



Redhead Exit *by Jack Bartholmai*

## Turning People On to Birding (In My Neck of the Woods)

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*For Roy Lukes, longtime naturalist at The Ridge's Sanctuary in Door County, the joy of birding comes less from list keeping than from the fellowship that sharing birds with others invariably creates.*

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*by Roy Lukes*

I got my start in birding after finishing a two-year hitch with the U.S. Army in June 1955. My very first teaching job, starting that fall, was in Shorewood Hills along the south shore of Lake Mendota. One of the first things I did was to become involved with the Madison Audubon Society and attend most of their Sunday morning field trips. Some of the excellent birders that I recall from those outings were Tom Ashman, Wilbur Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Norval Barger, Mrs. R. A. Walker, and Mr. and Mrs. Roy Lound.

What impressed me about those Sunday field trips was the strong teaching that was always present, and the ongoing desire to bird an area thoroughly but also to have good fun. I really can't recall whether or not there were die-hard listers on those trips; if there were, they kept it to themselves. However, if there was news of an unusual species having been seen, especially in the area north of Madison, the group did work very diligently to try to see it.

I do recall one occasion when the group suddenly came upon a Pileated Woodpecker. Immediately, great excitement dominated the scene—that is, for all but one person. Without reflecting the slightest interest, he nonchalantly said, "Oh, I've already seen one this year!" Yes, he was an inveterate lister and, then and there, I decided that I was not going to do my birding as he did.

It was while I was teaching seventh and eighth grade at Shorewood Hills that I began leading early morning bird hikes before school, especially in the spring of the year. Experience soon taught me that the trips were by far most productive with either all boys or all girls in the groups—never mixed. I did realize, of course, that there were times when mixed groups were tremendously important for the students' growth—just not with seventh and eighth graders trying to learn about birds in the field! I'd take as many students on those early morning hikes as



Figure 1. Among the many friends Roy Lukes has made in nearly 40 years as naturalist at The Ridges Sanctuary in Door County is this Ruffed Grouse, nicknamed Redruff. Photo (1977) by Charlotte Lukes.

I could fit into my old Nash sedan, usually around six or seven.

Yes, we did record lists on all of our outings, not necessarily to see how many species we could accumulate, but rather simply to keep good field notes that we later used in our classes. I must confess that there was always plenty of friendly competition between the girls' and boys' groups to see who could come up with the most species, but this point was never emphasized.

One experience with those wonderful groups stands out in my memory. By Christmas of that first year (1955), my students had come to realize that I enjoyed bird watching a lot, so they all pitched in and purchased an excellent

two-record set of bird songs made by the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University. In fact, I still have the records and the handmade card that one of the students produced to go along with the gift. It reads: "To Mr. Lukes, who is for the birds—and US!" It was signed by all of the students, and how I treasure this card today, so many years later!

What an excellent teaching tool those records turned out to be. One assignment I recall was for each of the students to write a short essay telling why they especially liked a particular bird song. It was Neil Reudisili who chose as his favorite the Yellow-headed Blackbird. This species and its song

greatly interested me, too. You can imagine my disbelief one Saturday morning during the spring of 1956, at Picnic Point along the south shore of Lake Mendota, upon hearing, of all things, a Yellow-headed Blackbird.

When I reported my find to Dr. Robert McCabe of the University of Wisconsin Wildlife Management Department, he told me that several pairs had been transplanted there as part of an experimental project. A wetland nesting site of this species had been encroached upon by highway construction near Sun Prairie, and it was from there that the nesting blackbirds were taken.

The following Monday morning I informed my bird watching students that I planned to go out to Picnic Point the next morning at sunrise. I had no trouble getting a group of about six, including Neil Reudisili, to accompany me, even though I said nothing about the possibility of hearing and seeing the Yellow-headed Blackbird. I had hoped to surprise them with the bird, but was having no luck finding it. Suddenly, just as I began to think we were not going to hear it, there came that unbelievable rusty gate-hinge sound, which on this morning was real music to my ears.

Neil Reudisili looked at me, his lower jaw dropping slightly and his eyes nearly popping out, and said over and over, "Holy Cow! A Yellow-headed Blackbird! Holy Cow! A Yellow-headed Blackbird!"

Never before that beautiful morning, nor since during nearly 50 years of teaching and leading nature hikes, has one of my birding groups been as thrilled with "the find" as those seventh graders were, hearing and seeing their first Yellow-headed Blackbird.

Neil Reudisili, now a Lutheran minister in North Dakota, visited my wife Charlotte and me during the summer of 2001 and, much to my great joy, Neil vividly remembered the occasion.

To me, this is what birding and nature writing are all about: the pleasure, challenge, learning, and discipline related to the study of birds, but perhaps more important, the great fellowship they invariably create.

It was when I started working as the manager and interpretive naturalist at The Ridges Sanctuary near Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1964, that I began leading twice-weekly early morning bird trips from late May through the end of July. Murl Deusing was president of The Ridges at the time and Harold Wilson, famous gull and songbird bander from Ephraim, was vice president. What excellent mentors they were! Both knew birds extremely well and were also outstanding teachers in the field.

Getting out of bed at around 4:30 A.M. on Wednesday and Saturday mornings to lead the bird hikes, doing morning and afternoon guided tours, evening programs, Friday morning exploratory hikes, teaching nature classes, working on the development of new trails, and building new bridges across the swales proved to be a huge workload. In looking back at those 27 years, I still feel that the bird hikes were the favorite activity of Charlotte and me—and of many Ridges members—and that it was through those hikes that we gained most of our new members.

We birded by car along a predetermined route of about 10 miles. In fact, our routes varied little from week to week. The important point was that we had come to know each of our 15–20 stops extremely well and could just

about predict what we and the group should be hearing and seeing, which made the two-and-a-half-hour trip very interesting and challenging for all people. Along with the adults, who ranged from experienced to beginning birders, there were also quite a few children.

