

It's a Wild World

A page in the life of a gentleman farmer and bird aficionado

Paul Pickett was dissecting rat brains for a living when he ran into Jim and Nancy Carpenter, the founders of Wild Birds Unlimited, at a garden center in Indianapolis. The three had more in common than a love of gardening. Pickett has a master's degree in ornithology, the science of birds, and isn't shy about talking to people he doesn't know. Pickett thought at the time that working in the retail store on weekends might give him a welcome break from his day job at the university. But Jim Carpenter saw more potential for the company than just hiring a part-time clerk. Carpenter hired Pickett to join the franchise team. Twenty-one years later, he is vice president of franchise development and still thinks Wild Birds is "an amazing place to work."

His love of birds came from his grandfather who was a game warden and brought injured birds home to nurse back to health. His grandfather preached responsibility and to never disappoint when you put yourself in a situation where people or animals depend on you.

Pickett earned a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of South Dakota and then stayed on to get his master's. That was his stepfather's advice: "Major in something you're passionate about, because you'll excel." Pickett took both gentlemen's advice to heart. You'll see that in his answers to our questions:

Trip of a lifetime: The Arkansas swamps where a (thought-to-be extinct) ivory-billed woodpecker was sighted. (Pickett didn't see it, but believes the bird is there.)

Most interesting college intern experience: Hand-feeding rats and water buffalo (parts) to crocodiles during a semester abroad in India. (And, yes, he has full use of both hands.)

Why birds? They're survivors; they're so beautiful, fast and they're just so free.

What talent would you most like to have? A good singing voice ... and everyone around me would probably like that, too, because it (the lack of a good singing voice) doesn't stop me from singing.

Pets: Two cats and a coop full of chickens (the chickens are mostly for eggs, but some are tame enough that they'll sit on his lap when he's surveying his park-like garden).

Lunchtime activity: We all bring our lunches—I bring eggs—and we eat in the conference room. I work with some of my best friends; so it's both personally and professionally productive.

Favorite way to eat an egg: Scrambled

Eating style: Healthy. I rarely eat junk food.

Do you eat like a bird? No, that would mean pigging out.

Last meal of your life: Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans and a really good Cabernet.

Signature accessory: I'm a sucker for

expensive shoes—but at a bargain. I buy them at Designer Shoe Warehouse.

Most prized possession: My grandfather's Concordia College ring.

Favorite Reality Show: Watching birds in my backyard.

Other business interests: I'm a partner in two independent coffee shops and a commercial kitchen you can rent by the hour. Clients include a guy who bottles barbecue sauce and a chef who rented it out for the whole month of October for a "pop-up restaurant" with an online menu and reservation system.

Office décor: An inherited antique desk, lots of bird pictures and pictures of friends and family, a small collection of crazy bird feeders (including Elvis and basketball great Larry Byrd).

Dream job: Raising endangered birds and going on the lecture circuit to talk about how important preserving nature is.

Favorite de-stresser: Yoga. I've been practicing for five years, but I took it up a notch a year ago when I went back for training. I didn't do it because I wanted to teach, I needed to know how to manage stress better. I hardly ever teach. It's hard to teach a regular class when you travel. I can't cancel a Discovery Day for a yoga class. (Nor would he want to.)

Do your coworkers know you do yoga by your calm demeanor? Yes, and when I talk to them and put a leg up into tree (pose).



You can call Paul Pickett a tree-hugger, but bird-watcher would probably be more accurate.

What's on your iPod? It's all over the map. Dave Matthews, Eminem, Sarah McLachlan and car yoga (podcast) from my last trip.

Favorite indulgence: Time alone in my garden.

Last book you read: "The Zookeeper's Wife."

What's on your bookshelf? "How to Raise Goats."

Any chance you might add goats to your backyard? It's legal to have chickens (and a Rooster if you bribe the neighbors with eggs), but not goats.

Tell us something we wouldn't know about you: I was born without a sense of smell. It's like having a bad cold. Chocolate and vanilla ice cream taste the same, but it makes me a low-maintenance dinner guest.