has to be you."

And so, I went home, and then the next morning, I just was like, "Well, what am I gonna call this thing?" And I went on Instagram, and I was like, "Okay, NYC Plover Project." Project seems better because it's not permanent or it's not like the rest of my life. But meanwhile, it's so clearly taken over every element of my life in a good way.

Mariann: Yeah, that reminds me of starting Our Hen House. Jasmin and I were like, "What should we call it? I don't know. Something about chickens? Our Hen House? I don't know." And then here we are 12 years later. *both laugh*

All right, so tell us a little bit about the Piping Plover. Who are they? Where do they travel? How do they live? And, of course, their connection to New York City and...well, not just...New York City and New Jersey and that area around there.

And why their situation is so dire and what they're up against.

Chris: That's a great question, and I get asked that a lot, and I think that it's a tough question to answer sometimes because people come to the table oftentimes, if they live in beach communities or they've spent time in areas where Piping Plovers are, (with) an opinion of who they are. And, "Oh, there's a lot of them."

They think that they're another bird, which is the Sanderling, so they see a group of birds running back and forth with the waves, and they think, "Oh, what are you talking about 'they're endangered species,' I just saw 150 of them."

Piping Plovers, one of the many reasons I love them, they're kind of loners. They don't spend a lot of time even with their mates. They are a precarious tiny little bird. They're about seven inches in length. They weigh about the same as two double-A batteries. They're a migratory shorebird species. They're listed

and federally protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. So that's 50 years this year.

Just a quick sidebar, the Endangered Species Act was signed into law by a left-wing lunatic President. Richard Nixon.

Mariann: *laughs* Richard Nixon, right.

Chris: You know, and this came up...

Mariann: Things have changed. Things have changed.

Chris: Right? And this came about at the same time as our seminal, most important environmental laws. And my pitch to everyone listening is, "Speak up with your elected officials to tell them that you support the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act." The Endangered Species Act is so important.

Mariann: The Endangered Species Act was a monumental advance like worldwide. We were ahead of the game...

Chris: Really?

Mariann: and we really need to get there again.

But anyway...

Chris: We really do, and the support for endangered species and the Endangered Species Act is something like nine out of 10. There's so many different studies. There hasn't been a recent study, so that might be interesting for a researcher to look at, but many studies have shown something like 90% of Americans are in support of Endangered Species Act protections.

But going back to the fact, except that there are...

Mariann: But we should also mention there are very, very powerful forces constantly trying to undermine it.

Chris: Yes. And this is where, back to things like big industry and food industry, and timber industry and some of our Democratic senators that...of course, Manchin, people know he is kind of a wild card, but like Amy

Klobuchar, Tammy Baldwin... They are kind of coming for protections of the northern long-eared bat.

There's been some good stories about some Endangered Species Act progress, but there's a lot of folks at the margins that are kind of chipping away at this seminally important law, and this is the 50th year.

So back to the Piping Plover. There's one endangered species that nests in New York City, and that is the Piping Plover.

Mariann: Where do they go when they're not in New York City? They're migratory?

Chris: They go to The Bahamas, Cuba, Turks and Caicos...

Mariann: Birds are just so amazing. They are just so amazing!

Chris: I know! They really are! Now, some go to Florida and Texas, which are wonderful birding spots, but I think every time I say that they're like, "Oh, well, why would they do that?"

And I'm like, "Well, birds don't vote. They don't vote." *Mariann laughs*

There was actually an elected official in New York City who, to our appeals to get them to support Piping Plovers... And believe it or not, there is work against them in New York... An elected official or a staff member for a member of Congress said, "Well, birds don't vote."

And that was really amazing and really honest of him to admit that. But that is something that, like for me, has stuck with me. And yeah, birds don't vote, but people do. And animals don't vote, farmed animals don't vote, but people do.

And I think it was something a long time ago, and I don't remember who it was, but it was, when we say, "Animals are voiceless," and I was corrected on that and I'm so grateful to the person who did that...

Mariann: I know that has become something that people said and still say in a completely valid and... you know, they're trying to say something authentic, but when you think about it, it's probably not the best way to express it.

