

Informal bird watching event has spawned friendships for years

Jim Wright Special to NorthJersey.com
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With all the doom and gloom about bird populations plummeting and birds going extinct, I wrote this column because I figure we all might welcome something upbeat.

Here goes.

Two Sundays ago, a small flock of bird-watchers in my hometown nature preserve, the Celery Farm, broke a local record that had existed since 1990. Weather permitting, birders have gathered at the same spot on Sundays at 8 a.m. for as long as I can remember.

Standing on an observation platform and maintaining their social distance, six birders saw or heard 42 species in precisely 60 minutes as part of the weekly challenge.

For the record, those 42 species were one more than a trio of local birders counted more than three decades ago. Another bunch of birders posted a similar result from the same spot in 2003.

If 42 doesn't sound like a lot, try topping it sometime. Two constant frustrations of the hour are birds that arrive a few seconds after the 60 minutes are up and everyday birds that call in sick or deliberately stay hidden to annoy everyone.

As John Bird, an aptly named participant in the recent record-setting hour points out, "We missed seeing or hearing some really common birds such as cardinal, Carolina wren and song sparrow. I think it shows that there are many ways that the new record could be bested in the future."

The most enduring aspect of the "Hour on the Tower" -- as marsh warden emeritus Stiles Thomas dubbed the weekly event from the start -- could be the camaraderie.

If you've gone bird-watching with a congenial small group or hung out at a hawk watch, you already know that these gatherings include sharing anecdotes (bird-related or otherwise), catching up on news, and groaning at a pun or two.

That's certainly true of the weekly Allendale gathering. Over the years, the informal event has nurtured dozens of birders and spawned friendships that have continued long after participants have moved away -- to Massachusetts, Arizona, California and parts unknown.

Some alumni even stage an Hour on the Tower when traveling, challenging the Allendale crew from as far afield as the Andes and the Amazon.

What's more, as Thomas pointed out many years ago, "You, too, can have your own Hour on the Tower at your favorite birding spot."

What's to stop you?

*For the curious and those keeping score at home, the 42 species were Canada goose, mute swan, wood duck, American black duck, mallard, northern shoveler, green-winged teal, great blue heron, great egret, turkey vulture, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, red-shouldered hawk, broad-winged hawk, red-tailed hawk, killdeer, rock pigeon, mourning dove, belted kingfisher, red-bellied woodpecker, downy woodpecker, northern flicker, American kestrel, red-eyed vireo, blue jay, American crow, tree swallow, black-capped chickadee, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch,

American robin, gray catbird, European starling, cedar waxwing, black-and-white Warbler, American redstart, yellow-rumped warbler, rose-breasted grosbeak, red-winged blackbird, common grackle, American goldfinch and house sparrow.

The Bird-watcher column appears every other Thursday. Email Jim at celeryfarm@gmail.com.

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