Birding Trails

Working To Alleviate Impacts on the Environment

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Birdwatching is an immensely popular and satisfying hobby. The National Wildlife Federation estimates that over 50 million Americans participate in bird watching (Stewart, Jun/Jul 06). A quick look at any popular birdwatching spot will also illustrate that birders can be of any age and skill level. They can range from anything to children to people who have retired or be very casual birders all the way up to nearly ‘professional’ birders who keep detailed observations and totals of the birds they see. The National Wildlife federation, in conjunction with the US Fish and Wildlife service went on to estimate that almost 20 million of those American birders pursued birdwatching away from home and that 5 million of those traveled to another state for the specific purpose of birding. With all of those people traveling to birdwatch, it is no wonder that states are doing everything they can to attract some of these tourism dollars into their economies. A very effective way that states are attempting to do this is through the creation of bird watching highway trails that link birding ‘hotspots’ in a very convenient and accessible way. As a result of this new approach to tourism, habitat is preserved through a number of ways and these local economies are making a good deal of money by preserving and promoting a natural resource they already had. Unfortunately there are conflicts associated with these trails and the general hobby of birdwatching that the trails promote. However, on the whole it is worth the inevitable impacts and conflicts that result from the bird watching trails to achieve the very positive environmental and societal results of the birding trails.

The concept of a state wide highway trail for birdwatching is a relatively new one. The first of these trails was established in 1995 as the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail and spans 2,000 miles from Louisiana to the Mexican Border. The coast of Texas has long been a very popular destination for birdwatchers as there are many rare species that can be found there as well as seasonal migration buildups that extraordinary to see. One of the most popular birding events in America is the hummingbird festival in Corpus Christy. Each year countless Ruby-throated hummingbirds will gather there on the coast in
unbelievably thick concentrations and prepare for their flight across the Gulf of Mexico. Such unusual events along with many unusual species has made Texas a popular birding destination for a long time. According to the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife, they viewed a state wide trail as a logical next step to enhancing their already thriving ecotourism which centers around birding.

Texas did not create and organize their extensive birding trail on their own. They had the help of a company called Fermata which is based in Austin. They were commissioned to identify the suitable spots for the trail, decided what improvements needed to be made to each site, create the maps and do all the tedious planning involved with a project with this. The company had a special emphasis on improving the environmental integrity of each site especially in terms of improving the state of wetlands. Another aspect of improving these sites was installing features such as boardwalks and carefully planned out trails to lessen the impact that the birders would have on these environments. Another goal that Fermata emphasized was to give coastal communities a way to sustain themselves economically by protecting the natural resources that they already posses. All in all the entire project of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail cost $1.5 million of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) dollars. This relatively small amount of money was all that was needed to create a comprehensive birding trail that helped protect and promote the environment while substantially improving the economies of rural coastal communities in Texas. This first, experimental highway birding trail in the US was a great success, with all of the original goals being met. How Fermata sums it up is “First, Texas is now recognized as a premier destination for birders throughout the U.S. Maps have been distributed to travelers from every state in the U.S. and several foreign countries. Communities have continued to invest in improving sites for birders, including purchasing habitat for additional destinations. Second, the GTCBT is now viewed as a cohesive unit, and rural communities that otherwise would not have the funds to promote their destinations are now profiting from their association with this larger marketing platform. Third, communities along the Texas coast that had previously taken their nature resources for granted are now becoming increasingly aware of the value of the resources. Birding is now viewed as an important
industry, and the resource upon which the industry depends (the birds themselves) is seen as worthy of protection.” (www.fermatainc.com) This first birding trail also proved to be a wonderful economic success as well. A survey card was sent out with each set of maps that was requested and out of the first 100,000 distributed, over 4,000 were returned. The average visitor spent over $78 per person with only 4.6% of those travelers living in the region. Further more, the average user of the trail spent over 31 days on the trail which means that a lot of revenue was coming into these communities. The results were also very positive in terms of user satisfaction and how important the visitors felt the birding trail is. Over 71% of the birders polled said that it was ‘very important’ that the GTCBT be provided as a public service with over 24% saying it is ‘important’ (www.fermatainc.com). Clearly the Great Coastal Birding Trail is a wonderful economic success and the people that participate in it are very satisfied and want it to continue which indicates that its success with only increase with time. As a result, it came as no surprise that many states rushed to imitate Texas’ very successful experiment.