Chris: Yeah. Yeah. Well, Piping Plovers have a most beautiful call and you know, I've heard all of their calls.

I've heard everything that they're saying in terms of like when they're upset, when their kid won't listen, when there's like a gull overhead, or when there's too many people on the beach. Like I've heard all of their different calls, and they're certainly not voiceless, so it's just like we have to pay attention to their voices.

Mariann: But it's a movement in which the allies have to do all the work.

Chris: It is, it is...

Mariann: Even in any other movement for the most oppressed people. In this one, the allies have to do all the work, and that's who you are.

Chris: That's a really great point. I never really thought of it that way, Mariann, but I think you're right.

So the Piping Plover, they arrive to New York City beaches in March. They stay here through August. They pair up, they find locations for Nest. The male will build these scrapes, which is essentially if you took like an empty clamshell or the palm of your hand and you just press it into the dirt, maybe line it with some shell fragments, but that's the nest. And it's generally...

Mariann: Already, one is terrified for them. There they are, just sitting out there on the beach.

Chris: Right on the beach itself, not up in the dunes. We put up protective fencing. We call it symbolic fencing because it's a symbolic, visual barrier, not an actual barrier. We put that up in mid-March, but right now, we're having a better season than we did last year, which is extremely exciting.

But when I say better...all Piping Plover work and we are now part of this international network of organizations, city, state, and federal agencies. We had a meeting in West Virginia, which is funny cuz you'll never find a Piping Plover in West Virginia. But we had a meeting at the US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Conservation Training Center, back in January, with all the folks working on Piping Plovers across the Atlantic populations.

And it's an amazing group of people, and I just absolutely adore the work, well the people doing Piping Plover work, many people for decades, and they've been so welcoming and wonderful and, "Join the party. We love what you're doing in New York." And so, for me, that's been amazing to come to this party kind of late, but realizing that I had so much to learn.

Mariann: Yeah. Tell us a little bit about the organization cuz we love to talk about the animals, but the fact that you founded an organization and turned it into something that's actually productive is such an important thing for people to hear. How that happened, how you did it, what the organization does, and how it brings people together to help protect the birds.

Chris: Thank you. Yeah, so I started in March of 2021. When I set up that Instagram account, I thought I could recruit some friends to get out on the beach with me to connect with beachgoers to help monitor this bird. Meanwhile, a couple of years later, my friends haven't joined, but for us, the first year I recruited maybe 30, 40 volunteers in 2021. Last year, we were up to more than 75 volunteers, and then this year, we'll have more than 250 volunteers...

Mariann: Wow. Wow.

Chris: And a staff of four. So it's really taken flight, so to speak. *laughs* And we have two Volunteer Coordinators this year. We have a Director of Programs who was our Volunteer Coordinator last year.

And I'm really excited too that we have a Community Liaison who grew up in the Far Rockaway community to connect with communities of color and other folks that may not have gotten the bird message or may not have gotten the conservation message. You know what's interesting too in the Rockaways is that the front lines of climate change in New York City is Rockaway.

If you think about Hurricane Sandy, which is just over 10 years ago, Rockaway got decimated and the city was forgotten in a lot of ways. So, the need for removing hardscapes and removing cement barriers and barricades... We have to have a permeable coastline. We have to have a coastline that's actually good habitat as well.

So there's a possibility of complimentary goals here of both habitat restoration and soft scapes along the water, but also towards being more coastally resilient for the city. And so, for us, kind of helping to make those connections is important. So the core of our work is working on the beaches of both Gateway National Recreation Area, as well as on the eastern end of the peninsula with New York City Parks Department.

So for us, we're able to connect with thousands of beachgoers and residents alike about, "What do these signs mean? Why are these temporary closures here? Why are we forced to kind of go around this one closure area?" And most of the time, it's a really productive and open conversation.

There's outliers, you know... Our volunteers go through extensive training. We do conflict de-escalation training. We are, as you said, allies but also ambassadors, and so we have to be positive and upbeat. We could be very much the first person to ever talk to them about a bird, the first person to ever talk to them for sure about a Piping Plover.

So if we start screaming and yelling about their off-leash dog, we've missed the mark. We've completely missed the opportunity to build a relationship.

