



Michael Zuiker, Owner
Wild Birds Unlimited Arlington
Store: (703) 241-3988
Mobile:(703) 635-6501

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Small Business Survives Despite the Pandemic & Bird Mortality Event

ARLINGTON, Virginia – As he worried his business would collapse during the COVID-19 pandemic, the owner of the Wild Birds Unlimited Arlington store faced a secondary financial assault that nobody could have foreseen: the novel bird mortality event that followed the arrival of cicadas in spring 2021.

With seven different jurisdictions ordering residents to stop feeding birds after birds started dying, mostly to avoid birds congregating around feeders, store owner Michael Zuiker faced an unusual circumstance in which the government was telling people not to buy his main product.

This trauma comes at an odd time. The store is celebrating its 30th anniversary of serving the Northern Virginia community. As Zuiker looks forward to what 2022 holds, he's hopeful that he can continue to rebuild in the wake of the pandemic and the bird mortality event.

"I felt like I was living through a firestorm at certain points these last two years," says Zuiker. "Just when I was finally able to open the store again to customers, they were seeing birds dying around them and being told not to buy bird feed. Add to that supply chain nightmares and the Delta variant, and I was afraid we wouldn't make it to our 31st year."

The last 30 years have been filled with a lot of growth and transformation for the store, but the last 18 months have proven to be especially difficult, as it has for most small businesses. The birding business, however, suffered through both the effects of the pandemic in 2020 and the mysterious bird illnesses and deaths in the spring and summer of 2021. Both proved equally challenging for the business. Still, Wild Birds Unlimited has survived thanks to the loyalty of its customers.

“Over the years, we have responded to the needs and interests of our customers and have been fortunate to have created a wonderful family of friends and supporters,” said Zuiker. “I am proud to serve Arlington and the region, providing superior services and products to bird lovers and environmentalists.”

This last 18 months has been a time for reflection that has confirmed what Zuiker has known all along: Wild Birds Unlimited plays a vital role, serving a passionate community of birders who have looked for support in preserving local birding, both in their gardens and neighborhoods.

Instead of shying away from the experience of the last two years, the Arlington store embraced it. Zuiker turned his store into a mini-Amazon, with online orders and thousands of deliveries during the pandemic. He transformed his SUV into a delivery van, driving many of the home deliveries himself over the last 18 months. The facts on the deliveries are impressive:

- Total home and curbside deliveries: 5,200
- Furthest distance: 29 miles, one way from Arlington store to College Park, Md.
- Most trips in one day: 30 deliveries
- Most miles in one day: 125 - 150 miles
- Heaviest bag of bird seed: 50 pounds
- Most steps he had to climb for a delivery at a customer’s home: 48 steps

“We look to the future, and it looks uncertain with the store reopening in the wake of the pandemic and the tragic losses of local birds,” says Zuiker. “What has bound all of us together for 30 years has been the great support of my customers who love their wild birds. There is no Wild Birds Unlimited without their continued trust in my business and my commitment to bring joy to their lives through their hobby of backyard bird feeding.”

Events planned for the 30th anniversary celebration, November 18 – 24, include storewide discounts on all products and swag bags with four or five items for each person coming into the store.

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For More Information, Contact:

Contact: Michael Zuiker, Owner
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Store: (703) 241-3988
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2437 North Harrison Street
Arlington, VA 22207

YouTube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMloakaYoMlucWG8k6CBUsQ/featured>

About Michael Zuiker

Michael Zuiker, owner of the Wild Birds Unlimited Arlington store, opened his franchise in 1991, after working for Marriott Corporation for 10 years. The store has always been located in the Lee Harrison Shopping Center in Arlington, Virginia.

Zuiker, 70, developed his appreciation for the outdoors as a youth, traveling throughout the United States and Canada and camping with his parents and eight other siblings. He started working at the age of 11 cutting lawns and shoveling snow. He graduated with an Associate's degree in Architectural Technology from Southern Illinois University.

"Like anyone who lives for a long time, I have survived many of life's trials and tribulations -- marriage, divorce, injuries, illness and grief," says Zuiker. "If I had it to do it all over again, would I? Hell, yes! I would do thousands of things differently but one thing I'd do the same is open a Wild Birds Unlimited franchise."

About Wild Birds Unlimited

The first Wild Birds Unlimited store was opened in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1981 by Jim Carpenter. Today, there are now more than 350 stores in North America. Wild Birds Unlimited is a specialty retail store that is dedicated to serving bird enthusiasts by providing products for hobbyists and backyard birders.

In its 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation National Overview, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reported in 2017:

- 81 Million people participate in feeding birds and other wildlife
- \$5 Billion is spent annually on birdseed and wildlife food
- \$960 Million is spent annually on bird feeders, bird baths, and nesting boxes
- \$1.8 Billion is spent annually on binoculars and spotting scopes
- \$7.6 Billion is spent annually on bird feeding and watching wildlife