Reflecting on a Quarter Century

A Bird Lover in the Making
As I reflect on the past 25 years, I think “how does a graduate electrical engineer, having worked in the computer business for over two decades, become involved in a backyard birding business?”

It all started when we purchased our home in Bloomington in 1973. The previous owner of our new home along with our neighbor were active backyard birders and he left a hopper bird feeder mounted on a pole right outside our kitchen window in the backyard. My first reaction was “what is that?”

I knew nothing about bird feeding so our next-door neighbor took the time to patiently educate me and got me interested in feeding the birds.

Over time, as I shopped for bird seed, I discovered this neat specialty store in Bloomington called the “Wild Bird Store” in the Clover Shopping Center next to REI. It had anything and everything you wanted or needed for feeding the birds, especially great birdseed mixes. I thought I had died and gone to heaven . . . it was a great store!

FOR SALE: Wild Bird Store
So I became an enthusiastic regular shopper and subsequently a VIP Member (now a Frequent Feeder Member) enjoying and receiving their monthly newsletter. One nice fall day in 1990, as I was relaxing and reading the newsletter in our three-season room watching the birds, what jumps out at me was an ad in the newsletter: “FOR SALE: Wild Bird Store”!

At the time, I was looking for a change in my career and it caught my interest: “hmm . . . an executive working for a large computer company with an interest in feeding the birds . . . owning and operating a small specialty retail store?”

Well, one thing led to another and with some trepidation I made the plunge and acquired the Bloomington Wild Bird Store in the spring of 1991 from Minnesota Greenery, which also had 6 other Wild Bird Stores in the area.

From there, we acquired their White Bear Lake store (1993) and their Newport store (1996),
When we first started, we were very unique in terms of being a specialty store for wild birds. We had products—feeders, mixes, poles, those types of things—that you didn’t find in other retail outlets and online like you do today,” explains co-owner Al Netten. “Feeding wild birds wasn’t the year-round activity that it is now,” he adds. “It was primarily a winter pastime.”

Son and co-owner Dave Netten comments on other ways the industry has changed. “Wild bird feeding has also become very specialized—you can attract specific species with the foods and feeders you use. And now we have mealworms, jellies and jelly feeders, nectars and nectar feeders to attract even more exotic birds.

“The industry is growing. Data show that 40% of households now participate in bird feeding. Higher quality products and foods are more prevalent in availability in the marketplace, too. Suppliers of bird feeding products are more educated about what’s good for birds and are getting more creative with how to make products critter-resistant,” Dave notes.

Despite changes in the industry, the core of All Seasons’ Wild Bird Stores’ philosophy has remained providing freshest, best quality food and feeders and expert advice to make sure both birds and customers are happy. In a 1992 interview in Bloomington Small Business, Al described the knowledge and service that still makes All Seasons Wild Bird Store locations a favorite with customers: “We’ll spend a lot of time with a beginning customer, even if it’s a small purchase, to make sure they walk out of here with the right thing. You have to impart the knowledge to customers to get them on the right track.”
1994
Al and Steve Endres working on the new Bloomington store

Bloomington store expanded and relocated within the Clover Center

1995
The Mall of America
All Seasons Wild Bird Store location opens

Dave Netten, Linda Gorr and Al Netten at the Newport store

1996
Acquired the Newport Wild Bird Store

Joe’s retirement party

1997
White Bear Lake store moved to the White Bear Hills shopping center

1998
Joe Murphy (inventor of Joe’s Mix) retires

1999
Minnetonka Store opens

2002
Eagan store moved to Cliff Lake Center in Eagan from Newport

2003
White Bear Lake store expands

2004
Website launches: wildbirdstore.com

2006
Online store opens

2007
Eagan store expanded and moved to Cedar Cliff shopping center; MOA store converted into an apparel store called Relaxadaisical

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Birding tour to view Tundra Swans and Bald Eagles in SE Minnesota

Birding tour to Hawk Ridge and guide Oscar Johnson (left)

Al playing Santa at 1992 holiday party

Naturalist Jim Gilbert at the new White Bear Lake location in 1993
which we later moved to Eagan (2002). We also started up two other stores from scratch: Mall of America (1995) and Minnetonka (1999). Our last acquisition was the Feed Store in Wayzata (2003). Over that 12-year period we grew from one store to six stores—and that is still the number of stores today.

Local and Family Owned
We are a family owned and operated business. Lila, my wife, was involved in the business for a few years early on, buying and merchandising nature and bird-related gift products. Her decorative touch gave our stores a boutique ambience. Dave, our son, was a student at the U of MN at the time and he began working in the business as a part-time sales associate. Upon graduation he said, “I’d like to work in a small business.” I said, “I’m a small business.” So he joined our family business full time and since has become a valued full-time partner and co-owner, sharing operating duties with his “old man”.

Grateful for our Customers and Employees
Yes, it is gratifying to be in business as a father-son family business. However, the most gratifying part of the business is the people—customers and employees. I have found that people who shop at our stores are some of the best—caring, loyal and trustworthy. They will tell you what they like and, in a respectful way, what they dislike . . . VERY MINNESOTAN. Likewise, our employees are like our customers. Why? Primarily because most all of our employees have been former customers like you; they are passionate about birds and therefore passionate about the business . . . they too are the best.

So to all of our customers and employees a heartfelt thank you for supporting our family-owned business over the past 25 years. It’s been a Chirping good time! ~Al Netten

ANNIVERSARY PICKS

Three Time-Tested Products
Each of these products has been sold in our stores since the first day we were open. Why not give ‘em a try?

1) Our exclusive Joe’s Mix
2) Droll Yankees
   A6 tube feeder
3) Heath seed
   scoop and funnel

Have an idea for a future issue of Birds-Eye View? Photos and articles may be submitted by email to info@wildbirdstore.net. Sign up for our weekly e-newsletter at WildBirdStore.com to receive information about backyard birding, store events and exclusive discounts.