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Bird-watchers, money migrate along Alabama coastal trail

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Associated Press

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Mobile, Ala. - Alabama has a wealth of resources in its skies, backyards and beaches: Birds.

In an eye-opening analysis, federal wildlife officials found that more money is spent on watching birds and other wildlife in Alabama than is spent on hunting.

Counting purchases on everything from vehicles for exploring to birdseed and binoculars for closer looks, \$626 million was spent in 2001 on watching birds and other wildlife in Alabama - compared with about \$601 million on hunting and \$719 million on fishing, according to an economic analysis by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"There are a lot of birders who are looking for new places to go," said Dwight Cooley, manager of the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge near Decatur. "They think nothing of driving six, seven, 10 hours to an area for good birding. Once they find an area, something special brings them back, like large numbers of waterfowl."

On the coast, Jereme Phillips, a wildlife biologist at Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge in coastal Baldwin County, said "hard-core" birders tend to know the best places to watch the migratory flights - and that means Alabama's coast.

"This is one of the most important stopover sites in the United States for tropical migratory birds," said Phillips.

This flight path extends into Mobile and out to Dauphin Island as the birds come and go across the Gulf of Mexico as seasons change.

The Bon Secour refuge on Fort Morgan Peninsula is on the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail and is in one of the giant circles for Audubon's annual Christmas bird count, which ended Monday.

Banding effort

Shore birds like herons, pelicans, gulls and egrets are found along the waterfront stops of the trail this time of year, along with birds that Northerners are used to seeing in their backyards in the summer - cardinals, bluejays, robins and hummingbirds, according to Bebe Gauntt, public relations manager for the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau.

In the spring, visitors can watch bird-banding sponsored by the North Alabama Hummer/Bird Study Group.

The unusual event takes place in a wooded area at the Fort Morgan State Historic Site, a pre-Civil War fort on Pleasure Island near the towns of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach.

The group sets up a banding station complete with fine nets to capture the birds and track their

Alabama



Bird-watchers keep their eyes and binoculars on the trees along the Alabama coastline. Bird-watching is big business in the state, bringing in \$626 million in 2001.

If You Go

■ For detailed maps, directions and trail information on the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail, download the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service brochure about the trail from www.daphne.fws.gov/acbt/acbt.htm.

■ For information on the development of the North Alabama Birding Trail, visit www.fermatainc.com. Rare bird sightings, current events and other information available from the Alabama Ornithological Association at www.bham.net/aos.

■ The Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge is a popular birding and hiking area; check out www.bonsecour.fws.gov/index_files/slide0001.htm for details.

■ **Bird-banding:** Free and open to spectators, April 3 to 17 at Fort Morgan State Historic Site. For information,

migration as a way of promoting environmental conservation. The birds are banded, weighed, examined for general health and released.

Last year, more than 3,000 people from 35 states attended the bird-banding, according to the group's co-founder, Bob Sargent. This spring, the event is scheduled to take place April 3 to 17. Spectators don't even need binoculars to see and photograph the tanagers, warblers and other birds - all in their showiest breeding plumage - up close; the banders do all the work.

"Now that people are beginning to learn about this event, they are coming from all over," said Gauntt. "They bring their lawn chairs and their cameras. It promotes an awareness of the need to protect the habitats of the birds."

Numbers are growing

Using U.S. Census data, the officials estimate that about 703,000 people took part in bird-watching in Alabama in 2001.

The vast majority were backyard bird-watchers - only 70,000 were out-of-state visitors - but about 40% of all watchers take trips to find birds.

And the numbers appear to be growing. Last spring, 16.8% of vacationers in Alabama visited the Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge, up from 6.4% in 2001.

In addition, activities involving wildlife observation grew from 10.3% to 17.2% for the same period, according to Gulf Shores visitors bureau estimates.

Officials at the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, pointing to the economic success of the coastal birding trail, are completing the North Alabama Birding Trail, which will go through 12 counties. The project, with about 50 sites, began Sept. 10 and could be finished by spring 2005.

visit
www.hummingbirdsplus.org
or call the Hummer/Bird Study Group's Alabama co-founders, Bob and Martha Sargent, at (205) 681-2888. As a fund-raiser, members of this non-profit research group will photograph visitors with the bird of their choice for a small fee.

■ **Weather:** Temperatures on Alabama's Gulf Coast range from high 60s to low 70s this time of year.

■ **More information:** For accommodations and information about birding and other activities, contact the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau at (800) 745-7263 or www.gulfshores.com.

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