

# More Than Birders: Illinois Volunteers Work to Save Habitat and Document Avian Population Trends

by Christine Williamson

One man fits 90 hours of hawk watching at Concordia College and 150 hours at Illinois Beach State Park into one autumn while working full time and spending time with his wife and children. Another worked diligently to defeat the DuPage County Board's plan to create a boating lake on the last large grassland in the western suburbs. An executive sold the interest in his family company to work as hard on conservation issues as he ever did for money, spending time in board rooms, swapping corporate issues for non-profit concerns. A suburban woman has removed two-thirds of the turf in her garden and replaced it with native plants, while a Chicago man works to enhance the natural areas along the shores of Lake Michigan.

These are birders and they are volunteers, each enthusiastically sharing their knowledge and expertise with others.

Bird volunteerism is alive and well in every corner of Illinois. Christmas and Spring Bird Counts, the most popular of birder volunteer activities, are flourishing in the state, as are breeding bird surveys sponsored by the Bird Conservation Network, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and various counties, universities and research institutions.

But there's more.

Illinois birders are volunteering to:

- record the feeding behavior of Black-crowned Night-Herons that nest in the Lake Calumet region
- chart the nesting habits of Eastern Bluebirds
- observe bird-tree interaction during migration in Chicago
- collect ground truth for cutting edge Doppler radar studies of bird migration
- monitor birds at a natural area in a local forest preserve
- pull garlic mustard on habitat work days
- adopt a local classroom and help children learn to love birds
- advocate for the Lights Out! Campaign in Chicago and convince Chicago skyscraper landlords to turn off the lights at night during migration
- organize southern Illinois birding appreciation days to raise awareness
- help purchase habitat for birds.

Beyond the worthy volunteers who record every House Sparrow on Christmas Counts, staff bird seed sales, conduct excruciatingly early morning breeding bird surveys and go mad on Big Day Bird-a-thons, a class of birder

volunteer exists that has charged out the garden gate and into the jungle. Their passion is inspiring, and they are making or will make a big difference for birds that inhabit Illinois. In this article, we feature profiles of just a few of the volunteer birders making a difference in Illinois.

## The Plant Manager

Terry Schilling is

known as the plant manager around Lincoln Park's Jarvis Bird Sanctuary, on Lake Michigan where Addison Street ends. Schilling has been birding at the fenced-in, Sanctuary wood lot since the 1970s. The Sanctuary is justifiably famous as a migration hot spot. Once a mini-arboretum maintained by Lincoln Park Zoo, the area was fenced when its caretakers went off to World War II and then became largely forgotten as far as maintenance went. Still, the combination of 70-year old trees and a variety of non-native spring bulbs and low bushes made the Sanctuary a favorite of neighborhood residents and migrant birds.

The lack of maintenance finally caught up with the Sanctuary. In 1998, the spring invasion of garlic mustard was so horrific that Schilling obtained a key to the gate from a person who shall remain nameless. He snuck in and by himself, pulled three bags-worth of the noxious weed from between the two ponds on the east side of the fenced area. "I thought I'd made pretty good progress," Schilling said. "And then I looked up. I saw an unbroken sea of gar-



*Terry Schilling pauses during a work day at Lincoln Park Bird Sanctuary in Chicago, where he volunteers managing the land to create a healthy habitat for neotropical migrants.*