

THE MIAMI UNIVERSITY NATURAL AREAS BIRD BLIND

By Hardy Eshbaugh
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How did it all begin? In December 2009 Max Streeter, a senior architecture student, came to Jim Reid, Field Manager of the Miami University Natural Areas, and asked if he could build some kind of shelter in the natural areas to meet the requirements of his senior architecture project. Jim told him that “We don’t build permanent structures in the natural areas” and asked, “Have you considered building a bird blind?” Max replied, “What’s a bird blind?” After some explanation Max said he thought it sounded like an interesting idea and would love to undertake the project.

In January 2010 Max and his team met with Jim and in short order many good things happened. Within 30 days they received pledges and donations of over \$10,000 for their project (and this was during a deep recession).

Max and his fellow students developed a concept for the bird blind, formed the Miami University Bird Club, and submitted a budget to Associated Student Government. The Miami University Bird Club received funding for a trip to a bird sanctuary to visit a bird blind, binoculars, CDs with bird songs and sounds, and building supplies and materials. Streeter said, “The Miami University Bird Club is the perfect way to meld bird enthusiasm and the bird blind.”

Over the following months Streeter and juniors Josh Carson, Alex Fritz, Nick Irmen, and Jared White built the blind on the site of a former nursery adjacent to the historic DeWitt cabin, the oldest building in Oxford Township, located just off State Route 73 east of Oxford.

“We really wanted to get other people involved in bird watching in association with this structure.” You can see that the blind is shaped like a reverse question mark surrounded by feeders, birdhouses, and plants that attract birds. Three benches have been strategically placed inside providing a panoramic window at eye height from the benches. The blind is wheelchair accessible and provides a special port for the physically challenged. There is an elevated area that will soon become a butterfly garden”, Streeter said. “We wanted to make it unique.”

Additional funding was provided by Audubon Miami Valley through a Toyota TogetherGreen grant from National Audubon Society. The Oxford Community Foundation and Elizabeth

Wakemen Henderson Charitable Foundation gave two generous grants. George Steel Fabricating Inc. provided steel plates, which Streeter estimated were worth about \$3,500. Gillman Home Center gave the students a big discount on lumber and bolts. The Natural Areas provided the land and plants to surround the bird blind. Members of Audubon Miami Valley also donated plants and labor. DeVore Land & Water Gardens provided guidance and design for the landscape planting. To enhance the bird watching experience, Eagle Optics and the Bird Club provided eight pairs of binoculars which students can borrow at the Miami University Outdoor Pursuits office. “It’s really been a community effort here and in the Cincinnati area to get all the parts to come together,” Streeter said.

On September 25, 2010, the Natural Areas held its Annual Hike-A-Thon and added bird walks to the new blind as a part of the event. The walks attracted more than 100 visitors.

In spring 2011 a designated bird trail opened that links the bird blind to near-by Four Mile Creek and the surrounding trail system. Professors Hays Cummins and Tom Klack will be planting prairie grasses and wildflowers on three large mounds in the blind area providing cover and seeds for the birds. Bird seed for the blind’s feeders comes from the Miami University Bird Club and a check-off purchase program from the Audubon Miami Valley’s annual bird seed sale, as well as from other community members interested in protecting wild birds.

Hardy Eshbaugh, then President of the Audubon Miami Valley Chapter, and Jim Reid say the bird blind is a very special feature in the Natural Areas where students, the community and especially young children, can experience birds in close proximity. “Once they have this experience they’ll be hooked and forever more sensitive to protecting the environment and the birds that live in it.”

Dr. Eshbaugh is Professor Emeritus at Miami University, where he taught botany. He served on the National Audubon board for 13 years. He was President of the American Institute of Biological Sciences and the Botanical Society of America, and currently serves on the Boards of the Atlantic Salmon Federation and the Catesby Memorial Trust.

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