

Award-winning author of *Song for a Whale*

LYNNE KELLY

“This book made
my heart soar.”

—Newbery Medal winner
Erin Entrada Kelly

THE SECRET
LANGUAGE
OF
BIRDS

Art © 2024 by Leo Nicollis

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

RHTeachersLibrarians.com



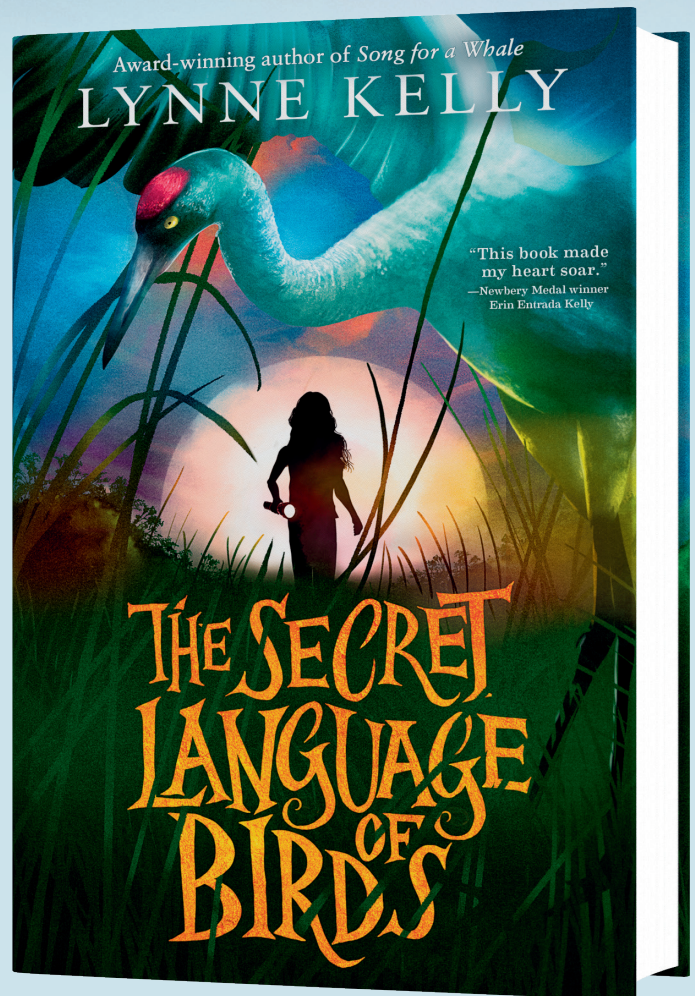
About the Book

From the award-winning author of *Song for a Whale* comes a poignant and heartwarming tale about a girl who discovers a pair of endangered birds about to lay eggs in the marshes of her summer camp and the secret plan she hatches to help them.

Nina is used to feeling like the odd one out, both at school and in her large family. But while trying to fit in at summer camp she discovers something even more peculiar: two majestic birds have built a nest in the marsh behind an abandoned infirmary. They appear to be whooping cranes, but that is impossible—Nina is an amateur bird-watcher, and all her resources tell her that those rare birds haven't nested in Texas for over a hundred years.

When Nina reports the sighting to wildlife officials, more questions arise. Experts track all the endangered birds, but they can't identify the female bird that Nina found. Who is she, and where did she come from?

With the help of some fellow campers, Nina sets out to discover who the mystery bird really is. As she gets closer to the truth, will she find a flock of her own?



Sam Bond Photography

About the Author

Lynne Kelly is the award-winning author of *Song for Whale* which won the 2020 Schneider Family Book Award and was named one of the best books of the year by New York Public Library. She lives near Houston, Texas, with her dogs, Abigail and Eloise.



Dear Educators,

This story was sparked by an unusual nest. It wasn't so much the rarity of the birds that made it unusual, though whooping cranes are some of the rarest birds in North America. The most surprising thing about this nest was its location. There are whooping cranes that fly from Northern Canada to the Southern coast of Texas for the winter, but there aren't usually any cranes in the state during nesting season. In the springtime just a few years ago, a crane couple from a nonmigratory flock in Louisiana made their way to Texas, where they built a nest and laid an egg on some farmland. This marked the first time in over a century that whooping cranes built a nest in Texas.