The most notable imitator of the Texas trail is the Great Florida Birding Trail. Florida’s birding trail was an enormous undertaking with 446 birding sites through out the state connected with over 2,000 miles of highway ‘trails.’ The trail was finally finished in 2005, but Florida began building the trail almost immediately after Texas’ success with their trial became apparent. Florida’s trail is organized differently than the one in Texas. It has nine ‘gateway’ sites that are remarkable sites ecologically and also offers extensive services for visitors including visitor and education centers (www.myfwc.com). Florida also makes it possible for communities to petition to add a site in their area to the trail. The site nomination form is very interesting in that it illustrates the goals and parameters of the Florida Birding Trail. There are the typical qualifications such as ecological/birding significance and legal access to the site. Another component that is considered in the nomination process is the ‘site resiliency’ along with how environmentally sensitive it is and how well it can stand up to public use. If a possible site is deemed to be too sensitive and can not absorb the impacts of birder traffic, it is not included in the birding trail. In this way, more sensitive sites are protected as birders are directed to less sensitive areas by the trail. Florida has also had tremendous economical success with their birding trail. In a state that derives a large
percentage of its dollars from tourism, such as amusement parks, resorts, vacation condos, beaches etc., it is very significant that birding makes up a good portion of their economy. The Florida office of tourism estimates that visiting birdwatchers spend over half a billion dollars a year in Florida (www.floridabirdingtrail.com) and a large part of what attracts these eco-tourists is the Great Florida Birding Trail. Florida is also favoring this new approach to a more environmentally sensitive approach to attracting visitors with the manager of the Great Florida Birding Trail saying: “we want to show people here that you don’t have to pave or drain a piece of property in order to make it profitable” (Mark Keiser, in Stewart). It is a good sign for conservation when a state that has had a long history of irreversibly altering landscapes and ecosystems, such as the everglades, to turn them into something ‘profitable’ has a change of heart and decides to begin attempting to make money form conserving and enhancing their natural landscapes and features.

Such benefits are what strongly encouraged other states to jump on the bandwagon of creating birding trails. Currently at least 24 states have major birding trails, completed, in progress or in the planning stage (Stewart). The main force behind these states’ excitement are the potential economic benefits that will most likely accompany such an undertaking. As established earlier, birders spend a good deal of money in the communities near where they bird. The planners of these trails do everything they can to maximize the money that these communities gain. Jeff Trollinger, the manager of Virginia’s version of a birding trail made this point very clearly when he stated that when planning their trail they “designed the loops to keep tourists in a particular area for two to three days” and therefore encourage them to spend money in that community (Stewart).

While the economic benefits of these trails are obvious, there are other benefits that are less obvious but no less important. A place may be an excellent bird watching spot, but it is not included in these birding trails if it is a sensitive area that cannot sustain the impacts of birdwatchers moving through the environment. As a consequence, the birding trails actually direct birders into less sensitive areas and away from the more sensitive ones. Another less obvious result of these birding trails is that they instill an appreciation of birds and the environment that sustains them in more people and in people from all walks
of life. These trails make the birdwatching itself more accessible to the general public. People that have a vague interest in watching wildlife but have no idea how to get information or knowledge on how to do it or where to go now have a very obvious place to go. These birding trail sites are commonly marked with very visible highway signs and these sites commonly have visitor’s centers that have very basic knowledge on bird watching and identifying birds. Many visitor’s centers will even loan out binoculars and field guides and explain how to use them. It stands to reason that the trails themselves are not only attractign birdwatchers, but attracting people to the hobby of bird watching. People who view and appreciate nature are simply more likely to protect it in their own activities and demand that society and governments do the same.

The birding trails also work to alleviate conflicts of birders with private property owners. In my own personal experience I have witnessed conflicts between birders and private land owners. Birders that are seeking a good place to birdwatch will commonly go onto private property, especially farming or ranching land. The land owners claim that the birders damage the land, spook cattle and damage crops. This is such a problem that the American Birding Association has a well publicized Birding Code of Ethics where one of the main points is that ethical birders don’t trespass. My cousin had a very vivid experience with confrontational birders. He is a peanut farmer in Ocala, Florida and there had been a public controversy about some Sandhill cranes that had been found dead and it was loosely speculated that perhaps they had consumed some ‘bad’ peanuts and died as a consequence. Not only did he have birders trespassing onto his land and disrupting his farming activities so that they could see the cranes that had gathered, some birders felt they had the right to verbally confront him on how he was ‘murdering’ cranes by farming peanuts. Not only were they verbally confronting him in a rather vicious way, they were trespassing on his land to do it. This may be an extreme example, but birders trespassing is not at all an uncommon thing among birdwatchers. On the flip side, my cousin’s situation also illustrates how strongly birders feel about protecting the environment and the birds they enjoy watching. Birding trails help to alleviate this conflict by making it very easy for birders to find excellent locations for seeing birds where there is no issue as to them trespassing or bothering people who want to be left alone.
These are not the only conflicts that birdwatchers encounter and cause while perusing their hobby. There are many examples in the scientific literature of studies that have been perused regarding how birdwatchers impact the landscape, the birds, and other recreating groups.

