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Wisconsin’s beautiful birds
Growing numbers of adults, kids connecting with nature through birding

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Madison, Wis.—Enjoy trekking around the Wisconsin countryside through marsh and woodland? Or is your idea of exploring nature admiring the view from your kitchen window? Either way, birding is an activity you and your family might enjoy, says David Drake, UW-Extension wildlife specialist and associate professor in the UW-Madison Dept. of Forest and Wildlife Ecology.

According to the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, more and more people from Wisconsin are discovering the pleasures of birding. Over two million state residents spent more than $744 million on bird-related equipment and trips in 2006.

Drake attributes the growing numbers to today’s urban lifestyles and the desire to connect with nature—and the fact that there are more than 400 bird species in the state. “You’ve got a much better chance of seeing a bird than a mammal, a reptile or an amphibian because there are so many more birds around,” Drake says. “Even in the biggest cities, you can see birds.”

About 15 percent of Wisconsin’s birds remain in the state year round, including backyard favorites such as cardinals, goldfinches and chickadees. Most others are migrants that come in the spring to nest and raise their young and then head south for the winter. Some migrants stop in Wisconsin for only a week or two to rest and refuel before they resume their long journeys.

Large numbers of shorebirds also migrate through the state, Drake says. Wisconsin waters attract white pelicans, which roost on ponds and along the shores of the Great Lakes, as well as plovers, ruddy turnstones, ducks, geese, loons and various types of terns.

One of the most “charismatic” members of the avian world is Wisconsin’s greater prairie chicken, according to Drake. A native grouse species, prairie chicken populations have sprung back after nearly dying out in the first half of the 20th century.

“Around 1900, prairie chickens were found in every county in the state,” Drake says. “But they disappeared along with Wisconsin’s grassland and prairie habitats.”
In the 1950s, the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources and state conservation groups began working to restore a small greater prairie chicken population in central Wisconsin. Now visitors to the area can experience the birds’ springtime ritual of stomping, wing-drooping and the mournful, booming calls that characterize the males’ mating displays.

Wisconsin birders might also encounter peregrine falcons and eagles—including golden eagles, which are typically found in the western U.S. Bald eagles have flourished in the state, drawing eagle enthusiasts from around the world. “Bald eagles have done so well here that some have been relocated to other states to reinvigorate their populations,” Drake says.

In addition to the enjoyment of simply getting to know Wisconsin’s birds, Drake points out that birding offers families a great opportunity to spend time together while doing something active. “Birding gets kids and adults outside—it’s a wonderful thing to do as a family,” says Drake. “And it’s a great avenue to teach kids about natural resources.”

Drake suggests finding a bird identification book or field guide that you’re comfortable using. A guide with either photos or illustrations that tells how to identify the bird and information about its range is best. Find out if the bird exists in Wisconsin. What is its habitat—wetland, grassland, forest?

For beginners, an illustrated guide that emphasizes certain features of the birds might be better. “Go to a bookstore or library to thumb through a few different ones,” says Drake. “Each has a different perspective. Find something you like. If you get a guide you’re not comfortable with, you’re not likely to use it.”

Binoculars or optics will reveal birds’ colors and markings more vividly than the naked eye. You will also be less likely to scare the birds away since you can watch them from a distance. According to Drake, $50 will buy a serviceable pair of binoculars, but you can spend more depending on your level of interest.

When’s the best time to watch birds? “You’ll see more birds when the sun’s coming up and when the sun’s going down,” says Drake. “Nocturnal birds, which are active at night, and diurnal birds, active during the day, are both still out during these transitional times of day.”

Drake and colleagues Scott Craven and Jamie Nack of the UW-Madison Dept. of Forest and Wildlife Ecology recently co-authored a new publication titled Birding in the Badger State and Beyond: How to Get Started that provides information on optics, bird identification and resources for the beginning birder. It’s available to view and order online at the Extension Learning Store.

“Birding is a great reason to get outside and experience nature,” says Drake. "You never know what you might see."
Did you know?
--Kirtland’s warbler, a federally endangered bird is making a comeback in central Wisconsin. Researchers discovered that the warbler’s population was declining not only due to habitat loss, but also to the interventions of another Wisconsin bird—the brown-headed cowbird. The cowbird lays its eggs in other birds’ nests. Unsuspecting parents end up raising baby cowbirds, often at the expense of their own nestlings. The DNR has contracted with wildlife services to remove cowbirds from the Kirtland warbler’s nesting area.

--Birds’ bill shape and size dictate what they eat.

--Birds have a very high metabolism. Their normal body temperature is 104 degrees Fahrenheit.

--The ruby-throated hummingbird is the only hummingbird species found in the eastern United States