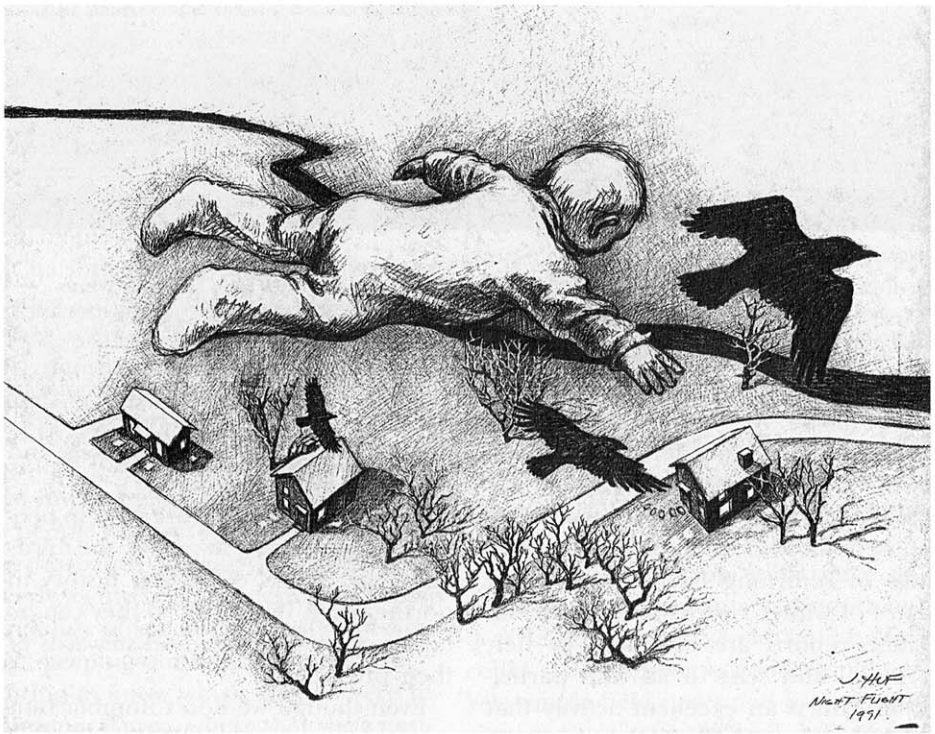

Night Flight *by Judith Huf*

Sharing the Wonder of Birds with Kids

The most important thing to remember when going birding with kids, says the author, is to make it fun. Following are a wide variety of tips and resources to help adults share their enjoyment of birds with children.

by Laura Erickson

One of the great tragedies of American education is the dearth of opportunities for children, or their teachers, to learn about the birds and natural history of their area. Small children are fascinated by animals, especially birds, so nature study is a highly motivating way to integrate science, reading, math, history, art, and other disciplines. And even more important, an understanding of the natural resources of an area is critical for any citizenry to make intelligent decisions about how best to use and to conserve those resources. In a resource-rich state like Wisconsin, it seems unconscionable for any child to finish 12 years of public education without learning about Greater Prairie-Chickens, Sandhill and Whooping Cranes, loons, hummingbirds, warblers, cowbirds, and even chickadees.

Short of overhauling the educational system, there are many ways we individual birders can give opportunities to children and their teachers to learn about birds. For those of us with children or grandchildren, nieces or nephews, or neighborhood children, we can and should take one or two along when we go birding. Sometimes, of course, we go birding in search of solitude, but when we go on Audubon, WSO, or other field trips, or go out with a birding buddy, sometimes the enthusiasm and sharp eyes of a budding birder can both make the day more enjoyable and produce a bigger list.

When I was living in Madison, a high school boy used to go birding with several of my friends and me. He quickly became so much a part of our group that he didn't even seem like a kid. I once brought a 13-year-old girl along when I went on a birding tour of Texas. At first, a few of the tour participants were upset about having a kid with the group, but by the end of the 10-day-trip, every person there was happy she came. Her thrill at each bird was contagious, and her observational skills far surpassed those of most participants, so our group saw several birds thanks to her. One of the biggest pleasures for me was watching skeptical birders warm up to this teenager.

Some Pointers on Birding with Kids

Successfully leading kids on a birding adventure involves different birding techniques than you'd use when leading adult birders on a field trip. A spotting scope is *very* useful with children because they get such a great view, and it's an easy way of getting all eyes pointed at the same thing. You can get amazingly great looks at songbirds though a scope, though they often won't stay in the field of view for more than a minute or two. So, it's important to give each child a number when starting out. The first bird may stay in the scope for the first three kids, and then the fourth, fifth, and sixth in line may see the second bird. Assigning numbers ensures that everyone gets to see some of the birds, instead of a few dominating the scope, and kids are amazingly good at waiting their turn and policing themselves because they appreciate the fairness of the system. Make sure whenever you set up the scope to set it at the height of the shortest student.

If binoculars are available, students and teachers should practice pointing out birds to one another. This is a skill that many birders could stand to polish, too. To become proficient at observation as well as communication, practice pointing things out using landmarks that everyone can see. When you stop at any good birding spot, it's useful to take a minute or two to call attention to a few specific trees, rocks, and other objects that help students to give precise directions to a bird. A laser pointer can be useful in wooded areas, but make sure only adults handle it. My son has permanent damage to one retina after a kid at school pointed a laser momentarily at his eye. Obviously, you should never point the laser directly at a bird for the same reason.

The "clock system" for locating birds is worthless unless everyone knows exactly what the face of the clock is. Airplane pilots and birders on a ship or in a car use one clock system wherein straight ahead of the craft is 12:00, straight to the right of the craft is 3:00, straight to the left is 9:00, and straight behind is 6:00. This is a hard system for group birding situations where everyone is on the ground because people seldom all stand facing precisely the same direction. One birding situation in which a clock system works well is when you've found a bird in a deciduous tree and can define the body of the tree as the face of a clock. Unfortunately, in this age of digital clocks and watches many children have trouble telling time anyway.

