

Birders of a Feather

Meet three people in Guelph
who do more than just watch birds

Arboretum and the few urban forests and neighbouring farm fields. Or is it just your average Guelph resident's ecological sensibilities and commitment to conservation?

The Canadian Nature Survey says that Canadians who engaged in watching, feeding or photographing birds did so for an average of 133 days per participant in 2012 — that's more than hiking, climbing and gardening. Point Pelee National Park reported a spike in visitors over the past few years for its Festival of Birds.

And it isn't just old folks birding. Nature Guelph added a Christmas Bird Count 4 Kids five years ago due to the popularity among families in their annual adult bird count, which celebrates 50 years this December.

For every birder, Guelph has dozens of birdwatchers. Wild Birds Unlimited reported an increase in sales of binoculars, seed and feeders, making last Christmas the store's second best in its 25 years in Guelph.

Birds are nature's ambassadors, the gateway into the natural world — an easy prize with their beauty, song and accessibility. They are also nature's "canaries in the coal mine," valuable indicators for changes in biodiversity and threats to the environment. Fifteen per cent of regularly occurring bird species in Canada are designated in some level of risk category by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife. One in eight bird species is threatened with global extinction, with 197 species critically endangered, reports BirdLife International. Sadly, statistics like this make birding a "see it before it's gone" pursuit for some birders.

The sport of birding can be both meditative and competitive. Anybody who's seen "The Big Year," the parody on birding fanatics starring Jack Black, Steve Martin and Owen Wilson competing for the largest species count over one year, should know that the stereotypes have some accuracy: birders can be obsessive. But Guelph breeds a very supportive, social community of birders with conservation at the heart.

In this feature, we introduce you to three of these people.



Chris Earley, the interpretive biologist with the University of Guelph's Arboretum, snapped this photo of a green bee-eater in Sri Lanka, where he has worked as a tour guide.

BY DAWN MATHESON

There are birdwatchers and there are birders. Birdwatchers look at birds; birders look for them. Guelph has a good number of both. Maybe it is due to our biology program, the only university in Canada

with a separate College of Biological Science producing offshoots like Wild Ontario, a travelling wild bird clinic and education program. Or possibly thanks to our plentiful green spaces: the 1,000 hectares of parks, the two rivers and lake (albeit person-made) protected by the Grand River Conservation Authority, the bird-friendly habitat at the

Chris Earley, the University of Guelph Arboretum's interpretive biologist since 1992, has been fascinated by birds since he was a young boy.

PHOTOGRAPHY • TEIGAN BAKER

Gavin McKinnon, *the kid*



PHOTOGRAPHY • PAULINE RUNSTEDLER

When I first met Gavin, he was a seven-year-old NAT, alongside my son. A NAT (“Young Naturalist in Training”) spends Saturday mornings banding birds and tracking animals through forest trails and Saturday nights in snowshoes at owl prowls and in hip waders at frog frolics. A long-standing partnership between Nature Guelph and Guelph Lake Nature Centre has yielded all this forest play for kids.

Gavin was the quiet child with dark almond eyes and long black eyelashes who watched everything like a hawk. Another NAT described Gavin as some kind of birding wizard.

One Christmas Day, at Guelph Lake for our family’s annual tradition of chickadee feeding, there was Gavin standing on the dam with a new telescope zoomed in on the gulls. Normally shy with us, he called us over: “You gotta look through here. You gotta.”

He’s 12 now, no longer a NAT but a NIT

(Naturalist In Training, ages 11 to 16) and known by many in Guelph’s birding scene as a rising star. When I interview him at his family home, he shows off yet another new telescope pointed at an open field stretching to the Speed River beyond. Gavin points out the nest boxes he erected in his backyard intended for bluebirds but visited mostly by swallows and house sparrows. His mom, Pauline, who has home-schooled Gavin from this very spot over the past few years, is in another room. His dad, Don, an ecologist, is out at work where he studies the greater sage grouse.

Q *Birding is kind of a passive activity, isn’t it? Some might suggest it’s more of an older person’s hobby, like golfing?*

A No, it is active. You are observing. You are walking out in the forest for long hours — like for five hours just to spot one bird.

Q *OK, but it isn’t really a typical pastime for kids, right? I mean, what about other 12-year-olds?*

A Well, it’s true; not many 12-year-olds are birding. So, yes, I’d say the majority of my friends are over 50.

Q *If you could choose between an afternoon playing all the video games you ever wanted with other kids or an afternoon birding with a bunch of seniors, which would you choose?*

A Well, it wouldn’t be the afternoon. It would be in the morning, when birds are more active.

