



Rest stop for birds

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By SAM HODGES

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DAUPHIN ISLAND -- Forget April in Paris. Where you want to be in April, if you're a birder, is here.

For 27 years, Sarah Gillespie of Hattiesburg, Miss., has been coming to Dauphin Island in April to see warblers, tanagers, buntings, grosbeaks and other brightly colored birds as they make a very needed first rest stop after their arduous migration across the Gulf of Mexico.

Gillespie has many specific memories of "fallouts," when literally thousands of the world's most beautiful birds, having fought north winds and stormy weather in the Gulf, drop exhausted onto the trees of Dauphin Island. She recalls the time the sun broke through to illuminate five Baltimore orioles in a small pine in front of her.

"With the sun gleaming on them, it looked like a Christmas tree," she said.

Because of migration, April is prime time for birds and birders all along the Alabama coast. This weekend, four teams of top-notch birders are trying to break the record of most bird species seen in Alabama during a 24-hour period. They chose April and the coast for their "big day" competition, because this is the time and place when the most kinds of birds are likely to be seen.

For the same reason, Bob and Martha Sargent of Clay, Ala., each April bring their crew of licensed bird banders to Fort Morgan on the Baldwin County side of Mobile Bay. They will stay through April 20, welcoming the public to watch as they capture birds in mist nets, then release them unharmed after slipping a tiny band onto one of their legs.

As of Friday, they had banded more than 1,000 birds, of 53 species, in order to provide ornithologists with more information about migration patterns.

The birding pace quickens next weekend, with the dedication of the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail, an eco-tourism project that includes markers and a map of top birding spots in the area. Roughly 200 members of the Alabama Ornithological Society will be on the coast then, too, for a 50th anniversary celebration.

The ornithology society will meet, as it usually does in April, on Dauphin Island.

This is home base for Alabama birders during migration, and it has a strong and growing reputation nationwide.

Last week, for example, Tom Ulrich arrived from his home outside Montana's Glacier Park. A professional nature photographer, he was pleased to have gotten good shots of a yellow-billed cuckoo and blue grosbeak in the renowned Shell Mounds area of the island.

"I'm hoping for warblers," he said during a slow stretch Thursday.

For Ulrich, Dauphin Island was one in a series of brief stops along the Gulf Coast. But Bob and Barbara Lawless drove from their home in Walpole, Mass., outside Boston, to spend eight full days on the island. By Friday, near the end of their trip, they were well-pleased to have seen more than 100 species of birds.

"This is just an excellent spot," Bob Lawless said.

The basic science behind Dauphin Island's excellence from a birding standpoint is easy to grasp.

Many bird species migrate to North America in spring, when vegetation and insects are sufficient to support them as they establish nests and have babies. Many of those birds that fly across the Gulf of Mexico -- trans-Gulf migrants, they're called -- look down and spot Dauphin Island as the first available landing place.

If the winds are to their backs, they'll likely keep flying. But a north wind persuades -- indeed requires -- them to recuperate and feed as soon as possible.

Scott Weidensaul's acclaimed 1999 book "Living on the Wind" is all about bird migration, and he devotes most of a chapter to Dauphin Island, including his own experience of witnessing a fallout there.

"I never actually saw the birds come down, but I could hear them, a series of low whooshes overhead and around me, like fast pitches that brushed past my ear or the thrumming sound of sticks whirled through the air," he wrote. "An instant later, the lifeless trees were seething with dozens of birds, which cascaded branch by branch, toward the ground, spilling out onto the understory. They started eating without preamble, without stretching or relaxing or preening -- feeding with a fervor usually seen only at state fairs during pie-eating contests."

Such events are rare and hard to predict. But influxes of birds in April are common enough for the term "Yucatan Express" to have caught on among birders. That refers to the arrival on Dauphin Island, usually about 4 p.m., of large numbers of birds that left Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula the night before.

The Yucatan Express is irregular enough to make Amtrak seem precise by comparison. Entire April days can pass on Dauphin Island without large numbers or variety of migratory birds.

"More birders than birds right now," said Margi Geddes of Pass Christian, Miss., as she and husband Wilburt stood in a drizzle Friday morning, looking at the marsh near the Dauphin Island airport.

Even when things are hopping, many birders have mixed feelings. They know that the more birds they're seeing, the tougher the crossing has been. Indeed, fishermen report birds collapsing onto their boats, and it's well-known that many birds perish in the Gulf.

"The majority of people I bird with enjoy a fallout, but they know what the cost is," said John Porter, a retired University of Alabama administrator who lives on Dauphin Island and has worked to preserve bird habitat there.

Then too there's the understanding that many migratory bird species are in decline, due to habitat loss. Spend any time among birders, and you'll hear them sing the blues about the decline in songbirds.

One particularly troubled species is the cerulean warbler, a tiny, sky-blue bird. Ornithologists estimate that the numbers of this warbler have declined by 70 percent since the 1960s, mainly

because its winter home in the Andes has been intensively logged.

When Dwight Cooley first started coming to Dauphin Island, in the early 1970s, April sightings of cerulean warblers were common.

"Now it's an event to see them," said Cooley of Decatur, Ala.

Two Aprils ago, overall bird numbers and variety were strong on Dauphin Island. Last spring was a relative dud. Even then, though, members of the Alabama Ornithological Society saw about 200 species of migratory and resident birds over a single weekend.

With that much to offer, and with birding growing in popularity, birders become an occupying force on Dauphin Island this time of year. The Gulf Breeze Motel is booked a year in advance for April weekends, because of birders.

"They're our best customers," said Karen Tafra, who owns the 31-unit motel with husband Mike and notes that birders are polite, have good credit, are up and out of their rooms early, and don't return with coolers full of smelly fish.

Don Rhodes, owner of the Seafood Galley restaurant, said that April on Dauphin Island without birders would be "devastating" to his business.

"We serve them three meals a day," he said. "Usually we serve breakfast at 7 a.m., but we kick it in early for them."

Tafra and Rhodes, in separate interviews, agreed that the only problem with birders is that they look for birds even while driving.

"That's just part of it," Rhodes said. "We're glad they're here."

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