A study in Delaware Bay regarding the various stakeholders that are impacted by the famous Horseshoe crab spawning runs every year considers how groups such as fishermen and the medical community were exploiting the crabs. The fishermen were harvesting the crabs to sell and the medical community was using them for research as it is believed that there is a compound in their blood that can be useful for medicines. Where the birdwatchers come in is rather interesting. When the crabs come on the beach to lay their eggs, they are followed by shore birds such as Red knots, who pursue them and feed on the eggs. The birds are in turn followed by birdwatchers who want to witness the unique phenomena of many birds in one place at one time and see species they don’t normally see. This annual event is considered by many to be one of the premier birdwatching events in the US. When the horseshoe crabs were being negatively impacted and as a result their populations were declining, the migratory shore birds that depend on their eggs for food were being impacted in turn. The birdwatchers along with conservation groups demanded that the commercial fishers cease harvesting the crabs. The fishermen refused, the case ended up in court and a judge issued an emergency freeze on harvesting until the situation could be further analyzed. This paper then goes on to compare what economic benefit’s the commercial fishers bring to the community versus the bird watchers. While both groups do generate considerable income for the area in similar ways as both are seasonal and depend on the horseshoe crabs, it is certainly more sustainable to focus the revenue generation on birdwatchers than fishermen who harvest and sell the crabs themselves. This was a direct and very public conflict between birdwatchers and commercial fishers that resulted in a good deal of media attention and a community to consider its priorities, harvesting natural resources or protecting them and still making a profit by promoting ecotourism. (Odell, Bioscience)

Another serious conflict that developed between birdwatchers and fishermen occurred in New York’s Central Park. Birdwatchers that frequented the park in order to watch the birds claimed that birds were being injured by the activities of fishers in the park. These were not commercial fishers, but private,
recreational ones. With enough press and noise from the birdwatching community, fishing was banned in Central Park as it was found to be dangerous to birds which annoyed bird watchers. (Barnes, Julien. New York Times)

Another source of conflict between birdwatchers and commercial fishers occurred in the unlikely world of aquaculture. People who raise fish from fry and feed them until they are a market weight and can be sold at a profit don’t really appreciate it when birds eat their fish and therefore their profits. To prevent predation on their fish by birds, many aqua-culturists covered their fish ponds with netting to keep the birds out. Birdwatchers noticed that many birds were being tangled in the netting, becoming trapped under the netting and dying as a consequence. They called the attention of the media and government authorities and the guidelines were changed to outlaw the use of certain types of nets that caused more frequent mortalities of birds. This is again another example of a conflict between birders and another group to the benefit of the birds. (Nemtzov, BioOne)

Birders can also have conflicts with the environment itself. Besides the obvious impacts that occur from traffic and disturbing birds with their normal birding activities, there are extraordinary and unusual impacts that have occurred at the hands of birdwatchers. The introduced and highly invasive English Sparrow and European Starling that were introduced into the United States years ago were both at the hands of romantic birdwatchers. The starling was actively brought to the US because an uprooted Englishman desperately wished to have starlings in his American garden as he had back in England. What began as a labor of love and a wish to bless his new home with the grace and beauty of his beloved birds became an ecological nightmare. The starlings were enormously aggressive with native birds, especially for food and cavity nesting sites. The consequence is that native cavity nesters, such as blue birds, were displaced from normal nesting sites and their populations suffered as a consequence. The starlings experienced a population explosion due to their new and very favorable circumstances and began to spread their range further and further west. Today they are found all the way to the western coast and can be commonly found in Tucson. This was a conflict that a birdwatcher created with native birds. (Kastner, Joseph, Smithsonian).
Another example of birders experiencing a conflict with the environment is with the impact that comes from birdwatching itself. On the beaches of Thailand, it was concluded by a study done on the area that the Malaysian plover was significantly negatively impacted by the birdwatching that was occurring on the beaches. The plovers were much more successful in reproduction when they were on beaches with less human disturbance. If there was human disturbance occurring around them, including birdwatching, and in some cases exclusively birdwatching, their clutch survival rate suffered. Possible causes were determined to be erosion and vegetation damage from the traffic of the bird watchers. (Yase, Journal of Applied Ecology)

Any sort of outdoor recreation is going to have impacts on the environment and ecosystems where those activities take place. Birdwatching is no different in that some impacts are unavoidable. There are many steps that can be taken to reduce those impacts as well as conflicts that occur between the birders and their environment as well as other groups. The Birding Trails that have been created with much success in many states and are in process in others are a good example of an approach that helps to lessen the impacts of bird watching while accentuating its benefits. These trails help to keep birders in areas that can sustain their impact with minimal effect and to keep them out of areas that would be severely damaged by their activities. These trails also help make birding more accessible to the public and help instill values of protecting the environment because they appreciate it on a very personal level. These birding trails also help states to maximize the significant revenue they generate from bird watching tourism which can be very good for small communities. The success of these trails also conveys the idea that there is good money to be made by preserving, protecting and enhancing the habitats where these birds live as opposed to damaging the land and using it for something else such as farming or urbanization. In short, these trails help to make bird watching more popular than ever, lessen birdwatcher impacts, create revenue for states through resulting ecotourism and promote conservation. All in all, these trails seem to be a good thing and they are very fun as well.
References


Florida Bird Trail Site Nomination Form

(www.floridabirdingtrail.com/nomination_form.PDF)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission “The Great Florida Birding Trail Awaits You”

(www.myfwc.com)

Great Florida Birding Trail (www.floridabirdingtrail.com)

Great Texas Wildlife Trails, Texas Parks and Wildlife

(http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildlife_trails/coastal)

Fermata Inc. - The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, Birding and Wildlife Trail Development:

(www.fermatainc.com)


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