Q *You’re young, do you have a memory of your first bird sighting?*

A Easy. The first bird I really remember seeing — the one who always greets me right at the front gate at Point Pelee — is a Baltimore oriole. We go every year for

the Festival of Birds. That’s where I learned about the 100 Species Challenge — seeing 100 species in a month. I started as soon as I got home, in 2010. The American robin is No. 1 on my list. It was on my front lawn. I got 55 birds that summer, but it was hard because I had to have my dad confirm each one since I was new. (And also just seven.) I’d sit on the deck then yell for my dad. By the time he came, the bird would be gone. Like No. 10: crow. I saw it way before that, at, like, No. 2, but my dad didn’t so it didn’t count.

(Gavin pulls out three sheets of lined paper that comprise his handwritten bird list. He has two photocopies for safeguarding.)

Q *Where are you at now?*

A I’m at 376. It’s not that impressive because I haven’t travelled as much as old people. That one’s my first unusual bird (Gavin points) — the mountain bluebird. I saw it in Puslinch. And that parasitic jaeger, No. 46, I saw on a boat in Newfoundland.

Q *What motivates you?*

A I don’t want to miss out on birds that have been seen. Like, if someone sees it, I want to see it, too.

Q *What do birds mean to you?*

A They can fly! I can’t fly. They can fly all the way to South America. And there are no customs — they are free, they can do whatever they want. Gulls at Niagara Falls cross the border 10 times a day with no customs. I want to go places, to be free like that.

At this point in the interview, Gavin jumps up and hollers. “Mom, there’s a green

heron in the tree! Where’s the camera? I’m going to digiscope it (take a photo through the telescope)!” Gavin points to a plump, velvety-green bird in a dead tree being dive-bombed by blue jays. After Gavin has uploaded the images to his Flickr account, we resume the interview.

Q *Do you have a favourite bird?*

A I have two: the red knot and the burrowing owl. Red knots are rarely seen in Ontario. I think there are, like, two records. I’ve never seen one. But I did see the owl in Grasslands National Park. OK, my very favourite is the red knot before burrowing owl. It is a reddish shorebird the size of a blue jay and breeds in the very tip of the Arctic up by Baffin Island. Then it flies down to the very tip of South America every year and flies back again! Not the longest migration like the Arctic tern, but long. I can’t get over how far it can fly, can you?

Q *What makes a good birder?*

A I think you have to like birds. But anyone can bird, no matter how long your legs are. You need to have good eyes. Well, you can be blind, but then you have to have good ears. I listen first, then I try to find it if I don’t know the call. But I usually know the call. I need to work on more calls though, like the really good birders.

Q *Who are the really good birders?*

A Well, Guelph is famous for birders. Can I pick three? No, can I pick five? One is definitely Chris Earley from the Arboretum. I help him out with his bird workshops.

Q *When you grow up, what do you want to do?*

A I want to be a guide for Tropical Birding or Quest Nature Tours like Chris. I’ve led one birding afternoon so far. I took the people up to the Arboretum, but they were more interested in frogs so it was only part successful.



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Chris Earley, *the educator*



PHOTOGRAPHY • TEIGAN BAKER

Whereas Gavin has the maturity and countenance of someone a couple decades beyond his age, Chris Earley's disposition is that of someone decades younger. At 47, he has a bounce in his step and displays such excitement when talking about nature that you can almost see a tail wagging. Having completed an undergrad in zoology and a master's at Guelph in environmental biology, Earley has worked as the Arboretum's interpretive biologist since 1992, a career, he says, he's always had. "I'm still running around with a dragonfly net trying to catch butterflies." Only now, the Arboretum, home to more than 200 bird species in the heart of the city, is his playground. Though he is known for birds (Earley teaches workshops on bird identification and has published four field guides

and a series of booklets), he's interested in pretty well everything nature.

QWhat got you into birding?

A I've birded my whole life. When I was seven we had a house in Strathroy that backed onto a conservation area. I knew all the local birds. I remember once I looked out at the mulberry tree and there was a black-throated blue warbler. I had never seen that bird before. Where in the heck did that come from?! I had to know why I hadn't ever seen it before and why it was here. That kick-started me on birds.

QYou were a kid who asked "why?"

A Yes. My parents didn't know a lot about nature, but they got me all the "How and Why" books. I used "The

Golden Pocket Guide To Birds" at six. I still have it. Then my parents took me to a local birder, Dalton Walpole. He was an older guy who had worked in the air force and couldn't hear very well. I could, so I pointed out the birds and he ID'd them. My interests just flew!

I was an anomaly. Back then, birding was for tree huggers and science nerds. People of all ages are really interested now, which is great.

QHow has your interest grown?

A Now, I bird all day long, but I tie birds into the whole picture. Like, birding is the jump-off point into nature. I draw people in through my bird workshops, then they are hooked. The more people are connected to nature, the more they are going to want to protect it. Don't tell anyone that I'm tricking them. Shhh.

QWhat makes you a good birder?

