

7 Super Success Stories in Birding-based Tourism

During the 1990s, Dr. Paul Kerlinger and others conducted a series of economic studies on the impact of birding ecotourism at a number of birding hotspots across America. The information provided by these studies is both insightful and revealing, showing that birders enhance the local economy of rural communities and businesses at amazing levels while visiting area birding attractions. The successes realized in these areas should inspire anyone interested the potential contributions of birders to local businesses.

- At Quivara National Wildlife Refuge, located at a rural location in central Kansas, a total of 17,400 birders were the primary user group of the 27,855 annual visitors to this refuge. Birders sampled tended to be upper middle-aged (40 to 69), well-educated (92% attended some college), earned incomes well above the national family average (43% earned greater than \$50,000), while men and women were almost equally represented. Visitors came from 19 states and 1 foreign country; 50% of the birders were from out of state, and 66% stayed in the area more than 1 day, averaging 2 days in the area. The average visitors spent almost \$400 on their trips to and from this refuge, which totaled about \$6,840,000. The economic impact on local communities was estimated to be \$636,000, including \$265,500 for lodging, \$177,000 for meals, \$70,000 for gas, and \$124,000 for other purchases (equipment, groceries, souvenirs, etc.).

We believe that many North Dakota communities can reap similar economic rewards given their proximity to excellent national wildlife refuges in our state. Given the fact that gas prices have increased substantially during the past 10 years, along with other products and services, we can expect even higher economic gains when birding is promoted nationally through advertising, marketing and promotions.

- At Magee Wildlife Area and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Area in rural Ohio, about 193,500 birders were the primary user group among the total of 432,722 refuge visitors. They tended to be middle-aged (average age = mid-40s), well-educated (72% attended some college), earned incomes well above the national family average (41% earned greater than \$50,000), and women and men were equally represented. Visitors came from 18 states and 2 foreign countries; 26% of the birders were from out of state, and 78% stayed in the area more than 1 day, averaging 2½ days in the area. The average visitors spent \$166 during their trips from start to finish, totaling about \$32 million dollars. The economic impact on local communities was estimated to be \$5,610,000, including \$2,550,000 for lodging, \$1,100,000 for meals, \$470,000 for gas and \$1,520,000 for other purchases.

- At a more remote birding hotspot – Whitefish Point, Michigan – about 4,000 birders visited annually, who were primarily middle-aged and upper middle-aged (75% were 30 to 69 years old), well-educated (87% attended some college), earned incomes of more than \$50,000 annually (42%) although 26% were retired, and women outnumbered men (57% women). Birders came from 21 states and 2 foreign countries; 42% were from out of state and 90% spent more than 1 day in the area, averaging 3½ days. The average sum spent by each birder on their trip to and from Whitefish Point was about \$366, totaling more than \$1,500,000 with the benefit to the local economy measured at \$381,449 including \$170,672 spent on lodging, \$38,928 on meals, \$13,620 on gas and \$158,224 for other purchases (equipment, groceries, souvenirs, etc.).

Due to the continuing growth in the number of people involved in birding nationwide, and because the cost of travel and touring has increased during the past decade, there is no question that the amount of money being spent in these areas by birders has increased significantly, and even greater economic payoffs have been generated in communities neighboring prime birding locations. Although the economic benefits to other communities in other areas of the United States may be realized on a smaller scale, this information is representative of the kind of economic impact that prime birding locations and the birders who visit them can have on surrounding communities.

- The greatest potential impact of birders to a local economy may be appreciated when considering the grand successes at Corkscrew Swamp Audubon Sanctuary in rural Florida. This site is located in a warm-weather location that is frequented by wintering “snowbirds” along with throngs of tourists attracted to southern Florida and its Gulf and Atlantic Coast attractions. At Corkscrew Swamp, birders were the primary user group among the 80,281 annual visitors. Corkscrew birders tended to be middle-aged (30 to 49; average 45 years old) and well-educated (87% attended some college); their incomes were well above the national family average (57% earned more than \$50,000), and men outnumbered women (58% men). Respondents came from 41 states and 7 foreign countries; 83% were from out of state and 83% stayed more than 1 day in the area, averaging more than 5 days. Visitors spent an average of \$1,300 per person on their trips to and from the sanctuary, which totaled from \$60

million to \$90 million overall. The local economic impact was estimated to be about \$12 million, including \$5,000,000 for lodging, \$1,600,000 for meals, \$300,000 for gas, and \$4,800,000 on other purchases.

When the economic potential of natural areas is appreciated, interest in preserving, and even enhancing and expanding these areas often follows. This benefits resident and migrating wildlife populations, as well as the communities surrounding wildlife havens. Wildlife habitat attracts birds, which attract birders, who spend considerable sums of money on travel, lodging, food, gasoline, equipment and other products and services.

- To put birding impacts statewide in Colorado into perspective, the total sales tax revenues generated by birders and other wildlife enthusiasts could purchase more than 29,000 computers for local schools. Annual retail sales in Colorado for birding and other wildlife-related recreation is 70% more than the total box office earnings of Star Wars, one of the highest-grossing films in U.S. history. The total funds spent for birding and other wildlife-related recreation in Colorado could purchase more than 54 million tickets to Colorado Rockies baseball games or 20 million tickets to Denver Broncos football games. Birding is big business in Colorado – every year!
- According to the latest government survey, more than 66 million Americans participate in birding each year, which is 31% of the adult population – almost one-third of all adult Americans. To put this number into perspective among outdoors enthusiasts, only 13 million Americans go hunting and just 34 million enjoy fishing. In the past 20 years, birding has become the most popular segment of wildlife recreation in America! What's more, it's safe to expect that during 2006 birders will spend more than 40 billion dollars! That's more than the amount spent by hunters and fishermen combined.

During the most recent 5-year survey period, the number of people who hunted decreased by 7%, and there was a 12% reduction in hunters' expenditures. The number of Americans involved in fishing during the same period declined 3% overall, and their expenditures fell 17% (by billions of dollars). By contrast, the number of birders and other wildlife enthusiasts increased by 5% during the same 5-year period, and their expenditures increased by 16% (several billion dollars)! Obviously, birders are the biggest, most attractive group of outdoor enthusiasts in America today.

- Wildlife researcher Gary Lingle found that people observing expansive flocks of migrating Sandhill Cranes and other birds that assemble each March during spring migration along the central Platte River in Nebraska generate more than \$40 million annually in tourism revenue for local communities each year. Most of these birds continue their migration north through North Dakota to nesting areas in northern Canada and Alaska. Can we attract \$40 million dollars per month – or even annually – to North Dakota in years to come? Why not! What a great boon to our economy this would be, and was a great success we could realize.

**Birding-based tourism stimulates and supports economic growth in many communities.
How about yours?**

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