

JIM SERVI

# Birding Keeps Gaining Popularity

## *Searching for Wisconsin's most unique birds*

**B**irding continues to grow in popularity around the United States with an estimated 85 million Americans taking advantage of the well-liked outdoor activity. Interest ranges from keeping a life list of birds and travelling to find new species to those who like to feed wild birds in their yards. Wisconsinites are lucky with over 400 species recorded and an abundance of viewing opportunities in every corner of the state. We also host some very unique birds.

Birding is a natural outdoor hobby for those who hunt, fish and camp throughout Wisconsin, because you are already near the best locations. My interest was sparked by my uncle Mark, who teaches in the Aleutian Islands in Alaska and just notched his 500th bird. Started in 2002, my list of 269 birds, spanning 11 countries and 17 states, has many more adventures to go to match that lofty feat.

For anyone interested in great birding opportunities, Mark says, "I'd mention Wyalusing State Park as a place to visit. I also saw a western tanager and Harris's sparrow at the same time in Gay Mills in Crawford County, along with both cuckoos. Willets and avocets were two rare sightings for me at Wyalusing beach. Thayer's and Iceland gulls in Milwaukee County were biggies for me as well."

Definitely some great places to explore and near the top of my list. To find the most unique Wisconsin birds, it will


take some work, but like anything that requires hard work, the reward is also great.

Standing nearly five feet tall, whooping cranes instantly come to mind as a unique Wisconsin bird. At one time, there were only 15 whooping cranes remaining. Thanks to Operation Migration, a program using ultralight aircraft to help the cranes to their migration grounds in Florida that recently ended, and other volunteers working to maintain the crane population, there are now over 600 cranes, including those in captivity. Still endangered, and one of the rarest birds in the United States, a flock that hovers around 100 lives in Wisconsin each spring and summer before returning to Florida. They make their Wisconsin home where Mark discovered his first whooping crane years ago. "I was able to add the whooping crane at the Necedah Wildlife Refuge," he said, happily recalling the memory as all birders do when asked about a personal discovery.

Kirtland's warblers are another extremely rare bird that can be found in Wisconsin. Placed on the endangered species list in 1967, they were thought to only breed in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Now they nest in the Upper Peninsula, Canada and Wisconsin. From only two successful nesting pairs found in Adams County during monitoring in 2008, the monitoring census has grown to

observations of 30 singing males last spring in Bayfield, Vilas, Marinette and Adams counties. Adams County reached a high of 12 successful nesting pairs in 2015 and is still the best location to find the elusive Kirtland's warbler. Habitat is vital when searching. They generally only live and breed in relatively large, dense stands of jack pines that are 5 to 20 feet tall (6 - 22 years old).

Piping plovers are a small, endangered shorebird that live along the shores of the Great Lakes. Only a handful of breeding pairs have thrived in Wisconsin in recent years, but 2016 saw a big announcement for the piping plover. For the first time in 75 years, piping plovers nested at the newly-restored Cat Island Chain in the Lower Green Bay area. Prior to that, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore was the only regular nesting sites. Several other areas have been established as critical habitat in Marinette, Manitowoc, Douglas and Ashland County to continue that momentum.

All of these locations are great places to begin or continue your birding journey. The great thing about birding is you only need a backyard or local park to begin and Wisconsin has a lifetime of destinations to explore. 

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