



Birdwatching Backpacks

Project Update Report 2021



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Nature Newfoundland and Labrador thanks all the organizations and volunteers that made this project possible. This project was conducted in collaboration with the Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries with funding support from Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro, and in-kind support from the Outfitters Adventure Gear and Apparel.





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Background

Birdwatching is a fun and non-intimidating way to engage youth and adults in an outdoor activity that helps familiarize them with their natural environment and local biodiversity. While birdwatching does not require many supplies, lack of access to quality binoculars and local birdwatching information may be a barrier to starting this activity. To encourage youth and adults to try birdwatching, Nature Newfoundland and Labrador (Nature NL) developed birdwatching backpack kits for distribution through the Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries. This project was conducted in collaboration with the Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries with funding support from Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro (NL Hydro), and in-kind support from the Outfitters Adventure Gear and Apparel.

The kits comprise lightweight backpacks that include binoculars and a bird field guide, as well as additional information on suggested birdwatching locations, likely species found at these locations, tips for beginners, as well as take-home resources (i.e., a checklist of Newfoundland and Labrador birds, birdwatching safety tips from NL Hydro). Youth backpacks also include activities for children and a bird-themed picture book. This project was trialled in the greater St. John's area starting in September 2020. This report summarizes the first five months of the pilot program and provides an overview of feedback received from birdwatcher backpack kit users.

Health and Safety

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Newfoundland and Labrador implemented various public health measures and restrictions in Spring 2020, while the Birdwatching Backpacks were in development. As such, modifications were made to the backpacks and the proposed trial of the backpacks with NL Hydro volunteers could not be conducted nor could Nature NL host the public "Introduction to Birdwatching" events to were planned to launch the backpacks. However, online bird learning related events were hosted by Nature NL that promoted the backpack program (see Advertisement).

Disinfectant wipes were added to the kits to allow users to clean equipment prior to use. NL Public Libraries implemented additional measures to reduce potential spread of COVID-19 (i.e., curbside pickup, removing items from circulation for 72 hours upon return).

Advertisement

Nature NL and NL Public Libraries have advertised the backpack kits through social media, public events, and local media. This has included:

- **Social Media** – Eight posts on Facebook with a reach of over 20,000 people, seven posts on Twitter with a reach of over 5,000 people, and three Instagram posts (reach unknown).
- **Public Events** – Monthly Nature NL Bird Learning Nights (online), NL Public Libraries Winter Birdwatching Event, Nature NL's Christmas Bird Count for Kids.
- **Media** – VOCM Radio Interview (October 20th, 2020), CBC Radio Interview (September 15th, 2020), print article in the Telegram (September 10th, 2020).

Circulation

Ten adult and ten youth backpacks were made available for distribution through the Newfoundland and Labrador Public Library branches in St. John's, Torbay, and Conception-Bay-South. As of the end of January 2021, the adult backpacks had circulated 33 times and the children's backpacks had circulated 37 times since the project launched on September 8, 2020. This was a great start to the program despite starting in the fall when birds tend to be less active and considering the various restrictions in place due to COVID-19. We expect to see an increase in circulation during the upcoming spring and summer, which are the peak birdwatching months with more mild weather conditions, the return of migratory birds, and breeding bird activity. Nature NL will continue to promote the backpacks throughout the spring and summer to raise awareness and generate interest in the program.

Patron Feedback

Since the launch of the program, Nature NL has received 18 feedback forms returned to the library by patrons who borrowed the backpack kits. Responses to all multiple-choice questions from the feedback forms are summarized in Appendix A. The feedback forms highlighted that most participants using the backpacks were trying birdwatching for the first time, participants spent more time in nature, learned about birds and birdwatching and would go birding again in this future. Many participants also reported that they would increase their support of bird conservation initiatives in the future. This demonstrates that the backpacks were successful in teaching users about local birds and biodiversity, encouraging users to spend more time outside, inspiring regular birdwatchers, and promoting bird conservation.

One thing I really liked about the backpack is...

“How easy it is to participate in the activity.”

One thing that could make the birding backpacks better would be...

“A longer loan period as I only got to birding once and I could not renew as others are waiting.”

