

Remembering Nancy Tanner and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, 1941

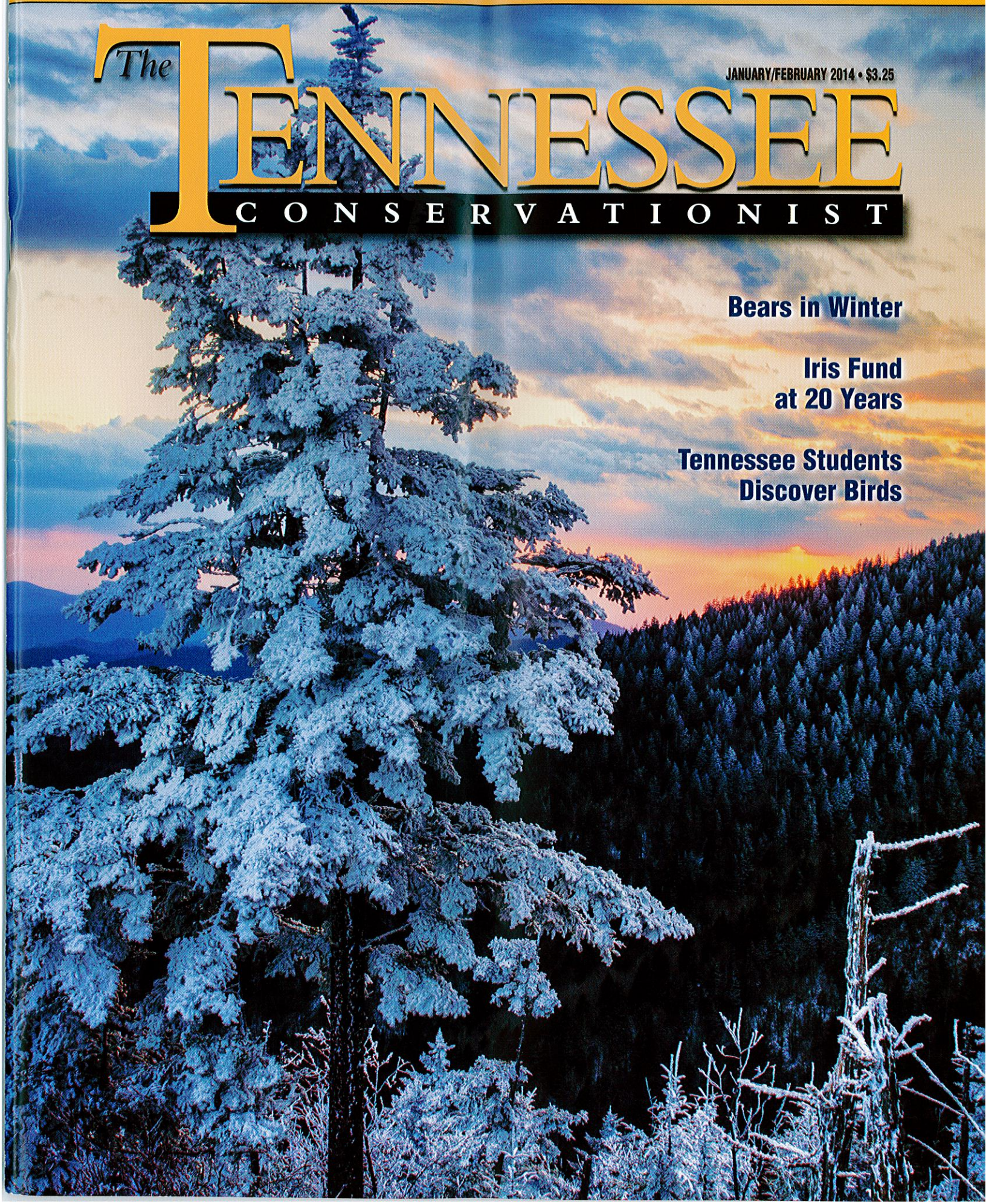
# *The* TENNESSEE CONSERVATIONIST

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**Tennessee Students  
Discover Birds**





# Helping Tennessee Students Discover Birds

By Vickie Henderson

In an innovative program that introduces students to the fascinating world of birds, the Knoxville Chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society has been visiting school campuses in the East Tennessee area to help students learn about birds.

Inspired by the *Discover Birds Activity Book*, and prompted by a desire to provide young people with a memorable introduction to birds, a team of KTOS volunteers visits area schools, donating books to all of the classrooms of a single grade level, and takes the students and their teachers through a three-part birding program. On a rotating schedule, students experience a slide show presentation of Tennessee birds and their songs and a show-and-tell treasure chest of bird related items, such as, talons, feathers and nests. They also learn to identify birds in their schoolyard through guided bird walks with close-up views of birds through birding telescopes.

I wrote and illustrated the *Discover Birds Activity Book* that was published by the Tennessee Ornithological Society.



