

# Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

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Northern Shrike by Nancy Halliday

## STILL A BIRD BRAIN? ATTITUDES TOWARDS YOUNG BIRDERS OVER THE DECADES

By Eleonora di Liscia

Whether it's 1962 or 2014, the bottom line is that some people still think you're weird. But the good news is there may be fewer people who do. And thanks to the internet, being a weirdo who birds is no longer isolating.

Below, we explore the experiences of young birders over the decades.

### The 1960s:

When Jeff Sanders started birding as a teen in 1962, the image of a birdwatcher was a little old lady in tennis shoes a la The Beverly Hillbillies. Jeff's friends would say "You can't be a birder. You're not a little old lady in tennis shoes." Or they would call him "Bird Brain." Sometimes, they'd say "Look, there's a rare species!" To which Jeff would reply, "You don't even know what a rare species is!"

"The level of humor wasn't very developed at that age. They weren't sophisticated enough to insult me properly," he said.

Jokes aside, Jeff's friends knew where to find him when they wanted to play ball. "If you play sports, you get a pass on certain things," Jeff explained.

Generally, Jeff kept his interest in birding secret, but on one vacation, he learned "that there were other people that were closet birders also."



Jeff Sanders Photo provided by Jeff Sanders

Responses to Jeff's birding, however, were not all teasing. Neighbors asked him to identify birds. "These people were astounded because here was a kid who knew something they didn't," he said.

Joel Greenberg's interest in birds took off in 1966 after a trip to see several Long-eared Owls. (Joel most recently authored "A Feathered River Across the Sky.")

While Joel says he was never attacked for being a birder, "there is definitely

a social price you pay. Adults think kids love birding but you lose a lot of those kids when the hormones kick in. It probably manifested itself in that there were no young female birders."

When attending University of Arizona, Joel met a girl from Arlington Heights and informed her he had selected that school because he liked birding. Joel mentioned this encounter to the late ornithologist Ted Parker, who said: "You never tell a girl that you are interested in birds!"

### The 1970s:

Greg Niese started birding at age 9 in 1972 to escape a bad home life. Greg didn't hide his birding—and suffered the consequences.

"I was kind of a scrawny kid up until the end of 6th grade, and I got my ass kicked all the time," he said. "I remembered getting dumped into garbage cans. I definitely got made fun of and picked on for being into birds."

By 7th grade, Greg gained 40 pounds and shot up 7 inches, and it was revenge of the nerds: "I beat everybody's butt who had come after me for 2 years."

Greg became such a fanatical birder that he started skipping



Joel Greenberg Photo by Ted Parker

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## STILL A BIRD BRAIN? CONTINUED FROM COVER

school. For that reason, while a couple of his teachers supported his birding, a couple of them did not.



**Greg Niese**

*Photo provided by ABA Blog*

"This kid named Carl, who was the most popular, most handsome boy in school, got into birding with me," Greg said. "The kids didn't know what the heck to make out of that. I do remember Carl getting counselled one day to stay away from me because I was trouble."

Greg believes that social media has made it easier for young birders. "It's become much more apparent how big some vocations such as birding, just how popular they are," he said.

For example, in the 1970's, a good day at Montrose might boast 10 or 15 birders instead of the approximately 200 today.

Steve Mlodinow, received some of the same treatment in elementary school that plagued Greg. Besides getting called "Bird Brain," he was pushed, shoved and punched, which stopped after he could fight back.

"When I was in junior high, they called me 'Bird.' Most people had no idea why they called me 'Bird.' They thought it was my middle name, or because I was a fast runner," Steve said. "I remember playing soccer, and this African American kid who I liked called me "Bird." I looked at him askance, and he said 'Why are you looking at me like that?' I said 'You called me 'Bird,' and he said 'Isn't that your middle name?'"

In 1972, at age 10, Steve saw a notice for ENSBC. "ENSBC opened up my whole world, because I really wanted to participate, and I had no way of really doing it at age 9 or 10 without a relative doing it," Steve said.

From ENSBC, Steve found the approval he didn't get from peers.

"From an emotional perspective, here were a bunch of people who not only didn't treat me like a freak but who treated me like a rock star because I could identify things, and I was just a little kid. It made me feel very special, which was the opposite of how I felt at school," Steve said.

Being in ENSBC encouraged Steve to continue birding. Steve went on to write a Chicago area bird guide and "America's 100 Most Wanted Birds."

### **The 1980s:**

Tim Joyce of Wild Birds Unlimited isn't exactly sure why, but he hid his bird watching from his peers.

"I'm thinking there was some caricature in Loony Tunes or some old cartoon I was picking up on. There was something that I saw or read about that insinuated that birders were of a certain ilk that I was not," Tim said. "For a long time, there was a preordained description of a birder. You had to be older. You had to have a vest on. You had to have a particular personality profile, and as a kid I didn't want to be known as a birder. I was concerned it would make me seem like a less popular person or an uncool person,"

Tim started birding in 1978 at age 5. By age 15, he worked at Audubon Workshop, a store for birdwatchers and birdfeeders. Tim could talk about birds with teens at the store, but he kept his birding hidden from his other friends.

