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# TRAVEL

## Alabama: Birders flock to Gulf Coast

Thursday, January 8, 2004 Posted: 11:45 AM EST (1645 GMT)

**MOBILE, Alabama (AP) -- 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 to 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.



Bird-watchers look into the trees in the Gulf Coast area of Alabama.

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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 January 5.

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. Ospreys arrive in late winter, and sea turtles nest here in the summer and hatch in the late summer and early fall.

### Promoting awareness



**Rusty Trump holds an indigo bunting on the Fort Morgan peninsula.**

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

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 percent of all watchers take trips to find birds.

And the numbers appear to be growing. Last spring, 16.8 percent of vacationers in Alabama visited the Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge, up from 6.4 percent in 2001. In addition, activities involving wildlife observation grew from 10.3 percent to 17.2 percent 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.

James C. White of Decatur, former president of the Tennessee Valley chapter of the Audubon Society, said his bird-watching activities have taken him around the world. He expects the north Alabama trail will "dramatically improve" bird-watching in the area.

"I'm sure it will attract a lot of birding enthusiasts," White said in a recent telephone interview. "I could name a couple of hundred birders in this local area."

The Conservation Department contracted with Fermata, Inc., an Austin, Texas-based firm, to handle the new trail. The sites will be organized in loops that require no more than a long weekend to view. Kiosks will be built at each site with information on the birds.



Fred Moore lets one of the bird-catching nets down at sunrise on the Fort Morgan peninsula.

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