Courtesy of Vickie Henderson



Vickie Henderson

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The book was initially requested by teachers as a student activity for the 2012 Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival, resulting in a simple, 12-page introductory version. The book was expanded the following year to its current 36 pages. To date, over 2,000 books have been distributed around the state by TOS members who have donated the books to classrooms. The activity book has also been introduced to community organizations and dis-

tributed through local environmental education and science programs.

The *Discover Birds Activity Book* includes science, math and language activities contributed by a team of educators including members of the National Institute of Mathematical and Biological Synthesis, the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont and individual naturalists and educators. Using actual data reported in the U.S. Geological Survey's annual Breeding Bird Surveys, students

learn to graph bird population fluctuations and consider what may be influencing these changes. A fun fill-in-the-blank activity offers information about migration while challenging students to identify nouns, verbs and adjectives to complete a story. A mathematical decoding activity helps students discover amazing bird champions of speed, distance, and size, and an introductory activity introduces

students to the interesting traits that make birds unique members of the wildlife community and among the most fascinating to observe and study.

Other activities include word search, word scramble, draw-a-nest, matching and crossword. Additionally, the book includes over 70 illustrations to color and provides encouragement to students to create their own illustrated book of bird observations similar to the field journals historically used by scientists.

## Discover Birds Program Reaches Nearly 400 Students

Expanding on the state-wide theme of donating books to classrooms, KTOS members, Billie Cantwell and Mark Campen, conceived the idea of offering students a "bird walk" when they delivered activity books to the six first grade classes at Rocky Hill Elementary School in November of 2012. Cantwell, the president of KTOS and the primary organizer of Discover Birds visits, put together welcome packets for each teacher that included a sample lesson plan, information about the Discover Birds blog, bird posters and calendars for the classroom and a list of teacher

books to 13 second grade classes at Sevierville Primary School. Cantwell coordinated the program with Sarah Green, second grade teacher and the 2012 Tennessee Environmental Education Association's "Teacher of the Year" for the eastern region. The 215 students were divided into small groups that rotated through the three parts of the program. Students on the bird walks received bird identification pages to help with bird recognition, spotted birds and learned to view them through the scope. They learned bird songs by finding the bird and identifying it while it was singing and even found an American Robin's nest with an incubating female to view through the scope without disturbing it.

"One of the coolest things is watching a kid look through the scope at something like a robin that they've seen hundreds of times before," says KTOS volun-



While participating in a bird walk with the Discover Birds Program, students look through a birding telescope, also known as a "spotting scope." Previous page: American Robin. Previous page, left: The Discover Birds logo.

teers. The idea of bird walks expanded to include a slide presentation and a hands-on bird treasure activity, and the Discover Birds Program was born.

In the program's next visit, the Discover Birds team delivered activity

teer, Chris Welsh. "They look, and at first you can tell they aren't seeing through the scope. You tell them to get their eye a little closer to the eyepiece, and suddenly they light up with a 'wow!' as they see the bird looking back at them."





Oliver Lang holds up a field guide to show students the items he carries in his pack while birding. Students giggle when they discover he also carries snacks and toilet paper. Below: After identifying a Cowbird on a bird walk, Chris Welsh explains to students how a Cowbird can raise young without building a nest — by laying eggs in another birds' nest! Below, right: The cover of the *Discover Birds Activity Book*.

To top off the fun interactions experienced at the school, Green later gave exciting feedback to the program. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she wrote. "Our students and teachers can talk about nothing else! What an inspiration you all were to us to be more aware and careful about our bird population. We all learned so much and will continue to learn from the beautiful materials that you so graciously left with us. I did not realize until after you left that your book was so incredible! What amazing illustrations! Some of our students that may not be the

