



Wild Birds Unlimited's Chief Naturalist is Helping to Strengthen the Brand's Bond with Nature

Wild Birds Unlimited

02/07/17 17:50:13

For more than 26 years, John Schaust's office has been the outdoors. From being an interpretive naturalist at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to the senior naturalist at the Cleveland Metroparks, Schaust's expertise lies in connecting people with nature.

Perhaps one of the most memorable moments from his pre-[Wild Birds Unlimited](#) career came from leading the Holliday Park Nature Center project in Indianapolis, Indiana. Realizing the park was in a state of disrepair, Schaust brought a wealth of practical knowledge in program development and park management to help turn things around. The immediate effect of his leadership was an increase in nature and environmental programming for children and families. Under his tutelage, volunteers were also recruited and trained to be naturalist assistants and trail monitors. He also proposed building a nature center. Serving as a liaison with the Friends of Holliday Park non-profit organization, he helped to launch The Campaign for the Nature Center—a fundraiser that resulted in nearly \$5 million. By April 2000, the long awaited Holliday Park Nature Center officially opened its doors.

"It was an incredible opportunity and an incredibly rewarding accomplishment. That moment solidified my passion for the natural world, and reinforced my desire to help others enjoy it as much as I did," Schaust

said.

Schaust's work with the Holliday Park Nature Center got him noticed by Jim Carpenter, the founder and CEO of [Wild Birds Unlimited](#) and an avid supporter of The Campaign for the Nature Center. The two of them started talking, and when Carpenter mentioned an open role at Wild Birds Unlimited as its Chief Naturalist, Schaust realized it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. This was back in 2004, and to this day, he says it's been an experience unlike any other.

"I came on board with Wild Birds Unlimited to help bring people and nature together. I quickly found that Wild Birds Unlimited is a place that truly lives out its mission statement—it's not just words on a piece of paper. With what we offer and the hobby we support, we're truly giving people a daily connection with the outside world. That is something I've dedicated my career towards doing," Schaust said.

In his role as chief naturalist, Schaust conducts and reviews scientific research on the natural history of birds, bird feeding and bird population trends, along with the development of nature and hobby education materials for each of Wild Birds Unlimited's franchise stores. He also manages all conservation partnerships and programs for the brand, including the Pathways to Nature Conservation Fund, which has provided scholarships for over 2,100 kids to attend National Audubon Society summer camps. John recently received a message from one of the Audubon Camp counselor thanking Wild Birds Unlimited for helping to provide the funds for underserved youth to attend their camp. The counselor went on to share, "nothing can explain what it was like to see the excitement in their eyes when they saw birds and other wildlife that they hadn't seen before."

"In a lot of ways, Wild Birds Unlimited stores are playing the same role as nature centers. I can help all of the brand's owners have more resources, more information and more methods to reach their customer base and really make their experience and the hobby better. And through that, we're helping owners and customers alike learn more about nature and have a stronger relationship with the world of birds." Schaust said.

Schaust has seen the power of the bird feeding and watching hobby firsthand, making his role as a chief naturalist a personal one, too. A few years ago, his father passed away at the age of 84. But while his father was sick and primarily house-bound, he started feedings birds in his backyard with John's help. His father loved every minute of it, sitting in his living room looking out his back windows to catch glimpses of visiting birds.

"Bird feeding distracted him from his worries and brought joy to his life every day. I looked at my father and truly understood what a gift this is we're bringing people," Schaust said. "That relationship with the natural world brings so many people so much joy and happiness, and it's something that will stick with them the rest of their lives. I see it every day at each one of our Wild Birds Unlimited stores. We're providing something that truly touches people, and that's something not many retail businesses can say they do."

In the years ahead, Schaust will continue to work toward the goal of making Wild Birds Unlimited the best local bird and hobby experts. He's currently in the process of revamping the system-wide training program that every store associate goes through, making them certified bird feeding specialists. He's also focused on the brand's bottom line—and that's making sure staff and stores are equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to be that important center for nature and hobby education at the heart of each community.

"It's been such a phenomenal opportunity. Before, I was having an impact on a small, local scale at my park. But the impact here in this job is much greater. I get to work with 300-plus stores to bring this

information, education and opportunity to our customers throughout North America,” Schaust said. “I count my lucky stars every day.”