

2020 Aldo and Estella Leopold Residency - AUGUST

Priyanka Kumar

Priyanka Kumar received a copy of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* as a birthday gift in July 2003, and she continues to cherish it to this day. She was intrigued by how Leopold chased grouse on a snowy day or the way he listened to geese honk. Priyanka responded to Leopold's childlike curiosity—the kind that we would do well to aspire to in our oversaturated, overextended, and tragically disconnected world.

Much like Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, Priyanka keeps a diary about the wildlife that passes through her neighborhood. On a summer day she might see mango-colored tanagers flying from tree to tree or thrashers stopping by to probe the membrane of the soil. Acutely aware of how birdwatchers tend to have a laser focus on life lists, Priyanka wants to examine the perils of what she refers to as “eye-candy-birding” and explore how to achieve Leopold's “land ethic” in a time when almost 50% of the world's bird species are in decline, because of climate change, urban sprawl, and pesticide-laden farming.

During recent research trips to northern New Mexico, Priyanka took part in the annual Abiquiú Bald Eagle Count and went on a patrol boat operated by the Army Corps of Engineers to explore the coves of Abiquiú Lake. Volunteers found only three eagles, a historic low, down from a high of 15 in 2015. This led her to ask two crucial questions: Is this an anomaly or are populations truly in decline, and have warmer winters caused distribution shifts? Last year, as we know, was the second warmest year on record since 1850. A *Journal of Raptor Research* article in 2015 acknowledged that the number of eagles counted in Arizona, Colorado, Nebraska and Texas are declining as well.

The Aldo & Estella Leopold residency will allow Priyanka to finish her book, “Conversations With Birds” (Milkweed Editions), in which she returns to her first encounters with outstanding and fragile birds in the Southwest, and considers the decline of important bird species in the high desert and how such declines impact what Leopold called our “land-community.”

A prolific writer, Priyanka Kumar has authored over a hundred essays and reviews on subjects including the high desert and bird migration. Her first book, *Take Wing and Fly Here*, explores how our “acquisitive tendencies have redefined our relationship with the outdoors.”