After I learned about this event, I knew I'd have to write a story about it. I gave this nesting discovery to my character Nina. She also learns how close whooping cranes came to extinction, with numbers in the teens in the 1940s. Thanks to the work of conservationists, their population is now over 800 and growing.

As you and your readers follow along Nina's journey, I hope you'll enjoy learning about these fascinating birds as much as I did.

Happy Reading,

Lynne Kelly



Pre-Reading Activity

Read about the whooping crane on the website allaboutbirds.org/guide/Whooping_Crane/overview. At one time, the whooping crane was almost extinct. Write a paper that explains how conservation biologists brought the whooping crane back from the brink of extinction. Include a concluding paragraph that discusses how everyone can help preserve the whooping crane population.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the Barlow family. The family is heading home after a long weekend in Austin and stop a Buc-ee's for gas and refreshment. Nina is distracted by a mockingbird and is left behind. How does the family discover that Nina is missing? Discuss Nina's conversation with Wanda, a worker at Buc-ee's. Explain why Wanda thinks the mockingbird trusted Nina. How does the mockingbird foreshadow Nina's fascination with the whooping crane?
2. Why does Sage, Nina's older sister, suggest that Nina attend Camp Bee Holler, a summer camp run by Aunt Audrey? Explain why Sage teaches Nina the German word *zugunruhe*. What is Nina's parents' opinion of Aunt Audrey? Why does her father call Aunt Audrey "an odd duck"? Explain the following description of Audrey: "She had always looked out of place indoors, as if someone had planted an oak tree in the living room." (p. 22) How does Nina's parents' opinion of Audrey change after Nina's summer at camp?
3. What is Nina's impression of Aunt Audrey? What does Nina have in common with her aunt? At what point do Nina and Aunt Audrey bond?
4. Aunt Audrey tells Nina that she will be part camper and part staff member. What are her staff responsibilities? Why does Nina worry about fitting in with the campers? How is the first day of camp awkward for Nina? Estelle, the cook, notices that Nina doesn't know where to sit in the dining lodge. Explain what Nina means when she says, "I did feel lost, but I didn't like that it was obvious." (p. 40) Why does she feel like an intruder and at what point does this change?
5. Nina meets Georgia, Emma, and Ant, three first time campers. Why do these girls name their cabin the Oddballs? Discuss how they make Nina a part of their group.

6. Explain why Cecilia, one of the older campers, calls Nina Wikipedia. How does Nina react to this nickname? Why does this make her careful about sharing her knowledge about birds? How does Vivienne attempt to make Nina feel better? Discuss how the story about the cuckoo eggs (p. 37) parallels Nina's feelings about camp?
7. It's a tradition for the older girls to go to the old infirmary on the night of the first full moon at camp. Discuss what they hope to find. The Oddballs ask Nina to sleepover in their cabin so she can go. How does this invitation make Nina feel that she belongs? What happens when the girls get to the old infirmary?
8. Nina realizes the white figure that scared the girls at the old infirmary is a whooping crane. Why doesn't she tell the campers about the bird? Explain why Nina returns to the marsh, even though she is breaking a camp rule. Nina notes that Josephine had carved a whooping crane on the wall of the old infirmary. Discuss the significance of this discovery. At what point does Nina bring the Oddballs along on her mission to observe the whooping cranes? Debate whether she is surprised by their interest.
9. Nina goes on a nature walk led by Libby, one of the counselors. Explain what Libby means when she says, "See, sometimes you have to get quiet and stop listening to all the noise. Then what's really important will stand out. Good rule for life, too." (p. 82) How might Nina apply this rule to her life when she returns to school in the fall?
10. In *Song for a Whale*, Nina attempted to make friends with Iris, a deaf girl in her school. Describe Iris. What mistakes did Nina make when trying to befriend her? Why does Nina think it's her fault that Iris transferred schools. Explain why Nina sits in the tree near Iris's house. Why does Nina think that Iris is the perfect person to help isolate the sounds of the whooping cranes? What makes Iris accept the offer? Explain how working together improves their relationship.
11. What leads the girls to Odetta, a whooping crane expert at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries? How does Odetta help the girls advance their research? Explain why Odetta insists the girls keep the whooping cranes a secret. Why is it unusual for the whooping cranes to be in Texas? At what point does Odetta realize that the male whooping crane is Willie Nelson? How does Nina discover that the female is Dolly Parton?
12. How does Aunt Audrey learn that the Oddballs, led by Nina, have been going to the old infirmary? Why does Nina feel that she has betrayed Aunt Audrey? At what point does Audrey become intrigued by the research the girls have been conducting? How does this improve Nina's relationship with her aunt?
13. Explain the title of the book.



