A rare streak of red in the sky in mid-May – that’s what Donna Meyer waits for at her Pewaukee home. It’s not the sunset. It’s a scarlet tanager migrating north. “I see the bright red zooming past,” she says. “It just stops you in your tracks.” Typically these brilliantly colored birds have stopped by the Meyers’ yard only briefly, flying farther north to nest. But in the last decade, that vivid color lingered into late summer and early October as pairs of tanagers decided to nest on the Meyers’ land. Perhaps it’s a reward for the efforts that Donna Meyer and her husband, Tony, have made to make their land “bird friendly.”

The Meyers have worked to preserve the diverse habitats on their land for years. So it was natural for them to agree to allow Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) researchers to study birds on their land. They joined 60 other private landowners and one government agency in Wisconsin and Belize participating in BirdsWithout Borders-Aves Sin Fronteras® (BWB-ASF). This is an international research-education-conservation project run jointly by the ZSM and its partner, the Foundation for Wildlife Conservation, Inc. (FWC). The project studies birds that migrate (some between Wisconsin and Belize) as well as resident birds, and encourages landowners to put in plants and maintain habitat that helps birds survive.

BWB-ASF chose private instead of public land as its main focus because “private landowners control a majority of the land in the U.S., and they usually take pride in their land’s upkeep, while public lands are really politically driven lands,” says Dr. Gil Boese, founder of BWB-ASF, president of the FWC and president emeritus of the ZSM. Private landowners tend to pass down land – and a concern for conservation – from generation to generation. “Political properties come and go with administrations. You spend all that time and money on something, and then it’s gone. I thought there’d be a possibility for a longer-term investment with private landowners.”

The project itself grew out of a personal desire to preserve birds. One day in 1992, Dr. Boese sat on the deck of his Pewaukee home watching birds. He picked up a newspaper and saw an article about the decline of migratory birds. “The species they
were talking about were the same I was watch-
ing,” he says. “I thought, ‘If what they’re saying is true, then what I’m viewing and enjoying will disappear.’ ”

The experience triggered the memory of a trek through the Belizean tropical forest in Central America. Dr. Boese recalled seeing some of the same birds in Belize as he saw on his own property. He thought, “If we could get on both sides of the Neotropical equation, maybe we could see what makes it tick.” He wanted to study migratory birds in both their breeding grounds in Wisconsin and their wintering areas in Belize to find out what people could do to help birds. Thus he began BWB-ASF; turning to friends and neighbors, such as the Meyers, for support. He set four goals: 1) Do research to discover what habitats are important to birds, 2) apply the research results to conservation by producing guides on how to manage land to help birds both in Wisconsin and Belize, 3) educate children and adults about birds and 4) train Belizeans so that they could conduct further research independently and have an impact on conservation strategies.

Researchers set to work at three sites in Wisconsin – Pewaukee in the southeast, Rosendale in central Wisconsin and Land O’ Lakes in the far north – and at three sites in Belize. One Belize site is Runaway Creek Nature Preserve, a 6,009-acre property that the FWC bought in 1998 and turned into a wildlife preserve. In Wisconsin and Belize BWB-ASF workers used mist nets to gently catch birds for banding. They also searched for nests and counted all birds seen and heard. At Pewaukee, they analyzed fecal samples to see what the birds ate. They found that insects sustained many birds in spring; in the fall, birds supplemented their diets with berries and fruits. Red oaks and pussy willows are the biggest providers of insects, which give birds protein, but box elder, yellow bud hickory and highbush cranberry also provide insect food for birds during migration. Landowners can help migrating birds by planting these trees and managing the land so that these plants thrive, says Vicki Piaskowski, international coordinator for BWB-ASF. She practices what she preaches in her own Wauwatosa yard by planting native plants such as dogwood and elderberry to provide fruits for birds, and white pine, hemlock and juniper, which provide shelter for birds.

Dr. Boese and his wife, Lillian, have planted in much the same way, with a particular emphasis on red oaks, which are disappearing in Wisconsin. “When I’m driving down Interstate 94 and I see a patch of oak trees, the next time I go by, it’s a shopping mall,” he says. He wraps oak sapling trunks with wire mesh in his otherwise naturally growing property to protect them from deer. Although the Meyers also let their land grow naturally, they have learned a thing or two from BWB-ASF and other conservation groups. The Meyers focus on eliminating alien species, such as buckthorn and honeysuckle, which choke out native plants. The Meyers also have BWB-ASF researchers to thank for discovering four scarlet tanager nests on their property in 1998.

Likewise, BWB-ASF can thank the Meyers and the other landowners for letting researchers gather enough data – since 1997 they have banded 10,140 birds just in Wisconsin – to produce guides that will teach other people how to make their yards or land bird-friendly. “We want to have a practical application to our research,” Piaskowski says. “This is where private landowners come in. We’re using what we’ve learned to provide information to help them manage their lands to help birds.” BWB-ASF published a free-of-charge, 106-page guide for Belize landowners in 2007 and will publish a free guide for Wisconsin
Birds may be small creatures, says Piaskowski, but they can have large effects on the environment. Birds disperse seeds, pollinate plants and control pests. Many people appreciate birds for the beauty they bring to our lives. They are also considered indicators of environmental change. “If birds start declining, it indicates that something might be unbalanced in the environment or we are losing some important habitats,” she says. For example, when the pesticide DDT became popular, some bird species declined dramatically. When scientists investigated, they found out how detrimental DDT was to some birds and their eggs. The chemical eventually was banned in the U.S.

The current decline in migratory birds isn’t due to chemicals, but mainly to a loss in habitat. Donna Meyer has noticed: “Forty years ago we had many more birds, at least during the winter, and a variety of birds.” In November 2007, the National Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy warned that nearly a third of American bird species “need immediate conservation help to simply survive.” In June 2007, the Audubon Society reported that the populations of some of our most common birds had fallen by as much as 80%.

Although planting oaks and pussy willows in your yard to help birds find food during migration may seem a small step, Dr. Boese says these patches of bird-friendly land make all the difference. “It was thought that fragments of land were useless to the survival of a species,” he says. “But I say fragments are all they have left in some places. And they’re making use of these land fragments.”

By Erin Wiltgen and Paula Brookmire

Thanks to these Wisconsin landowners participating in Birds Without Borders-Aves Sin Fronteras:

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Note: Only Pewaukee landowners are pictured on these pages because their land is the closest BWB-ASF research site to the Milwaukee County Zoo.