

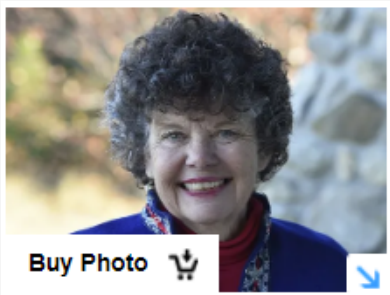


# Crossroads: It's winter, but golden potatoes are sprouting at learning center

Coggin Heeringa, Special to USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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The Annual Christmas Bird Count for Sturgeon Bay is scheduled for this Sunday. It goes without saying that Crossroads will participate, and we are again inviting the public to join our efforts.

*(Photo: Tina M. Gohr/DOOR COUNTY ADVOCATE/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN)*

For 364 days each year, bird watching is a guilty pleasure for me. But on *the* day, the day scheduled as the local Christmas Bird Count, birding is an

imperative, something I have done for 44 of the 119 years this citizen science effort has taken place.

During many years, counting birds and recording them by species has been a lark. On this one day, free of the pressure of responsibility and deadlines, whether solo or with friends and family, I could frolic in the forest and enjoy the beauties of nature.

Sometimes there have been so many birds I've run out of room on my tally sheets.

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During other years, the weather has been downright hostile; it's been wet or icy or windy or sometimes all of the above. The birds (apparently smarter than the birdwatchers) hunkered down. I've never been totally skunked, but there have been years when my list has been pathetically short. But no matter how grim the weather, unless the count is officially called for weather, I will go.

I don't know if walnuts were in short supply or what, but we were told (and the children were flabbergasted to learn) that in Green Bay potatoes were gilded and hung on trees. Golden potatoes! Whoever heard of such a thing?

Well, this holiday season we have golden potatoes at Crossroads. No, we are not gilding vegetables. We are hosting a University of Wisconsin/USDA Potato Research Project, and the potatoes they are growing have bright golden interiors underneath their brown skins.

According to researcher Renee Sauer, "Criolla is a small, round, very yellow Columbian variety often sold by street vendors, fried or boiled. As a satellite experiment, selections of Criolla potato plants are planted in the Crossroads greenhouse to make crosses for the next generation.

"We plant the best tubers in this generation with the goal of ultimately producing a Criolla type that grows well in our conditions with a similar taste and look as the original Columbian variety. Then we cross pollinate the flowers in order to produce true potato seeds (the fruit similar to small unripe tomatoes). These seeds will be field planted in 2019 and again selected for the best tubers."

What makes a potato desirable? Researchers are hoping to breed potatoes that store well. Currently, criollas sprout almost immediately. The ultimate objective is to produce potatoes so inbred that in gardens and small fields, they can grow from seeds rather than seed tubers.

So, down in our greenhouse, snug in their little pots, the Criollas are starting to sprout. Perhaps some day seeds from these golden potatoes will be a gift to a hungry world.

You know what else is golden? Silence. I can still remember my mother repeatedly announcing over the high-decibel din of my childhood home, "All I want in this world is a little peace and quiet!"

Alas, we can't help much with peace, but we might enable some quiet. During the run-up to Christmas Day, we will offer a number of family programs. Our goal is to inspire environmental stewardship, but it might be helpful for a parent or grandparents or neighbors to get the kids out from underfoot for a while so preparations can be made.

Family programs will be free and open to all residents and visitors to Door County. No reservations are necessary.

Crossroads at Big Creek is a donor-supported learning center comprised of three preserves. The Collins Learning Center, located at 2041 Michigan St. just east of the Highway 42/57 roundabout, is open daily from 2 to 4:30 p.m. and during scheduled activities. The Collins Center will be closed Dec. 25. Trails and restrooms always are open.

*Coggin Heeringa is the director/naturalist at Crossroads at Big Creek.*