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# A fine Feathered Franchise

Carmel businessman grows his love of birds into a national brand

By Deb Buehler

Store photos by Mark Lee

Bird photos courtesy Wild Birds Unlimited

**W**inter birds gather in the cold sunlight to feast on black oiled sunflower seeds. From titmice to juncos to nuthatches and black-capped chickadees, attracting and watching backyard birds has become a lifetime hobby for many local Hoosiers.

For more than 30 years, bird enthusiasts have sought out seeds, feeders, bird baths and more from Carmel-based Wild Birds Unlimited. The retail resource launched by CEO and founder Jim Carpenter offers more than seeds – franchise owners and employees alike are knowledgeable about attracting and feeding native bird species across the country.

## Enthusiasm turned business venture

After working for a couple of years in a garden center, Carpenter decided to turn his love of watching and feeding

birds into a business. The first Wild Birds Unlimited store opened in the Broad Ripple area in 1981.

“About a year later, a relative of an employee stopped by to visit and asked me how to do what I was doing,” Carpenter said. “I told him to come back in 6 months and I’d sell him a franchise.”

Along with wife Nancy and a local business partner, Carpenter developed the franchise model, selling the first one to the interested relative who opened a location in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For the next six years, Wild Birds Unlimited grew steadily, opening about 5 stores a year. By 1989, the

**“...fifty to sixty million people feed birds in their back yards”**

–Jim Carpenter

Carpenters were able to buy out the business partner and became the sole owners of the corporation. In the years that followed the company grew by twenty to thirty stores a year, becoming the largest franchise system of backyard bird feeding and nature specialty stores. Now more than 300 Wild Birds Unlimited stores can be found across the U.S. and Canada.



Downy Woodpecker



Jim Carpenter



### Education and Expertise

Kathy and Dave Williams purchased their first franchise in 2001, opening a Wild Birds Unlimited store on Michigan Road and then opening a second location in Westfield in 2003.

"We've had a great franchise experience," Kathy Williams said. "Jim Carpenter is down to earth and hard working – he and his staff are regular folks who are passionate about nature and birds. They are constantly coming up with new and innovative ideas which are why Wild Birds Unlimited is a leader in the industry."

Williams said Hamilton County has a lot to

offer bird enthusiasts. She explained that every season produces different birds, keeping the hobby interesting. By changing seed offerings, bird watchers can attract both year-round residents and migratory birds.

"Right now, birds need foods that are higher in fats to stay warm. Feeders can be filled with seeds and suet to attract winter birds," Williams explained.

Education is an important part of offerings available at Wild Birds Unlimited. Williams said that her staff is comprised of knowledgeable experts available to answer questions and

troubleshoot challenges backyard birders encounter. Because the hobby attracts people of all ages, Williams and her staff work with beginning birders to experienced backyard feeders. She often invites people to bring in a picture of their yard from the window where they will be bird watching. This is a great way to consider what type of bird resources will help them attract a diverse collection birds. When clients come in wondering what bird they are seeing, Williams said they get bird books out and help identify them. Williams said she's always learning – that's her favorite part of store ownership.

### Retail Innovations

As the November 2012 franchisee convention approached, Carpenter and his staff decided it would be a good time to rebrand the Wild Birds Unlimited look and feel. Together with a staff team, Carpenter set the goal of improving every facet that impacts the customer experience.



"We think our brand is what makes us different from other specialty retailers," Carpenter said. "The staff team began to explore what we could do to create an appealing environment in the stores interior. We want people to have a great time, learn a lot about birds and the hobby of bird feeding and watching."

The new branding inspires customers through the five senses, plus what Wild Birds Unlimited calls the sixth sense: energy and the emotional impact of the in-store experience.

Carpenter explained that after many meetings, the design team identified best practices for Wild Birds Unlimited stores in support of a great customer experience. The team chose an approach that is helping store owners integrate what they already have with cost effective upgrades for a new look.

"We put it all together," Carpenter said. "A color pallet, flooring selections and digital marketing assets." A new warm color scheme includes grey, brown and blue, bringing the feeling of the outdoors into the store with a pallet that works well in every region of North America.

The new store design was unveiled at the Wild Birds Unlimited location at 4040 E. 82nd Street in Indianapolis. Highlights of the rebranding include new signage in the seed department enabling customers to select the best blend based on the birds they wish to attract. The cash wrap area shares Wild Birds Unlimited patented bird feeder history and expertise in bird feeding. Customers are also finding ways to access and share information about the hobby in the form of videos, hobby information and streaming live web cams. The community board has been enhanced to communicate more local



Black-Capped Chickadee



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information while giving customers a place to post photos of birds they've seen in their own backyards.

"Today fifty to sixty million people feed birds in their back yards," Carpenter said of the hobby. "The hobby is enjoyable to all ages and backgrounds. All someone needs is a small yard or wild area nearby – from apartments and condos with small decks to new subdivisions where farmland has been transformed for neighborhoods; birds can be attracted with no mess at all." Carpenter said that now he knows customers who have been coming to the store for 30 years. He considers it gratifying to know that these customers have inspired their friends and children to get involved in the hobby too.

"It is our mission to bring people and nature together and we do it with excellence," Carpenter concluded. "We do it through bird feeders and by challenging ourselves to improve our ability to serve our customers." **HCBM**

Attracting birds to a backyard feeder can be a fun family activity. Keep track of your bird feeder sightings and watch for new arrivals as milder weather returns this spring. A bird book can come in handy for birds you've never seen before.

Here are some birds typical to Indiana in the winter months:

House Finch

White-breasted Nuthatch

Dark-eyed Junco

Northern Cardinal

Tufted Titmouse

Northern Flicker

American Goldfinch

Eastern Starling

Song Sparrow

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