

# South High School

## Indigenous Bird Knowledge

### 2019 Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Savaloja Grant Report

#### Submitted by:

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Weekly Student Bird Walk

South High students are very grateful for the support of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Savaloja Grant Program! The Indigenous Bird Knowledge Project brought Ojibwe bird stories, basic birding skills, and knowledge of bird habitat needs to 130 Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee students at South High.

Students engaged in weekly bird learning and larger quarterly projects. Learning activities included weekly bird walks through the neighborhood on Fridays; readings from Charles Grolla's books, and live interactive presentations by Mr. Grolla over Zoom and in person;



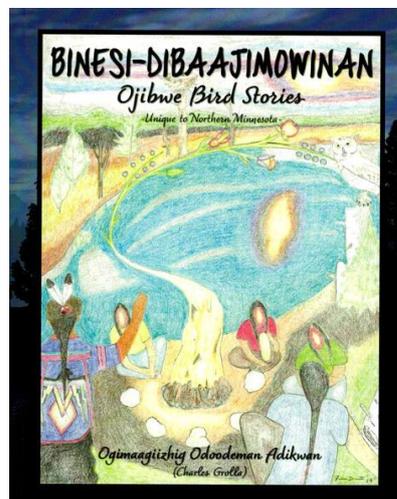
individual research projects about birds and the native plants that support them. Each student chose a species to research in depth. They learned about the habitat requirements, food needs, nesting needs, and behavior of their target species, and documented their research in project slides. They then made recommendations for the bird garden design based on their research.



The work with Mr. Grolla had a profound impact on many Ojibwe students and families, many of whom were excited about the opportunity to connect with bird knowledge from their own community for the first time or to build on their families' existing knowledge. For example, students were interested to learn about the important role of migizi (bald eagle) in Ojibwe culture and understand teachings from elders in their own families about eagles. Mr. Grolla's Zoom storytelling visits motivated many questions and inspired interest in bird behavior. Students wanted to understand why some birds migrate and some stay behind, and were amazed to learn that small birds like gijigijiganeshiinh (black capped chickadees) have adapted to survive Minnesota winters.

Students especially appreciated Mr. Grolla's in-person visit. During that visit, students were able to practice following proper Ojibwe cultural protocol for receiving oral teachings and learn about how bird knowledge is integrated with teachings about growing up and becoming contributing community members. Through these teachings, students understood that they have a responsibility to gain the knowledge needed to care for their bird relatives and to pass this knowledge to the next generation.

Reading Mr. Grolla's book and hearing his stories also inspired non-Ojibwe students, including Dakota, Lakota, Oromo, and Quechua students, to seek out bird stories and teachings from their own communities. One student shared a webinar recording with our class so we could learn about Dakota bird stories from Dakota elder Dr. Neil McKay.



One of the highlights of the year came when students created a slide deck about a bird to present to the community. Due to coronavirus transmission rates, we had to move to distance learning for a time and were not able to have students share their presentations at an in-person gathering, so I assigned each student to go home and share their slides with family members, as well as interview elder family or community members about their bird knowledge. It was amazing to hear the many stories shared by community members when we returned to class, and to see the broader impact of the students' work as they told of birding experiences with their families.

RESEARCH SUMMARY SLIDE: Blue Jay Diindiisi by Hopa, Krissa, Bre



**My bird's needs:**

Habitat: mixed woods and suburban and city gardens

Food: different types of nuts, grains, berries, acorns

Nesting: made with grass, weeds, twigs, mud, bark, moss about 8-30' high

How has colonization affected your bird?  
Blue jay population has decreased by 25% just since the 1900s

**About my bird:**

Name in Ojibwe:  
diindiisi

How big is your bird?  
10-12 inches

How does it behave?  
They are aggressive and intelligent

**One plant my bird needs:**

- White oak tree
- miizhimizh
- hides and eats acorns



Students mentioned pointing birds out to family members and were excited to share sightings of new birds in their neighborhoods. Students were also able to use iNaturalist and eBird to find out what species were being observed in the area, and they used the Cornell All about Birds website to find the identifying features of different species. Through in-school and out-of-school observations, students learned to use shape, size, color pattern, habitat, songs and behavior to identify birds. Many students who could not name any birds in fall were able to identify common neighborhood birds by spring, including misko-bineshiinh (cardinal), aandeg (crow), diindiisi (blue jay), opichi (robin), migizi (bald eagle), nika (Canada goose), ininishib (mallard), and baateshiwsh (dark-eyed junco).

In spring, students wanted to do even more to share their work with the broader school community, so they created posters about birds they had studied, and their habitat needs, and posted them in one of our school's display cases and in the hallways. Many students and staff were interested to learn more about the birds in our neighborhood and how we can improve habitat for them.



In the fall, students visited Oheyawahe (Pilot Knob), a Dakota sacred site and important habitat for overwintering and migratory birds.



There they learned about native plants and the importance of restoration for birds from experienced restoration workers from Great River Greening. Students applied that knowledge on the site when they participated in an ecological restoration by spreading seed of native plants, including plants important for food and nesting materials, and later when they developed a plan for a bird garden on the South High school grounds.

Work on the school garden was delayed due to the Minneapolis teachers' strike, but our classes persevered nonetheless, getting permission from the district for the project, smothering turfgrass and weeds and applying cardboard, hay, and compost to the garden site, and developing a list of native species beneficial to birds that would thrive at the site. Students developed a garden design which included plants that provide food, shelter, and nest materials for local birds, a bird bath and feeders.



## Initial prep of bird garden area fall 2021

Students smothered turfgrass and weeds with cardboard and landscape fabric.



## Garden Site Prep Continued in 2022

With continuing support from Great River Greening, students laid down a layer of cardboard, then compost, then hay, then another layer of compost and a final layer of hay.

Along with...



Our class secured additional funding and support from Great River Greening and will complete this expanded garden project next fall. Students hope that this garden will serve as a learning space for students and community members to observe birds and learn more about how to improve urban ecosystems to better support them.

#### Expenditures for South High Savaloja Grant of \$2425

- \$1250 – Ojibwe Bird Stories books; 30 books @ \$40/book
- \$250 – Charles Grolla webinar #1
- \$250 – Charles Grolla webinar #2
- \$725 – Charles Grolla in-person visit