

Birding in North Dakota – 10 Qs and As

This is the final segment in North Dakota Tourism's 10-part Birding-based Tourism Marketing Program. We have covered a wealth of topics and provided a library of information for communities, organizations and interested individuals to use to develop and promote birding-based tourism attractions in our state. This final segment will share some questions that have been forwarded to me, which I will address in appropriate fashion.

Thanks to everyone who has submitted questions and, especially, thanks to everyone who has followed this unique series of articles this spring! Thanks also for the enthusiastic support of the staff at North Dakota Tourism, especially Sara Otte Coleman, along with Heather LeMoine and Tricia Miller. I hope this effort has helped to inform, and even inspire, interested people about a variety of topics related to birding-based tourism, and I am especially pleased that this series will be available for future reference on the North Dakota Tourism Web site for people to use in months and years to come. I hope this work also helps to raise your awareness about the natural world that surrounds us, the importance of protecting and appreciating wildlife and wild lands, and the great opportunities we have to enjoy these resources first hand and share them with visitors from near and far, here in North Dakota.

- *Best Wishes, Paul*

- ***Why has birding become so popular during the past 20 years?***

During the 1990s, birding was the fastest growing outdoor activity in the United States. Numbers of active birders continue to increase today with almost 70 million Americans enjoying birds and birding. It remains one of the top 3 outdoor activities in the United States, ranking among golf and gardening in popularity. People feed birds in their yards and travel down the road and across the country in search of birds; they photograph birds and they appreciate getting in touch with nature through birds, sometimes daily, and through all seasons of the year. The activities of birding, which may include hiking, photography, cycling, canoeing, kayaking, backpacking, camping, auto touring, censusing and research studies and artwork in the field, along with backyard endeavors such as feeding, watering, housing and landscaping. Birding can be enjoyed at home, at work, around town and in the field – almost anywhere you wander. Many people also enjoy the camaraderie that birding offers, either as a social opportunity or as an outing spent with family or friends. The birding landscape is ever-changing, literally by the minute, as these mobile, active animals carry out their life processes. And you never know what interesting bird you may find, where you might find it, or what kinds of behaviors or interactions you may witness or photograph! Birding offers infinite opportunities to enjoy yourself, and the element of surprise always gives you a fun boost when the unexpected happens. That's part of the excitement that birding offers, and part of the joy of birding. As you enjoy birding, take a friend, teach a child, expand your horizons, and you will appreciate the natural wonders of the world – even within your little world – all the more.

- ***Can you explain the attraction of birds?***

Birds are colorful, abundant and they come in a multitude of varieties, each with interesting behaviors to study. Each species has unique songs and calls and, of course, birds can fly! Who wouldn't want to fly like a bird? Ultimately, birds bring us in touch with the natural world, whether we live in an urban landscape or a country haven. Birds attract us to travel to new locations and many birders even travel from country to country in search of new birds and experiences beyond our borders.

Mammals are interesting too, but most mammals are nocturnal and very secretive, so we only see a few common species at opportune locations and times. Fish are almost impossible to see in their natural habitats, and reptiles, amphibians and insects hold little interest for most people, although some interest in butterflies and the more spectacular moths has grown during the past decade.

Ultimately, when we talk about wildlife-based activities, birding is the dominant, if not exclusive focus of our interests.

- ***Can you name the best birding locations in North Dakota?***

While the best birding locations are dictated by the birds you see at a given time and season, they should also be aesthetically-pleasing locations where you can enjoy spending time in a natural, birding-friendly setting. In North

Dakota, we have a wealth of great birding locations on private lands across the breadth of our state, but if I were to name the top birding locations, I'd offer the following list:

Paul Konrad's Top 15 North Dakota Birding Hotspots

Kidder County -- centered in the county seat of Steele -- 701-475-2133

Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge -- 21 miles north of Stanley -- 701-848-2722

J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge -- 3 miles north of Upham -- 701-768-2548

Theodore Roosevelt National Park -- Medora -- 701-623-4466, (North Unit, 701-842-2333)

Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge -- 4 miles southeast of Moffit -- 701-387-4397

Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge -- 23 miles northwest of Medina -- 701-752-4218