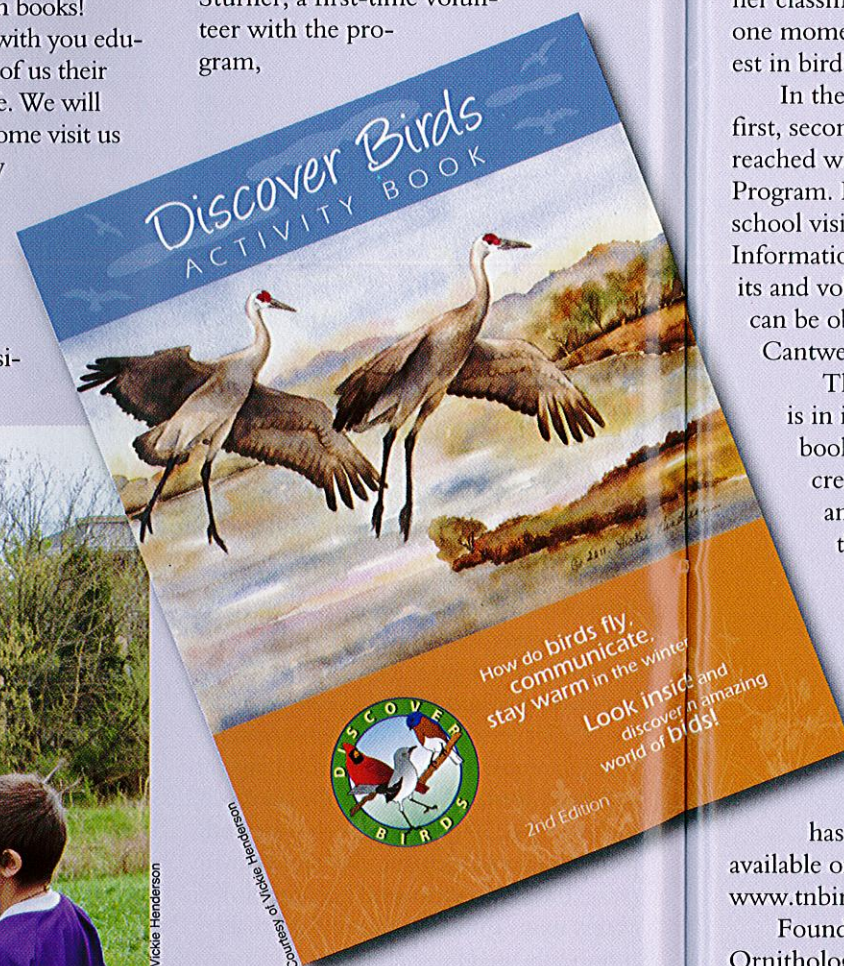
star students in math and reading have found an outlet for their artistic talent and now want to make their own books! Everyone that you brought with you educated us and shared with all of us their passion for birds and wildlife. We will never be the same. Please come visit us again to remind us how very important your work is. Thank you for inspiring another generation of environmentalists!"

The following month, volunteers visited an enthusi-

astic group of third graders at Sequoyah Elementary School in Knoxville with 65 students and their teachers participating in the program. Volunteer Doug Schneeberger interpreted bird treasure items for the students, including bird skulls and owl pellets. The owl castings were a particular hit because students had recently dissected them in their science class and were eager to talk about their discoveries.

Cantwell described the students as "sponges soaking up all the information" and found that many students could answer her questions when she showed them slides on bird species in Tennessee. She also played bird songs for the students. "I used my I-bird phone application for the sounds and they were asking 'what app is that? I want it!' They really enjoyed hearing the songs and if I talked about a bird they asked, 'can we hear what it sounds like?'"

In the small group walks, students quickly spotted birds on the school campus and were treated to close views through birding scopes. Kelly Sturner, a first-time volunteer with the program,



described her experience leading the bird walks. "I have very little skill in setting up spotting scopes on birds! But the kids were so patient and just lit right up when they saw their first bird through a scope. They were noticing details they had never seen before, like a cardinal has an orange bill and a robin has a yellow bill."

Sturner also enjoyed the eagerness of the students. "It's refreshing to look for birds with kids because there are no 'bird snobs.' To them, a robin is as exciting to see through a scope as a warbler. The kids make you look at common birds as if for the first time."

Common birds were not all the students found. The school grounds produced several singing warblers, and one of them was the brilliantly-marked black and orange Blackburnian species. "At one point I spotted a Blackburnian Warbler foraging high in a tree and managed to get one student onto it with the scope," Welsh commented. "She was the only one who saw it, but five minutes later she was describing it to her classmates. Sometimes it takes just one moment to develop a lifelong interest in birds..."

In the 2012-2013 school year 394 first, second and third graders were reached with the Discover Birds Program. KTOS is currently scheduling school visits for the 2014 spring season. Information about arranging school visits and volunteering with the program can be obtained by e-mailing Billie Cantwell at: [bfcantwell@gmail.com](mailto:bfcantwell@gmail.com).

The *Discover Birds Activity Book* is in its third printing with 4,000 books published. The book was created at the third grade level and is appropriate for second through sixth grade students. Printed books are available for purchase by individuals and organizations by contacting Cyndi Routledge at: [routledges@bellsouth.net](mailto:routledges@bellsouth.net).

The Tennessee Ornithological Society has also made the activity book available online at the following link: [www.tnbirds.org/education.html](http://www.tnbirds.org/education.html).

Founded in 1915, the Tennessee Ornithological Society is an indepen-



Billie Cantwell, KTOS president, helps a student identify a bird pictured on the back cover of the *Discover Birds Activity Book*. Below: Students study owl pellets in the bird treasures section of the program. The castings of hair and bits of bone that the owl cannot digest are like a mystery the students enjoy solving.

dent, non-profit, educational and scientific organization devoted to the study and conservation of birds. It is the oldest conservation organization in Tennessee. Local chapters hold monthly meetings, offer educational field trips and monitor bird populations in their area. For more information visit the TOS website at [www.tnbirds.org](http://www.tnbirds.org).

(Vickie Henderson is an artist, writer and photographer residing in Knoxville. She is author and illustrator of *Red-shouldered Hawk Territory*, *A Sketchbook Journey Through Nesting Season*, the Tennessee Ornithological Society's *Discover Birds Activity Book*, and Operation Migration's *Whooping Crane Activity Book*. Visit her website: <http://vickiehenderson.com>.)