Mariann: I assume that a lot of the people who are volunteering with you, and this is really tough work and takes a lot of devotion, but I assume a lot of them are not vegan, don't have a big picture about farmed animals.

Am I right? Is that something that you try to negotiate at all, or do you ignore it? And not to ask 12 questions at once, but is there a way in which an endangered species can be a gateway issue for people to see the bigger picture about animals? Do you see that happening?

Chris: I think so. I think if you look at Piping Plovers, you'll be hard-pressed to find a more vulnerable and more fragile species in New York City and the baby Piping Plover, which is precocial and must go down to the water's edge and feed itself from a few hours after birth.

We have this pair of young chicks. They're about 10 days now, which is good because you have to get them to 25 to 35 days to be able to fly or fledge. And that's the assessment, right? Like you wanna get those fledglings up, which is surviving chicks. But these two little renegades, they have this whole closure beach that we have set up temporarily with our friends at National Park Service, and they kept leaving the closure! Like running all over the beach, running up to people, running on people's beach towels.

There's no better ambassador for the Piping Plover than the Piping Plover and then their chicks more so. And so for people to be able to see an endangered species up close and then to see their family interaction, but also these young chicks, it was like watching these folks on the beach fall one by one into the grasp of the Piping Plover because they're like, "Holy crap, these are the most amazing, beautiful little birds." And, "Wow, they're endangered. Wow. How many of them are left?" I love non-native species. I love birds that are doing great with numbers.

Like, I don't like people hating on gulls. I think gulls are amazing, and I love going to the beach and hearing laughing gulls. So I do think that having people

look out for the most vulnerable species on the beach has extended to people caring more about other species like American Oystercatchers and Terns, which sometimes are hard to love because they will attack you, but I think that's one of their best attributes.

But I think I would love a vegan world. 1000%. I think everyone in the organization knows that I'm vegan. When we do events and things, we have vegan food, and there was like one thing where I had a vegetarian option, and our partner was like, "I'm very surprised that you have a vegetarian option..." He was almost disappointed.

But we are big believers of using local food vendors and restaurants, and so, like our friends at Super Burrito, they have an amazing vegan poblano burrito, and so we got like 150 of those for our training. So it was really amazing.

Mariann: So it's kind of a soft sell, but it's there.

Chris: Yeah, it's a soft sell, but I've certainly met quite a few vegans across the endangered species world. We are part of the Endangered Species Coalition, which is a wonderful Washington DC political and advocacy organization of about 400 plus organizations working for individual, but then (also) across multiple species and biodiversity.

I think that the biodiversity crisis has not gotten its share of assessment and attention, and urgency as our climate crisis has. If there's something I've been consistently disappointed with, it's when climate activists don't make the connection to animal agriculture.

Mariann: Yeah.

Chris: But also, widespread species loss and the connection between wildlife we're looking out for, and it's not even that far of a connection. It's like billions of birds are being quote euthanized, or quote killed, in these situations for avian influenza. And no one sees them, no one will meet them.

If that can't motivate bird folks...

One of the things that I was really on a tear about, and we moved on to other things, but I know some people are still working on it in New York, but you know there's a hundred storefront slaughterhouses in New York City.

Mariann: Yeah.

Chris: And, they're horrific, but animals escape there, and then all of a sudden, it's on all the local news, and everybody wants to see that little calf make it. and everyone...

Mariann: Yeah, people are so weird when it comes to how they think about animals. I mean, we all know that, but you must see it.

Even more so because you're working with people who care so deeply about these plovers that they're sacrificing their time and their energy, and I'm sure it's frustrating...

There are other issues that must come up, too, like with endangered species sometimes protecting an endangered species involves killing other wild species, even though obviously their main threat is undoubtedly coming from humans and development, we don't do anything about that... Instead, we worry about whether there's a fox or something like that.

And I'm sure feral cats are a huge issue as well. How do you handle those situations?

Chris: Yeah, so we're not involved with any sort of lethal predator management, but there's definitely issues across the board.

And if you look at the continuum of threats, you're absolutely right, us humans are there at the extreme. For us, it's about getting the vast majority of folks, and it's the bell curve, right? We're trying to reach that mass of center of people that are like, *puts on a gruff voice* "Yeah, birds, whatever..."