Curriculum Connections

1. Aunt Audrey encourages Nina to sketch things that she sees. Research one bird mentioned in the novel. Note the unique features the color and shape of the feathers, beak, and feet and the behavior of the bird. Write a short paper that discusses how to identify the bird. Attach the sketch to the paper.
2. Reread the story of Josephine, the camp ghost. (p. 47-49) Then create a two-page story in graphic novel format about her.
3. Florence Merriam Bailey, an ornithologist in the 1800s, wrote articles for *Audubon* magazine. Find out more about her life and work. The following website is helpful: wams.nyhistory.org/industry-and-empire/fighting-for-equality/florence-merriam-bailey/. Write a feature article about her life's work to include in a science encyclopedia. Create an appropriate title for the article.
4. Nina calls the outdoors as “a peaceful kind of noisy.” Write a poem that Nina may give to Iris about the noise in the marsh.
5. Create a brochure about Camp Bee Holler to distribute to prospective campers. Include a description of the camp, a map of the facilities, a list of activities, and quotes from campers.
6. Make a clay sculpture that Nina might create when she and Aunt Audrey go the art barn at the end of a tough day. Write a description of her work for an end of camp art exhibit.
7. Write a letter that Nina might send to Aunt Audrey thanking her for the summer at Camp Bee Holler.



Vocabulary/ Use of Language

Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include: *nonmigratory* (p. 106), *orienteering* (p. 133), *sync* (p. 171), *viable* (p. 205), and *imprint* (p. 208).

Websites for Further Research

audubon.org/

The official website for the Audubon Society

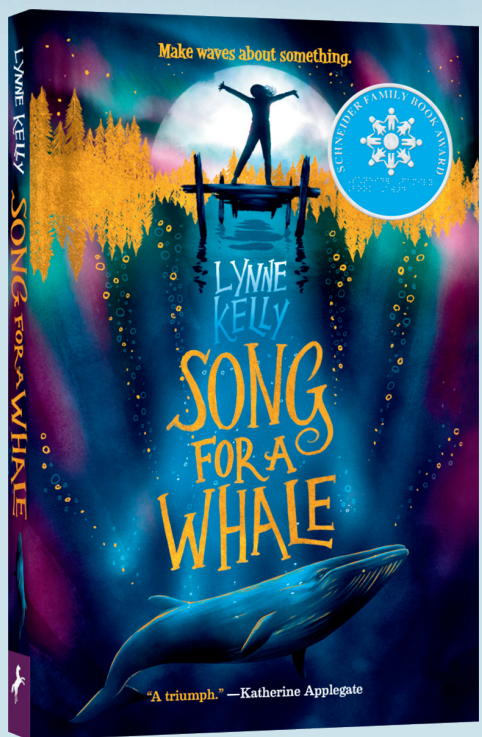
abcbirds.org/blog/backyard-birds/

The official website for the American Bird Conservancy

fws.gov/

The official website for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Praise for *SONG FOR A WHALE*



Art © 2024 by Leo Mickalitis

“A satisfying, energetic read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Uplifting.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Transformative.”

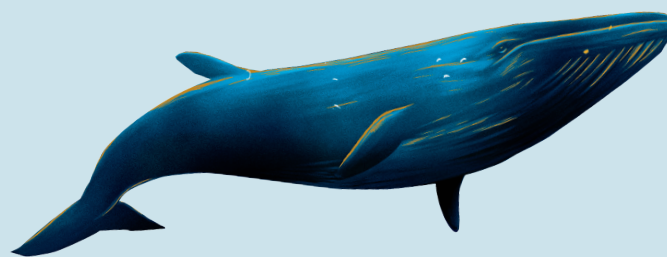
—*Booklist*

“Finely crafted.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Thoughtful.”

