

## Bird Watching Becomes a Billion Dollar Business

By GARRY MITCHELL, AP

DAUPHIN ISLAND, Ala. (May 9) - A red-bellied woodpecker paused to peck at a pine tree as other birds darted in and out of feeders strung up outside a recreational vehicle at the Dauphin Island campground.

Seated in a folding chair a few yards away, Theresa Daniel watched the aerial acrobatics through binoculars. "I saw a yellow-billed cuckoo," she said, comparing bird sightings with her husband, Jerry.

The Nevada couple, making their first trip to the island, are among hundreds of bird-watchers who flock to the island in April and May, then return in October, in search of birds on the migratory route to Mexico and South America.

Well-worn birding trails lead through the palmettos and piney woods to the beach. At the end of a boardwalk, a retired news photographer sat on a bench near his viewfinder camera on a tripod.

"I'm waiting for seagulls. I've seen a flock of pelicans," said Bob S. Bukaty, who hails from Buffalo, N.Y.

Local officials estimate birding has an economic impact of more than \$2 million on the island, but federal wildlife officials say it's a multibillion-dollar business nationwide. The average birder is 49 years old and more than likely has a better than average income and education, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service report says.

Philip Pryde, a professor emeritus at San Diego State University, coordinates national bird counts reported by teams of bird-watchers. Although it's an informal count, he said, there is some competition for the title of "birdiest city, county or coastal" area.

Currently, Dauphin Island holds the lead for "birdiest coastal" site based on its April count of 185 species.

The ranking gives the island "bragging rights" among birders, said John F. Porter Jr., the volunteer executive director of the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, a nonprofit group with about 300 members scattered around the United States.

Last year, the honor went to Brownsville, Texas, which counted 125 bird species.

There are 384 species on the official list of birds for Dauphin Island, Porter said. Many bird watchers come to Dauphin Island to see the warblers, though red-bellied woodpeckers also are a common sight.

The island has the advantage of numerous trans-Gulf of Mexico migrants headed north in the spring. Another place with a similar advantage is the Dry Tortugas at the tip of the Florida Keys, Pryde said.

05/09/05 06:51 EDT