What really added excellence to the early morning bird hikes was when I convinced my Ridges board of directors that we needed enough good pairs of binoculars to enable all participants to be properly equipped. We purchased 15 pairs of adult-sized glasses and 15 pairs of good quality children's glasses. Not once did we ever have problems with the birders and the binoculars they were using.

Charlotte, being the excellent recorder, carefully listed all bird species either seen or heard on all of these early morning hikes and posted them from week to week on a chart in the nature center. This feature proved through the years to be of great help and interest to visiting veteran birders or people who were new to birding and were anxious to learn. We were not nearly as interested in trying to amass large lists of species as we were in simply "keeping our finger on the pulse," getting to know which species were in the general area, where they were nesting, and what the population trends were from summer to summer.

I fondly recall one special stop northwest of Baileys Harbor along a quiet country road where we'd stop in front of a family's summer cottage. Fortunately, the building was set back at least 50 yards from the road and the shades were always drawn. Perhaps the owners were late sleepers or they were peeking out at us from the side of the curtain, wondering what all those peo-

ple with binoculars and scopes were staring at.

To the rear and side of their cottage stood a small storage shed, on top of which was fastened a black rooster weather vane. It was while we were finishing up at the previous stop that I predicted to our group that at the next stop I would show them an Eastern Bluebird perched on top of a rooster. Very few times did we miss observing a bluebird perched on top of the black rooster, using it as a hunting perch and scanning the surrounding yard for its breakfast.

Many area school groups visited The Ridges from May through late fall each year. Now that we owned 15 pairs of properly sized binoculars for young people to use, our birding classes really began to excel. We always split a visiting class of 25 to 30 kids into two groups on a rotating basis. I had a Sevastopol High School home economics class sew 15 durable side sacks, each large enough to hold Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds* and a notebook and pencil.

What a remarkable difference it made with all students having their own binoculars and field guide. We could really do some good teaching. Yes, simple field notes and lists of species seen were emphasized, but never so rigidly as to spoil the excitement of simply seeing the birds. Fortunately, I was able to whistle in Black-capped Chickadees and White-throated Sparrows successfully on a regular basis. In addition, we often saw Red-breasted Nuthatches, Common Yellowthroats, Northern Waterthrushes, and Winter Wrens. Sensing the thrills those students were experiencing—many of whom were seeing and hearing those birds for the first time—are some of my



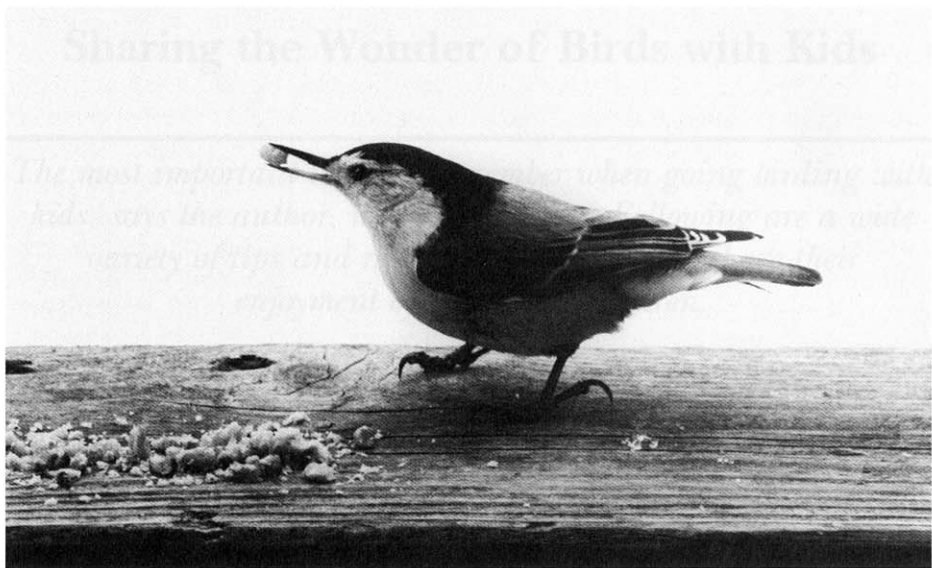


Figure 2. Teaching adults and children about the common birds in their area (like this White-breasted Nuthatch), says Roy Lukes, is more rewarding for him than amassing a large species list. Photo by Roy Lukes.

most cherished memories of teaching about birds.

Charlotte has coordinated a “spring bird watch” in Door County for the past 23 years, which involves around 20 households who record their first sightings of returning birds and the last dates of winter visitors for the season. These reports are tabulated by her, printed, and sent to all who participate. This is an excellent activity that adds to people’s knowledge of the birds of this area and also is a good way to get to know other birders who, in turn, keep in touch with us regarding the birds being seen throughout the year.

We’ve also kept day-to-day anecdotal records of many natural phenomena, including bird sightings and their daily behavior, on our 23 acres over the past 29 years. These records are filed by the month and many are used in my weekly newspaper nature essays. I’ve written around 1,900 essays, beginning in June

of 1968, for the *Door County Advocate*, in addition to those that have been published in the *Appleton Post-Crescent* and the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*.

Our main objectives are to help people become more aware of the birds and other facets of natural history in northeastern Wisconsin so they can be better observers and good stewards of their property.

Even though we don’t number ourselves among those who are challenged to see and list as many different species of birds that they can each year, I must admit that on many occasions after carrying my heavy tripod and spotting scope or camera on one shoulder, along with a carrying case of camera equipment, writing materials, and field guides, that I tend to “list” quite noticeably to one side!

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