



Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary

Clark Street and Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60201



clarkstreetbeachbirdsanctuary.org

Fall 2025

From the Sanctuary Stewards

by Rob Linsenmeier, co-steward



Happy Anniversary! This fall marks the tenth anniversary of initial plantings at the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary. On a sunny September afternoon, volunteers and guests gathered at the Centennial Park picnic tables, just outside the bird sanctuary, to celebrate the anniversary and to thank the many people who contributed to its creation along with those who continue to make it such a special place: city staff and officials; landscape designers and advisers; donors; Steering Committee members (listed on page 5); and all our dedicated planters and weeders and waterers and birders. Through our collaborations and individual efforts, an area that was mostly bare sand has been remarkably transformed, creating just what our visionaries imagined. Native plants that we've nurtured—some planted by us and some arriving on their own—now cover much of our approximately two acres, making it a welcoming place for insects and for birds. It has also become a place where people passing by stop, relax, and often learn a little about nature. The volunteers learn a lot more as the sanctuary changes with the seasons.

Our anniversary celebration featured pizza and cake, along with music provided by the Hastings Hot Band. CSBBS volunteer David Pelzer is at the left, on mandolin. This issue of our newsletter includes excerpts from short speeches made at the celebration supplemented by reflections from some CSBBS volunteers.



But before that, what about the *next* ten years? Are we done? Hardly. Our experience shows that the site takes continual maintenance to stay ahead of the invasives (like soapwort) and aggressive natives (like tall goldenrod), and we will continue experimenting with new species, as we have this year with snowberries, black chokeberry, prairie bush clover, and lobelia. Even in this small area there are several different microhabitats, so we also experiment by transplanting species (for example, whorled milkweed, mountain mint, and silverweed). Many of our plants feed insects and birds, but are not visible to passersby, and a priority for the next few years is to make the site more beautiful for people walking along the path in Centennial Park; this will also increase the diversity of the plant community. And our work will continue to bring people together to volunteer.

How the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary Started . . .

by Libby Hill, co-steward

During spring and fall migration, my friend Sue and I used to bird the wild area that grew up between the Northwestern University lakefill and Clark Street Beach. It was densely packed with shrubs and trees and the perfect stopping point for migrating birds. Over the years she and I became friends with the man who ran Northwestern's sailing center, a sort of a shack of a building. One day, probably in 2010, he caught up with us and said, "You only have five more years." He explained that Northwestern would be building up to the edge of their property and would be taking down trees and the sailing center.

A couple of years later, in October 2012, I saw a rendering of what became the Segal Visitors Center, and I knew that meant the birds' sanctuary would be gone, but that Evanston's Tree Ordinance would require Northwestern to pay a fee for each tree it took down on Evanston's land. I didn't know how much money that would amount to, but I knew it would be enough to create a bird sanctuary somewhere.

I went to see our mayor, Liz Tisdahl, and asked for her help. I said I didn't want the money going into the General Fund, where it would just disappear, or toward parkway trees, but toward a replacement sanctuary. I suggested this be a grassroots effort. Mayor Tisdahl suggested it would happen faster if I worked with staff. That sounded good to me, so she immediately sent off an email. In short order, my friend and great birder Judy Pollock and I



Landscape architect Ryan Kettlecamp and Libby Hill at our 10th anniversary celebration

were working together with Paul D'Agostino, the Environmental Services Coordinator, and Stefanie Levine, landscape architect for the city. Together with other staff, we walked the official boundary line between Northwestern and the city. Then, the four of us went to Montrose Beach, the premier birding spot along Lake Michigan in Chicago. Judy and I explained that this was what we wanted. We then drove back north along the lake, looking at every possible Evanston location for the new bird sanctuary. We reached Clark Street Beach, and Paul said that this beach, the largest in Evanston and right next to the original wild area, would actually be the logical spot. There would be plenty of room for beachgoers and volleyball players—and the bird sanctuary.

The amount of money that came in was \$176,000! The city contracted with Kettlekamp and Kettlekamp, Evanston-based landscape architects, to design the sanctuary. Judy became their

bird adviser. The city held two public meetings, and there was unanimous agreement that this was a good idea. We agreed to name it Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary in perpetuity. And in October 2015, just three years after my meeting with Liz Tisdahl, the sanctuary was being planted and we held a joyous dedication ceremony—complete with a children's dance class costumed as migrating birds and Evanston groups from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Belize, where "our" birds migrate to spend the winter, who shared their musical traditions and enjoyed our special spot with us.

