

Sky Dogs, Bird Chick and Odd Bird land in Midwest

Written by Valerie Rose Redmond
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Sky Dogs, Bird Chick and Odd Bird flew in and landed at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge on October 13 for a birding diversity convention aimed at increasing birding among nontraditional audiences. The "Focus on Diversity: Changing the Face of American Birding" themed convention attracted a large flock of 75 birding enthusiasts from New York, Washington D.C. and from across the nation as far west as Los Angeles, Calif.

The conference was spearheaded by Dave Magpiong, president of the New Jersey non-profit corporation, Fledging Birders Institute. Magpiong is one in the group of birders who have donned the monikers Sky Dog, Bird Chick and Odd Bird.

"We're excited to be part of this conference," said Minnesota Valley NWR Refuge Manager Charlie Blair addressing the crowd. "We know that we will get information today that will help us move our program forward."

The conference focused the nation's demographic shift and the increasing and imperative need for concentrated outreach to nontraditional audiences. Barriers to birding and call to action strategies were also points of discussion.

The diverse crowd at Minnesota Valley NWR looked like America. "Who are American birders?" Magpiong asks. "This does not look like any other birding event that I've ever been to," he said looking out at the crowd before drawing the contrast of the American populace of 65 percent white and 35 percent non-white as compared to the birding community at 92 percent white and 8 percent non-white. "We share this love—beautiful birds. Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge was no accident," he said, referring to the venue. "It is perfect."

The dual mission of Magpiong's Fledging Birders Institute is "enhancing the healthy development of our youth with the profound benefits of bird watching and promoting public awareness of avian diversity and factors which threaten it thereby fostering a societal bird conservation ethic." The event was live streamed and tuned in by viewers at <http://www.livestream.com/USFWSMidwest>

Themes of relevancy, perspective and people were repeated throughout the conference. Speakers at the conference indicated that social economic factors, perspective and relevancy

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play a huge role when making attempts to reach non-traditional audiences. In his presentation, Clemson University Professor of Wildlife Ecology Dr. Drew Lanham referenced a popular birding corridor in an impoverished South Carolina community where the people have no water to drink. Attempts to rectify the situation were met with concerns from environmental communities about how it was going to impact bird habitat. This, he says, "while people have no water to drink." Lanham also referenced a population density map of people of color in the nation and invited the audience to overlay it with a bird conservation map. "Do we ever think about land conservation regions and think about the layers of humanity underneath? It's a critical thing," he says. "If you are not talking to the people on that landscape, then you are not addressing the issues of conservation."

Magpiong invited the audience to submit their call to action ideas before announcing that the next conference will be in the Rio Grande Valley. This diversity conference and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's decision to host it, brings us all one step closer to changing the face of American birding.



Notable speakers at the conference in addition to Lanham included wildlife photographer and author Dudley Edmondson, bird guide author Kenn Kaufman, birding enthusiast Paul J. Baicich, birdchick.com blogger Sharon Stiteler, Texas Parks and Wildlife ranger Roy Rodriguez, and birding enthusiasts Doug Gray, Marta DelCampo, and Derek Washington, among others. While Washington answers to Duck and Oddbird and Stiteler to Bird Chick, Edmondson, Gray, Lanham, Magpiong, Baicich, and Rodriguez have dubbed themselves the Sky Dogs. Also on the speaking agenda were the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's own, Dr. Mamie Parker, Judy Geck, and Tom Worthington.

For more information on this and other birding events, visit:

<http://fledgingbirders.org/about.html>

To view a live stream of the conference visit:

Early Morning Live Stream: http://www.livestream.com/USFWSMidwest/video?clipId=pla_22dff4e2-7710-4036-8327-71af78a3edf9&utm_source=lslibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb

Late Morning Live Stream: http://www.livestream.com/USFWSMidwest/video?clipId=pla_ee6246da-b695-43fc-b3c4-5c2630a6054a&utm_source=lslibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb