



YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB TOOLKIT

How to get started in structuring your new club,
recruiting members, and setting up activities



INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, then you have some interest in launching a Young Birders Club (YBC). All we can say is—go for it! It will be one of the most rewarding things you ever do. This toolkit offers some suggestions on how to get started in structuring your new club, recruiting members, and setting up activities.

Starting a club for young birders doesn't mean you need to be a bird expert or a kid expert. All that's required is a contagious interest in birds and nature. If you have a genuine desire to share this enthusiasm with fledgling birders, then you have what it takes, whether you are a teen or adult organizer.

Keep in mind as you coordinate this exciting endeavor, you're not alone. You can (and should!) rely heavily on partners. Consider the Black Swamp Bird Observatory and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology your first partners. (Contact information can be found at the end of this document.) We can help you find other local, regional, and national partners too. You may also have ideas about which groups would be thrilled to contribute to a cause as



worthy as a Young Birders Club. Together we can make this happen.

WHY START A YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB?



There is strong evidence reinforcing the emotional, developmental, and educational value of contact with nature, and starting a Young Birders Club is a great way to encourage outdoor pursuits. Though there are students out there with a strong interest in nature, we've learned they often feel isolated. Building a Young Birders Club gives them a community to be involved in.

For leaders sharing nature with the next generation, interacting with young people and fostering their interest is truly satisfying. The students' enthusiasm for birding is often contagious and inspirational. Involvement in a Young Birders Club can provide the most invigorating and rewarding work imaginable for the coordinators.

THE BENEFITS OF YOUNG BIRDERS CLUBS

The benefits of membership in Young Birders Clubs extend well beyond getting young people outside on field trips. Clubs help increase awareness and appreciation of the natural world and instill a conservation ethic in their members. Club activities also build important life-skills such as peer mentoring, leadership, communication, community involvement, and more.

- **Community:** Young birders may often lack friends at school who share their interest in nature, but clubs foster valuable friendships between like-minded students. By developing a network of peers and a sense of community, YBCs facilitate self-confidence and interpersonal communication skills among youth members. Seeing former YBC members returning to participate in YBC events testifies to the strong community that the clubs foster. Such continued involvement can also provide inspirational leadership and mentoring to current members.



- **Mentoring:** On field trips, adults step back and let the students take the lead. Students helping students is key to the success of existing YBCs. (See the Ohio Young Birders Club example.) Mentoring also builds self-confidence.
- **Career development:** By providing experiences and connections, YBC programs help build skills needed for careers in environmental fields. Involvement in a Young Birders Club adds credibility to the student's resume, college applications, and cover letters. Participation in YBCs has enabled members to attend prestigious colleges, be hired as seasonal wildlife employees with state and federal government agencies, and acquire jobs with international birding tour companies and other environmental organizations.

Though many former YBC members are now pursuing careers in biological sciences and natural resources, we are just as happy to cultivate future dentists, sheriffs, and community leaders with an awareness and appreciation for nature and conservation. We maintain communications with YBC graduates, and do our best to continue facilitating opportunities that will enhance their careers.



WHAT KIND OF CLUB WILL IT BE?



There are some important questions that organizers must consider in the early planning stages:

- **Target audience**—Most clubs focus on teenagers, but some target a younger audience, while still others are more family focused. Who do you want to reach?
- **Basic activities**—A few YBCs sponsor events at major birding hotspots and travel extensively. Others stick close to home by hosting their events at local nature centers. How active do you want the club to be? How often should it meet?
- **Finding partners**—YBCs are often programs within established nonprofit organizations such as bird observatories, birding clubs, nature centers, and state ornithological organizations. Determining what resources exist locally and who the partnering organizations and individuals could be is **essential** in laying the foundations of your club.

TIP: Discuss your ideas with other YBCs and the youth in your area. There's a listing of other clubs on the Young Birders Network website.

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT

With a core group of organizers, the next job is to pull in your first members. Word-of-mouth is generally the best recruitment tool for Young Birders Clubs. Existing bird clubs and Audubon chapters usually have newsletters where you can get the word out about your new club. Biology teachers at local high schools may be helpful in reaching students directly through classes. When you're ready for your first meeting, getting an announcement into the calendar section of your local paper is also a possibility.

