



## News Release

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### **Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Announcing 2026 Passenger Pigeon Award Winners**

*Recognizing outstanding achievements in advancing bird conservation*

**Madison, March 4, 2026** — Through the Passenger Pigeon Awards, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology recognizes individuals or organizations that have made outstanding achievements in advancing bird conservation, promoting the field of ornithology, and contributing to the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology mission of enjoying, studying, and conserving Wisconsin's birds.

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology board of directors selects recipients based on nominations received during the open nomination period. Award recipients are formally recognized during the Awards Dinner and Ceremony at the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Annual Convention to be held in Madison at the Best Western Plus InnTowner in Madison on May 15, 2026.

#### **Award Categories**

- [Bronze Passenger Pigeon](#) – presented to individuals who have made outstanding contributions in their local communities or in the state to promote the field of ornithology.

**Charles 'Chuck' Henrikson** for over ten years of guiding weekly bird walks at the UW–Madison Arboretum, inspiring many people to get more engaged in the enjoyment of birdwatching. Henrikson also serves on the UW–Madison Arboretum Board of Directors.

**Jill Kunsmann** created a neighborhood community science group, the Nest Box Ninjas, in 2023, to promote local bird conservation through nest box monitoring. Monitoring nest boxes on volunteer properties throughout the breeding season and monitoring vegetation provides valuable data on bird reproductive success in relation to native vegetation.

**Mary Murrell** for writing, producing, and hosting the bi-weekly "Bird Report" on WVMO — Monona's community radio station since 2018. Murrell's educational content often includes advocating for meaningful conservation efforts. The Wisconsin Broadcaster's Association honored her work in 2025. Murrell serves as the Bird Guide for San Damiano Park in Monona, a recognized Bird City, during their annual celebration of World Migratory Bird Day.

**Tom Schultz** for his involvement in the local community of Green Lake promoting the protection of habitat and encouraging the enjoyment of birds and nature. Schultz co-founded the Green Lake Bird and Nature Club in 2015. Schultz leads frequent bird watching field trips and developed a map of Green Lake County birding hotspots. An advocate for education, Schultz presents educational programs on bird identification, recent sightings, and manages the club's social media. The annual Green Lake Bird Fest was started by Schultz and includes a Birds and Brews Social, field trips, speakers, and engagement of local businesses. With support from Alliant Energy, Schultz installed Osprey nesting platforms at Green Lake, started the Green Lake Christmas Bird Count, installed informational kiosks about birds and their habitats, and is the coordinator of the Green Lake Breeding Bird Atlases.

- [Noel J. Cutright Conservation Award](#) – recognizes outstanding contributions to bird conservation in Wisconsin.

**Erin Geise** has dedicated years of service to the work of bird conservation. Through her work at the Cofrin Center for Biodiversity University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, Geise manages the research and restoration of the school's multiple natural areas, Wequiock Creek and Point au Sable and coordinates monitoring at Ken Euers Nature Area. In her role at the Cofrin Center for Biodiversity, Geise mentors students of all ages and career paths, works with the Oneida Nation on bird monitoring and conservation on their lands, performs outreach and science communication, coordinates with Northeast Wisconsin Bird Alliance, Audubon Great Lakes, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Piping Plover recovery in the Green Bay area, is a co-founding member of SOAR

(Snowy Owl Airport Rescue), and manages University of Wisconsin-Green Bay involvement with the Great Lakes Wetland Monitoring Program.

**Fred Strand** worked tirelessly on behalf of endangered and threatened species and promoted the establishment, management, and protection of bird habitat, relentlessly working to educate the public on bird conservation issues. Strand spent over 46 years saving the Common Tern from extirpation on Lake Superior and was responsible for progress toward the recovery of the species in Wisconsin. Since 1984, Strand banded over 20,000 Common Tern young, which have formed the nucleus for maintaining a stable Common Tern population along Western Lake Superior.

- [Samuel D. Robbins Lifetime Achievement](#) – honors people who actively contribute to the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology above and beyond their having previously received the Silver Passenger Pigeon Award.

**Carl Schwartz** has been engaged in Wisconsin's rich history of ecologists and naturalists throughout his professional and volunteer career. Schwartz is active at the local level through multiple birding clubs like the Ozaukee Washington County Birding Coalition and Noel J. Cutright Bird Club and is also active at the state level supporting the statewide Great Wisconsin Birdathon. During his service as the Bird City Wisconsin Program Director, he recruited and cultivated Wisconsin communities to benefit birds and people, designating 77 communities as Bird Cities.

- [Special Recognition Award](#) – recognizes the collective efforts of a far-reaching project or partnership that increases the public's awareness and appreciation for birds, their habitats or the need for conservation.

This year there are two award winning organizations.

**The Prairie Enthusiasts** have worked tirelessly to preserve, restore, and protect prairies and oak savannas throughout Wisconsin (and Illinois and Minnesota). Their land management has created and/or preserved vital habitat for grassland birds, whose numbers are in steep decline. The Prairie Enthusiasts work extensively with private landowners to protect remnant prairies on their land or begin prairie restoration, often through the Conservation Reserve Program. They provide consulting services and volunteer crews for prescribed burns of private land. Through their education efforts, The Prairie Enthusiasts have raised public awareness of the role prairies and oak savannas play in our ecosystem and the importance of protecting grassland birds.

**Gathering Waters** has spearheaded the collective effort to preserve and expand the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund working tirelessly to lobby, advocate, and rally Wisconsinites to work together to save the fund that allows conservation organizations to buy land and necessary habitat for birds and other wildlife in Wisconsin. Through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology purchased land to increase the Honey Creek Preserve. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program is in jeopardy and is in need of funding reauthorization. Gathering Waters continues to lead the efforts to save this valuable program.

For further information about the award winners and the years of recognition, visit [Awards - Wisconsin Society for Ornithology](#). To register for the 2026 Passenger Pigeon Award dinner visit [Annual Convention - Wisconsin Society for Ornithology](#)

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*The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology is a nonprofit organization established in 1939 whose mission is: promoting the enjoyment, study, and conservation of Wisconsin's birds. The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology sponsors birding field trips throughout the year, hosts an annual birding convention, publishes a quarterly journal and monthly newsletter, offers research grants, and serves as an informational resource center on bird-related issues. The Society provides opportunities for all people to enjoy resident and migratory birds, while being a leading steward of and ambassador for Wisconsin birds. [Home - Wisconsin Society for Ornithology](#)*