LIFE

Scour the skies with UConn's Birding Club



Students from the Birding Club gather on an early Saturday morning at Horsemarn Hill to get a look at some of the native birds on UConn's campus. These students have built a lot of friendships in this club by connecting through nature.

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It's 7:45 a.m. on a fall Saturday morning. The University of Connecticut campus is quiet and nearly empty — no doubt influenced by the 45-degree weather, which feels 10 degrees colder with the ceaseless wind. But for the dozen student members of UConn's Birding Club gathered outside the Wilfred B. Young Building, it's the perfect conditions to find some birds.

Jonathan Green, the vice president of Birding Club and a seventh-semester biological sciences major, said the early morning starts are necessary to catch birds when they're the most active.

"That's when the birds come out," Green said. "You can see them at any time of day, it's just easiest to see them when they're out foraging, and that's what they do in the morning."

It only took a few minutes to prove Green's claim. A brief walk brought the group to Valentine Meadow, a space behind Horsebarn Hill and a common birding spot for the club. With each member wielding binoculars, either their own or borrowed, everyone pored over the wide-open swath of land by the horse stables.

Once the initial excitement of a spotted deer faded, the collective attention turned toward red-tailed hawks. What started as a pair gliding far above the trees, avoiding pestering crows, suddenly became a group of six, all occupying a similar space in the sky. A buzz of energy ran through the group as the members took note of their behavior and sudden dives toward the trees below.

After the raptors' spectacle, the group inched toward an area of shrubbery. Countless sparrows flitted between branches, sporting their own mottled brown patterns. Amongst the common species, mainly song sparrows, came infrequent sightings of rarer variants like a white-crowned sparrow and a Lincoln's sparrow.

As the members scanned the area, Green pointed out the avian outliers and their distinguishing characteristics. With 12 years of birding experience and having joined the club in his fourth semester, he knew what to look out for. He said he tries to make the club as accessible as possible for anyone who lacks birding experience.

"I definitely try my best to point out everything I can," Green said. "Our goal is to get people out there and pay attention to things that maybe they weren't before while also allowing some connecting over shared interests."

The meeting wraps up around 9 a.m. Green recorded 18 different species and nearly 200 different birds within the hour of birding. Despite the high numbers and enjoyable sights, he joked that it might have been the least far the club has traveled during their Saturday meetings.

The club hosts their outdoor meetings every Saturday morning, typically around the same time. While they usually tackle locations on campus, especially near Horsebarn Hill, off-campus expeditions to locations like Mansfield Hollow State Park are also common. Green said winter does not stop the club from meeting outside, and that the Horsebarn Hill area supports bird species that are active during the season.

Rebecca Denhart, the president of Birding Club and a seventh-semester student double majoring in molecular and cell biology and ecology and evolutionary biology, said she helped establish trips to Hammonasset Beach in Madison, Conn.

"That first trip, I remember getting it set up was a challenge, but once we were there, it was a big accomplishment," Denhart said. "It was so fun to get out somewhere with other people and go somewhere different. We really enjoy going to the coast, now it's been a tradition."

Deven Gopalakrishnan, a seventh-semester structural biology and biophysics major, said staying on campus can be just as exciting as the farther trips.

"I really enjoy just going to Horsebarn Hill, even though you might see the same birds," Gopalakrishnan said. "Everything changes with season and it's never the same exact birds."

Denhart said the club also participates in a larger competitive event each semester. In the fall, the club joins an event called "The Big Sit," where members stay in a circle by Horsebarn Hill and identify as many species as possible while staying in the boundaries. In the spring, she said the club participates in an intercollegiate competition where members can move around and find as many species as possible within the campus radius.

"Some people can get pretty competitive about listing species or species numbers or being the top in a certain county or state," Denhart said. "But we try to balance that with quiet observation and appreciating the biology and natural behaviors."

But the outdoor fun is only half of what Birding Club offers. On Monday evenings in Monteith, you can find a couple dozen club members engaging in a variety of bird-related activities. Depending on the week, you may get a game of bird-themed Hedbanz, an educational presentation on local raptor species or screening of the animated movie "Rio."

A club favorite is bird-themed Pictionary, where members must draw a random Connecticut bird species for their team to guess.

"The energy is always really high with these games, but it's good practice for people too," Denhart said. "Knowing those essential field marks and what is going to get people to recognize the bird."

Information about upcoming meetings and trips for the Birding Club can be found on their Instagram.

The electric camaraderie between members, whether during Saturday's chilly dawn or amidst the slog of busy Monday evenings, gives a sense of what the community means to people.

"I don't think I would feel as good if I didn't have a social birding aspect too," Green said. "I had a realization of what it meant to bird as a club as opposed to just on my own. It's different, but definitely desirable to connect with other people that are interested."

Denhart said she joined the Birding Club in her second semester after always loving birds.

"I was always looking for a community of people my age to bird with that I didn't have a lot of exposure to in high school," Denhart said. "I came here and found the Birding Club, and finding people my age that I could relate to and learn from and collaborate with was really an amazing experience."

But not everyone comes into the club with a specific birding background. Gopalakrishnan said he joined on a whim after seeing the club at the involvement fair during his second year.

"That sense of community kept me going back because everyone there is just the best," Gopalakrishnan said. "It's more about spending time with the people in my opinion. I love looking at birds, but I don't get the motivation to go birding alone as much."

Gopalakrishnan said the club has changed how he views the world and the creatures that live in it, no matter how small or how much attention is required to see them.

"Birding Club has shaped my life," Gopalakrishnan said. "And I'm sure if you take the time to wake up at 7:45 a.m., it'll change your life too."



The University of Connecticut Birding Club meets on Oct. 19th at 7:00PM to play "Birding Pictionary" and converse. The Club meets regularly on Mondays and goes field watching on Sunday mornings.

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