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
Watch me dance!
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.”
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.

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.”

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!