In addition, most backpack users reported spending quality time with friends and family and having fun while using the backpacks, indicating that the kits are not only educational but provide social benefits as well. Users reported learning more about library services and approximately half said they would borrow more materials from the library. Users also reported learning more about Nature NL and approximately a quarter of participants said they would attend future Nature NL events. Future participation in Nature NL events will continue to educate the participants about the environment and conservation in our province.

All backpack users said they would recommend the backpacks to family or friends. In particular, users really appreciated that the backpacks were well-equipped with educational material and included

good quality binoculars. Users liked the comfortable backpacks and the take-home materials provided. While the response to the backpack kits was positive, users provided some recommendations to improve the kits:

- 1) several participants suggested loaning out the backpacks for longer to allow users the time to use the backpacks for multiple birdwatching excursions,
- 2) participants responded that having extra binoculars in the backpacks or family-style backpacks with gear for an adult and child would be useful for families since it can be hard to reserve two backpacks at the same time.

Future Plans

Nature NL is preparing to launch the Birdwatching Backpacks province-wide in Spring 2021. This expansion will include modifications based on the feedback received from surveys and from the library. The expansion project will include family backpack kits, which include supplies for both adults and children to facilitate use of the backpacks by families. This will help overcome the difficulties some families had in taking out both an adult backpack and youth backpacks at the same time for family birdwatching outings. Secondly, we are coordinating with the library to loan out the backpacks for a longer period (e.g., two weeks) in response to this request from patrons. A longer loan period will give patrons the opportunity to use the backpacks multiple times in one loan period. Nature NL will continue to provide the same high-quality equipment, including the same binocular models, after receiving positive feedback from patrons. Nature NL is also working on translating the educational materials to provide at least one backpack kit in French for each library region. We are looking forward to seeing the birdwatching backpack available all across the province of Newfoundland & Labrador.

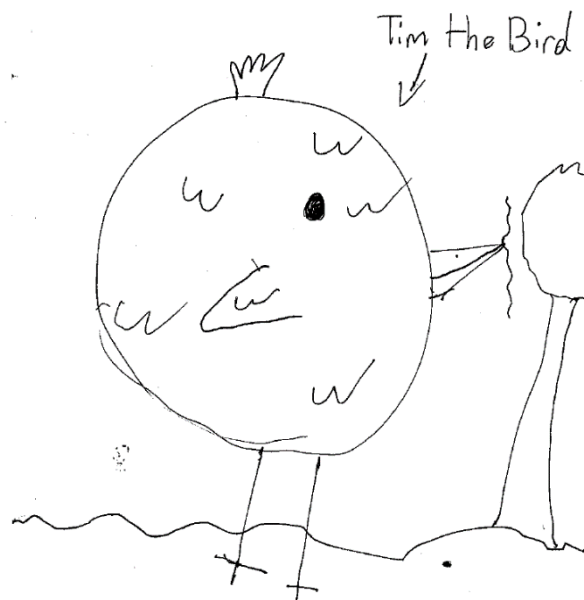


Figure 1 A bird drawing from one of the patron feedback forms.

Appendix A: Summary of Feedback Survey Responses

Table A-1 Summary of responses to question one on the feedback survey ("Because of the Birdwatching Backpacks, I..."). Total number of respondents: 18.

Answer	Number of Responses
Had fun!	13
Spent more time in nature	12
Spent quality time with friends or family	12
Tried birdwatching for the first time	10
Tried Binoculars for the first time	6
Felt more calm, relaxed, or energized	5
Became a new library member	1
Became a new Nature NL member	1
Made a new friend	1

Table A-2 Summary of responses to question two on the feedback survey ("I learned something new about..."). Total number of respondents: 18.

Answer	Number of Responses
Birds and birdwatching	17
Library services	8
Nature NL	7
Plant and animal variety in my area	6

Table A-3 Summary of responses to question three on the feedback survey ("I will..."). Total number of respondents: 18.

Answer	Number of Responses
Recommend Birdwatching Backpacks to family or friends	18
Go birdwatching again in the future	17
Borrow a Birdwatching Backpack again in the future	16
Borrow more materials from the library	9
Support local bird conservation initiatives	8
Attend future Nature NL events	4