

Ozaukee County Is FOR the Birds

By Marjie Tomter

What is this about Ozaukee County being a “Bird City” and why are so many individual Ozaukee municipalities following suit?

Along with the county, the city of Mequon, the Town of Grafton, the City of Port Washington and our neighboring Village of Newburg have all been recognized by Bird City Wisconsin in the last four years.

Maybe it is because they understand that the more species of birds that an area has, the higher the property values will be. An area that has many bird species needs to have a diverse collection of trees, shrubs and other growing things. Prospective home buyers as well as birds love that diversity of plants and a 2011 study in Lubbock, Tex., indicated that homes with more than one species of less-than-common birds in the area sold, on average, for about \$32,000 more than comparable homes without them.

Perhaps Bird Cities understand that birds are the indicators of a healthy environment and they are willing to take extra steps to improve the ecological health of their community. The birds are daily reminders that a community has a healthy eco-system, something that more and more people are seeking.

The Bird City Wisconsin website sums it up well. “Like the proverbial canaries in a coal mine, birds serve as indicators of the ecological health of our planet.... (And) without the environmental assistance we get from birds, we would have to spend far more money on pest control and keeping natural systems in balance. Insect-eating birds reduce the need for chemical pest control. Birds also are voracious eaters of weed plants and rodents. They provide us with “free ecological services” and are unheralded assistants to farmers, foresters and gardeners.” (And yes, when you use pesticides, you accidentally harm the birds. Fewer birds mean more bugs and then you spray more poison.)

Ozaukee County and its Bird City Wisconsin communities know that their residents love the birds. Bird watching is the second fastest growing hobby in the United States right now. Birding has a huge presence in Ozaukee. Ozaukee County has a prominent location on the Lake Michigan Migratory Flyway and people, as well as their avian counterparts, literally flock here in spring and autumn to be part of this.

Why does Bird City Wisconsin exist and what does it take to be a Bird City? Bird City exists to encourage all municipalities to practice sound conservation practices for birds by enhancing their environment and through public education. The rationale is impressive. Birds are indicators of the health of our environment. They capture our imagination with song, beauty and flight. They add to the quality of life and thrive in open, vegetated areas like backyards, playgrounds and parks as well as in natural areas. While they can be negatively impacted by development, smart planning can find ways of enhancing their environment along with development. Many species are in decline and awareness and effort can make a difference before it is too late.

Communities become recognized as Bird Cities by following guidelines and best practices for creating and protecting habitat, limiting or removing hazards, engaging in public education, practicing community forest management and celebrating International Migratory Bird Day. It is not a heavy load but more of a mindful approach to community practices while appreciating the beautiful things that we have naturally and are not only free, but are things that cannot be bought or replaced at any price.

When the Bird City Wisconsin sign shows up at the entrance to a community, it is a strong indicator that this is a community that cares about its environment. If your community is not yet a Bird City, you should be asking “why not.”

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