"The only person, when I was a teenager, outside of my job that I would talk about birds with was my girlfriend. I would say 'Hey, I went birding this morning,' without too many particulars, and then I would move on. I didn't want her to think I was a geek, I guess," he said.

By college, Tim did a complete turnaround. He no longer cared what others thought and came out of the closet about birding.

### **The 1990s:**

Josh Engel started birding at age 12 in 1994. A shy child, he did not advertise his vocation. Josh wouldn't wear his binoculars around his neighborhood because he didn't want other kids to see him birding.

But as he became older, Josh became more comfortable about his birding.

"It took some time to get comfortable about it because there weren't any birders especially in my age group," Josh said. "It was a very nerdy thing to do. It wasn't something that people had really heard of at all."

Josh's siblings and friends ribbed him about it usually good naturedly, but not always. "My brother got all my friends to call it 'herding' instead of 'birding.'"

Josh gained respect, however, as he made a career out of ornithology and started travelling to exciting locales. Plus, he says, birding has become more mainstream.

"One thing that changed young birding culture was the internet. I didn't have any other young birders when I was growing up and then a guy in California started an email list for young birders and that was really eye-opening to realize there were plenty of us around the country and we were able to interact," he said.

Josh has remained friends with people he met through the email list, many of whom have become biologists, tour leaders and ornithologists. For this reason, Josh works with Illinois Young Birders to keep young birders engaged.

## STILL A BIRD BRAIN? CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

### Millennials:

Ethan Gyllenhaal started birding around age 11. He told others about his birding with mixed responses. Some peers thought it was cool, and some thought it was crazy.

"I know people who had problems admitting they were birders because they thought people thought it was weird, but I never had a problem because it's who I am and I never felt ashamed of it," he said. "I felt I could share it with everybody who wanted to know about me, and I'm glad I did because I made friends that way."

Ethan did get his share of teasing in middle school. "The kids were: 'Ah, man. Do you get off on birds? Do you look at their genitals and stuff?' But that was a vast minority. Most of the time people would ask me what my favorite bird was or where I went to watch birds," he said.

Dan Sweet became a birder in 8th grade at age 13. At first, he didn't tell anyone about his hobby, but then he got a job at Wild Birds Unlimited in Glenview.

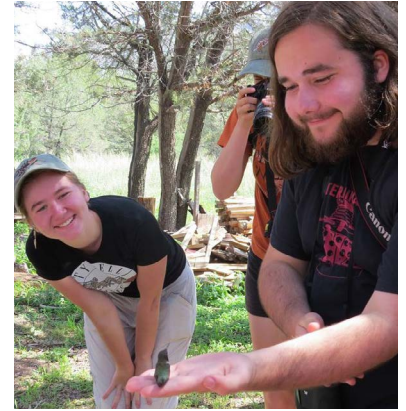
"I never really told a lot of people. I guess I was a little bit embarrassed because it wasn't what

regular kids did. They were into video games," Dan said. "Once I became older, it really became no big deal. Since I had a job doing it, it wasn't troubling. I was in 8th grade and I already had a job."

At age 3, Nick Minor told his mother he wanted to be an ornithologist, even using the word: "ornithologist." In his pre-teens, he started birding actively. Nick was not at all shy about sharing his passion.

"If you do something and you are confident about it, people respect it," he said. "I am always really open when people ask me about it, and I try to engage them. It's kind of a life mission of mine to get people more interested in nature and science. My openness about birding kind of led into that, a sort of science evangelism."

While some people have told Nick that what he does is weird, most people have responded positively. He has also been able to connect with science teachers in a way that wasn't otherwise possible, such as through his experiences interning at the Field Museum.



**Ethan Gyllenhaal with hummingbird in hand** Photo by Jennie Duberstein



**Nick Minor** Photo by Tim Lenz

## CONSERVATION COLUMN: OUR OTHER WARM BLOODED FLYING FRIENDS (HINT: THEY FLY MAINLY AT NIGHT)

By Lloyd Davidson

These are, of course, the 12 species of bats that live in this area of Illinois. Yes, you should be careful around bats and never pick one up that seems to be injured or sick but this is a group of mammals that deserve as much respect and admiration as the birds that we all find so attractive.

This truly remarkable group of mammals contains over 1200 species of animals, or about 1/5 of all mammalian species on earth, and their importance to our health and wellbeing is enormous. They are responsible, for example, for killing literally tons of harmful insects just in the Chicago region each year, from up-to 3000 mosquitos each to many adult moths whose larvae kill significant numbers of agricultural and ornamental trees, shrubs and vegetables and the nectar feeding species are important pollinators.

Besides their inestimable value as insectivores and pollinators,

their echolocation systems, after which sonar systems are modeled, if rather crudely, are one of the most remarkable evolutionarily derived systems in any animal. Something similar exists in dolphins.

