

Birders partner with refuges to conserve habitat and provide quality visitor experiences



On Every Refuge, Birds and Birders

Since nearly 50 million Americans identify themselves as casual or avid birding enthusiasts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has launched a National Wildlife Refuge System Birding Initiative to connect national wildlife refuges, birders and birds. The project aims to strengthen quality wildlife-dependent recreation on refuges, including wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

The initiative was launched with the appointment to the Birders Team of fourteen well-known birders, including authors, editors, educators, conservationists and members of the business community. Southeast Regional Refuge Chief Jon Andrew and Southwest Chief Chris Pease serve as co-chairs of the team, and the National Wildlife Refuge System Chief and Migratory Birds Assistant Director act as ex-officio members.

The Birders Team has combined with FWS staff to form a joint team. Service staff include biologists, refuge managers, and visitor services staff from Refuges and Migratory Birds. They have developed templates, models, and pilot projects for use at refuges and similar locations. Their role in choosing and implementing pilot projects has been crucial for the success of this effort.

Long-Time Focus on Birds

The Service is the principal federal agency charged with protecting and enhancing populations and habitats of more than 700 species of migratory birds. According to the Service's *Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis* (July 2009), there are about 48 million birders, 20 million of whom travel to watch birds. The one in five Americans who watch birds spent an estimated \$36 billion in 2006, including money for binoculars, field guides, bird food, bird houses, camping gear and travel-related expenses.

The Refuge Birding Initiative will not only give the Refuge System a more visible role in promoting birding, it will also highlight the central role of national wildlife refuges in bird conservation. Already, a third of all globally significant Important Bird Areas (designated by the American Bird Conservancy) in the United States are national wildlife refuges.

FWS Birding Initiative Purpose:

To establish a set of medium-term and achievable ideas to present to the Refuge System that will improve and increase appropriate Refuge System use among birders and nurture simultaneous birder commitment to the Refuge System.

- ❖ National Wildlife Refuges recognize birding as an important and growing recreational pursuit.
- ❖ National Wildlife Refuges welcome birders and offer individuals and families quality birding experiences.
- ❖ National Wildlife Refuges offer economic benefits to gateway communities from local and non-resident nature tourism effects.



Steve Hillebrand

Benefits

National Wildlife Refuges build community conservation bonds and feelings of community quality-of-place and well being. Interpretive and education programs about birds and birding are offered on hundreds of refuges through many different formats: as talks, general nature hikes, birding walks, signs, brochures, exhibits, and self-guided opportunities.

By providing these types of bird-focused recreational opportunities for visitors, the Refuge System will support the growth of compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities. Using birds as the catalyst to connect more people to nature helps ensure that visitors of all ages gain a better understanding of their relationships to the natural world, their impacts on it, and their role in being good stewards now and in the future.

The Birder Friendly Refuge

The Birders Team developed a dozen white papers that contained ideas for refuges to better address the specific needs of birders. From those ideas, a prioritized list of 20 items was developed, forming the basis to make a refuge “Birder Friendly.”

Elements of a Birder Friendly Refuge include:

- Up-to-date bird lists are available on-site and online.
- Visitor enhancement projects are planned with birder input.
- Seasonal birding information is available for casual and avid birders.
- Bird walks offered for families, youth groups, and beginners.
- Bird feeding stations are established and properly maintained near visitor centers, where appropriate.
- Field guides and optics are on hand for loan.
- Bird finding guides for individual refuges are developed and available on-site and online.
- Refuges participate in state or local birding trails, scenic byways or other community programs.
- Refuges identify and communicate ways birders can help refuges, by volunteering, citizen science, purchase of Duck Stamps.
- Refuge staff is visible to local birding groups through meetings, field trips, posting to list serves.



Northern Aplomado Falcon/Fernando Cerra

Projects and Accomplishments

- Produced instructional DVD and print guide to Developing Visitor Center Bird Feeding Stations.
- Bar-graph format bird checklists are being piloted in the southeast and southwest.
- eBird Trail Trackers are installed on 12 refuges around the country.
- Three refuges are in the process of developing bird finding guides, in English and Spanish.
- Launched the Birder Friendly Refuge System Incentives Program to enhance birding experiences at refuges nationwide.
- Dispensed optics and field guides for visitor loan programs to 80 refuges.
- Birder Team members are participating in distance learning broadcasts from the National Conservation Training Center on topics such as Birder Friendly Refuges, Developing Visitor Center Bird Feeding Stations, and Cornell Lab’s BirdSleuth Curriculum.
- The Service has signed an MOU with the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology to partner on education, citizen science and research programs.



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For More Information:
www.fws.gov/refuges/birding

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April, 2010

