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Illinois Bird Clubs Provide for Varied Interests and Skill Levels

By Christine Williamson

Birders of all calibers from the beginner to the fanatical lister tend to flock together to learn more about birds or brag about birds they have seen. A local bird club is very often the vehicle which helps turn an interested nature watcher who has just been awed by her first Scarlet Tanager into a dedicated, skilled, and knowledgeable bird watcher.

A few people I know are entirely solitary birders. They actually taught themselves to bird from books and lots of solitary field practice. And they still prefer to bird alone. But for most people, a bird club is nearly as important as their first set of binoculars. As both a training ground and a source of camaraderie, bird clubs continue to flourish across the state.

Bird clubs in Illinois share some common characteristics. Most meet monthly except in the summer and over the Christmas holidays, and provide members with programs about birds, bird watching, and bird identification. Some clubs rely on local hot shot birders as speakers; others bring in nationally known birding experts for their programs. For example, the Chicago Ornithological Society recently featured Jon Dunn, an expert on warblers. Many club members take slide photos of birds on their trips; so travelogues about birding trips are some of the most common programs. For instance, the North Shore Evanston

Bird Club sponsors a slide night just for its members.

Most bird clubs offer at least local field trips. Some clubs organize much more elaborate and far-reaching trips to national and international hot spots. The Evanston North Shore Bird Club has featured trips to Whitefish Point in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as well as its usual tour of the Skokie Lagoons in suburban Chicago each spring. The Illinois Ornithological Society has organized pelagic birding trips in North Carolina as well as sponsored outings to hotspots in the state that others may not have known about. One trip, for example, brought birders to a Clay-colored Sparrow nesting spot in the Rockford area. The illustrious leader was American Birding Association's President Dan Williams.

Many bird clubs have special beginner identification field trips and workshops. Almost all Illinois bird clubs conduct at least a Spring and Christmas bird count in their area. Quite a few clubs also use volunteers to perform summer breeding bird surveys and some fund more in-depth birding research on ecologically sensitive properties in their area.

Bird clubs reach their members with a monthly, quarterly, or annual newsletter filled with club news and events, conservation news, and bird identification articles. A few newsletters are packed with bird count