



Focused on Feathered Flight

MY CO-OP

Chris West at Loveland Pass, Colorado.

By Al Cornell with photos by Chris West

When I asked him if he could make a living birding, his girlfriend laughed. Erin Lehnert, who is a biologist for the National Park Service, had sat quietly across the room for over an hour knitting a hat—or crocheting something. She quickly defended Chris West’s obsession with being a birder. He’s sticking to it and business is increasing. It’s a new profession and growing fast—she said, “Taking flight.” And she added that teaching nature subjects is an investment in the future.

Anyone living where the REC lines end at the upper end of Jarvis Hollow had better love the natural beauty of these hills. Residents there are surrounded by them and could easily be assimilated into them if they’re not overly burdened with electronics.



Chris spent his first 10 years in Chicago before his family moved to the 120 acres in Dayton Township. Even in Chicago, he had gained interest in birds. There were places where he could view birds, and he had a pair of binoculars by the time he was 6.

He was home schooled from first through 12th grades along with his brother Anthony. The 120 became the big backyard for their exploration. While no stone was left unturned, mostly the eye was drawn to the sky. Chris' fascination with flight began to fixate on feathered flight. Everybody knows there are crows, hawks, and sparrows, but the varieties continued to increase for him. To date, he has identified 176 species on or flying over their property.

Birds are identified by sight and by sound. Most folks can identify some vocalizations of barred owls and blue jays, but fewer know the voice of the bluebird. Devoted birders learn to use vocalizations for species identification of most birds.

Chris said, "I've lain out in the driveway and listened to various birds flying over during migration that won't land in this wooded habitat. I've heard tundra swans, ring-billed gulls, herring gulls, least sandpipers, and lesser yellowlegs."

Speaking of being out in the lawn, try scoping the moon at night. Chris says May 10–20 is the peak for spring migration, and up to 50 birds per minute can be seen flying across the face of the moon.

Of course, many nights are slower, but peak nights can be determined by checking computer sites that show up-to-date radar images of major bird migrations. Most of the bird images

crossing the moon cannot be identified to species, but this is one of those cool things a person can do from home. A person will remember this experience long after a typical night out would be lost in cerebral cobwebs.

If we expand the zone from the 120 acres to all of Richland County, the number increases to 242 species identified. Many of the added species are wetland associated. Some were seen at the Sextonville sewerage ponds, Lone Rock flowages, and the mill pond before the dam was removed. Another species was a snowy owl that showed up along Merry Hill Road. Barb Duerksen called Chris, and he immediately drove the few miles to view the large ghostly owl of the tundra making a winter's visit to the neighborhood.

Chris knows there are other species that reside in or sneak through the county that he hasn't seen or heard. Included in that list are short-eared owl (he saw one a mile into Sauk County), long-eared owl, and LeConte's sparrow.

But for birds to be the source of livelihood, Chris had to start small and develop into an international birding guide. He is now co-owner of Nature Scape Tours and in recent years has led tours to Trinidad-Tobago, Columbia, Ecuador, and Brazil among other locations.

Tropical areas are rich in bird species. Columbia, with an area about the size of Texas, has over 2,000 bird species, five times as many as the United States. In addition to numbers, the striking colors attract many bird watches to those areas.

When he was 14, Chris volunteered to lead a field trip for the Natural Resources Foundation and has led Audubon field trips for more than 10



Chris West is an international bird guide.

years. Many volunteer birding trips involve school groups, and Chris takes special delight in the awe expressed by first-graders as their focus is directed toward the fascination of feathered neighbors. After a few years, kids cross that threshold to where they are too cool to be wide-eyed.

When he was in southeast Arizona in 2009, Chris' bird guiding gained momentum. That is a popular place for birding, and he was able to initiate the guiding business. More recently, birding tours include winter trips to Sax-Zim Bog in northern Minnesota.

Leading a tour is not all just having fun. Fundamental to the tours is exceptional bird knowledge, but that alone fails to accomplish the task. For tour events, he has to be 90 percent travel agent. The business demands being able to handle the logistics and the group of bird watchers. Yet each trip offers Chris immense rewards.