"A couple of months ago we were showing a local pastor around the bird sanctuary. She asked me what has been the biggest personal reward of the 10 years since starting the project. She fully expected me to answer 'the birds.' But I answered that the biggest reward was the unintended consequence of making new friends among those who come together to volunteer at the beach. Yes, it is wonderful to be pulling tall goldenrod in the company of palm warblers, but they migrate. Our new friends stick around." ~ Libby Hill

Landscape Designer Ryan Kettlekamp on why visiting the bird sanctuary is so rewarding for him:

“People walking by don’t realize that this area was like a Sahara, that it’s not a natural environment but a created environment. . . . They don’t sense that there was a designer involved. And it was because of all the volunteers that this has been possible.”

. . . And How It Grew

by founding co-stewards Jerry Herst and Judy Dorfman, adapted from an article in our Fall 2022 issue

In the spring of 2015 when Judy Pollock asked us to become stewards of the new Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary in Evanston, we had no idea what we were getting into. We knew that our focus would be on the plant community, the foundation for providing food and shelter for birds. However, we thought our job would be to learn about the 20 or so plants that landscape architects Kettlekamp and Kettlekamp had installed and to try to keep invasive exotics from getting established. We were told that this was an experiment—turning a bare sand beach into a living habitat—and that we wouldn’t know for several years what worked.



Jerry leads a tour through the bird sanctuary during our 10th anniversary celebration

Now, ten years later, we know that something definitely worked! We are deeply touched and gratified by the growth of so many communities: plants, birds, insects, and PEOPLE who have joined in this adventure. Many people volunteered to work with the plants: planting and watering those we want, sometimes disbursing them to new areas, digging up invasives. We have now identified over 150 plant species at the bird sanctuary—way more than 20! Some are ones we have planted since the original installation. Others were already there before 2015, including the cottonwood and elm trees and some asters. Some species showed up on their own and we were delighted to discover them, including silverweed,

primrose, some spurges, and wild trailing bean. Some showed up on their own and we weren’t happy to have them, typically because they spread well in our environment and crowd out plants that are better for the insects and the birds. (We also, on rare occasions, dig out plants that are harmful to humans because, for example, touching them causes itchy rashes.)

Sometimes plants have needed our help in other ways too. We learned that metal fencing was useful not only to protect some plants from rabbits, but also, remarkably, an invasion of beavers!

How did we learn about all these plants? We weren’t starting from scratch, but we had a lot to learn—and one thing we learned is that many people were eager to help, including several local Evanstonians who shared their expertise. Once, when we were really stuck, we traveled to the Chicago Botanic Garden for help from their botanists. They were surprised at how much digging was required to ID the purple sand grass that showed up on our beach. Field trips were another learning experience—including trips to 63rd Street Beach and Loyola Beach in Chicago. Our bible of botany is *Flora of the Chicago Region*, by Gerould Wilhelm and Laura Rericha. Digital field guides have gotten better and better, and they have also been an important tool.



Julie chats with other volunteers at our 10th anniversary celebration

And then, in addition to the plant team, there are our dedicated bird monitors who faithfully show up to observe, identify, count, and document the birds that visit our area and record their data on eBird, the international birding project of Cornell University. We have had almost daily coverage during the spring and fall migrations since the sanctuary's early days.

Some volunteers came together to form an active Steering Committee. One volunteer took on the role of writing weekly announcements about workdays, one coordinates bird monitors, and one coordinates the watering crew. Workday leaders keep records of who came and what they did. Our communications team maintains a website, writes this newsletter, maintains our social media presence, updates the informational kiosk, and more!

We have an ongoing working relationship with City of Evanston staff who supply us with water and store our hoses in the winter, help us maintain our border fencing, and loan us tools and wheelbarrows. Many organizations have provided dedicated volunteers who come for one or several days each year. We have also received generous monetary donations from Evanstonians to support our work.

Although we handed over the stewardship to Libby and Rob, we still come to the bird sanctuary and hope to continue to learn about plants and this unique beach ecosystem. And, we get to keep the best parts: new friends and new relationships with each other and the land. What could be better?

