



Thief River Falls Rotary Club

2018 Savaloja Grant Report

Thief River Falls Rotary BirdWatch Project

Grant Administrator: Jessica Muller - TRF Rotary

Studies show that birdwatching is good for us. It lowers stress levels, boosts concentration and creativity, and releases endorphins (the "feel-good" hormones). Being outdoors also helps us be more caring and connected to nature. Wildlife viewing also can have a positive economic impact on rural communities through tourism (Thief River Falls is destination on the Pine to Prairie Birding Trail) - and birdwatching is fun!

The goal of the Thief River Falls (TRF) Rotary BirdWatch Project is to introduce students to birds and to create a new generation of birdwatchers in Pennington County by

- putting the tools of birdwatching in the hands of every 7th grade student at Franklin Middle School
- teaching them how to use binoculars, field identification guide books and bird ID apps
- taking them outdoors to see the birds and wildlife of the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland
- exposing them to a healthy lifestyle that includes outdoor activities
- engaging them in life-long learning and citizen-science projects (eBird, Project NestWatch, Project FeederWatch, etc), and showing them everyone can contribute to the scientific study of birds

In addition to the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, the TRF Rotary invited local organizations, foundations (the Thief River Falls Education Foundation and the Beito Foundation), businesses (Scheels, Athlon Optics, Sjoberg Cable, Tractor Supply, and Walmart), government agencies (the NW Minnesota Regional Development Commission and the US Fish & Wildlife Service) and Agassiz Audubon Society to support the project.

The TRF Rotary BirdWatch Project purchased 200 binoculars and bird identification books - one for every 7th grade student in Thief River Falls - to use (and take home) for the school year. When the binoculars arrived in May, six Franklin Middle School (FMS) parents volunteered to unbox them, inventory them, attach the straps and ready them for students to take into the field.

Agassiz Audubon Society presented workshops at FMS on how to use the binoculars. In mid-May, science classes went on a field trip to Agassiz Environmental Learning Center - where they practiced spotting woodland birds.

Agassiz Audubon Society returned to FMS in the fall and presented workshops for 7th Grade Life Science students on how to spot and identify local birds using the field ID guide, bird checklists and the Merlin App (which the FMS IT team downloaded onto their iPads). Teachers Amber Murry and Dalia El-Sarraf took students outdoors to practice - and challenged them to spot, identify and document (prepare a report on) a bird in their neighborhood..





FMS science teachers and building staff identified a location for a bird feeding station (and a native plant garden) so students can participate in the Cornell Lab's Project FeederWatch. Tractor Supply provided bird food and metal storage cans. Sjoberg Cable donated a web cam.

When FMS teacher Mark Lee expressed an interest in adding nest box construction (Eastern Bluebirds, American Kestrels and Wood Ducks) to his 7th grade Industrial Tech curriculum, the Project applied for funding. We continue to seek donations to cover the cost - the lumber (poles and predator guards). After the students build the nestboxes, we plan to help them participate in Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Project NestWatch (partnering with the city of TRF and the TRF Public Library).

The TRF Parks Department has agreed to help us identify suitable locations for students to install nest boxes in city parks. Agassiz Audubon has volunteered to recruit, organize and train adult volunteers to help them during nesting season - through evening programs at the TRF Public Library.

In November, Agassiz Audubon presented workshops at FMS on how to spot owls in the TRF area, and in December, Agassiz Audubon volunteers took all six 7th grade life science classes out to practice spotting and identifying winter birds, and to survey and map bird feeding stations (and the plants that attract birds) within walking distance of school.



In the spring of 2019, Mrs. Murry and Mrs. El-Sarraf plan to focus on attracting birds to the FMS campus and creating a local bird checklist (and map) to display at school. The NW Regional Development Commission (in Warren) has donated two large poster-size maps of the FMS neighborhood for the students. This may result in a publication on the birds in the vicinity of FMS.



How are we doing?

Mrs. Murry and Mrs. El-Sarraf report that "everything has gone really well." They developed a student/parent binocular loan agreement, worked with the FMS grounds staff to identify locations for bird feeding stations, scheduled programs for students on how to use the binoculars and bird books, and provided opportunities for the students to get outside to watch birds.

Before the project started Mrs. Murry and Mrs. El-Sarraf had little experience with birds, binoculars and bird books. They said the Agassiz Audubon programs were important to the project because "the kids get more from an outside expert." Now that they've had an opportunity to experience it with their students, Mrs. Murry and Mrs. El-Sarraf say they're looking forward to doing more of it - this winter and spring. Studying birds fits right into the science curriculum ("the environment") they'll be teaching this spring.

The "bird feeding station" installed adjacent to the greenhouse windows has been a "startup" challenge for the project. The birds were slow to find the feeders and when they did, we were concerned about bird-window collisions. Mrs. Murry's students attached laminated leaves to the outside of the windows to make them more visible (by breaking up the reflections of the sky and the woods).

