

Selling Socks to Save Seabirds

BROTHERS WILL AND MATTY GLADSTONE ARE COMMITTED TO CONSERVATION.

by *Elizabeth Watson Chaney*

Will Gladstone, an amateur birder, was in his 5th-grade science class in Newton, Massachusetts, when he first heard of an eye-catching bird. It's called the blue-footed booby. The population is declining, he learned. Will decided to raise money to support conservation efforts. As he was brainstorming ideas, his gaze came to rest on his feet, and the idea hit him. Feet, he thought, blue feet! He decided to sell bright blue socks and donate the money to environmental organizations trying to help the birds. His younger brother Matty became his partner. The boys started the Blue Feet Foundation in 2016.

Dance of the Silly Birds

The blue-footed booby is a unique seabird that lives near the Pacific coast, from California all the way to the Galapagos Islands. These goose-sized birds have an impressive wingspan—about five feet (1.5 m) wide. Their distinctive feet are bright enough to send you searching for your sunglasses. During mating season, they like to show off with a unique dance. They lift one blue foot up into the air at a time to give the best possible view. Ornithologists (scientists who study birds) refer to the dance as “foot rocking.” Males whistle as they dance, while females draw attention to themselves by making honking noises. The spectacle transforms them from simply silly looking to laugh-out-loud comical. It's

a sight to behold! The word ‘booby,’ by the way, comes from the Spanish word *bobo*, meaning “foolish” or “clown.”

Getting the Foundation Going

Starting the foundation began with a search for blue socks. Will and his dad searched online for companies that made them. They found the best price from a supplier in China. The next step was to have a logo contest. After selecting their favorite design, Will and Matty sent it to the sock company to customize the product. Their dad loaned them money to order a few hundred pairs. After the socks arrived, Will set up a website. When the first orders started coming in, they mailed socks to customers right away. The boys planned to donate all profits (the



Matty (left) and Will raise money to study and protect blue-footed boobies.

Watch me
dance!



amount left over after a business pays its expenses) to groups that help the blue-footed booby.

In the beginning, it was a challenge for the boys to gather support for their cause. They decided to ask a better-known conservation organization to sponsor them. They reached out to several, but none were willing. “They didn’t agree to it, because we were just kids,” says Will.

Although this was discouraging, the two persevered. Finally, they came across an organization they hadn’t heard of before: the Galapagos Conservancy. Its mission is to support conservation in the Galapagos Islands, which lie about 600 miles (970 km) off the coast of Ecuador. This group of islands is home to about half of the world’s blue-footed booby population. The conservancy staff replied with an enthusiastic response. “We love what you are doing!” they cheered. They offered to highlight the foundation in the conservancy’s newsletter. “That helped a lot,” says Will. It gave them confidence in their new venture and boosted the Blue Feet Foundation’s credibility. The brothers also created a social media presence.

Four years later, their perseverance has paid off. They have 18,000 Instagram followers and 10,000 Facebook followers and counting. The 18,000 pairs of socks they’ve sold are walking all over the globe. Orders have come from 50 different countries, including places as far away from Massachusetts as Japan

and New Zealand. Visit the picture gallery on their website and you’ll also see blue socks being modeled by a few famous folks, including members of Blue Man Group (known worldwide for their performance art) and a Boston Bruins hockey player.

At first the boys packaged all the sock orders themselves. But as business boomed, it began to interfere with getting their homework done. To speed up the process, they hired a nearby company to take over the packaging. They also moved sock purchases from China to Ecuador. This helped support the Ecuadorian economy, and customers like the socks even more.



BIRDING AS A HOBBY: *Inspiration from Will Gladstone*



What is a birder? A birder is a person who enjoys observing birds in the wild and trying to identify them. Most birders invest in a good set of binoculars. Will’s pair was purchased by his parents on a whale-watching adventure in Alaska, but they’ve turned into a fine set of birding binoculars.



What is a list? Most birders keep lists of all the birds they’ve been able to identify in their natural habitats. At last count, Will had about 250 different birds on his. He’s studied them enough that he can identify them by their physical appearance, and sometimes he can recognize them by their unique calls. Each species has its own.



Will’s best birding tips: “Get some bird guides, or just go out in nature and explore.” You can also find birding excursions through a number of wildlife organizations. Will is grateful for his family, who supports and shares his interest. On birding trips, says his brother Matty, “Will is basically our guide.”

The Benefits of Giving

Will and Matty have raised more than \$130,000 in profits, all of which they have donated to either the Galapagos Conservancy or the Charles Darwin Foundation (which has become another sponsor). The money enabled biology professor David Anderson from Wake Forest University to travel to the Galapagos in 2017. He wanted to study why the blue-footed boobies aren't flourishing as they used to. "All nesting colonies in Galapagos are in the Galapagos National Park," explains Anderson. "No one can mess with them or even be on land near them without a special permit."

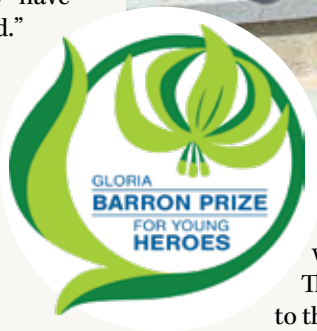
Although the population of these birds in the Galapagos has declined significantly over the past 20 years,

Anderson has seen some hopeful signs. These include an increase in young birds. There is still work to be done, however. Although the decline in population is slowing, it's not reversing. Elderly birds are dying faster than chicks are being born.

"What they need is a specific kind of fish," says Anderson. Sardines were once a major part of the birds' diet but they "have all but disappeared."

Anderson says it's not clear what's causing the sardine population to drop. The birds make up for the calories by eating other types of fish. But researchers suspect that the low percentage of sardines in their diet is somehow related to their lower breeding rates. As of now, scientists do not know how to boost sardine populations.

Will, now 15, has won several awards for his efforts to help his blue-footed friends. In 2017 the brothers received the John Muir Youth Conservation Initiative Award. In 2018 Will received honorable mention in the Action for Nature International Eco-Hero Awards. And in 2019 the brothers received a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, which came



with \$10,000 in prize money. They donated the entire amount to the Galapagos Conservancy. In the summer of 2017, Will's class went on a week-long trip to Ecuador, including a few days on the Galapagos islands, where he got his first glimpse of a blue-footed booby in the wild. Although it was from a distance, he says it was "an awesome feeling."

Elizabeth Watson Chaney is a freelance writer based in North Carolina. She was introduced to birding as a child. Her father, who just turned 80, has been a birder for 70 years!

See you out there.



Favorite birds: In addition to the blue-footed booby (obviously), Will is especially fond of the rose-breasted grosbeak with its bold black-and-red coloring. "They're not that common," explains Will, "so it's really exciting when you see one."



Booby birding: Say you're in the tropics and spy a bird that looks like a booby but doesn't have blue feet. Don't second guess yourself! The booby is actually a family of seabirds, and their feet are not all blue. You might have spotted a red- or brown-footed booby.