—*The Bulletin*



Awards

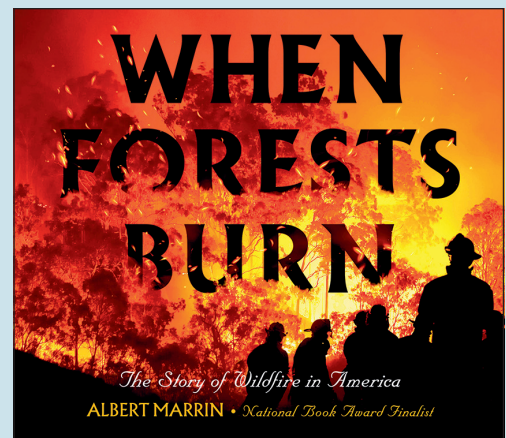
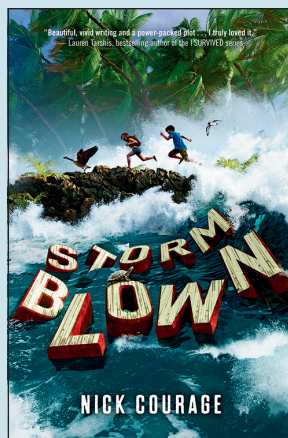
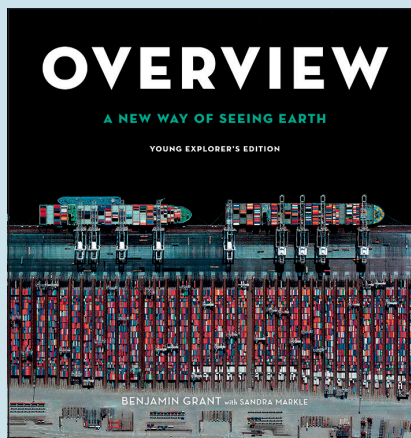
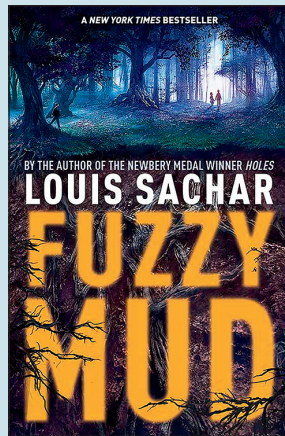
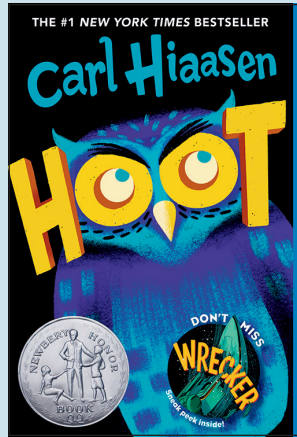
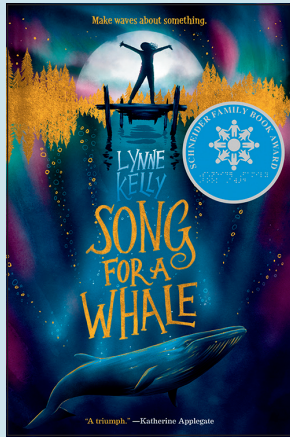
- ALA/ALSC Schneider Family Book Award Winner
- WINNER, Pennsylvania Keystone Book Award
- WINNER, California Horace Mann Upstander Book Award
- Chicago Public Library Best Books of the Year List
- New York Public Library Best Books of the Year List
- Georgia Children’s Book Award Nominee
- Illinois Bluestem Book Award Nominee
- Kansas William Allen White Book Award Nominee
- Massachusetts Children’s Book Award Nominee
- Minnesota Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award Nominee
- Missouri Mark Twain Book Award Nominee
- Nebraska Golden Sower Book Award Nominee
- New Mexico Land of Enchantment Book Award Nominee
- Oklahoma Sequoyah Book Award Nominee
- Pennsylvania Young Readers Choice Award Nominee
- South Carolina Book Award Nominee
- Texas Spirit of Texas Reading Program Book
- Vermont Golden Dome Book Award Nominee



Download
the guide

Recommended Reading for Conservation and Environmentally Conscious Kids

These books promote the importance of protecting animals and our planet.



Visit RHTeachersLibrarians.com, your online destination for all the resources you need for your school or library!

