



December 21, 2021

Organization Name: Gunflint Trail Historical Society (GTHS)
Project Title : Birding Unit for Chik-Wauk Nature Center
2021 Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Savaloja Grant Report
Submitted by: Suzanne Weber
Grant Amount: \$1,420.00

The Gunflint Trail Historical Society operates Chik-Wauk Museum and Nature Center and deeply appreciates receiving the Savaloja Grant, made possible by a donation from the Savaloja Family in honor of John Savaloja.

With the Savaloja Grant, Chik-Wauk Nature Center was able to purchase new, durable, high-quality binoculars and other items which make a difference in the overall experience of visitors engaging in birding activities for many years.

Chik-Wauk Museum and Nature Center is located on Saganaga Lake, 57 miles from Grand Marais, Minnesota. Saganaga Lake is an Ontario/Minnesota border lake. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is in close proximity to the Nature Center. The 50-acre site was almost entirely burned over by the 2007 Ham Lake Fire, offering an opportunity to view forest regrowth and its associated bird species. It is a forest in transition.

Chik-Wauk receives over 8,000 visitors a summer. Many are guests of area resorts and campgrounds, and others are seasonal and year-round residents of the Gunflint Trail. The Nature Center is a building designed for activity. It features tables and benches and themed activity centers. Shelves are stocked with topical reference books, games, and activities. One of the activity centers is "birding".

Description of Project

The goal of this project was to establish a birding educational unit suitable for children through adults, which integrates the correlation between healthy environments and healthy bird diversity. Absolutely key to the project's success was purchasing quality binoculars which are sized for younger faces, as well as good-quality adult binoculars.

Two staff members, Kendall Prehn and Emma Adams, and one volunteer, Kathy Lande, were responsible for developing the birding unit. Kendall and Emma have environmental sciences degrees. Kathy has been a volunteer at the Nature Center for 11 years and an avid birder.

Nature Center staff and volunteers welcome visitors to the building, provide an overview, and must quickly establish and offer age-appropriate activities. Children must be accompanied by adults. Some adults are eagerly engaged, others browse the Nature Center resources while their children participate. All are strongly encouraged to take binoculars outside to practice birding skills.

Challenges

Summer of 2021 was full of challenges. COVID-19 precautions remained in place, requiring masks. Several Nature Center volunteers chose not to work with visitors, adding to the work load of staff. The entire region was in a severe drought, and in August the USDA Forest Service closed the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Superior National Forest lands. Chik-Wauk resides on Superior National Forest land, however, after two days, Chik-Wauk's buildings were allowed to open, but not the hiking trails. The nearby resorts suffered cancellations, and visitor numbers were down at Chik-Wauk during the closures. Then wildland fires broke out. By Labor Day Weekend most of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness was re-opened. By that time, the school year had begun, reducing the numbers of visitors with children.

An additional challenge was new staff. The two Nature Center staff arrived in late May and had little time to prepare for a full-scale birding educational unit, let alone test its effectiveness. The staff did well with the time available, and each had some training in ornithology. None-the-less, more time would have helped more fully develop and test a unit. Also, late May and June are the best birding months for population numbers and song identification. These two months were missed. The birding week took place in August, which offered limited opportunities.

The Gunflint Trail Historical Society looks forward to expanding and improving the birding unit in 2022 and future summers.

Budgeted Expenses

All binoculars budgeted were purchased. The price for adult binoculars *was discounted from the original prices found, thus reducing that line item expense.* The youth binocular prices were the same as the original research, as were the books, games, and other supplies. Staff and volunteer hours were approximately 120 hours on this project. An entire week in August was devoted to birding, however visitor numbers were down due to wildfires and closures of Superior National Forest. The Gunflint Trail Historical Society (GTHS) purchased bird call acoustic equipment in 2021, as noted. The equipment is used by both adults and children.

Children completing a birding activity during a birding "day" or birding "week" are eligible to receive a special patch featuring a Common Loon.