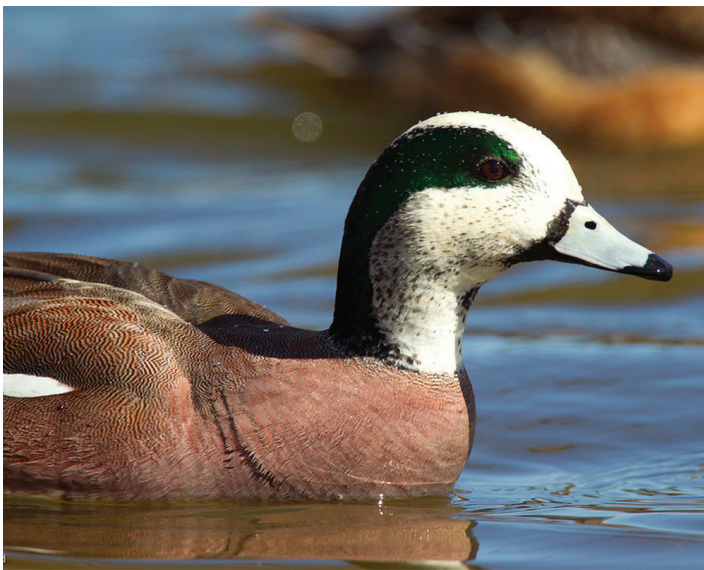


TIP: Even for the most established Young Birders Clubs, membership recruitment and participation remains a challenge. Try not to set your expectations too high and don't get discouraged. It takes time to build any program.

CLUB STRUCTURE & FEES

This is where advice solicited by organizers from existing clubs can guide you. Questions to answer at this stage include:

- **Youth membership fees**—Will there be dues for the club? Some YBCs offer free membership and simply encourage donations from participants.
- **Adult supporter fees**—Some clubs have a separate fee for adults who support the club and participate in field trips. (Again, check the Ohio example to see their structure.) Will you have this category in your club?



- **Club leadership**—Every club needs leaders. How will your club officials be selected? Who will collect membership dues, if they are imposed? How long will each person hold office?
- **Publications**—A club newsletter may be established to help keep members and supporters informed about club activities or other opportunities. Who will spearhead this project and how will it be distributed? How often?

FUNDING A YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB

Zero or low membership fees mean that YBCs must rely on outside support to sustain the club. Your local partner organization, local environmental organizations, and bird clubs can be strong supporters of YBCs. For groups interested in beginning a club, allocating the organization's resources and personnel time needs to be a serious consideration. With growing movements across the country to get young people outdoors, funding options continue to grow. Look into any community foundations that provide funding resources in your area. These foundations often offer great information about funding sources that may be appropriate for your young birder program.



YOUTH PROTECTION LAWS AND REGULATIONS



The following section is not meant to discourage anyone from starting a Young Birders Club. However, navigating your state's youth safety and protection rules is an important (if somewhat challenging) initial hurdle. All Young Birders Clubs must make child safety and wellbeing priority number one, and there are some stringent standard operating procedures. In some states, laws dictate these requirements. In others, the standards represent industry expectations for youth organizations. Laws and regulations vary by state, so it is imperative that you thoroughly research your own state's regulations.

Safety procedures are different for nature centers that have youth programs on site, versus organizations where staff and volunteers transport youth participants and chaperone overnight field trips. In some states, any adult participant transporting youth members or chaperoning (excluding parents who are with their own children) must be fingerprinted and have a background check. Again, we urge you to thoroughly research your state's laws and adhere to them.

LIABILITY INSURANCE & WAIVERS

Any organization (or individual) taking participants on any coordinated trip must have proper liability insurance. If your club is sponsored by an umbrella organization, they may already have such insurance in place. However, it is worth checking on specific requirements the policy may have for minors.

An extensive participant waiver including medical information and emergency contacts should be on file for every participant of Young Birders Club activities. Trip leaders should carry duplicate copies for every participant on each field trip. It may seem extreme, but this preparedness is crucial should an emergency arise. A file stuck in an office drawer serves no use if a participant should ever require immediate medical attention.

Similarly, all Young Birders Club participants should have photo release forms on file. This is especially critical in the age of social media, as posting photos of children on the Internet can be a concern to parents. Knowing who has signed photo releases is an important responsibility for YBC coordinators.



TIP: See the appendices for sample forms, and feel free to adapt them to your purposes.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation limitations are one of the major differences between a Young Birders Club and



an adult organization. Some organizations require that parents bring student members to the field trips. This can prove limiting in some instances, so other clubs allow any adult to transport students. Many clubs have some form of carpooling system. Once parents get to know the other students involved, people from the same area often travel together to trips. Such carpooling can be facilitated by a club listserv, where people can discuss where they're coming from and whether they can give rides. The logistics of getting interested youth to distant field trips can be challenging, but communication and ride-sharing can greatly ease the burden, and the rewards are certainly worthwhile.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement varies from simply dropping off the students, to jumping in on field trips and answering questions before the students can. Any YBC's goal should be to foster student interaction, youth leadership, and peer mentoring. Parents are encouraged to remain on the fringes during field trip outings. After all, Young Birders Clubs are about the students, and there are plenty of adult birding opportunities elsewhere.

As expected, new students often remain close to their parent on their first couple of field trips. After a few interactions with the other students, though, friendships are quickly solidified. Each



field trip becomes a reunion of friends, and there is ample catching up that occurs.

