

Increasing Bird Watching Opportunities for Youth in Diverse Communities 2021 Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Savaloja Grant Report

Organization: Anoka County Parks, Wargo Nature Center

Project Leader: Todd Murawski

Date Submitted: December 29th, 2021

In April of 2021, Anoka County Parks was awarded \$1,715 from the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union and its Savaloja Grant program. The goal for these grant funds was to increase bird watching opportunities for youth and increase the understanding and appreciation of birds for youth in diverse communities in Anoka County. These grant funds allowed Anoka County Parks to purchase 15 pair of Kowa YF II in 8x30 power binoculars (\$105 each). These optics allowed the programming unit of Anoka County Parks to provide additional youth-oriented birding programs to the youth of several diverse communities of Anoka County.

Wargo Nature Center, where the programming unit for Anoka County Parks is located, strives to educate participants on the outdoors. An increasing part of that goal has included providing bird-related programming for youth and diverse communities. Having additional high-quality equipment that is properly fitted for youth allowed the programming unit of Anoka County Parks to better facilitate the understanding and appreciation of birds.

Our participation numbers and requests for birding programs has grown significantly in Anoka County over the past few years. In particular, we receive many more youth/school aged requests, which has been a wonderful addition to our programming schedule. With the Savaloja Grant funds, Anoka County Parks was able to purchase high quality youth-sized binoculars. This has allowed us to better accommodate the increased youth birding programs and better equip young people so that they enjoy, learn about, and appreciate birds even more. Several communities in Anoka County hosted new youth bird watching/general bird education programs in 2021; including Columbia Heights, Spring Lake Park, Fridley, and Coon Rapids.



Youth birding programs were free to all participants and open to youth aged 5 -17. Marketing for these programs was done through county and municipal websites, seasonal activity guides, newspapers, Twitter, Facebook and marketing e-mails.

Accomplishments for the project include;

- 12 additional youth birding programs hosted in 5 different municipalities in Anoka County
- A total of 115 kids that used the new binoculars
- A total of 122 bird species observed during these programs
- Birding program collaborations established with communities in Anoka County, which will continue for years to come

Expenditures for the grand funds are as follows;

15 pair of Kowa YF II in 8x30 power @ \$105 each (+tax) = \$1,685.25

3 sets of backyard bird identification cards @ \$29 (+tax) = \$93.09

Total = \$1,778.34

All staff time, marketing, travel expenses, and additional materials for these youth bird programs were paid for by Anoka County Parks.

The one major challenge to accomplishing the goal of this project was restrictions and issues related to COVID-19. Several scheduled birding programs were cancelled due to lack of registrations, school districts eliminating field trips, and social gathering concerns due to the COVID-19 virus. Safety protocols were in place for all programs hosted by Anoka County Parks, including sanitization of equipment, limiting group sizes, and social distancing.

Also, our original proposal for the Savaloja Grant funds included a birding event in the spring hosted in collaboration with the City of Columbia Heights and Anoka County. When Anoka County was awarded a smaller portion of funds requested the decision was made to use those funds for additional optics. This allowed for additional birding programs throughout the rest of the year, and more importantly into the future, rather than just hosting one event.



Kids, ages 9 and 11, observing a Pileated Woodpecker December 2021



Columbia Heights, 55 birds observed by this youth group, September 2021

In conclusion, despite COVID limitations, the \$1,715 for MOU's Savaloja Grant program allowed dozens of under-served youth in Anoka County to experience the wonders of birding and watching. Having properly-sized optics for kids to use while observing our avian friends makes for a more positive and enjoyable experience for them. In turn, these positive interactions with birds, and the outdoors in general, has hopefully inspired a life-long interest. These new youth binoculars are going to be used for many years to come. Anoka County Parks will continue to collaborate with diverse communities to get youth outdoors, active, and birding! Thank you MOU for the Savaloja Grant funds and for all you do to promote and foster bird education, research, and appreciation.



Students trying out new binoculars