

MNBBA Fledging Birders – the whole story

When I decided to adopt a priority block to survey for the Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas project, I saw it as an opportunity to make a contribution to our scientific knowledge. Even better, it was an activity I could do while already pursuing my favorite activity, birding. Little did I know how much fun it would be and what other great discoveries were in store!

I decided to adopt two priority blocks in Pope County – West Central Minnesota. Since I grew up in Pope County and still have many ties to the area, it seemed fitting to explore there. Our family farm is in Pope County and I still have extended family living in the area, including my 97 year old mother, cousins, and several generations of extended family.

As I was scouting my blocks and making plans to survey the area, I noted that one of my cousins, his daughter (and son-in-law), and grandchildren lived pretty much in the middle of one of those blocks. I knew that the children were interested in birding and all sorts of outdoor activity so I decided to ask them if they would help me survey my block.

In early June I paid a visit to their home and sat down with 11 year old Aanan and 13 year old Mason. After briefly explaining the breeding bird atlas project to Aanan and Mason, I received an enthusiastic “yes, I want to do it” from both of them. Since time was short, I gave them a very basic outline of the tasks involved, told them I would send them some more information, and promised to visit them when I returned from a birding trip to Alaska. I sent them a packet of printed material from the BBA web site and a copy of Sibley’s bird guide. A few days later, I left on the birding trip expecting to return a few weeks later and pick up where I left off.

At the end of June, I paid a visit to the family and was fully prepared to start documenting breeding bird activity with the kids. I was quite pleased and amazed to learn that they had already started and were well on their way. On their own, they had created a working manual with the printed BBA material I had sent them. They had developed a birding route around their farm, studied the breeding bird codes, and documented bird sightings including location and conditions down to time and weather conditions. They had filled up the tally sheets I sent them and had started a separate notebook with carefully written information. Mason had utilized tape flags to create reference tabs in the Sibley bird guide, making it much easier to find birds in the book. All of this was done on their own with no further coaching from me or anyone else.

Their reporting accuracy was excellent. We spent much of the day birding around the area. If they were not sure of a bird, they were quick to say so. I quizzed them to determine if their observations were correct and noted that virtually all of their identifications were on target. I showed them a number of birds with which they were not familiar, including the songs and calls. They were very quick to learn new ID skills.

For me, birding with them was a truly remarkable and fun experience. Their enthusiasm, desire to learn, acute observation skills (youthful eyesight and hearing), and respect for nature’s creatures was fantastic. Also of note, they appeared to have developed this interest in birds pretty much on their own. There are no other avid birders in the immediate family, although, to be fair, everyone in their family is “animal friendly” and Aanan’s grandfather has encouraged him by helping him identify birds since he was a small boy.

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Their parents have a number of domestic animals at their hobby farm and their mother is known to have rescued many abandoned animals.

Perhaps the following anecdote relayed to me best exemplifies the enthusiasm and self-starting initiative shown by these kids.

During several of their birding walks, Aanan and Mason were unable to get a good look at one particular, skulking bird but continued to hear its persistent call. On the basis of quick glimpses and unsatisfying looks at the bird, they tentatively identified it as a Common Yellowthroat. Perhaps also somewhat motivated by their dad's skepticism regarding this identification, Aanan brought a portable voice recorder on one of their walks. He made a brief recording of the song and replayed it on the spot. Predictably, but quite unexpectedly to him, the bird flew right out and perched in plain sight providing them a confirmation of their preliminary ID. Not only is this a heartwarming story but, to me, this is an example of the initiative, creativity, and persistence of these young people. This level of initiative is rare even among adults but is even more striking among our youth. Once again, this was done with little or no coaching from adults.

As a follow up – I explained to Aanan and Mason why the Yellowthroat responded to the recorded song. They were fascinated at the little bird's need to defend its territory and were quite pleased with their new knowledge.

I plan to go birding with them again next year to nurture and encourage not only their birding interests but their wider interest in nature. I hope I can, in some small way, encourage what is already well established – a willingness to initiate action and follow through – and an interest in the creatures around them. During the last birding day we were able to find one of Mason's "target birds", a pair of American Redstarts. In August we birded Glacial Lakes State Park (in Bob Russell's block) and some prairie areas in the county hoping to find Aanan's "target bird", Cedar Waxwings. We found some Waxwings. We also found a pair of American Kestrels with at least one juvenal. We were able to admire them in the scope, preening. On our hike, Mason, our plant expert, pointed out numerous wild flowers and native prairie plants.

Both, however, participated fully in the BBS project and both have demonstrated great maturity, creativity, initiative, and energy. Their teamwork on this project was terrific and truly inspiring. For his effort, I placed Aanan's name in contention for a pair of binoculars through the "Biology Binocular Bob" program at the Minnesota Ornithologist's Union Youth Mentorship Program and he was selected to receive a pair this year.

For me, it is an honor to share this experience with them an unexpected bonus for what began as a simple and mundane task in the Breeding Bird Atlas Project. What fun this has turned out to be!

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