SUMMARY

Young Birders Club leaders face the challenge of being a chaperone, a role model, and a friend. Just like experienced adult birders, young birders will have different reasons for taking up this wonderful hobby. Some will thrive on the social aspect of finding peers who share their interest in nature and the outdoors. Others will yearn for meditative experiences in nature. Still others might become obsessive listers who strive to see as many bird

species as possible. Always remember, though, that any YBC is first and foremost about the kids. While it can be initially challenging to work through youth protection laws, transportation, and logistics, the end rewards are extraordinary. Your efforts and support are invaluable to the young birders. You'll find them to be an inspiration, and you'll appreciate nature in ways you never have before.



CASE STUDY: THE OHIO YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB

History

Understanding the history of the Ohio Young Birders Club, the country's first YBC, may help when planning new clubs. The OYBC is one example of how a Young Birders Club can work, but is by no means the only successful example.

In spring 2006, six teenage birders in Ohio came together to discuss possibilities for bringing this cohort of nature enthusiasts together with peers. These young birders, with oversight from Black Swamp Bird Observatory staff and volunteers, developed the foundation for what would become the Ohio Young Birders Club. The mission of the Ohio Young Birders Club is to encourage, educate, and empower our youth conservation leaders.

Youth in Charge

The club's adult founders recognized from the start that, for the club to succeed, youth members must be involved in every aspect. The most important advice the OYBC offers to other organizations is to keep the youth involved in making decisions. Empowering students should be part of every Young Birders Club mission and has served as the OYBC's cornerstone from day one.



OYBC board. The current YAP is comprised of active club members, and this group is very involved in all club operations. This group of student leaders generates many of the best ideas for the club. Furthermore, involvement in the YAP encourages strong leadership, planning, budgeting, and communication skills.

From the start, the youth were given many responsibilities and full oversight of their club, with support from adults willing to facilitate whenever possible. The founding student members became the first Youth Advisory Panel (YAP), functionally the



Club Structure & Fees

The basic structure of the Ohio Young Birders Club was established by the Youth Advisory Panel. These students felt strongly that involving younger kids would create challenges on field outings, so membership is limited to ages 12 through 18. This age range is broad enough to allow interactions between older and younger student members, and helps reinforce mentorship and interpersonal skills.

The founding youth members of the OYBC also felt that membership dues were important, even for students. They felt it reinforced the club's value. Annual membership for the OYBC is \$10 for youth members (ages 12-18). The majority of OYBC activities are free. For some field trips, such as overnights with food costs, a small fee is charged to help offset expenses.

While youth members are the target audience of young birders clubs, adult supporting members also receive measurable benefits. For the OYBC, adult supporting membership is \$20 per year, and the club has roughly equal numbers of student members and adult supporters. Adult supporters are not allowed on field trips unless they are trip leaders or bring a student.

Club Activities

The OYBC offers an extensive membership package, including opportunities for monthly field outings. These may be field trips to birding hotspots, overnight trips, or service projects (such

as constructing and installing Osprey nest platforms). Many of these opportunities involve students in professional research projects that give participants hands-on experiences to increase field skills and baseline knowledge. Other ambitious service projects have included several BioBlitz events where OYBC members teamed with regional experts to document as many living species as possible during one day.

Publications

The OYBC publishes *Golden-Wings*, a quarterly newsletter. Student members enhance their writing and communication skills by contributing to the newsletter. Most of the content is student generated, and includes trip reports, species profiles, poetry, sketches, and photographs. Every issue also includes a young birder profile. We distribute the newsletter to OYBC members and adult supporters, and make past issues available online. Many members opt for an e-version of the newsletter, but we also send hard copies to those that prefer it. This publication provides a venue for student members to share their work with the club, and the students continue to impress with their caliber of submitted works. The newsletter serves as an ongoing source of inspiration and communication, helps show where donations go, and demonstrates the value of the club's efforts.

If you have questions for the Ohio Young Birders Club, please contact:

Email: info@ohioyoungbirders.org Phone: Black Swamp Bird Observatory (419) 898-4070

Annual Conference

The annual Ohio Young Birders Conference is the keystone event for the Ohio Young Birders Club. The event is a one or two day conference that includes field trip outings, student presentations, and a keynote address by a regional, national, or international youth conservation leader. The conference draws participants from throughout Ohio and the surrounding region, and provides a venue for OYBC members to present their experiences in a professional conference setting. Preparing and delivering these presentations gives the students a sense of pride and accomplishment. Public speaking is an essential career skill, and this conference is often the students' first large-audience speaking experience. Former OYBC members often reflect back on the conference as they apply for colleges and employment.

Transportation

Parents and volunteers provide some of the transportation, but thanks to a very generous donation, the OYBC is also fortunate to have the "Bird Bus." This ADA approved, 14-passenger bus does not solve all transportation difficulties, but it certainly helps for shuttling participants around during field trips. The bus is especially useful when our cohort of Amish students attend, allowing for increased participation from this segment of Ohio's diverse birding culture.

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