

# The Great Wisconsin Birdathon

FROM YOUR BACKYARD.

*Diane Packett*

The May morning is warm and sunny. In the backyard, chilled goblets of orange juice sit next to lawn chairs that face a table laden with a sumptuous feast of peanuts, beef suet, white millet and black oil sunflower seeds. Binoculars are at the ready. Let the Great Wisconsin Birdathon begin!

Every spring since 2012, teams of birders have joined the Great Wisconsin Birdathon to tally as many bird species as possible in a day while collecting pledges and donations for the Bird Protection Fund. Through the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, the fund has supported the second Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas, whooping crane reintroduction, Kirtland's warbler monitoring (and other monitoring programs), and bird habitat protection and restoration initiatives in Wisconsin and abroad. Environmental organizations all over the country actually host hundreds of birdathons each year.

For many birders, the birdathon is an opportunity and a challenge to find as many birds as possible in 24 hours, and even engage in friendly competition with other teams. Top-notch birding skills and a well-planned route through diverse habitats are assets here, as is the ability to go without sleep. Timing the birdathon to coincide with peak migration, and good weather for birding, make for a thrilling and rewarding day.

But it doesn't have to be that intense. The point is to get outdoors, see birds, and raise funds, and there are many ways to do so. For a number of teams, the birdathon is about birding small, locally



Common yellowthroat

JEFF GALLIGAN



CAROLYN BYERS, MADISON AUDUBON SOCIETY

**Fourth graders at Lincoln Elementary School in Madison spot birds in the neighborhood around their school as part of the Great Wisconsin Birdathon.**

and leisurely. These birders may not be able to commit to a full day of traveling, want to bird "green" without fossil fuels, or prefer birding slowly.

In 2014, John Kraniak wanted to see which species were in his own neighborhood, so his team did their entire birdathon in his backyard.

"I'm interested in urban ecology," Kraniak says. "Nature isn't something that's

just up there in the Northwoods. It's right here in the city."

When he announced his plan, teammate Florence Edwards-Miller cautioned him that they might be lucky to see 20 species of birds. When they wrapped up their bird count, they had seen 50 — and it was only 11 a.m.

To be fair, Kraniak says he has "a singularly well-situated yard," next to the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, and there was a wave of migration the previous night that brought 20 species of warblers to one tree. He had also baited Baltimore orioles to the yard with orange slices over the previous two weeks.

"It was almost like cheating," Edwards-Miller jokes.

For those whose front yards don't include an arboretum, a walk through the neighborhood or local park can provide all the birds you need for a good day. Laurie Solchenberger's fourth grade class at Lincoln Elementary School in Madison has done just that, finding 39 species in the neighborhood around their school. The Great Wisconsin Birdathon has been part of Solchenberger's curriculum for several years, and last year her class took a different approach

to fundraising. Instead of asking their families to donate to their birdathon, students collected spare change over a period of three months and raised \$114. Half their earnings went back to the Madison Audubon Society, which worked closely with the class to teach environmental games to the whole school.

For 15 birders in Green Bay, the beautiful Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary was an obvious choice for a morning birdathon. Fueled by feet, not fossils, the GREEN Bay Birding team split into groups to hike about the sanctuary. Afterward, they gathered for a pizza lunch to share bird stories, and tallied up 87 species.

Clay-colored sparrow.



JEFF GALLIGAN

“It was definitely a social time, so we made sure we had fun,” says Nancy Nabak, who organized the event.

But perhaps the most relaxed birdathon happened entirely within a 17-foot-diameter circle. Anita Carpenter, a retired pharmacist, biologist and writer, has conducted the Great Big Sit for the last five years. Her bird count is part of BirdFest, a Bird City Oshkosh spring



Downy woodpecker.

JEFF GALLIGAN



John Kraniak and Florence Edwards-Miller conduct a successful birdathon in Kraniak’s front yard, spotting 50 species by 11 a.m.

JOHN KRANIAK, NATURAL RESOURCES FOUNDATION OF WISCONSIN


event in Menominee Park. In 2015 the Big Sit doubled as a birdathon team, the Winnebago Warblers. From a vantage point with views of Lake Michigan and Miller Bay, Carpenter and friends have seen as many as 50 bird species.

“People walk by or bicycle through the park and stop and ask us what we’re doing,” Carpenter says. “We tell them about the birds and let them look through our scopes, and they say ‘Wow, I go through this park all the time and I never knew all these birds were out here.’ I get excited when people get excited. I might point out a Baltimore oriole, and it might be the first one they’ve seen. It’s a good way to teach people about birds and nature.”

This year, the Great Wisconsin Birdathon is working with Bird City Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology to encourage communities all over the state to participate by birding backyards and neighborhoods, parks and public lands. Organizations and Bird Cities that participate receive half their team’s earnings to use for their own conservation projects. Birding locally allows people to connect with the very birds and habitats that they are helping to conserve.

“Birdwatching makes you appreciate the exact spot that you’re in, and gives you a sense of place,” Edwards-Miller says.

This year, the Great Wisconsin Birdathon takes place from April 15 to June 15. The Natural Resources Foundation can help interested participants form a team and raise money. For more information, check out the birdathon website at [WIBirdathon.org](http://WIBirdathon.org).

Then fill the birdfeeders, pull up a chair and enjoy the view. The bird you see could be the bird you save. 

*Diane Packett is the Great Wisconsin Birdathon coordinator and a wildlife biologist specializing in migratory birds. She shares her Oregon, Wisconsin home with her husband, three (indoor) cats and two beehives.*



Thanks to our Great Wisconsin Birdathon partners and sponsors: Bird City Wisconsin, Madison Audubon Society, Wisconsin Audubon Council, Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative, Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, *Birdwatching Magazine*, the Brookby Foundation, Eagle Optics, John J. Frautschi Family Foundation and We Energies Foundation.