You know? Or just like, *puts on voice again* "Yeah, Piping Plovers, we have those in Massachusetts, whatever..." And those people are like, "Cool, that's great you're out here volunteering! Good for you! Go plovers!" We love those people, right? That is the vast majority, 80-90% of people.

Then there's like the people like me who are completely on board and just wanna start organizations and do stuff for this bird because it's so important, because we can.

And then there's the other side, which is an extreme outlier, as well. They're profiting in conspiracy theories, they're repeating lies, "They're put here by the government." They're bringing in other social issues to say, "Oh, the reason why we care about Piping Plovers is because we don't care about this."

And it's like this zero-sum game, right? If the Piping Plover gets a little bit of pie, then that's pie I don't get, right? And that's very New York. It's, dare I say, very Rockaway, which is just like distrust for the government, for each other.

And just come out to the beach, come meet me. I'm easy to find. Our volunteers are very easy to find, and just come look through our binoculars and look at this little bird that you've maybe villainized.

So that's the human piece. But of course, there are definitely natural species like the Peregrine Falcon, which numbers aren't great in the state of New York either, but massive predator to wild birds, but specifically to Piping Plovers and other beach-nesting birds. Baby birds are pretty much everyone's lunch, and I think that's why broods of Robins and other birds, there are so many chicks, right? Because so few will survive.

Mariann: But, presumably Peregrine Falcons, I mean, there may be things that you could do about it, but you are not gonna go after Peregrine Falcons because they're endangered as well.

Chris: No, exactly.

Mariann: Or at least threatened. I'm not sure. I guess my point would be you can kind of avoid those issues of dealing with the feral cats, and so you don't have to confront that conflict. You just defend the Piping Plovers and leave it up to other people to deal with some of the predator issues. Which must really help because it would be hard if your organization had to also be out there killing animals which protecting wildlife can involve killing animals.

Chris: I do believe that I don't wanna wade into places of unproductive debate, or screaming and yelling, but like for me, lethal predator management, especially of natural species, of even human commensal species, like gulls and crows and raccoons...

Like, there are ghost crabs on the beach, which is definitely linked to climate change because our winters are shorter and warmer, and these terrestrial crabs are getting bigger. But some of these species, like gulls and raccoons, are coming because of the trash. So if we can correct that with trash, right?

Mariann: There are things you can do that don't involve killing everybody.

Chris: Right. But then, you know, lastly, feral cats. It absolutely is a conflict between the bird world and people who advocate for TNR. And I have a lot of

friends that are doing amazing work for community cats and feral cats, but at the end of the day, you cannot have outdoor cats of any type in an area where there are beach-nesting endangered birds. I mean, these birds cannot fly. So, cats cannot be near these beaches, and unfortunately, they are. And so that is going to be a conflict going forward. And it's a conflict already now.

But, dare I say, can we sit down and talk about this? Can we figure this out together? Unfortunately, it's been a lot of animosity and name-calling on each side. But like cats in breeding areas of endangered species are an invasive species. They shouldn't be there, but why are they there? Because of us humans.

Mariann: And I think that also, I think many people who are representing the cats, not everybody but, are sympathetic to this issue, but just point out that it's not a matter...Like they're not eradicable because people keep abandoning cats.

Chris: Yeah. Yeah.

Mariann: So TNR is not just a method of supporting cats. It's the only way to control them, and at least if they're fed, they're less likely to predate, though I'm not underestimating...It's just an ongoing issue that is a nightmare for many, but I don't think everybody on the cat side, so to speak, is unsympathetic to this issue.

They just are pointing out, "We don't know...your solutions don't actually work, of killing the cats because people have been killing cats for eons, and there are just more and more and more cats."

Chris: There's been some positive things like Jones Beach. I know that they had feral cats near Piping Plovers, and I believe that they've pretty much solved that problem, or definitely, it's gotten a little better. And so, for me, I think it's about more conversation, and it's as much the cat world as it is the bird world. And people that I know in bird conservation and wildlife conservation have almost a different point of view, and we're more open to discussing this issue. It's the birders, like sometimes the people with...

