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Young birders stretch their wings

By Vanessa Schneider

Special to The Journal

Like most bird lovers, Ben Winger can tell you the down-slurred sound of what-cheer, what-cheer, wheet, wheet is from a cardinal — without even seeing it.

“For most people, it takes them a while to know there are birds around them,” says the senior biology major at Cornell University. “Birders, even in mid-conversation, are constantly listening to the noises.”

Recently while in Sapsucker Woods, surrounding the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, Winger was ready to grab his binoculars in one swift movement if he happened on a red-winged blackbird or a barn swallow.

Winger is captain of The Redheads, the student counterpart to Team Sapsucker, a group of five lifelong birders who work at the Lab, that last year won the World Series of Birding, a 24-hour bird watching marathon throughout New Jersey. More than 100 teams from around the country competed Saturday in different categories to find the most bird species, by sight and by sound.

Cape May, N.J., the site of the World Series finish line, is at the crossroads of continental bird migrations. From terns traveling from Argentina to thrush from Louisiana, enthusiasts can see thousands of birds migrate through the area this season.

The Cornell Lab, an ornithology powerhouse, is like the New York Yankees of birding. During last year's event, Team Sapsucker identified 229 species, beginning with the eastern screech-owl at midnight to a black rail at 9:52 p.m., and the team won again this year.

The Redheads, the first student group representing the Lab, also includes senior Scott Haber, junior Glenn Seeholzer and sophomore Jay McGowan. They came in second, competing with teams within Cape May County, while Team Sapsucker competed with teams covering the entire state.

On a path along Sapsucker Woods Pond, McGowan, appropriately capped with bright red hair, clutched his binoculars. McGowan, also a biology major at Cornell who began birding at age 5, says he's always been interested in the natural world.

“He's the impetus for the name Redheads,” says Winger, as McGowan approached, though the name really was inspired by the Cornell Big Red. “See anything cool?”

“I saw a worm-eating warbler,” says McGowan, referring to a ground-nesting bird that

feeds mostly on caterpillars, not worms.

"Sweet."

In its current composition, Team Sapsucker, the Lab's team of more than 20 years, includes co-captains John Fitzpatrick and Ken Rosenberg, Steve Kelling, Brian Sullivan and Chris Wood. Not every member will see and hear the same birds, so the event, which runs on the honor system, requires 95 percent of the birds be identified by all team members.

The idea for the event began in 1982, when World Series founder Pete Dunn and some friends wanted to bring attention to the habitats New Jersey provide for migrating birds. They came up with the idea for a game, and the first World Series was held in 1984 with 13 teams.

New Jersey is along the Atlantic Flyway, a migration route birds travel to breeding and feeding grounds in the north and south. Sheila Lego, who works at the Cape May Bird Observatory and has been organizing the event since 1995, says the state offers a range of habitats, making it ideal to spot different species.

"It goes from coastal to salt marshes to fresh water marshes," she says. "It's got grasslands. It's got mountains. It's got forests."

Teams raise money for the conservation cause of their choice. Last year, Team Sapsucker raised \$180,000, and this year hope to raise more for projects in Latin America.

"The reason why most of us are doing this, besides the competition, is it's a big fundraiser," Rosenberg says. "The more birds everybody finds, the more money is raised."

Since working at the observatory, Lego says, she has seen a phenomenal growth in the hobby. In 2001, there were 46 million bird watchers, ages 16 and older, in the United States, according to a report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2003. The survey defined birders as people who have either gone a mile or more from their home in order to observe birds or tried to identify birds around their home. Eighty-eight percent, or 40 million, of those birders observe in their backyards.

"It's very peaceful," Lego says. "You just need a pair of binoculars, maybe a field scope and a good field guide."

One of the highlights of last year's competition, Rosenberg says, was spotting the Western Grebe, a water bird from the west. There are few records of its presence in New Jersey, Rosenberg says, and that Saturday, Team Sapsucker was the only group to identify it.

Spotting that rare find is just one of the many reasons birders are so passionate. For Winger, there's always more birds to see and find.

"Once you start," he says, "you can't stop."