Once the kids know where the bird is, it's often a good idea to show them a field guide picture of a bird as they're watching it. Although advanced field birders know we're supposed to observe and record field marks before consulting a book when documenting a rarity, there are some genuinely useful aspects to looking at the bird and the picture at the same time. First, on the practical side, when you're dealing with 30 kids and have only a couple of pairs of binoculars and one scope, passing around a field guide picture gives the kids waiting their turn at the optics something to do. More important for beginners, looking at a field guide representation and the actual bird at the same time will help them to fix in their minds how real birds compare with their representation.

Unfortunately, passing around a field guide to 30 students can be difficult—at least a few kids will lose the page, and some kids will take a minute or two to figure out which picture on a page is the bird they want. To simplify things, take apart an old field guide (the *Golden Guide* is great for this because its pages fall out after a few years' use) and make flash cards. When I was a teacher, I carried around 40 or 50 flash cards of the most likely birds, plus a field guide for unexpected treats. It was a simple matter to find and pass around the right flash card when a new bird appeared on the scene.

In a classroom or with a group of kids, you can use those same field guide flash cards and magazine photos of birds to quiz kids on their identification skills. When I was a classroom teacher, I put pockets on a poster board and could display a couple of dozen flash cards by our classroom bird feeder, so the kids could easily learn to identify birds around school. The pockets allowed me to change species seasonally.

Watching videos about birds with children does the kids a disservice. Remember that a half-hour quality video is the result of hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of hours of fieldwork. Most current videos are edited to be more exciting and fast-paced than reality, setting up kids (and a lot of grown-ups) to be disappointed with nature. My father-in-law once asked me in all seriousness why I bothered to go bird watching when I could see a lot more birds doing a lot more interesting things by staying home and watching TV. Slide programs, on the other hand, can be very useful for showing big, colorful photos of different species and talking about them. WSO has reasonably priced sets of slides of Wisconsin birds, and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and VIREO can fill in gaps. But when showing slides to children, make sure you have interesting stories about each species—kids are far more interested in the natural history and weird and interesting things about how birds live than they are in identification tips.

The most important thing to remember, whether you're taking kids on a birding adventure or showing them slides of birds, is to make it fun. That doesn't mean you have to be an extroverted performer in order to make it work. Simply show your own enjoyment of birds. And whatever you do, when a child points out a bird, don't be blasé. For example, if someone sees a European Starling, talk about how this bird was named by English-speaking people long, long ago—the name comes from "little star," either for the tiny, starlike flecks on its plumage or for its body shape in flight. Tell them that when Columbus came to America, there wasn't a single starling here. In 1890, a Shakespearean society in New York City decided to introduce every species ever mentioned in a Shakespeare play, and sent to England for 60 starlings which they released in Central Park. The following year, just to make sure their introduction took, they brought over another 40 birds. And from that small beginning starlings increased and multiplied until they are now one of the most abundant species on the continent. If it's winter, point out some starlings perched on chimneys warming their little fannies.

Resources for Birding with Kids

To learn a wealth of information about the common birds around you,

get a copy of the *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* or Kenn Kaufman's *Lives of North American Birds.* There are also abundant web sites that provide information about birds, or even full-fledged bird study lessons, for free. Journey North (http://www.learner.org/jnorth), the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (http://birds.cornell.edu/), the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (http://www.mbrpwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html) and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (http://www.uwgb.edu/birds/wso/) all have great resources for teachers and students (and birders in general!).

There are several ways we can encourage local schools to provide at least some nature study opportunities. Many teachers would enjoy teaching a bird study unit, but feel uncertain about their own birding abilities. Local Audubon chapters and bird clubs can help by providing local checklists and identification guides to schools in their area, along with a copy of their newsletter for interested teachers.

Duluth Audubon Society put together two kits that each include 30 pairs of binoculars, 30 field guides, the *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs* CD set, the *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds,* and other materials so teachers can have everything they need to teach a unit about bird study. Teachers are asked to pay $10 to rent a kit for a week—the money is used to replace lost and broken items. Members and local stores enthusiastically helped raise money and contribute items. Also, donating old spotting scopes, binoculars, and field guides to a local school is a far better way of dealing with them than putting them in a closet.

Local groups can and should schedule regular field trips specifically for teachers and Boy and Girl Scout leaders, and even occasional workshops to help teachers and others who work with kids to learn how to incorporate bird study into their curriculum.

If you really want to dig in, you can volunteer to help a Boy Scout troop work on their Bird Study Merit Badge; help Brownies, Girl Scouts, or Cub Scouts work on a bird project; help a teacher with a bird unit; or even sponsor a junior Audubon or after-school nature club. The current pamphlet used by Scouts to earn the Bird Study Merit Badge, published in 1999 when the requirements for the badge were completely revised, is written by Eagle Scout Scott Weidensaul, author of *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds.* It's a worthwhile book for anyone putting together a bird study project for kids.

As birders, we take pride in being able to discern the differences between the *Empidonax* flycatchers. With children, it's far more useful to know basic information about House Sparrows and Chimney Swifts (which nest in a lot of school chimneys!). Helping them find answers to their questions, you'll get immersed in some of the real mysteries of ornithology, and your own birding will be the richer for it. And, in the long run, the more people know and appreciate birds, the more vested in their protection our society will be. Teach kids to love birds today and you'll give both kids and birds a brighter tomorrow.

Laura Erickson
4831 Peabody St.
Duluth, MN 55804