Mariann: Yeah, can you talk a little bit about the difference between birders and people who care about birds? Because birders have always struck me as very weird...

Chris: Well, yeah...

Mariann: No offense to people out there who consider themselves birders, but I just mean the people who are just collecting.

Chris: Yeah. Anyone who kind of thinks that solving a problem, like the way to solve a problem is to jump on Twitter and to like rail against...

Like, I was a volunteer, and our rabbits have all come from New York City Animal Care Centers, and there are a lot of folks out there who're very anti-ACC because they have had to euthanize animals for space. It's not great, and I don't like that, but there's a lot of animals. And I mean, look at ACC, look at how many animals are (there).

They have so many dogs right now that they're all in cages in the hallways. I have very little time or patience for people, and I'm probably gonna get some haters on Twitter now for saying this, but I have very little patience for the sort of keyboard bandits that are just attacking or throwing stones at people that are really trying to do good.

And if you think that they should do better, absolutely join the fight, roll up your sleeves, and do something. But like lobbying attacks on Twitter, usually, it's Twitter, but it just doesn't solve anything. It really doesn't.

So I guess like for birds, like birders and conservationists. A lot of birders care deeply. I know that. But then there's quite a few people, too, that their motivation is just to look at these species, right? And they have a list, or they're tracking their birds with an app, or they're really motivated to see rare birds.

Like I've had multiple birders in New York City say to me like, "Oh, well, what's out here today?" They'll come out with all their gear, and they're like... it's almost like when I say, "Piping Plovers are here and they're rarer than any bird that you think you're gonna find." And they're like, "Oh, I've seen Piping Plovers."

And it's like, "What are you talking about?!"

Mariann: Yeah, that's very hard.

Chris: It's like on your list that you've already checked off or something?! But when I started this, I thought like we'd have all these birders getting involved with our cause, like tweeting our stuff or sharing our stuff on Insta and all of this stuff.

But, I can count on one hand of all of our volunteers, the people that came into this as hardcore birders.

Mariann: Mm-hmm. That's unfortunate. Yeah. I'm sorry to hear that.

Chris: Yeah. But my challenge to the birding community is it's not enough just to look at these birds. We have to do something about their survival.

Three billion birds have been lost since 1970. That's a conservative number. Every single shorebird is in decline. Every single species, so it is not enough to go out. I have had birders that are texting us photos of dogs off-leash. I've had birders calling us about things even worse, and I'm like, "You were there! You were there, why didn't you say something?"

So that's the thing that really burns me up is that, like, listen, my dad was a birder. I don't call myself a birder, and that's just a thing.

Mariann: Yeah. And I wanna make clear, I'm not saying that just because you're a birder doesn't mean you (don't) care about birds.

It just seems to be a certain, unfortunately, from what you're saying, a fairly large number of birders who don't seem to care about birds other than as a checkoff.

Chris: 80% of our volunteers have never picked up binoculars. They are from all walks of life: all races, all ages, all ethnicities, multiple countries of origin.

We have a Swiss volunteer. We haven't had a Swiss volunteer. We have so many people from across the globe, New Yorkers, all of them, right? They're coming together. They might be just arriving, or they've been here their whole lives. Like a seasoned Rockaway local who's out on her bike every single morning, and her name is Yolanda, and she's amazing.

We have the best, most kick-ass volunteers, and they show up in their fanny packs, and we give out stickers, and we give out temporary tattoos, and we give out postcards and magnets and all of these different things. We have these T-shirts that really distinguish us as volunteers.

We don't sell them. Everybody wants to buy 'em, but they're only for our volunteers. They're like baby blue, almost like the UN Peacekeepers, like in that color vein. But I love a lot of birders. There's some great folks out there, and

they do care deeply, right? But like a lot of people, at least in the birding world in New York City, they don't really care about Piping Plovers or other birds.

And that's fine, but I think that we have to stop just assuming that somebody who's looking... It's like the people who go on safaris, are they actually gonna be a part of like...

Mariann: Exactly! Very good analogy. Yeah.

Chris: And that's what it is essentially. It's like an urban safari.

Mariann: It's a collector syndrome.

Chris: Right? Yeah.

