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Birdwatchers flock to state though species are on decline

Fowl play in Alabama

Birders may be key to saving vanishing species

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Mary Lou Miller can attest to the 35-year decline in birds that is disturbing birdwatchers and wildlife professionals around the United States.

An Audubon Society member, she has been going on Christmas bird counts for exactly that many years and has watched as the number of migratory birds on the list has dwindled.

But she is optimistic about another trend, the infusion of young blood into the birdwatching community. Miller, 76, watched with amazement Saturday as birdwatchers half her age strode ahead of her, identifying birds in seconds, sometimes only by their calls.

"Although there is a certain irony in people becoming enthusiastic about birds as they disappear, it also presents an opportunity. Birders may be the economic and political force that can help save the birds," the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated in a report, *Birding in the United States*.

Almost one in four bird species in the United States are in decline, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The downturn is attributed primarily to the destruction of habitat resulting from human population growth.

At the same time, more than one in five Americans now are birdwatchers, according to the agency's recently released survey. The agency defines a birder as a person who has taken a trip a mile from home to watch birds or has closely observed or tried to identify birds around the house. Forty percent of the 18 million birders in the country travel for their hobby, according to the survey.

Bird calls:

In Alabama, birding has exploded in the past year, said Brian Jones, a spokesman for the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel.

After the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail opened last year, tourism officials found that calls about the trail and reports from local businesses indicated they were truly onto something.

"We have found out if there's a rare bird sighting, birders don't think twice about hopping in the car

or hopping on a plane to go try to see it," said Bebe Gauntt, public relations manager for the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau.

So conservation and tourism officials moved to open a similar North Alabama Birding Trail in Decatur and this year will launch an advertising campaign promoting birding in Alabama. A brochure that tracks birding spots throughout the state has proved to be one of the state tourism bureau's most popular, Jones said.

"The birding industry as a whole has just boomed," he said.

Since the most recent numbers available are from 2001, state officials can't quantify their conviction that snowbirds are stopping as they pass through the state, that in-state residents are traveling more to watch birds and that out-of-state residents are targeting Alabama for their birding trips.

In 2001, \$626 million was spent in Alabama on birding, according to the Tourism Bureau.

Birdwatching, in addition to being a clean and environmentally friendly industry, attracts the kind of tourists every state would like to have, Jones said.

According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, birdwatching increases with education and income, and the largest number of birdwatchers earn more than \$100,000 a year and have college or advanced degrees.

"This is a coveted demographic, as far as travelers, because these people have a lot of discretionary income," Jones said. "That night they go out to a restaurant, they go shopping, they go antiquing."

On `life lists':

Alabama is well positioned to jump on the birdwatching trend, as Texas and Florida already have done, because of its position on the Gulf Coast. Each spring migratory birds practically fall out of the sky in flocks, exhausted by their flights from Central and South America.

The state also has a series of unique ecosystems from the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf Coast, so that birders seeking new species for their "life lists" can find a variety of birds.

In 2001, Alabama officials say, 703,000 people went birdwatching in Alabama.

In 1900, the year of the first Christmas bird count, only 27 birdwatchers could be found throughout the United States and Canada to help the fledgling National Audubon Society create a new pastime.

It was the custom in the 19th century for teams to go afield with their guns on Dec. 25 for a Christmas "Side Hunt"; whoever brought back the most dead birds won.

But by the turn of the century, Americans were becoming concerned that the apparently limitless resources of the New World were at risk and that birds in particular were declining.

As birdwatching grew, birders became a lobby that helped usher in such protective programs as the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1903 and the Migratory Bird Act of 1913, which protects waterfowl and other migrants.

The increase in concern for birds nationwide has been reflected by the increase in the Christmas Bird Count, which now includes more than 50,000 participants.

The count, which now is held on a variety of days running from late December to early January, provides the longest-running database in ornithology.

The crowd that scouted the area around the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the Birmingham Zoo on Saturday were enthusiastic - and skilled. Birds that might not even be a brief shadow to a casual observer were one more tufted titmouse for the list, while a squeak like a chew toy out in the woods was another brown-headed nuthatch.

As the day wore on, Miller was content to pull out a folding chair and sing the praises of organizers who had tapped into the enthusiasm for birdwatching and sent the young, strong eyes to her territory.

"Our regular crowd is good, but they're all a little older than I am," Miller said. "We needed some new blood."

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