The Art of Birding North-central Wisconsin

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The smallest park in Wisconsin—measuring a mere one-tenth of an acre—also might well be the smallest park in the world. In this minuscule park, situated where the 90th Meridian of Longitude bisects the 45th Parallel of Latitude, sits the Reitbrock Geological Marker, signifying the exact center of the northern half of the Western Hemisphere.

The carved wooden marker is positioned exactly halfway between the Equator and the North Pole and halfway between Greenwich Meridian and the International Date Line. There are only four places like this in the world that commemorate the intersection of two imaginary lines marking the four quarters of the earth. Two others are under water and the fourth is in China.

Small things have a way of taking on larger significance, and the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, just 25 miles east of the Reitbrock Geological Marker, proves this statement true.

Why else would the editors of Wisconsin Trails, a respected state journal, in 2002 have named the Woodson as Wisconsin's "littlest museum with the biggest reputation"? The basis for this accolade can be summed up in three words: Birds in Art.

Three Little Words, One Big Exhibition
What began as a one-shot exhibition in 1976 proved so popular that it has been reprised anew each year subsequently, with the 31st annual exhibition organized in 2006. Its worldwide reputation has soared, and birds and artists from around the world are its stars.

That wasn’t the case in 1976. The original exhibition focused largely on birds of the Midwest, as the title Birds of the Lakes, Fields, and Forests suggests. Upland game birds and backyard feeder favorites depicted in oil, acrylic, watercolor, and wood turned the Woodson's galleries into a lively indoor "aviary" aflutter with species familiar to and loved by residents of north-central Wisconsin.

Why the Museum's inaugural exhibition was founded on birds is easily explained. Owen J. Gromme (1896–1991), considered the dean of Wisconsin ornithology, took on a pivotal role when he accepted an invitation from Museum cofounders John and Alice Woodson Forester to organize an exhibition that would introduce the Woodson Art Museum to the community and motivate local residents to check out Wausau's newest cultural attraction. Well-connected and well-recognized in the worlds of ornithology and avian art, Gromme quickly secured loans from more than forty American and Canadian artists. Birds of the Lakes, Fields, and Forests was hatched.

Every artwork mentioned in this article can viewed at the WebExtra <aba.org/pubs/birding/archives/vol39no1p54w1.pdf> that accompanies this article.
The Museum’s board of directors made two watershed decisions following the close of *Birds of the Lakes, Fields, and Forests*: make it an annual exhibition and change the name to *Birds in Art*. Little did they know the impact these two decisions would have in influencing the Woodson’s character and future direction.

For starters, *Birds in Art*, which opens on the weekend following Labor Day and remains on view for nine weeks thereafter, has become the cornerstone of the Woodson’s exhibition schedule and can be counted on as surely as Sandhill Cranes returning to Wisconsin each spring and migrating south again come autumn.

It also didn’t take long to realize that *Birds in Art* was providing a vibrant breeding ground for the acquisition of artworks upon which the fledgling museum could build its permanent collection, and in 1983 directors approved a plan that set the Woodson on a course to become the acknowledged world standard-bearer for its collection of art having avian and nature themes. In short, a simple plan with far-reaching ramifications: The Museum’s collecting focus would be artworks depicting birds or subjects related to birds—and *Birds in Art* would be a primary source for contemporary works on this subject.

For several years after *Birds in Art* first took flight, North American birds maintained a commanding presence, as did North American artists. Over time, however, the *Birds in Art* landscape evolved to include both artists and species from around the world. This evolution has brought a resounding international flair to the middle of Wisconsin.

But with Wisconsin at the heart of the Upper Midwest, Marathon County at the heart of Wisconsin, and Wausau at the heart of Marathon County, there is little doubt that the avifauna of America’s heartland will always play a major role in both *Birds in Art* and the Woodson Art Museum’s collection, which today numbers nearly 4,000 objects.
Order It Up

Name an avian order indigenous to Wisconsin or known to traverse its migratory routes and odds are that it is represented in a painting or sculpture.

