

Let's go birding!

Many of today's best birders got out into the field at a young age. Catherine Cocks talked with Carl Bendorf, founder of Iowa Young Birders, about encouraging young naturalists.

What inspired you to found Iowa Young Birders?

After growing up and raising our family in the Iowa City area, my wife, Linda, and I spent eight years in Minneapolis and Chicago before deciding to return to Johnson County in 2011. Both Linda and I had a lot of background in education and nonprofit work. Combining this with a desire to give something back to the Iowa birding community led us to start Iowa Young Birders. Ultimately, our inspiration is a desire to provide young Iowans who are interested in birds with a way to connect with mentors and with each other and to use birding as a way to build awareness of habitat and conservation issues.

How did you get interested in birding?

When I was twelve, I started birding around the Amanos. A friend and I would ride our bikes out into the country (which wasn't very far!) to find birds. We even used a small reel-to-reel tape recorder to record birds. Over the last fifty years, I've always watched birds, and I've been involved in the Iowa City Bird Club, the Iowa Ornithologists' Union, and the American Birding Association, of which I currently serve on the board of directors. I've also been fortunate to learn from a number of mentors and friends, including Tom Kent, Jim Fuller, and others here in Iowa City.



Iowa Young Birders board member, Bill Scheible, (right)

Iowa Young Birders executive director, Carl Bendorf (right)



What kind of activities do you offer through Iowa Young Birders?

Our main program involves offering young birder field trips on Saturday mornings all around the state. Since 2012, we've led more than thirty field trips and have hosted more than five hundred young birders, parents, grandparents, and volunteers. Our field trips are led by volunteers and are family-friendly; they focus on giving young birders ages eight to eighteen a lot of encouragement and a great outdoors experience. There is generally no cost for our field trips, but we do require advance registration. We are also planning a special overnight bus trip this coming March to central Nebraska to experience the spectacle of sandhill crane migration. Our full schedule and all the details are at our website: www.iowayoungbirders.org. Our field trip program is made possible with support from both individual contributors and organization grants.

What information and equipment would I need to get started as a birder?

The main ingredients to start birding are a sense of curiosity and the willingness to give it a try. Anyone can start birding around home or in the neighborhood. Beyond that, there are endless options for binoculars and field guides and information on the internet; we try to provide some guidance for these on our website. The Iowa City Bird Club is also a great resource for learning about birds and birding. The best advice is to just start observing and, of course, come on one of our field trips!

Do you have a favorite place to look for birds in or near Iowa City?

Johnson County offers many excellent places to find birds, including Hickory Hill Park, Coralville Reservoir, and Lake Macbride. My personal favorite spot right now is probably our own five-acre property in northeast Johnson County. In the past three years, we've seen 148 different species of birds here, which is a relatively high number considering we don't have any water areas nearby.