

Bird brained

Greater Rochester, bastion of bird-watching

By Kate Antoniadis



Clockwise from top left: Northern Saw-Whet Owl, Cerulean Warbler, Rubenstein in action Opposite: Rochester Brainery fall birding class

Whether you've recently survived your first Rochester winter or you've dealt with our weather your entire life, you might find it hard to believe that you don't have to leave town (or visit the zoo) to see brightly colored tropical birds. In fact, you can catch glimpses of these feathered visitors when some of them nest here during the summer and others make a pit stop during their migration to Canada. Depending on the season and the location, you can encounter hawks, owls, vireos, warblers (the abovementioned tropical visitors), and many others. Greater Rochester is a prime spot for bird-watching, thanks to our location south of Lake Ontario and the many local resources available to birders.

One of these is the Rochester Birding Association (RBA), a nonprofit run entirely by volunteers. The RBA, which has about 370 members, leads fifty-one field trips a year—free of charge—to places like Irondequoit Bay, Braddock Bay in Greece, and Vitale Park on Conesus Lake. Beginners are welcome: Ten of each year's excursions are aimed at new birders. The group also supports local conservation efforts and hosts monthly speakers.

Although the RBA has gained many members since launching its extensive new website at rochesterbirding.com, it's likely that those numbers would be even higher if it weren't for the common misconception that bird-watching is solely a hobby

for retirees. Laura Kammermeier, who's been birding for fifteen years and is now in her mid-forties—and president of the RBA—dismisses this “old people” myth. In fact, she says, when she takes friends birding for the first time, their reaction is always the same: “Their jaw drops.”

Fellow birder Jesse Michael Rubenstein agrees. “Everyone who's never done it thinks it's going to be boring,” he says. His mission to get more people, especially younger ones, excited about birding led him to start New World Birding (nwbttours.com), a guided-tour company, in 2014. “My goal is to expose people to it and show them this is a fun, easy way to explore Rochester. I've been to places

Rochester Birding Association president Laura Kammermeier shares Her birding tips

In the spring, many birds' plumage is especially colorful, and you'll hear lots of birdsongs. Fall is also a good bet for birding, and even in winter various species of waterfowl gather on unfrozen lakes.

Make sure to stay on the trails and don't trespass (especially because a person carrying binoculars and a camera near private land will strike some people as

suspicious). Don't get too close to birds roosting on their nests, either. “If you stress them out,” she says, “they may abandon their nest or increase their stress hormones.”

If you spot a bird from your car, pull over rather than slow down to a crawl and continue driving.

Insect repellants with DEET help keep

away ticks, which can carry nasty diseases. Tuck your pants into your socks for extra protection, and when you get home, check your body for ticks.

During a rainstorm, the descending clouds can work in your favor, so consider staying outside if it's safe. “Often after a storm there'll be crazy amounts of birds,” says Kammermeier.

Grow | Wildlife



Bird photos by Dominic Sherony; others by Lindsay Steptany

I never would have known about, just while birding. Just get a pair of binoculars and you're good to go."

Kammermeier explains why there's a good chance you'll be able to observe a lot through those lenses: "As the birds migrate north from Central and South America, the ones that continue up to Canada reach our shore and drop down and are tired and hungry." After resting a few days, they cross Lake Ontario at its narrowest point. She says that warbler sightings are especially sought after by local birders. "A lot of people are all about the warblers—they're a little harder to see, and they're very colorful and beautiful." Along Braddock Bay, she says, a "world-class hawk migration" takes place each spring, bringing thousands of hawks.

Rubenstein often begins his tours at Washington Grove at Cobbs Hill. When passing birds spy the big green spot among all the rooftops, as they often land for a rest there, he says. A visit to the park can offer countless photo opportunities, but Rubenstein advises against being too focused on getting the perfect shot. "It's an

experience you have to enjoy in the moment," he says, "so if you're sitting there wondering how your Instagram photo is going to come out, you're going to miss the experience." 

Kate Antoniadis is a freelance writer/editor whose main gig is serving as editor of Corporette. A Rochester native, she lives in Brighton with her husband, son, and four cats.

Useful Resources

eBird (ebird.org)—a "real-time, online checklist" of millions of bird sightings; a mobile app allows birders to submit information from the field

Merlin Bird ID (merlin.allaboutbirds.org)—free bird identification app

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Sapsucker Woods (birds.cornell.edu)—offers classes, sophisticated birding tools, indoor and outdoor viewing areas and trails, and extensive web resources

iBird Pro, iBird Lite (ibird.com)—a field guide and bird identification tool

Rochester Brainery (rochesterbrainery.com)—Rubenstein occasionally teaches classes on birding, including one this September

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