Gaviiformes? Marshfield, Wisconsin, artist Sandra Wiesman Weiler’s Loon Haven (1998) embraces the aura of this near-mystic bird that is synonymous with the wilderness country of the Midwest’s upper reaches. She depicts a scene near and dear to all visitors to Wisconsin’s northern lake region—an inlet haven where a mother loon and two chicks glide among a bed of water lilies.

Owen Gromme broadens his loon focus by setting two adults and two chicks against the wider background of Lake Katherine in Hazelhurst, a timber town founded by Cyrus Yawkey in the late nineteenth century and now a popular “up north” Wisconsin resort and vacation destination. His 1985 oil painting is quintessential Gromme and a thoughtful tribute to the Museum’s founding family.

Strigiformes? Owls are well represented in the Woodson’s collection. Although Snowy Owls make it to central Wisconsin only when sparse food supplies drive them far south from their more northern ranges, Leigh Voigt’s Snowy Oil Portrait (1991) calls to mind rare and oh-so-memorable sightings. By painting the owl much larger than its normal size, Voigt showcases its intricate patterning and focuses on the seemingly impenetrable depth of mystery and wisdom of its eyes.

Anseriformes? Oh, yes, ducks, swans, and geese figure prominently in sporting scenes, landscapes, and portraits in both two- and three-dimensional works. Maynard Reece of Des Moines, Iowa, has been painting waterfowl for 74 of his 86 years. Over the Marsh (1989) reflects Reece’s intimate knowledge of marshland environments and the ways of the waterfowl that inhabit them. Although his version more likely depicts an Iowa scene, the ten Canada Geese could just as easily be lifting off over Wisconsin’s Horicon Marsh.

In contrast, Thomas Quinn focuses on the quieter side of Canada Geese in Fog Groom (1987). Their signature vigilance is gone as the pair quietly preens with unlikely and casual abandonment, not bothered by the probing yellowlegs.

Gruiformes? The first piece to welcome visitors arriving at the Woodson Art Museum is Kent Ullberg’s visually striking Rites of Spring (1998), a twelve-foot high pair of bronze Whooping Cranes, located adjacent to the Gateway Garden. Another signature piece is Robert Bateman’s 1987 acrylic painting of young Sandhill Cranes based on a scene he observed at the Mead Wildlife Area in southwestern Marathon County.

Songbirds and other feeder regulars brighten the Woodson’s galleries just as they do woodlot and backyard habitats. After all, who can resist the frolicking escapades of Black-capped Chickadees; the fetching, sun-dappled hues of the American Goldfinch; or the chirpy cheerfulness of the American Robin?

Noted American painter Frank W. Benson (1862–1951) paradoxically manages to capture the chickadee’s lively playfulness and congeniality, even though his five birds are at rest. They may not be flitting and frolicking here, yet their warmth comes across despite their barren-twig perches and the cool watercolor tones Benson uses to convey the impression of a brisk winter day. American poet Robert Frost, a well-known nature lover, originally owned Chickadees, having purchased it from a 1938 exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

With loose impressionistic strokes, Jay J. Johnson presents a fleeting glimpse of beauty and winged motion in Goldfinch Flying (2002). The finch’s brilliant yellow feathers and rapid flight typify the wonderful colors and constant motion associated with songbirds, while Johnson’s background use of trailing lantana adds splashes of deep purples and pinks that gardeners cherish.

Wisconsin’s state bird—the American Robin—is an easy spot for a novice birder, whether seen in bright acrylic hues as in Terry Isaac’s Backyard Robin (1992) or through the more somber tones of graphite Ryan Jacque uses in Autumn Chill (1999). Isaac portrays his thrush on a dogwood branch, although in Wisconsin the state’s official tree—the sugar maple—would be the perch of choice for this avian dignitary. Using just the tonal values of black and white, Jacque denotes the cold, dry feeling of fall as two robins huddle on the forest floor among desiccated ferns and withered leaves before wisely migrating south.

Home is Where the Art Is

Wausau’s city motto, “Welcome Home to Wausau,” serves as a maxim of sorts for the Woodson Art Museum as well—as artists from across North America and spanning the globe find the welcome mat rolled out at the corner of Franklin and 12th Streets for them and their artwork.