One of the most magical experiences I've ever had was stepping out of our car just after sunset in White Sands National Park about 30 years ago, as we were preparing to hike with our young son to a primitive camp site there for an overnight stay, and finding a nectar feeding bat hovering right next to me, feeding on nectar from a white, night blooming cactus flower. It was a sublime moment. Indeed, the night blooming cereus jimson weeds and tobacco plants are all examples of white flower species that bloom at night specifically to attract bats and other such night flying nectar feeders.

Currently, however, the very existence of some species of our

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**PROGRAM NIGHTS**

All programs are held on the fourth Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd., Evanston, IL. Free admission, parking and refreshments. For more details on programs, check our website at [www.ensbc.org](http://www.ensbc.org).

**September 23, 2015 – Native Bees 101: Sam Droege** When we think of bees, we think of the colonial honey bee, who’s colonies are now subject to collapse. Honey bees are more commodity than wild animal—think chickens are to birds as honeybees are to native bees. Sam Droege, head of the bee inventory and monitoring program at the U.S. Geological Survey, will use high definition photography to highlight our native bees’ beauty, their diversity of life styles, and their intrinsic role in native plant pollination.

**October 28, 2015 – Birds and Windows – The Chicago Database: Dave Willard** David Willard of the Field Museum will interpret the database of nearly 70,000 bird fatalities from window strikes in Chicago. As unfortunate as these deaths are, we can learn a lot from them—about bird migration in general, as well as ways to reduce the number of fatalities.

**FIELD TRIPS**

**SEPTEMBER 6, 2014 – SATURDAY**

**Chicago Botanic Garden.** Expect fall passerine migrants, particularly warblers, vireos and thrushes, plus anything else we can find. Meet 7:00 a.m. at Starbucks at 243 N. Skokie Blvd. just south of Lake Cook Rd., east side of Skokie Blvd. near Nordstrom’s & Marshalls, to carpool with participants who are Botanic Garden members. Leader: Bonnie Duman.

**SEPTEMBER 7, 2014 – SUNDAY**

**Hawkwatch, Illinois Beach State Park.** Meet at 8:30 a.m. at the Nature Center parking lot, South Unit near the Park Lodge. Target species will be early migrating hawks and passerines. RSVP to Leader David B. Johnson at [djohnsoda@comcast.net](mailto:djohnsoda@comcast.net) or 224-567-9650.

**SEPTEMBER 21, 2014 – SUNDAY**

**Paul Douglas Woods “Mixed Bag”.** Look for early waterfowl, late shorebirds, possible rails and bitterns in the marsh, lingering nesters and migrants in the grasslands, and fall warblers in the shrubs and wooded areas. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at the Grassy Ridge parking lot, Central Rd. west of Roselle Rd. From the east, take I-90 to Roselle north exit, west on Central. Leader: John Elliott.

**SEPTEMBER 27 AND OCTOBER 4, 2014 – SATURDAY**

**Northwestern University Campus.** The NU campus has long been a stopover for migrants of all kinds headed south. Park on the lakeside of the upper deck of the south parking lot off of Sheridan Rd. and Clark St., north of Clark St. beach, at 8:30 a.m. Leaders: Libby Hill and Wayne Svoboda on Sept. 27 and Libby Hill and John Bates on Oct. 4.

**OCTOBER 18, 2014 – SATURDAY**

**Daniel Wright Woods – New Trip!** Target birds are sparrows, other late migrants, and a few hawks if the winds are right. Daniel Wright Woods is located at the intersection of St. Mary’s and Everett Roads. From that point, turn south into the preserve. Meet in the first parking lot at 7:30 a.m. Directions: From the south, take I-94 or Rte. 41 north to Rte. 22, go west to Riverwoods Rd., then go north to Everett Rd., then go west to St. Mary’s Rd. From the north, take I-94 or Rte. 41 south to Rte. 60, go west to St. Mary’s Rd., then south to the entrance. Leader: Jeff Sanders.

**CONSERVATION COLUMN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3**

bats is being threatened by White Nose Syndrome, a fungal disease that is sweeping through virtually all species of U.S. bats. While it’s hoped that none of our species will go entirely extinct, their numbers are becoming seriously depleted across the nation and will likely remain so for possibly tens of years into the future, or more, just at a time when mosquito-borne diseases such as West Nile Virus, various types of encephalitis, and even malaria and dengue fever are spreading northward in the U.S. due to global warming.

The Illinois Extension has an excellent small leaflet that describes our locally resident species and some of the threats to their existence ( See: [bit.ly/KMb0gt](http://bit.ly/KMb0gt)). Unfortunately, this was written before White Nose Syndrome appeared. One of the best sites for learning about the beauty, variety and importance of bats is Bat Conservation International, a group I belong to (See: <http://batcon.org/>).



*Reddish Egrets Photo by Richard Paulson*