

An indigo
bunting at John
Parker's feeder.



Birding with babies



Phoebe Humphrey at Human Nature School
day camp.

Open Young Eyes and Ears to Nature's Winged Wonders

THE GRAND TRAVERSE REGION HAS LONG BEEN SYNONYMOUS WITH FOOD, ART AND RECREATION. Now its abundant shoreline and natural areas, national birding festival and birding “trail” that guides visitors to prime birding sites along a scenic 120-mile highway corridor are making it equally synonymous with birding opportunities.

And there's no time like the present to grab your binoculars and life list and get out in the field – or backyard. Mid-April to mid-May is spring migration time in the region, followed closely by nesting season beginning at the end of May.

But how do you make that birding excursion fun for the whole family?

By MARTA HEPLER DRAHOS

Photos Courtesy of the Human Nature School, Saving Birds Thru Habitat,
Boardman River Nature Center, Joe Brooks and John Parker

**“Bird’ is one of the first words kids say,
and birds move around so it catches the attention of kids.”**

— Docent and Boardman River Nature Center walk leader Molly McCombs

Naturalist and birding expert Alice Van Zoeren, of Empire, recommends starting in the backyard. Place a feeder by a window, where the birds’ bright colors and movements will tap into your children’s natural curiosity. Then encourage your kids to observe the birds’ behavior.

“Bird behavior is suited for any age level because it uses observation skills: what birds are eating and how they behave at the feeder, which ones grab a seed and fly away and which ones stay and eat,” she said.

Amy Daniels Moehle and her husband, David Moehle, encourage daughters Nadia, 13, and Sonja, 10, to keep track of what they see.

“When the kids were really little we put a blank list on the wall this time of year, as it transitioned to spring, and everyone would write down what they saw at the feeder,” said Daniels Moehle, of Beulah. “There was this delightful moment when the grosbeaks – we call them Mr. and Mrs. Grosbeak – came back.”

Birding with kids away from the feeder requires a different approach, one that doesn’t use the “B” word, Daniels Moehle said.

“If you take them, pack a little lunch in their backpack and say, ‘Let’s go for a walk. Why don’t we bring the binoculars?’ You don’t say we’re going birding. If you want children to do it, it’s all in the pitch,” she said.

Learning to deal with binoculars is a must before kids can venture far from the backyard feeder, Van Zoeren said.

“It’s a skill they have to develop. And that’s usually the biggest hurdle,” she said. “The trick is to look at what you’re trying to see steadily while bringing the binoculars up to your face.”

How well kids handle binoculars depends on their patience and their eye-hand coordination, said Stu Butterfield, a sales associate at Energy science and nature center in Suttons Bay.

“The problem with binoculars is you see something you want to look at and



Molly McCombs, docent and guide, gives kids an up-close look at the Boardman River Nature Center.



Kay Charter, the executive director of Saving Birds Thru Habitat, examined a nest box to determine which species nested in it. In this case: House Wrens.

sometimes it’s difficult to spot it in binoculars because they narrow your field of view,” he said. “For a child, that can be frustrating.”

The store carries binoculars for kids as young as 5, starting at \$14.99 for a 5-power plastic pair that’s easiest to use. Eight- and 10-power models for kids 8

and older feature metal construction for about \$5 more.

“They’re starter binoculars but real binoculars,” Butterfield said. “They’re good for smaller hands.”

Connecting kids to nature early by getting them outdoors is crucial in preserving birds and their habitat, said Kay

Birding resources for kids

Need a little help encouraging your young birder?

Kids who read may like early birding books designed especially for them. Among the best – available at Wild Birds Unlimited in Traverse City – are Peterson Field Guides’ **“The Young Birder’s Guide: Birds of North America”** and **“Bird Log Kids,”** a journal in which kids 5-12 can record their birding experiences, paste feathers and photos of birds and even draw pictures. It includes bird facts, games, projects and ways to help our feathered friends.

Birding websites, bird identification apps like *ibird* and other technology also can engage young minds.

Free-lance naturalist and bird expert Alice Van Zoeren, of Empire, recommends Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology’s **allaboutbirds.org**, an online guide to birds and bird watching, where kids of all ages can watch a fluffy albatross chick grow up on a live cam from Hawaii or play games like Bird Color Challenge. Players are shown an image of a bird for five seconds, then get to test their recall by selecting up to three of the bird’s most prominent colors.

On **KidZone.ws**, kids can work bald eagle and penguin jigsaw puzzles or play a “bird-word” word search game.