In fact, the Woodson’s experience is that the art of birds is an international language and that the people who create, judge, exhibit, view, appreciate, and purchase the art of birds have a global perspective, too.

Among the pleasures for Woodson staff is welcoming an artist to Wausau for the opening of Birds in Art and, even better, discovering that it is the artist’s first visit to the United States. Such an announcement is met with typical Midwestern loyalty: “You’re seeing the best first!”

Bird artists are often keen birders, eager to add North American species to their life lists. Members of the Wausau Bird Club happily volunteer to take visiting artists to nearby rookeries, flowages, parks, and other birding hotspots, and every few years the Museum plans an organized trip to the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo or to the...
1 • Snowy Owl Portrait, 1991. Watercolor on board by © Leigh Voigt.


3 • Loon Haven, 1998. Oil on hardboard by © Sandra Wiesman Weiler.

4 • Over the Marsh, 1989. Oil on canvas by © Maynard Reece.
Raptor Education Group in Antigo so artists can have up-close encounters. Many also have discovered the pleasures of a trek to the top of Rib Mountain, the fourth-highest point in Wisconsin and within easy walking distance from area lodging. From the sixty-foot observation tower, visitors get a birds-eye view of the Wisconsin River Valley tinged with the first hues of autumn brilliance.

Dutch artist Ulco Glimmerveen made his first visit to America in 1992, the year of his Birds in Art debut. He vividly recalls observing Belted Kingfishers and Red-breasted Nuthatches at Bluegill Bay Park along the Wisconsin River. It also was the first time he witnessed Common Loons in their breeding habitat, in this case on Lake Katherine, 75 miles north of Wausau, in true loon country. Glimmerveen remembers being impressed on subsequent birding jaunts in Marathon County by how he “could lure little bids with a squeaking sound, which is not possible in Europe, strangely.”

Similarly, Haruki Koizumi’s first trip to the United States in 1997 came about because of Birds in Art. For Haruki and his wife, Junko, every bird was new to them. When they first stepped onto the Museum’s grounds, an American Robin greeted them, as if fulfilling its official role as Wisconsin’s ornithological ambassador. On the annual artists’ picnic outing four years later, when Haruki’s artwork was again included in the exhibition, the Koizumis spotted a Bald Eagle and got good photographs of its nest on Lake Katherine. Their Wausau journey in 2001 proved more memorable than they had expected—and not just because they spotted American Goldfinches and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. International travel came to a near standstill in the wake of 9/11, which delayed the Koizumis’ return to Japan for ten days. On their next visit three years later, they spied Turkey Vultures, an American Kestrel, Wild Turkeys, and Sandhill Cranes along with a bounty of nuthatches, crows, ravens, herons, and waxwings—species Wisconsinites may take for granted.

A 2005 Birds in Art juror added more than a dozen birds to his list in May while out and about with local birder Dan Belter. Paul Knolle, head of collections at the Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede, The Netherlands, counts seeing an Upland Sandpiper, one of his “most wanted” species, in the Buena Vista Grasslands southwest of Wausau as the pinnacle of his trip, noting that “it took some minutes to calm down and take a proper look. It was not easy to leave the area.” Having missed by only two minutes a rare opportunity to see an Upland Sandpiper in The Netherlands when one turned up almost miraculously two hours from his hometown, Paul experienced a “moment of real joy when [he] saw this beautiful, strange bird walking in the grass” in the heart of Wisconsin.

Knolle actually started his U. S. birdwatching in Chicago a couple days earlier when, walking to the Art Institute of Chicago, he saw the first of many White-throated Sparrows and his one-and-only Eastern Towhee. On his return drive to Chicago before flying back to The Netherlands, Knolle saw the last new species of this trip—a Palm Warbler—during an all-too-brief stop at Horicon Marsh.

**Art Amid Nature**

The Woodson Art Museum at one time regularly touted itself as being the best spot in Wisconsin for indoor bird(art)watching. That scope broadened in 1987 when Eagle Rock (1983), a monumental Kent Ullberg bronze, became the first sculpture installed on the grounds, where it welcomes visitors at the 12th Street entrance.