Staff and volunteers welcoming visitors to the Nature Center must quickly establish rapport and suggest activities, if an interest in activities has been expressed. Some visitors wish only to browse, others have specific questions. At the beginning of each day the staff set up activities at several stations in the Nature Center (spaced for COVID precautions). Each station has its own table and benches, reference library, and activities. There is a second area next to a window where the binoculars are placed, ready to be used. Next to the birding station is an interpretive panel with photos of common birds, and mnemonics associated with each bird song. The acoustic bird call listening devices are part of the interpretive panel. Often hikers return to the Nature Center to listen to the devices, after hearing a particular song along a trail (White-throated Sparrow, for example).

Families with young children are most often engaged in the “make a bird feeder” activity. This activity uses recycled cardboard tubes, string, peanut butter, and sunflower seeds. The completed feeder may be taken home or hung with the outdoor feeders. A picnic table near the feeders is a perfect spot to watch bird and red squirrel activity, and practice binocular use.

Those new to binoculars are encouraged to learn about focusing. Adults are engaged along with the children. In addition to the bird feeders, several other objects serve as binocular “target” practice. Those include a historic bird house which is used by Tree Swallow each year, a floating Common Loon nest, and a nearby beaver lodge. Once focusing is accomplished, outdoor practice on live birds (or butterflies or flowers) is encouraged. Nature Center staff are on hand to assist and answer questions and spend as much time as possible with each visitor.

The feather matching game proved popular for children approximately of pre-teen age. The game was purchased with the Savaloja Grant. Other birding games are available for use in the Nature Center for more experienced birders, and useful for rainy day activities.

The floating Common Loon nest has been used for many years (the floating unit has been replaced several times), and is a very popular feature. Since it is in the lake, it is protected by water on all sides. There is little watercraft traffic in the bay. Boaters are alerted with a signed buoy. Bald Eagle are the main concern. The USDA Forest Service naturalists presented two programs about loons during the summer of 2021. The Nature Center library contains numerous reference books about loons, and has many bird and birding guides.

Hikers may stop in the Nature Center and borrow a birding back pack. The back packs contain binoculars, birding guides, and a bird list for the 50-acre campus.

As much as time allows, Nature Center staff engage discussions of the environment of the area, its importance to birds and other flora and fauna. A bulletin board is set up daily for visitors to write their “sightings”, and find a magnetic identification card, if possible.

Each visitor is different. Some wish to simply walk through the Nature Center, others look for full engagement. The staff answers questions and locates further references for those seeking additional information.

Presentations are offered weekly during the summer and fall months. Many are science-based. In 2021 presentation related directly to the environment and birds were about climate change and weather patterns.

Actual MOU Grant & GTHS Expenditures

				MOU	ACTUAL	GTHS -Actual
Binoculars					\$ 748.00	
Four pairs binoculars for use on property.				\$ 712.00		
Four pairs of different styles of kids' binoculars t				\$ 200.00		
Books:					\$ 100.86	
<u>Bird Watching for Kids</u> by George Harrison				\$ 28.00		
<u>National Geographic Kids Bird Guide of North America</u>				\$ 40.00		
<u>Audubon Birding Adventures for Kids:</u>				\$ 20.00		
Activities and ideas for watching, feeding and housing our feathered friends						
Acorn Naturalist supplies:					\$ 241.23	
Feather replica sets				\$ 120.00		
5 Laminated gardening for birds guides				\$ 50.00		
5 Laminated nest/egg guides				\$ 50.00		
Journaling materials for assembling take-along bird lists.				\$ 200.00	\$ 45.91	
Birding Unit Program Development staff & volunteer time						\$ 2,000.00
Guest presenters -USDA Forest Service - No charge						
Bird Call Acoustic Equipment					\$ 284.00	\$ 716.00
			SubTotals	\$ 1,420.00	\$ 1,420.00	\$ 2,716.00
				Project Total		\$ 4,136.00

Nature Center - Director Jacqueline and family constructing bird feeders



Loon and chicks sculpture hangs from the Nature Center ceiling



Mother & son practice using binoculars. Window looks out at the bay.



Binoculars, helpful hints, new *Bird Guide*



Successful feather match. Interpretive panel and listening devices are on the wall and bench.



Kendall looking across the bay – floating loon nest is aligned with her elbow



Practicing using binoculars at Chik-Wauk, looking across the bay