Lake Metigoshe State Park -- 16 miles northeast of Bottineau -- 701-263-4651

and **Turtle Mountains State Forest** -- 701-228-5422

Icelandic State Park -- 5 miles west of Cavalier -- 701-265-4561

plus **Tetrault Woods State Forest** -- 701-228-5422, and the nearby **Pembina Gorge**

Sheyenne National Grassland -- 12 miles east of Lisbon -- 701-683-4342

Garrison Dam Tailrace and Recreation Area -- southwest of Riverdale below Garrison Dam

Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge -- east of Edmunds -- 701-285-3341

Tewaukon National Wildlife Refuge -- 5 miles south of Cayuga -- 701-724-3598

Sully's Hill National Game Preserve -- 13 miles south of Devils Lake -- 701-662-8611

Cross Ranch State Park and Nature Preserve -- 12 miles southeast of Hensler -- 701-794-3731

Audubon National Wildlife Refuge -- 2½ miles north and ½ mile east of Coleharbor -- 701-442-5474



- **What is your best advice to any group interested in developing a birding attraction? What attraction will attract the most birders?**

First, you must have impressive natural resources in your area that attract a variety and abundance of birds and permit public access. Hopefully, you will have some of the “Most Wanted” birds found in North Dakota among the mix of species found there. You should have a key wildlife refuge, wildlife management area, state park or another large public establishment to help attract attention to your endeavor. Hopefully, you will have several of these kinds of public lands in your region. An initial inventory of birding sites and the birds found is helpful, if not imperative, so a professional ornithologist or a seasoned knowledgeable birder is required to provide some initial information.

My best advice is to develop a birding drive, because a birding drive provides the basic information that birders and other interested people require: basic information about where to go, how to get there, when to visit and what to expect during field trips during each season. A birding drive provides a map or series of maps that direct people where to go and how to get there, usually with directions that may state in simple terms how far to drive north, then turn west (left) and continue to the south shore of the lake . . . The season, the day, the hour, and the exact minutes you visit a location will dictate what birds you will find there, so birding drives should also provide seasonal information about what kinds of birds can be found during spring, summer, fall and winter, while describing when

these seasons begin and end (e.g. winter can be mid-November to mid March in North Dakota, rather than the true season of late December to late March).

All this information is organized in an attractive package – usually a booklet, sometimes a fold-out map – that offers a host of information about the birds, landscape and habitats, and area contacts – along with the all-important easy-to-follow maps of the routes within the birding drive.

Armed with this valuable information, anyone can enjoy birding in your area any day of the year (weather and road conditions permitting). Because roadways and wildlife behavior rarely change drastically, a birding drive can function without change for a decade or more without updating, and once you have a birding drive publication produced, it is easy to add amendments or make changes as required.

As a birding drive prospers, the sponsoring group or another interested party can add any number of attractions to a birding drive – photo blinds, elevated walkways built above wetlands or streams, observation platforms, observation towers, parking pullouts, educational signs, directional signs, hiking trails, canoe routes and more can help to improve the access and outdoor experiences for everyone.

- ***What is the difference between a Birding Drive and a Birding Trail?***

What's in a name? A birding drive tends to be a smaller, more local entity than a birding trail. A birding trail tends to connect birding hotspots via the shortest, quickest route along established paved highways. Similar birding trails began in Texas, where there are a series of birding trails that cover the entire (huge) state of Texas as the Great Texas Birding Trail. Florida likewise has a statewide system of birding trails that traverse the entire state of Florida. Certainly, an extensive birding trail could be developed in North Dakota, but it would require extensive state and federal planning as well as funding.

Birding drives were developed as more local, community-based projects that have auto routes that meander within a 50-mile radius of the host communities. Birding drives are developed on a much smaller scale, hence they require a very small fraction of the finances and time that a birding trail requires. Another difference between birding drives and birding trails is that a birding drive offers great birding along the route, which includes adjacent private lands and any public land in the area. On a birding drive, the journey is indeed the payoff.

Having made this distinction between birding drives and birding trails, the localized birding trails that have been established in North Dakota could be considered synonymous to birding drives, for they differ little except by name.