The pace of acquiring and installing outdoor sculpture picked up in the mid-1990s with the dedication of the Margaret Woodson Fisher Sculpture Gallery, an elegantly landscaped 1.5-acre garden in which meandering brick pathways create organic-shaped islands for the presentation of sculpture. Today visitors to the Gallery and grounds enjoy a mix of seventeen mammalian and avian sculptures, including three fountain pieces, tucked into inviting courtyards, terraced gardens, and a woodland pond area, all easily reached and many with nearby benches that encourage rest and reflection.

A recent addition, Walter Matia’s 2005 bronze Wild Turkeys, is installed in a small walled hollow near the Museum’s main entrance, where a stately American elm once stood. Wild Turkeys populate the woodlots on Wausau’s fringes and beyond, and with the Woodson located on the eastern edge of the city, it’s not outside the realm of possibility that flesh-and-blood turkeys who wander inside the city limits may come eye to eye with their bronze brethren.

Bart Walter’s bronze of a running Ostrich has become a favorite in the Sculpture Gallery since it joined the lineup in 2001. The ostrich seems to defy gravity as only a small section of two toe pads supports its weight. Walter invests the sculpture with a sense of tension by shifting the bird’s massive body out and away from its foot, making it appear as if the ostrich is banking around a nearby small tree.

Two additional sculptures that line the pathway to the main entrance offer a hint of the natural bounty and beauty that await visitors inside. In Sherry Saleri Sander’s bronze Wood Ducks on Still Water (1992), a gaggle of seven birds balances gracefully on both ends of a log in a scene that conjures up a walk in a pond-studded woods, while Tony Angell’s two chunky yet seductively posed Trumpeter Swans (1987) sculpted from white Carrara marble invite visitors to explore the piece from all vantage points before they step indoors. Given the inherent fragility of marble and the bite and sting of Wisconsin winters, this work must be protected from the elements from November through
1 • Chickadees, 1938. Watercolor on paper by © Frank W. Benson (1862–1951).

2 • Bart Walter’s 2001 bronze sculpture Ostrich. Photograph by © Richard Wunsch.

3 • Kent Ullberg’s 1983 bronze sculpture Eagle Rock. Photograph by © Don Frisque.

March as part of the Woodson’s commitment to the care and conservation of its art holdings.

**Still Something at Thirty**

The wind beneath the wings of *Birds in Art* may have blown there through serendipity, but after flying high for thirty years now, the exhibition stays aloft under its own power and personality these days. Its flight has given the Woodson Art Museum a charismatic brand identity worth crowing about even as the exhibition has evolved over the years, as all viable species do.

Much as a bird fastidiously builds its nest, the Woodson Art Museum has meticulously maintained a permanent collection where birds and all manner of avian accoutrements take center stage. Taking a cue from Edward Hicks’s *Peaceable Kingdom*, species never known to have been spotted in or to have migrated through north-central Wisconsin keep company with the birds of the lakes, fields, and forests of the Badger State. The result is galleries and gardens alive with a spirited joie de vivre that is very much a product of the Woodson Art Museum’s Midwestern roots.

Mark Eberhard’s portrait *The Birdwatchers* (2000) humorously speaks to that joie de vivre as well as to the camaraderie, determination, frustration, and ultimate joy that birds engender in the field and in the hands of artists who find in them an unending source of inspiration. Eberhard’s birders could very well be on a birding trek through Wisconsin that includes a stop at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau as well as in the small agricultural community of Poniatowski, just up the road from the Reitbrock Geological Marker. What birds will they spot among the dappled leaves?

To view more art in the Woodson Museum’s collection, check out the WebExtra <aba.org/pubs/birding/archives/vol39no1p54w1.pdf> for this article.

*The Birdwatchers*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas by © Mark Eberhard. Note: To see what they’re looking at, visit the Woodson Art Museum’s website <lywam.org/collections/index.cfm?room=paintings>.