Another aspect of the business is private guiding, which Chris has been doing for six years. It usually entails one to three clients but can be more. They come with specific

requests concerning places they want to visit or species they hope to see. It may involve a day spent locally, a trip to Horicon Marsh, or to places beyond.

As Chris' proficiency in bird guiding has become known, more doors of opportunity have opened. At one point, he was asked to be artist in residence at Woodson Art Museum for several weeks. He reviews worldwide bird guides published by Princeton University Press. His reward is a pre-release copy of the book for which he posts a review on Facebook.

He has traveled to Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, Belize, and Canada on birding trips. Those trips constitute part of the University of Hard Knocks for a professional birder. Intense birding includes sweat, swamps, and swatting bugs.

In a society where guidance counselors suggest pursuits at which one can "make a good living," birding is not on their list. Wealth is not a highly anticipated reward.

Chris is a local resource for those who want to talk birds, take birding tours, or have children interested in feathered flight. 



1. Sedge wren summers in Wisconsin marshes. 2. Greater prairie chicken in Colorado. 3. Wedge-billed hummingbird in Columbia. 4. Sword-billed hummingbird in Columbia. 5. Northern hawk owl. 6. Violet-tailed sylph in Columbia. 7. Red-legged thrush in Bahama. 8. Bobolink, once a common grassland bird in Wisconsin. 9. Great gray owl in Sax-Zim Bog in Minnesota.

MY CO-OP



MEMORIES OF SLEDDING

It was the week following Thanksgiving and it had snowed six inches, enough for sledding on Lizzy Hatliff's hill behind our one-room school. I dragged my old sled down from its storage place in the rafters of the woodshed, ran some sandpaper along the rusty runners and headed for school. I knew that during the first recess we'd all be out on the hill, those with the cheap hardware store sleds, and Mildred with her Flexible Flyer.

Flexible Flyers were the Cadillac of sleds. We all wanted a Flexible Flyer but knew we'd probably never get one. Sometimes, when Mildred was in a good mood, she would let one of us ride down the hill with her to get the feel for high-quality sledding on the back of her wonderful sled. What a thrill it was to ride on such a marvelous machine, to feel the wind rushing by, to hear the runners crunching on the hard-packed snow. To see the look of awe on the faces of your fellow schoolmates when you flew by.

Then, as you approached the bottom of the hill, you felt this precision machine turn in a wide arc in one direction and then in the other. No other sled came close to riding as well as a Flexible Flyer, or so we believed. If the truth be known, there wasn't a wit of difference between the ride on a hardware store sled or a Flexible Flyer. It was clear though that the Flexible Flyer was better constructed and flashier to look at. And the owners of Flexible Flyers also made sure we all knew the kind of sled they owned—which cost a bit more than our sleds. That was clearly one of the important qualities of the Flexible Flyer. It gave a kid bragging rights.

Sledding has been popular with school kids since Colonial days, when sleds were made entirely of wood and could not be steered. The Flexible Flyer sled was the first one to come on the market that could be steered. In the late 1800s, Samuel Leeds Allen, a farm equipment manufacturer, discovered that

to keep his employees busy year-round, he had them making Flexible Flyer sleds in summer when his business was slow. So he began making Flexible Flyer sleds in 1889. He tried various sled designs, starting with sleds with wooden runners, which he replaced with flexible steel ones. By attaching a movable crossbar, the sled became steerable. He named his creation Flexible Flyer and added the famous arrow and eagle design to the slatted wooden seat so everyone could recognize his creation.

Initially the sled didn't sell well. But as interest in sledding and tobogganing increased, the demand for Flexible Flyer sleds sky rocketed. Soon the Flexible Flyer sled sold more than all the other sled manufacturers combined.

The Flexible Flyer is still a prestigious sled. It has maintained its reputation over the years and today is a reminder of not only the fun of sliding downhill, but how, no matter what kind of sled a kid had, he still longed for the Cadillac of sleds.



Excerpted from Country Ways and Country Days, Voyageur Press, 2005. For more information go to www.jerryapps.com.

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