

Remarks by NRCM People's Choice Award winner Robin Robinson of Brunswick at our 2018 Conservation Leadership Awards event in Yarmouth on October 17.

I want to thank everyone for coming and I want to thank all of you for what YOU do to protect our environment. I started the Facebook MAINE Birds group on a lark with no grand purpose, but it quickly took off and now there are nearly 19,000 members {we now have over 20,000!!!!}. There are people from everywhere: simple people who don't know anything about birds who are looking at birds on feeders through dirty kitchen windows who don't know what they are, outstanding world class photographers, and first-rate birders. One of the things I'm the proudest of is that the members are from all walks of life – simple people, complicated, educated, rich, and poor. I think that is an imperative in protecting our environment that everyone feel that they have a place to be.

I believe that people will learn to protect that which they have come to love. How people come to love something is through familiarity with it and appreciation for what it is through education. Suddenly, the little brown bird in the kitchen window is a Chipping Sparrow or a White-throated Sparrow. Or, "Oh my god! It's NOT an eagle? I was sure it was an eagle!" And that's how they become invested in it, then suddenly, they want to protect that thing. Then, they learn about things like diseases are spread though unclean bird feeders that aren't maintained; that as much as they love the ducks that white bread for ducks (like people) is a bad idea. In the MAINE Birds group, they can learn in an environment that is not pedantic or condescending and made up solely of highly educated specialists, they learn from peers AND experts. Average, everyday people can feel like they have a place where their opinions and questions matter and it's safe to ask questions. So, they learn about things like releasing balloons at public events, or their grandchild's birthday party, though they have grown up their whole lives doing it is bad for birds and the environment; they learn about the hazards of plastic straws, bags, and so on, and that these are things THEY can change. They don't have to feel helpless and hopeless or that the solution is too much bigger than they are. Everybody has a little bit of hope in that process. I believe that everybody's little bit of hope is what is going to save us all.