During the early weeks of the Covid pandemic, we halted work at the bird sanctuary. Soon, though, City officials okayed our return—with several safely precautions (masking, 6-foot distancing, no shared tools, no large groups, sanitizing the gate after contact). I felt very lucky, during that challenging time, to be able to gather with like-minded people in a calming environment and to feel that I was making a positive difference in the world. ~ From a longtime volunteer

I joined the efforts at the bird sanctuary ten years ago with friends who were leading the project, and I've witnessed the transformation of this beautiful place on the shore of Lake Michigan. I remember when I found the trailing bean plant for the first time; it had established itself in many places around the sanctuary and continues to thrive today. When plants indigenous to this area appear on their own and do well, we know that we've helped to create a healthy environment. ~ From a longtime volunteer

Bird Spotting at the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary

by Nancy Pinchar

In 2015, under the guidance of the founding stewards, designated bird monitors began visiting the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary on a regular basis and contributing to a record in the public database eBird. They have entered information on bird species found in or near the bird sanctuary during the Spring and Fall migration seasons and the specific areas in which the birds are observed. These data have provided helpful insights into the different species using the habitat and their habitat needs.

Of course, our area attracted birders long before the sanctuary was established—and, in fact, before the eBird platform was launched—but with no shared system or schedule. In the ten years from May 2015 when the first CSBBS volunteers began more systematically monitoring the birds through September 2025, 203 species have been identified at CSBBS. Our bird monitors account for over 1000 checklists during this period! You can explore the records online yourself; go to ebird.org/hotspot/L3615041.

2025 has been an active bird monitoring year. Our Spring season started on March 23, with early arriving Field and Song sparrows, and ended the first week of June, with the last of the Chestnut-sided and Canada warblers passing through. Thanks to our dedicated bird monitors, we were counting daily for this ten-week period. We

identified a total of 81 species within the habitat, including 61 migrating species, and an additional 20 species in the surrounding beach and park areas. Some notable observations within the sanctuary included Orchard oriole, Scarlet tanager, and Yellow-bellied flycatcher in May and a small flock of American avocets on the beach in April.

The sanctuary becomes a summer residence for some of our migrants. This summer we saw Red-winged blackbird, Warbling vireo, Eastern kingbird, Baltimore oriole, Blue-gray gnatcatcher, Song sparrow, Barn swallow, and



House Finch, May 2025
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Magnolia Warbler, September 2025
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more. By late summer these summer residents began to migrate south, and the habitat was in a quiet period—but migrating birds were leaving the far

north and heading south to our area. On August 25 we started our daily Fall monitoring to track these migrants passing through again. Species identified so far include Magnolia warbler, Wilson's warbler, and Swamp sparrow.

Bird monitors and the planting, weeding, and watering crews sometimes seem to be doing their own thing. This 10th anniversary of the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary is a good time to express the bird monitors' gratitude to all the habitat volunteers for creating and maintaining this safe harbor for our migrating and resident birds.

I spent hours upon hours as a child roaming through the wooded ravines and creek beds and undeveloped meadows around my house in southern Indiana. Having rewilded space so close at hand here in the big city has been revitalizing in a way I hadn't realized I'd been missing until I stumbled onto it back in 2017. I never get tired of spotting, identifying, admirin,g and cataloguing the birds, arthropods, mammals, plants, and even fungi I come across during my migration monitoring sessions, and it feels really good to see our little slice of dune habitat really coming into maturity over the years. ~ From a longtime volunteer

Late summer
and early fall
blossoms at
Evanston's Clark
Street Beach
Bird Sanctuary



Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary – Steering Committee Members

Susan Comstock
Al Gabor
Jerry Herst

Libby Hill
Rob Linsenmeier
Sarah Miller

David Pelzer
Nancy Pinchar
Elizabeth Showalter

Chris Steel
Whitney Troy

Newsletter editor: Joan Linsenmeier

From the conclusion of our presentation at the 2021 Chicago-area Wild Things Conference:

- *There's always more to learn.*
- *Expect to make mistakes—and try to learn from them.*
- *Delight in new discoveries--and share them with each other and the public.*
- *This special opportunity to help restore the earth is beyond anything we dreamed of. What a gift!*



Fall 2015

Fall 2025



Celebratory banner outside the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary in Fall 2025