A I know the birds, and I know where to be in order to see them. Little sounds tip me off. Like, I'm even birding when I'm inside. Through the slats in my fan from my office here, I listen for bird calls. Two weeks ago, there was this faint sound coming through. My brain tweaked. I grabbed two people in the hall and we ran outside and 44 sandhill cranes flew by. I can't get away from it. At my house I have a speaker so I can hear the outside inside my house. I can bird when I'm doing dishes.

QDo you dream about birds?

A Yes. I have my regular bird list — I keep track for a biodiversity standpoint. I'm at over 2,150 bird species on eBIRD, a great online, shared resource — but I also have my "dream bird list," birds

I've seen in my dreams. I have over 100 on that list. And, yes, I dream in colour, that's how I identify them. (Laughing) I even had an adventure dream once where I was being chased by a monster, then a bird flew by and I had to stop so I could identify it. It's all very embarrassing.

QMost exciting sighting?

A My most rare sighting is three kakakeroris (Rarotonga flycatchers) I saw on Cook Island when I was on a university work-study. There were less than 25 in existence. Today, their population is starting to come back.

As an educator, my most meaningful sightings are always shared ones. One night, I was leading a group calling a screech owl. It's nice to hear an owl; sometimes you might see one. All of a sudden, one came out of the forest and hovered above my face, like right above my face and I honestly thought it was going to land on my face. You've never seen more shocked people! And not a single photo!

QWhat does it feel like to spot a bird?

A Like total fulfilment. You float for a while afterwards, especially if people are really excited by it. The nature connection has been made. I feel like I've done a good job. And birds are amazing because this connection can happen in your own backyard!

QBest location to bird in Guelph?

A Obviously, the Arboretum (he says with a wink). For me, the Wild Goose Woods. It has a variety of habitats so there is always an element of surprise and open enough forest so that you can get a good look at something when you spot it.

QTime of year?

A Slowest time for birding is July and August, but southern Ontario is amazing — there is almost always



A pine grosbeak perches on berries in the winter.

PHOTOGRAPHY • CHRIS EARLEY

WHERE TO START

THE ARBORETUM
Sparrow Workshop: Those Little Brown Jobs
Friday, May 20, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
uoguelph.ca/arboretum
519-824-4120 ext. 52113

GRAND RIVER CONSERVATION AUTHORITY
Search for "birding" at grandriver.ca
for birding maps and information.

NATURE GUELPH
(Runs Naturalists In Training program)
Check natureguelph.ca for May/June
birding events

INTERNATIONAL BIRD DAY
Stop by the covered bridge behind the
Boathouse at 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. on May 14
for birdwatching. The event is part of the
2Rivers Festival and is hosted by Nature
Guelph. Visit 2riversfestival.org.

POINT PEELEE FESTIVAL OF THE BIRDS
festivalofbirds.ca
April 29 to May 18

WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED
Bird Hikes
Meet in the Wild Birds parking lot on May
7, May 28 and June 18 at 8:30 a.m.
guelph.wbu.com
519-821-2473

something happening here. Like, in September there are the hawks! November and December is gull time. Then it's winter birding season — great for owls. Early spring is your early migrants. Then May! May is peak season, everything is moving through. It's bonkers! You've got migration, pair formation, lots of song. And in June, it's nesting.

QWhat is the furthest you've travelled to spot a bird?

A I've been a nature leader for Quest Nature Tours since 1999. I get to go all over the world birding, like the Arctic, and I've been to Africa 11 times. And this past February, I was just guiding in Sri Lanka.

QWhat do you identify as the biggest long-term threat to the bird population in Guelph?

A Loss of habitat. Guelph has a good record for connecting wild spaces, but there is so much pressure to develop. The Arboretum is slowly becoming an island surrounded by development and there is a great stress on the wildlife.

Marlene Hart, *the retiree*

Marlene Hart, at 72, is known as a good birder in Guelph’s birding circles, but she won’t tell you that herself. “I’m not the flamboyant type. Besides, I’ve only been at it for 15 years, since retirement.” Hart spent her career indoors in a hospital lab in a suburb of Montreal, “about as far removed from a bird habitat as you can be,” before moving to Guelph for her husband’s work. Knowing no one, inspired by a distant memory of a childhood love of birds, Hart popped into Wild Birds Unlimited in 2001 and rekindled her passion, something hard not to notice when visiting her in her south-end home in Guelph. Answering the door in a black-knit cardigan embroidered with jays, larks, cardinals and finches, Hart invites me into a living room where the decor is definitely bird motif. Her bathroom is wallpapered with shore birds, her bed cover adorned by red cardinals and her coffee mug with a red-breasted nuthatch. We sit at a table with piles of bird photos and calendars featuring Hart’s own bird photography. Outside the window, I see not one but four bird feeders brimming with seed.



PHOTOGRAPHY • CHRIS EARLEY
A pileated woodpecker.