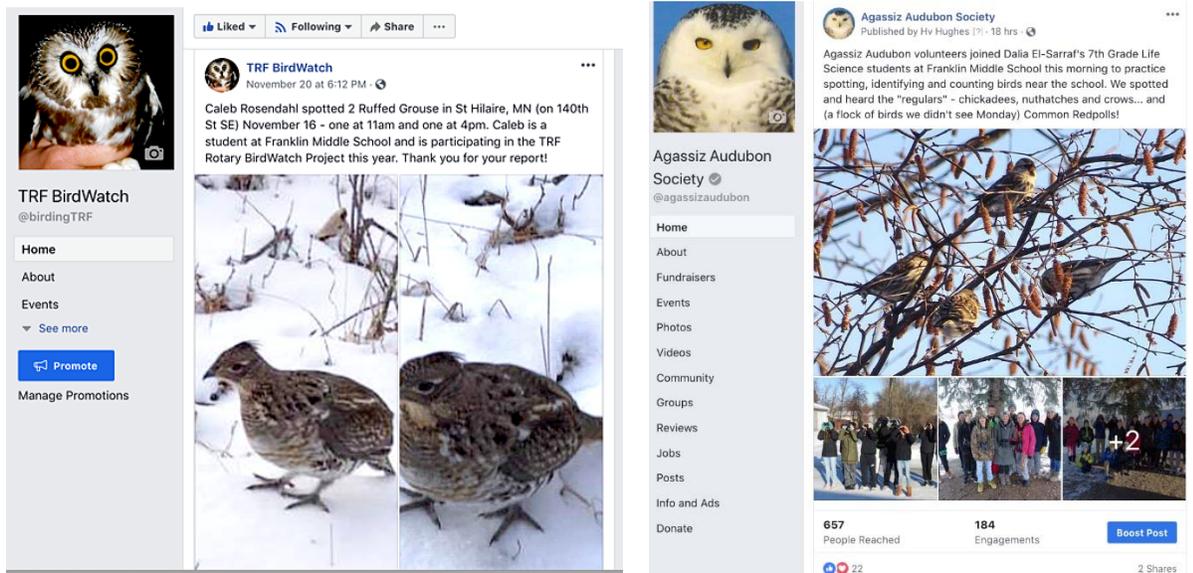
None of us anticipated that the FMS snow removal contractor (concerned that the snow piled under the poles would discourage birds), would remove the poles and feeders after the first fall snowstorm. So we're back to "square-one" with the feeding station. When we get the feeding station in a "better" location, students will have additional bird-watching opportunities (including participation in the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's *Project FeederWatch* and the *Great Backyard Bird Count* programs).

Another challenge has been off-campus birding trips to Agassiz Refuge and the flood control impoundments. The Project is exploring ways to fund bus trips, and to engage families in birding opportunities at Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge (the annual fall duck banding program), perhaps starting a TRF Christmas Bird Count (in collaboration with Agassiz Audubon, the TRF Public Library and perhaps Northland College) and publicizing family friendly raptor "events" in the Grand Forks area (Peregrine banding and Northern Saw-whet Owl migration studies).

Despite these first-year "start-up" challenges, we expect this year's program success to carry through into the future - and that birdwatching will continue to be an integral part of the 7th grade life experience in Thief River Falls.

Project Publicity

The Rotary, Franklin Middle School and Agassiz Audubon have publicized project activities through newspaper stories in the Thief River Falls Times (news releases attached) and posts on Facebook.



The image displays two screenshots of Facebook posts. The left screenshot shows a post from 'TRF BirdWatch' dated November 20 at 6:12 PM. The post text reads: 'Caleb Rosendahl spotted 2 Ruffed Grouse in St Hilaire, MN (on 140th St SE) November 16 - one at 11am and one at 4pm. Caleb is a student at Franklin Middle School and is participating in the TRF Rotary BirdWatch Project this year. Thank you for your report!'. Below the text are two photographs of Ruffed Grouse in a snowy environment. The right screenshot shows a post from 'Agassiz Audubon Society' published by HV Hughes 17h - 18 hrs. The post text reads: 'Agassiz Audubon volunteers joined Dalia El-Sarraf's 7th Grade Life Science students at Franklin Middle School this morning to practice spotting, identifying and counting birds near the school. We spotted and heard the "regulars" - chickadees, nuthatches and crows... and (a flock of birds we didn't see Monday) Common Redpolls!'. Below the text is a large photograph of several birds perched on bare tree branches, and a smaller photo of a group of people standing outdoors in winter clothing. The post shows 657 People Reached, 184 Engagements, and 2 Shares.

TRF Rotary BirdWatch Project
2018 Budget Report

Income - \$ 19,050

for Binoculars

\$2,000 - MOU Savaloja Grant
9,000 - TRF Education Foundation
4,000 - TRF Rotary Club

for Bird Field Identification Guide Books

\$3,000 - Beito Foundation

for Program Expenses

\$1,000 Thief River Falls Rotary
50 TRF Walmart

Product Donations

Metal seed storage cans: Tractor Supply
Bird food: Tractor Supply
Large Maps: NWRDC/ Troy Schroeder
TRF City Map
2 FMS Neighborhood Maps
Web Cam: Sjoberg's Cable

Expenses - \$ 19,050

\$15,000 - 200 Binoculars 8x42 Athlon Neos

\$ 3,000 - 200 Bird ID Books
Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America

\$ 1,000 Program Expenses

\$ 50 Bird feeding supplies