

## **Building Connections with America's Birders**

*by Maggie O'Connell*

The National Wildlife Refuge was born for the birds on Pelican Island in Florida – and today offers America's birders some of the finest winged paradises found anywhere in the world. Waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, raptors, neotropical migrants -- almost anything that flies stops at a national wildlife refuge.

Nearly 170 refuges have been designated Important Bird Areas by the American Bird Conservancy and the National Audubon Society.

Many refuges go out of their way to make birders feel right at home, with viewing platforms and great walking and driving trails. Many refuges work with local educators, Friends groups and private sponsors to introduce youngsters to nature. Others celebrate their bird populations with community festivals. Many participated in last year's Big Sit, the nation-wide bird watching event sponsored by *Bird Watcher's Digest*; still more are expected to join in this year's observation on October 12.

Recognizing how important refuges are to birding, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2006 launched its National Wildlife Refuge System Birding Initiative. The Initiative will both help birders appreciate the value of refuges and help national wildlife refuges recognize the value of birders as advocates, volunteers and economic supporters of local communities.

A 14-member Birders Team, representing different sectors of the birding world, is spearheading the drive. The Team includes authors, editors, educators, conservationists and business leaders. Two additional panels provide support and feedback: a group of independent biologists, educators, authors and other birding specialists; and a panel of Service staff biologists, refuge managers and visitor services specialists.

Birders love it when refuges post bird sighting lists outside visitor centers or offices for those early morning or late afternoon visits.

Birders value tips on where and when to look for their favorite species. So, local bird club members might make good front desk volunteers. Bird groups also could be asked to help establish, monitor and interpret nest boxes and platforms for species of concern. The Refuge System has created a custom-made Web site, <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/birding/index.html>, to help nurture connections with birders.

“Through the Birding Initiative, we believe we can help foster a better appreciation of refuges as premier birding locations and, along the way, help reconnect people to nature,” says Jon Andrew, Southeast Region Refuge Chief and chair of the Birding Initiative. “In the long run, we not only kindle a passion for birds, but a passion for conserving and managing wildlife habitats for all time.”

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