- ***How does a community or group get started?***

Many birding attractions are developed through the interest and drive of a single dedicated person. Often, it is a group of people who have a good leader or two. Sometimes, it is the understanding of an insightful travel professional, who understands the economic value of attracting birders. Usually, it's a birder who understands the value of sharing a treasured birding area. The people involved may be wildlife biologists or refuge staff who wish to elevate local interest in wildlife or public lands and natural resources. Many business owners and managers see the value of increasing customer traffic through their door get involved, and even bankers are known to join such endeavors to help improve the local economy for businesses and residents. Ultimately, the people who develop a birding attraction must be dedicated to the effort for the long run – years; even decades. And although one person may initiate a birding project, it ultimately takes a dedicated group of people, which may evolve over the years to add new insights and enthusiasm to such a project.

But it all starts with one person who inspires others, either at a community business meeting or in a gathering of interested individuals. It can be very interesting to see how infectious such an idea can be for people among a group, and now that several birding attractions have been produced in North Dakota, it's a little easier to go to school on what works best and what provides the best benefits per cost and time spent.

When it comes down to actually producing the product, say a birding drive, any group will need to work with a knowledgeable consultant; someone who knows birds, birding and birders; someone who understands writing, photography, publication design and printing; someone who appreciates the importance of marketing and the ultimate need to raise adequate money to finance the initial project as well as the marketing and promotions needed to support the attraction year after year. When you have found someone with all that experience, or a number of professionals who specialize in each aspect of this work, you're ready to forge ahead to the ultimate step to develop a successful birding attraction.

- ***What kind of investments in time and money will each type of event require?***

To hire a professional to develop a birding drive in your area, that is, to have a pro do the preliminary field work, plan the auto routes, create the maps, write and design a booklet, select appropriate photographs and print 10,000 copies for distribution, you can expect a minimum \$10,000 investment. The size and design of the booklet, the number of photos used, and the amount of time a professional or a number of professionals spend on the project can increase the cost appreciably. But while \$10,000 is a considerable amount for an individual, it is not huge when

undertaken as a community endeavor, and considering that this initial investment will serve the community or organization for many years to come, it's a matter of spending \$10,000 to attract several tens of thousands of dollars in return – hopefully hundreds of thousands of dollars over time. Developing a birding drive requires some meeting time, but essentially, the professionals employed to produce the birding drive handle almost all of the work.

However, you will need to promote a birding drive or any other attraction every year, and that will require raising a few thousand dollars annually. Too often, marketing and promotions are overlooked or downplayed when they must be emphasized instead. You must attract birders to your attraction – every year – just as you must attract patrons to a movie theater every week.

Birding festivals, however, require a huge amount of time to plan, promote and produce, usually among a cadre of volunteers, sometimes with paid personnel. The cost of a birding festival will vary considerably, but a quality birding festival will employ a nationally-respected authority who will conduct a seminar, present a keynote address and participate in field trips. This requires airfare, ground transportation, lodging, some meals and an appropriate cash payment for their services during the day or days they attend. Transportation for daily field trips, often in the form of comfortable buses or vans, can be costly overall. Large-scale promotions are absolutely necessary for birding festivals, and they will require thousands of dollars in advertising. When you consider the payback over just a few days, birding festivals are extremely cost and time expensive!

Birding festivals do serve some important purposes despite their short duration and high costs: They bring birders together with excellent guides who can help them learn a great deal about birds in a short time in the field and at seminars; they bring attention to the abundant natural resources in the area; they focus on the birds found in the area and the habitats the birds require, and they provide a source of pride for the host community along with the obvious economic benefits associated with lodging, transportation, dining and other activities.

- ***Can you provide some information about birding economics from our neighboring state of Minnesota?***

Minnesota is considered one of top birding states in America. In fact, it ranks second in the number of citizens who participate in birding. According to a 2001 government survey, almost 2 million Minnesota residents participated in birding activities, which range from travel and photography to feeding birds (about 1,993,000 Minnesotans aged 16 years and older). This total represents more than ½ of the state's population 16 and older – 54% of the Minnesota population of 3,688,000 (16 and older).