There are a couple of accounts out there on Twitter and stuff like bird alerts and like locations of sensitive species like owls and other things. And we don't have a lot of rules for our volunteers, but one rule is never post nest locations...

Mariann: Oh yeah.

Chris: Chick locations. Anything specific to the beach-nesting birds of any type to Twitter or to other places because there's folks out there who have posted locations of sensitive species. We haven't had this (happen) too much, but we'll never post where the chicks are because people come out with like, their massive cameras...

Mariann: Yeah, of course, it's New York City. You're gonna get a lot of people, no matter what the issue is. Or the topic or the cause. There's a lot of people...

Chris: But the one thing I really love, I take so much pride in, is that our volunteers are picking up binoculars for the first time, and will go to be looking at birds and watching them and witnessing them and going to other places. And I think that that's absolutely amazing.

And so one thing we want to do more of in the future, and one idea we have, is to do a sister school program between primary schools in Far Rockaway, Anne Arbor, and Edgemere in Queens and sister schools in Andros, Bahamas, one of the places where our birds nest.

Mariann: Yeah, that's really cool. Yeah, and I want people to understand... Our listeners are from all over; probably not that many of them are from New York

City or its environs. And even people from New York City are not that familiar with the Rockaways.

It is a crazy situation how invisible, in so many ways, the beaches of New York City are, even though they're surrounded by millions of people. But the communities you're talking about, what I wanted to point out, they are not prosperous communities.

These are communities that experience a lot of poverty, or at least some of them, The Rockaways vary. I love that you're doing that work, and I'm looking forward to hearing more of that project. It sounds amazing.

Chris: Thank you. Yeah, it's a wonderful place. I mean, the Rockaways is such a mix and beautiful mosaic of people from all across the political spectrum.

And what's exciting for me is that you can't just size someone up based on maybe a shirt they're wearing, or a hat they're wearing, or like what they look like, sound like, their age, or their background, or whatever. Like the support for Piping Plovers and, specifically, for the work we're doing in the Rockaways.

We've done something like 10,000 hours of volunteer work so far, and yeah, there's a few people who are like, "Oh, these are outsiders coming from Brooklyn and into our community." I'm like, "Cleaning your beach! We're actually cleaning your beach!" *Mariann laughs*

Mariann: Coming all the way from Brooklyn! *laughing*

Chris: So it's actually a positive thing, but most people have been like, "Oh my goodness, look at all these people."

And we have people taking two subways and a bus, a ferry and a bus and a bike, three buses, right? People driving, people taking their bike all the way from Brooklyn, or taking their bike from across the peninsula. So it's pretty amazing and humbling to witness the commitment we have. We have people out every single day right now, in July.

Mariann: Well, it sounds amazing, and I'm sure that a lot of people listening who are in and around New York City will be interested in finding out more and volunteering, but since most of our listeners are not from New York City, or many of them are not from the US, I just really wanna put in a plug for the story you've told here.

Everybody's looking for that volunteer opportunity, and so many of us are thinking that's in veganism or farmed animal work. As you say, sometimes that is just too big and too overwhelming. I love this "Think globally, act locally" when it comes to animals. Think globally about all of the animals, but everyone has a species somewhere near their home that's in trouble. And probably some people working for them.

So I think it's a great way to get active. And it's also a great way to be able to spread this message of a global view of animals to people who care about animals but are not seeing the big picture, so I love the work that you're doing. Chris, thank you so much for sharing it with us today.

And people can find you all over the internet, right? And in all of the usual places, and you get loads and loads of press. Very important and very impressive that you managed to get so much press for this project.

Chris: I think any animal cause is overwhelming. They're all overwhelming in different ways, but just don't look far because there's a conservation organization, animal organization, an animal shelter, a rescue for a certain species everywhere. Or an injured bird...

Mariann: It gets you outta the house! It gets you meeting good people...

Chris: Yeah, it does!

Mariann: Also into beautiful places and seeing beautiful animals.

Chris: Absolutely.

Mariann: So it's a great way to become active. Thank you so much for sharing it with us today.

Chris: Thank you.

Mariann: I feel like I've been in the Rockaways!

Chris: Thank you so much. It's been my pleasure, my honor.