PHOTOGRAPHY • TEIGAN BAKER

QAre you a birdwatcher or a birder?
AI definitely pursue birds, so I guess that makes me a birder. You won’t catch me sitting inside playing cards. I’d rather be out somewhere by a tree. I don’t go anywhere without my binoculars. OK, not to Zehrs, but I have them in the car always, in case. And they can be useful with street signs.

QWhat makes a good birder?
AI’m not a patient person, but I’ve had to learn to be. Once you see one, keep your eyes on the bird as long as you can to study it before it flies away.
One thing is you need a good memory. But it’s hard. Like, you go to see the warblers in May at Pelee one year — there are over 35 species — but then, 11 months later, you’ve forgotten them. You

have to go back to the guidebook!

QHow did this obsession begin?
AI came late to this. But, I have very clear early memories that stick with me today. I was five in a tiny town near Swift Current, Sask., and my dad pointed out a killdeer on a dusty road doing its broken wing act — you know, trying to distract us away from the nest. So smart! I was fascinated. And I’ll never forget hearing the western meadowlarks. Such a beautiful song — I can hear it still. My mom said I could name every bird in the “Little Book of Saskatchewan Birds” by the time I was three.
When I grew up, that all ended. I was working and had kids — you know, you need a lot of time to bird. So, not until I retired did I start birding.



A young Cooper’s hawk in Rockwood. PHOTOGRAPHY • CHRIS EARLEY

QTell me how that came about.
AIt was the Wild Birds hike led by Bryan Wyatt (he’s part owner and a great birder) in May 2001 on Crawford Tract. I saw an indigo bunting! The brilliant blue one. Amazing! That was the day I got hooked. Last Sunday I was with Bryan again on the same trail, 15 years later.
If people are interested in birding, Guelph is a great place to find a group and share birding adventures together. That’s what got me into travelling for birds, too.

QTo where?
AGosh. Trinidad, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Australia and New Zealand, where I saw a takahē — they’re endangered. I was on a protected island only reachable by boat. The first year, in 2011, I didn’t see it, so I went back in 2014, and saw not one, but three!

QWhat do you love about birds?
AOh the songs! You can get used to the cardinals and sparrows and chickadees, but now when I go other places in the world, it can be fascinating! In Trinidad, the bell bird song sounds just like a bell. I’m even fascinated by the really ugly songs, like

the harsh, grating song of Australian crow. Sounds like a cow being slaughtered. We humans as a species pretty well look the same, but there is no end to the diversity of birds! Humans are just so boring compared to birds! Not really! (Laughing) Well, sort of.

QWhat place do birds have in your life?
AThey practically give me a reason for living. Like the winter listing from Dec. 1 to Feb. 29, I see how many species I can get. ... There’s lots of competition, but really, I’m trying to beat my own record.

QLet’s talk gear — what are your essentials?
AMy camera. And my mom’s old Tilley hat for the sun. I’ve stuck on all my birding pins — there’s over a dozen.

QWhat’s left? What would you love to see on your list?
AI’m at 1,227. I just went to Cuba with my birding friend to try to see the smallest bird in the world, the bee hummingbird. A big, small one on my list. ... But I didn’t see it. Though we did see a Zapata sparrow. I only added 27 species to my list. Not a big haul this time. 🐦

style panel



Suzanne Bone, Indu Arora, David Halls and Emma Rogers are the Guelph Life Style Panel. See page 12.

Do you ever take time to do a little birdwatching?

SUZANNE: I do love seeing birds and hearing their songs, but I am neither birdwatcher nor birder. A few years ago, my youngest son was quite interested in snowy owls, and we drove out to where some had been spotted. Alas, the closest we came to seeing one was a white plastic bag that for a moment, in the distance, looked promising. These days, I have a colleague who has a bird-of-the-day calendar, so I know I’ll get to see one beautiful bird every day.

INDU: I have two children, Jasmine and Angad, and they love to birdwatch in the backyard, especially in the mornings when the birds are singing during breakfast time. We went to a March break workshop at Home Depot and the children built colourful bird houses that we will be placing outside.

DAVID: I have never been a big birdwatcher, but I do enjoy watching the larger birds around the lake at my cottage. It always gives me a small thrill when one of the large blue herons stops off for a rest on our dock. We were also quite privileged last year, during a trip to Peru, to be able to visit with a condor in a rehabilitation facility. It was an amazing experience to stand beside one of these massive birds. Their wingspan is huge and the claws on their feet were massive.

EMMA: Whenever I travel, I tend to find myself doing some sort of birdwatching. The last time I was in Vancouver and went whale-watching, I ended up watching the birds the majority of the time. They were everywhere diving into the water catching fish. It was really interesting to see how precise and quick they were — and a little nerve-racking as they came a little too close for comfort!