By the way, the top 10 states with the “highest percent of resident participants” (birders) among their total resident population were Vermont, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Alaska, Montana, Maine, Oregon, Washington, New Hampshire and Wyoming. Also, the top 10 states with the “highest *number* of participants” among their population were California, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Florida, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Washington and Virginia. (These numbers mostly parallel centers of U.S. population.)

In 2001, Minnesota attracted 634,000 non-resident visitors who spent \$115,640,000 on travel-related services and another \$198,180,000 on equipment while birding in Minnesota.

The moral of the story, let's invite all those Minnesota birders west to enjoy the best birding location in the Northern Great Plains!

- ***What about advertising in North Dakota?***

Keep in mind, if a community attracts a birder from Fargo, and one from Miami, each person will have the potential of spending the same amount of money in your community. In fact, the birder from Fargo may be more successful in convincing other birders to visit your area, and they will be more likely to revisit your community.

If your goal is to attract 200 birders, you are less likely to reach that number by advertising in North Dakota; we just don't have that many traveling birders. If your goal is to attract 2,000 birders, you'll need to use a broad approach to promoting your attraction or business to many high-population birding groups – regionally and nationally.

- ***Can you offer a little more information about Paul Konrad?***

How about a lot more? Paul Konrad developed and wrote the 10-part Birding-based Tourism Marketing Program for North Dakota Tourism. Paul is a product of North Dakota, living in Bismarck most of his life, graduating from North Dakota State University in Fargo, and residing in the little town of Kulm most recently. To learn more about Paul and his work, to read some of his articles and view many of his photographs, you can visit his web site at www.WildlifeAdventures.biz, where there is information about how you can contact Paul directly. Paul's more extensive biography is provided below:

Paul Konrad is a wildlife biologist, writer and editor, photographer, birder, ornithologist and birding-based tourism promoter who travels across the country and around the world in search of wildlife adventures. Paul is one of the most recognized wildlife authors, birders, wildlife photographers and tour personalities in the United States.

Paul is a wildlife biologist who specializes in the study of birds with more than 30 years of professional experience as an ornithologist. He has conducted field research on cranes, hawks, owls, ducks, geese, parrots, seabirds, shorebirds, prairie songbirds, desert birds, tropical forest birds and island species. Paul began his career working with Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center and the International Crane Foundation and he continues to work with some of the top wildlife conservation agencies in the world.

Konrad has been a birder all his life. He works to promote birding-based tourism and is a seasoned birding tour guide. His work in wildlife research and tourism has taken him to 44 countries and all 7 continents of the world. To his credit, Paul has been described as one of the most instrumental people in promoting the continuing boom in birding, wildlife tourism and wildlife photography in the United States during the 1990s and beyond.

Paul is also a photographer, writer and editor. He is the former editor of *WildBird* magazine, based in Los Angeles, where he published 96 issues during his 8-year tenure. More than 2 million wildlife enthusiasts have enjoyed Paul's vivid writing styles while he worked as the editor of *WildBird* and contributed to other public- and science-oriented publications. Paul is one of the most published wildlife authors in America, with more than 450 popular articles published to date, along with more than 1,100 published photographs, 22 research publications, 1 book and 7 web sites.

Today, Paul operates Wildlife Adventures, an umbrella business that includes a variety of professional endeavors that range from writing and photography to field research on bird populations, birding-based tourism promotions and marketing outdoor products, producing web sites and assembling education-based information about birds for students, teachers, birders and anyone interested in learning more about birds.

For more information about Paul Konrad, refer to his most prominent website at www.WildlifeAdventures.biz. A popular article that highlights Paul's expertise in birding and tourism – Top 50 Birding Hotspots in North America – is featured at <http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/1998/wildbird/wildbird.htm>

Thanks for joining us throughout this series. If you prospered from this 10-part birding-based series, please contact North Dakota Tourism and let them know you appreciated their efforts. Good luck, and here's to Legendary birding!

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The logo for North Dakota Tourism features the words "North Dakota" in a large, bold, black script font. Below this, the word "LEGENDARY" is written in a smaller, black, all-caps, sans-serif font, with wide letter spacing.