With a little help, kids can even use



ebird.org, a real-time online checklist program where global users can record the birds they see, keep track of their bird lists, explore dynamic maps and graphs and share their sightings in order to contribute to science and conservation.

“You can search and find out what people saw at Boardman Lake during the last 10 years in April, for example. Or you can search by species,” Van Zoeren said. “They have these amazing interactive maps that show the migrations by color. You can watch it over the course of the year as birds go south and north.”

Charter of Saving Birds Thru Habitat and Charter Sanctuary in Omena.

“If we don’t teach them about the wonders of nature, who’s going to take care of the natural world when they grow up?” she said.

The nature education center and adjacent bird sanctuary host scores of visitors and field trips every year, where kids are engaged through games, open-ended questions and observation.

“You guide, you let them discover. You take them out there and see a bird and say, “What do you think it is?” Charter said, adding that visits start out with a slide presentation on bird basics before kids take to the sanctuary trail. “It’s all kind of like playing an outdoor game. It makes them stop and pay attention to what goes on around them.”

Birding by ear is especially fun for kids, who have a natural facility for languages, said Charter and Van Zoeren. One of the most popular birds at Charter Sanctuary is the warbling vireo, whose distinctive call sounds like: Do you see me? Do you hear me? If you see me, will I squirt?

“Kids are really quick to pick up on birdcalls because they don’t have a preconceived notion that it’s going to be hard,” Van Zoeren said.

Kids at the Human Nature School in Traverse City listen for birdcalls not



Joe Rogers of the Wildlife Recovery Association in Shepherd holds out a pigeon for Nadia, left, and Sonja Daniels Moehle to touch at a fall meeting of the Grand Traverse Audubon Club.

to identify their species but to heed their message, said co-founder Kriya Townsend. The school, which offers year-round weekly nature programs for kids 4-13, teaches what bird language expert Jon Young calls the five basic bird “languages”: alarm, male-to-male aggression (territorial), juvenile begging, companion call and song.

“Birds are some of the best teachers. They’re like the messengers of the forest. So if you can tune in and pay

attention to them your connection to nature will be that much greater,” Townsend said.

The Boardman River Nature Center offers periodic programs about birds just for youngsters. But if you’re looking for a family outing, join one of its monthly nature walks the first Saturday of every month (April through December) at its Traverse City preserve. Docent and walk leader Molly McCombs said the two-hour-maximum

walks cover everything from leaves and wildflowers to amphibians and mammals, depending on what is encountered. Birds are a major focus.

“They’re so noticeable because they’re all around, especially with all the water we have there,” said McCombs, a member of the Grand Traverse Audubon Club. “‘Bird’ is one of the first words kids say, and birds move around so it catches the attention of kids.”

Families also are welcome on field trips of the Leelanau Peninsula Birding Festival, May 28-June 1. But parents can get a little alone time by signing up their kids for the festival’s Bird & Bug Safari, which meets at the Suttons Bay Visitor’s Center for the short jaunt to Suttons Bay Wetlands.

The GT Audubon Club doesn’t gear its program specifically to families but doesn’t discourage kids from coming to its meetings, said president Ed Moehle.

“We tried to reach out somewhat, but not to the little kids. We don’t have the patience that it would take to cultivate the little ones because their attention span is so short,” he said, adding that the average age of club members is 60.



Kay Charter, executive director of Saving Birds Thru Habitat, takes children on a “Bird and Bug Safari” in Omena.



Male and female cardinals feed their young.

“I’ve run into kids that were serious about birding, and they’d follow you all day long. But it’s rare.”

Consider striking out on your own

with a family visit to one of the region’s many land conservancy properties, with their diverse topography from woodland and wetlands to uplands and grasslands.

Glenn Chown, executive director of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, said properties that are part of the M-22 Sleeping Bear Birding Trail are some of the best for birding and are among the nation’s most unique.

He recommends the Dryhill Grassland at Arcadia Dunes, better known as the C.S. Mott Nature Preserve, and nearby Arcadia Marsh, in Benzie and Manistee counties, for nearly guaranteed sightings – a must when birding with kids. One is host to rare grassland birds like meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrows and bobolinks, while the other boasts coastal marshland birds like egrets and herons.

“You’ll get completely different habitat for completely different birds. And those people who like lists can check off the boxes,” he said. “Birding is like fishing. If you don’t catch any fish, you’re not going to go fishing again.” ■