

This is Wisconsin Water News, a production of the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. I'm your host, Marie Zhuikov. Today's episode is:

Accessible birding event delivers

Barker's Island in the Duluth-Superior Harbor was the site of a free, bird-focused morning during the fall of 2022. People of all ages and ability levels attended an accessible birding outing led by experts from the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory and the Friends of the Lake Superior Reserve.

My name is Luciana. I'm the education coordinator at the Lake Superior Reserve. We're really happy to host the event today....

The group met at the Lake Superior Estuarium on the island in Superior. They were welcomed by Luciana Ranelli, education coordinator for the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Ranelli explained the three options for learning about birds. The first was inside the Estuarium, where staff from the University of Wisconsin-Extension Upham Woods Learning Center had arranged bird artifacts and learning stations. Second was a spotting scope behind the Estuarium staffed by Pat Collins, a volunteer birding expert with the Friends of the Reserve. This was designed for birders with mobility issues or anyone who preferred a more stationary option. The third was a guided tour along the Barker's Island boardwalk with Margie Menzies, education director for the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory in Duluth.

Superior resident and former city council member Mick MacKenzie recently had hip surgery, so the second station appealed to him. He came to the event because he's

"I'm just enjoying life and this is part of it – to see this, you know nature."

MacKenzie discussed the population health of kingfishers in the estuary with Collins. Then MacKenzie noted that when he was young, he used to play on Barker's Island. He was impressed by all the thoughtful development on the island now. His recollections were interrupted by Collins, who spotted a hummingbird. MacKenzie was surprised that the birds were still around in September. Collins explained the birds' habits.

"They'll migrate through starting this time of year. As long as there are flowers blooming, they'll stick around."

Meanwhile, Menzies' group got oriented to their binoculars and began their walk on the boardwalk. Sightings of the ubiquitous herring gulls around the island prompted Menzies to discuss a rare bird that steals the gulls' food: the parasitic jaeger. A Jaeger Birding Festival is held on nearby Wisconsin Point annually this time of year because it's a prime time for spotting jaegers during their migration south from the arctic.

Her discussion was interrupted when two pigeons landed on the Estuarium roof.

"When you look at birds, what do you notice about that bird that helps you think about what it is? What kinds of diagnostic clues can you look at on that bird?"

Someone mentioned the pigeons' orange feet.

"Yes, those red-orangey feet are a dead giveaway . . . nice chunky body."

The group moved farther along the boardwalk, following the shoreline of the island to the public beach, which is surrounded by native plants. Along the way, they spotted a turkey vulture, common mergansers, mallards, cormorants and warblers.

Kate McCall, a member of the board of directors for the Friends of the Reserve group, attended the event because,

"This is the stuff I love."

She is interested in making the outdoors more accessible for people of differing abilities and previously attended an accessibility training session offered by the Reserve.

Just one of the things she learned was that cormorants don't shed water off their backs as easily as other birds after they've been diving.

"That's why they're so clumsy when they fly afterwards. I always wondered that. It's fun to learn more, not just the habitat of birds, but their patterns of flight. I just really enjoyed it."

This free event was made possible through the University of Wisconsin–Madison Dean's Innovation Grant to collaborators from Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center, the Reserve, Wisconsin Sea Grant, University of Wisconsin Extension, and Bayfield and Ashland counties.

That's it for this episode of Wisconsin Water News, just one of the ways that Wisconsin Sea Grant, which is 50 years old this year, promotes the sustainable use of Great Lakes resources through research, education and outreach. Listen and subscribe to us through I-Tunes and Google Play or at seagrant.wisc.edu. Thank you to Pat Collins, Mick Mackenzie, Kate McCall, Margie Menzies, and Luciana Ranelli, and thank you for listening.