

What it's like to be a professional birdwatcher

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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A birder who gets paid to find and count birds, Jonathan Stein is encamped at Harrington Beach State Park, a prime waypoint for migrating waterfowl and songbirds

Visitors to Harrington Beach State Park in the Town of Belgium are likely to encounter a plywood shelter just a few feet off the paved trail south of North Point, which separates the park's north and south beaches.

It's purpose is to shelter people conducting surveys of migrating waterfowl. The upper half of the east wall is open, providing a spectacular view of Lake Michigan.

Since late March, the shelter has been a second home to Jonathan Stein, the first full-time waterfowl counter hired by the Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory at Forest Beach Migratory Preserve. He stays in an apartment in the preserve office building, which also houses the observatory office.



"I don't know what I would have done without the shelter," said Stein, who has braved snow, rain, wind and frigid temperatures. "When I got here, the lake was all iced up as far as I could see. It was really neat to see the ice recede."

Stein, 28, is in the shelter every day, except Saturdays, from 6:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. — longer if it's an active flight day — peering through his long Bushnell spotting scope, recording the types and number of birds he sees.

He welcomes visitors. Just knock on the shelter and walk to the front to talk to the avid birder, who will gladly discuss the waterfowl or other birds he's seen and explain the difference between diving ducks (those that dive for their food) and dabbling ducks (those that dip their heads into the water).

"That outreach is a really important part of this job," Stein said. "You're sharing with people what you know about birds and nature and sharing your enthusiasm that may rub off on them."

"When there are a lot of birds, that has to be my focus, but when there aren't as many, I can talk."

One day last week, he spotted 250 Bonaparte gulls and 35 canvasback ducks and

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red-breasted mergansers in the first hour.

Most waterfowl migrate at night, when it's impossible to spot them, Stein said, so he's in the shelter before sunrise when the birds are still quite active.

"I'm mostly looking for migrating birds, those flying north," he said. "I have clickers for greater scaup, red-breasted mergansers and Caspian terns. I also count songbirds and raptors."

The question he gets most often — and one he wonders about himself — is what are the best conditions for waterfowl and hawks to migrate.

"There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason," Stein said. "It would seem the optimum would be strong south winds and a combination of sun and clouds, but it's variable. I personally think they're keying in on atmospheric pressures that we're not attuned to."

Stein's job with the observatory, which is funded through a private grant, will end May 30. His next job is in Adams County, where he will monitor nests of Kirtland's warblers, a rare bird that is found only in that part of the state and adjacent Michigan. He will monitor their nests for the Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Federation.

"They (the two areas) are thought to be the only populations left worldwide," Stein said. "It's a very rare bird. They have very specific nesting requirements and lost much of their habitat to development."

Stein likes that he gets paid for what he loves doing, and said it's important work that provides data to help protect bird and wildlife habitats and track the effects of environmental changes. His work is often required for environmental impact studies.

"It seems important to me to maintain for future generations this wonderful wildlife we have," he said. "Birds are such an important visible component of our world. It's important to maintain them."

Between jobs, Stein lives with his parents in Delaware, his sister in New York or friends or takes a vacation, his spotting scope and binoculars always handy.

"I lead a pretty nomadic existence," said Stein, who hasn't had an apartment or home since 2010.

When Stein participated as a volunteer in the Detroit River Hawk Watch, he met a man who travels around the world doing bird surveys.

"He said he thought it would be a good job for me," said Stein, who has a degree in American studies from the University of Delaware and was a journalist at the time.

In his new career, Stein was an intern at the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory in San Francisco, did songbird surveys in Illinois, New Hampshire and Wyoming and spent a winter in

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Jamaica mapping the territories of American Redstart warblers.

American Redstarts nest in North America but spend the majority of their time in the Caribbean and Central America staking out the same territory each year, Stein said.

Stein searches the Ornithological Society website for jobs.

"Most jobs here are in the spring through fall," Stein said. "It's difficult to find winter jobs like the one I did in Jamaica. They're very competitive and have limited openings."

So far, he said, he hasn't tired of the nomadic life and has made enough money to support his simple lifestyle. Stein's interest in birds was sparked when he was 8 or 9 by a pair of white-breasted nuthatches.

"It was amazing watching them walk down the tree upside down," he said. "I wanted to learn everything I could about them."

That prompted him to research other birds he spotted and led to participation in bird counts.

When he decided to make a full-time job of his avocation, he took courses in biology, general herpetology and ornithology and wildlife policy at the University of Delaware.

"But I learn better in the field than in school," Stein said. "I really value the knowledge that comes from getting out and doing things."

Stein said he used to photograph birds, but not any more.

"I would spend so much time trying to get a good picture that I didn't really watch the birds," he said. "It's more interesting to me to watch the birds' habits and create a mental image. There are plenty of photographs on the Internet."

Image information: A long spotting scope allows Jonathan Stein to count a myriad of migrating waterfowl on Lake Michigan.

Photo by Sam Arendt