

Birders of a feather

Great Minnesota River Birding Day brings out area's bird enthusiasts

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A fast start for birders means a very slow walk through the woods.

And the Great Minnesota River Birding Day got off to a fast start at 8 a.m. Saturday for the four birders in Seven Mile Creek County Park between Mankato and St. Peter.

A foot bridge makes for the head of the trail along the creek, and the quartet of binocular-toting avian eyeballers didn't make it halfway across the bridge before they stopped. Breaking into an impromptu formation that would have made a flock of Canada geese envious, all four put field glasses to their eyes and froze on birds somewhere in the woods.

"A blue jay, three of them."

"Ooh, there's a little guy. I think it's a ruby crown."

"There's a robin up there."

"There's an abundance of jays here."

"Are you sure it's a ruby crown? I haven't gotten a good look."

"Definitely. Eye rings. That's a ruby crown."

By the time the group got moving again, they'd added a chickadee and a flock of about 30 probable red-wing blackbirds. About 80 feet later Larry Filter of Mankato pointed, the other three get their binoculars up and they spotted a sparrow of some sort and some downy woodpeckers.



John Cross

Brad Beisel, Larry Filter, Frank Kraft and Bob Douglas, left to right, didn't get far down the trail at Seven Mile Creek County Park Saturday before spotting birds. The foursome represented one of 30 teams birding in the Minnesota River basin in an attempt to get a count of the variety and abundance of birds along the river.

Another 30 feet and they froze again when somebody eyed what turned out to be a white-throated sparrow and then, in something of an early highlight, a pileated woodpecker.

"We get kind of excited when we see one of those," said Filter, an avid avian watcher and leader of the team at the county park. "They look almost prehistoric."

A first-time birder tagging along on the walk never saw the quick-moving pileated woodpecker, but many of the other species were there for even the slowest-eyed people to spot and enjoy. That was part of the message that bird enthusiasts hoped to spread with the first, and probably annual, Great Minnesota River Birding Day.

It was a bird-counting exercise timed for the fall migration with 30 teams scattered throughout the Minnesota River watershed from the Twin Cities to the Iowa border to South Dakota to Ortonville to near Fergus Falls. The final list is expected to show an impressive array of species and a large volume of varied winged creatures.

The hope among members of Minnesota Audubon is that awareness will grow of the birding resource the river basin represents. The area is well placed for spotting migrating birds. And it represents a transitional area between the birds of the eastern deciduous forests and the prairies to the west.

The organization is working to develop the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trail, hoping to identify the best locations to share with people interested in seeing the birds for themselves.

Plenty of people should be interested. Birding ranks just behind golf and gardening among the most popular outdoor activities in the nation, according to Audubon Minnesota. The organization didn't identify the source of its statistics, but officials say that more than 23 million Americans travel annually to look at birds and other wildlife, spending an estimated \$29 billion each year. The implication is that the Minnesota River basin could draw tourists simply for the nice variety of birds in the area.

Filter, Frank Kraft of Mankato, Bob Douglas of St. Peter and Brad Beisel of Minneapolis weren't focused on economic development early Saturday morning. Despite cool temperatures and dreary skies, they were simply having fun.

Walking through a stretch of woods, a light sprinkle started to fall. Birds have enough sense to stay out of the rain, and most were apparently hunkered down in a dry spot. But the break in activity allowed the four men to chat about birding, including a discussion of the hotshot birders in the region.

One woman Douglas has birded with kicks butt when it comes to identifying a species.

"She just looks and she knows," says Douglas, a Gustavus Adolphus College professor, comparing her expertise to his struggles to decide what type of bird he's looking at. "I get so frustrated. I look and I fret and stew and I cuss."

Filter and Kraft talked of a local man who knows the birds' calls so well he almost always can predict what a bird will be before anyone gets a pair of binoculars locked on it.

The light rain stopped, a catbird meowed in a nearby tree, a flicker was spotted across the valley. The ignorant observer saw neither, but Kraft offered consolation. Even the devotees sometimes have to accept less than a precise identification when a bird darts by.

"Some of them get classified as LBJs," he said. "Little brown jobs