

Working With America's Byways®  
To Help Foster A Conservation Ethic  
And Sustainable Rural Economies

# THE REFUGE SYSTEM BIRDING INITIATIVE

By Roxanne E. Bogart, Wildlife Biologist, Division of Bird Habitat Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Nathan Caldwell, Scenic Byways Coordinator, National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt established Florida's tiny Pelican Island as the first national wildlife refuge dedicated to the protection of native birds. Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System has grown to 547 refuges that provide breeding, wintering and stopover habitat for more than

700 species of migratory birds. In fact, virtually one-third of all globally significant Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the United States are national wildlife refuges (NWR) and potential destination sites for the nation's 46 million birdwatchers. Indeed, more than sixty percent of refuge visitors will be watching birds during their visit.

Team. A "circle" of a couple dozen Fish and Wildlife Service employees has been recruited to consult with and support the Team. In addition, a circle of supporting birders from outside the Fish and Wildlife Service is on hand to provide advice and feedback to the Birder's Team.

"The Birding Initiative is long overdue and a welcome chance to learn more about what birders would like to see happen on refuges," remarked Mr. Andrew. "It is also a great opportunity to help make the broader birding community aware of how to help conserve and protect refuge lands and other important bird habitats."

As part of the Birding Initiative, the Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the National Scenic Byways Program (NSBP) to improve information on bird watching along many of the 126 America's Byways® and to highlight birding opportunities on National wildlife refuges along National Scenic Byways and All-American Roads. There are already 62 national wildlife refuges and several of America's Byways are also closely associated with designated Birding Trails, which invariably have national wildlife refuges as featured sites. The Great River Road National Scenic Byway, Coulee Corridor National Scenic Byway, Pacific Coast Scenic All-American Road, Lake to Locks All-American Road and the Volcanic Legacy All-American Road are examples of these associated routes.

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Sandhill cranes, Canada geese and other waterfowl migrate through the Coulee Corridor in Washington State each spring and fall. Many of these birds congregate at the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge at the south end of the byway, creating a spectacle of sight and sounds.  
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Recognizing the importance of refuges to future generations of birds and birders, the Service has launched a National Wildlife Refuge System Birding Initiative. The effort aims to strengthen the relationship between the birding community and the Refuge System and to increase opportunities for quality bird watching on refuges.

To carry out this initiative, the Fish and Wildlife Service will be collaborating with a newly appointed 14-member Birder's Team—a panel of well-known authors, editors, educators, conservationists, eco-tourism experts and members of the business community.

Jon Andrew, Refuge Chief for the Fish and Wildlife Service's southeast region, chairs the Birder's

The Fish and Wildlife Service is coordinating the Birding Initiative and NSBP efforts to take advantage of existing opportunities that showcase birding opportunities on national wildlife refuges. The Birding Initiative is also about fostering a conservation ethic and involving more Americans in the work of conserving the nation's birds and their habitats. At the same time, the National Scenic Byways Program promotes sustainable economic development that benefits the resources along America's Byways. Birding can play a significant role in a byway's continued success.

National wildlife refuges and the Fish and Wildlife Service and its State wildlife agency and park partners are key players in managing natural resources that make the byways special places to visit and live. Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) along the Lake Erie Coastal Ohio Trail National Scenic Byway is an internationally recognized birding destination. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's publication *Banking on Nature 2004: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife*

*Refuge Visitation*, non-consumptive recreation-related visitation to Ottawa NWR contributed almost \$2.9 million to the local economy in 2004. In *Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis - Addendum to the 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, the Service estimates that 84 percent of all non-consumptive recreation users on national wildlife refuges are birders. Based on that percentage, birding at Ottawa NWR contributed almost \$2.5 million to the local economy and the byway. Ottawa NWR adjoins the State's Crane Creek State Park and Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, another birding hot spot that probably provides similar economic benefits.

Much work needs to be done, as many bird populations continue to decline. The Fish and Wildlife Service has listed more than 90 bird species as threatened or endangered in the U.S. and nearly 300 species as birds of conservation or management concern. Habitat loss due to alteration or destruction continues to be the major reason for the declines of many species. Collaboration with byway communities provides tremendous

opportunities to share these conservation messages with the American public.

Declining, too, are outdoor recreational experiences for families. In his recent best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv reports the dramatic decline over the past 20 years in unsupervised outdoor play and discovery by children. He cites diminishing opportunities for young people to enjoy woods and streams because of fear of crime, rapid suburban development, and an increasing trend toward indoor entertainment. By participating in a quality family-oriented, wildlife-dependent recreation like birding, citizens—especially youth—can develop a deep sense of wonder for the natural world and a passion for protecting and restoring the earth's community of life for future generations.

Byways.org, the website for America's Byways travelers, promotes bird watching as a featured activity. National Wildlife Refuges are along 10 of the byways currently listed. When the list is revised to include the 45 new National Scenic Byways and

All-American Road designations, at least five new byways with National Wildlife Refuges will be added. Part of the Service's effort with byways will be to develop modest Birding Itineraries for the byways with National Wildlife Refuges units along them. The Itineraries will be accessed so travelers interested in bird watching can easily plan the wildlife-oriented part of their visit.

The National Wildlife Refuges Service and its partners, including the NSBP and America's Byways, will work through the Refuge System's Birding Initiative and Birder's Team to establish refuges as the premier birding locations. These destinations will help reconnect people to nature, fostering in them a passion for conserving and managing bird habitat.

For more information, on the Birding Initiative and America's Byways, contact Paul Baicich at paul.baicich@verizon.net or Nathan Caldwell, the Service's Scenic Byways Coordinator, at Nathan\_caldwell@fws.gov or call (703) 358-2205. ★



Tourists stop to view the birds along Ohio's coastline. With its diversity of habitat, the Lake Erie Coastal Ohio Trail offers opportunities to see approximately 350 species. Public domain.