

## National Wildlife Refuge System “Birder Friendly” Refuge

Many of the nearly 40 million refuge visits each year are from casual or avid birders. The 20 characteristics/features below have been identified by birders as important to making their visit to refuges more enjoyable and productive. Not all components will be appropriate for all refuges, but this list provides a starting point for staff, Friends, and volunteers to address the unique needs of birders. High priority items are in italics.

### Welcome and Orient Birders

#### *1. Bird checklist*

An up-to-date bird checklist is extremely important to birders of all abilities and should always be available at the visitor center, entrance kiosks, and/or on websites. There are three kinds of checklists: the Service standard (four-column) checklist that many refuges already use, a shortened list with pictures of common or specialty birds (good for casual or beginning birders), and several refuges are pioneering bar-graph formats (avid birders preference).



#### *2. Public use facilities*

Birders appreciate safe, maintained towers, boardwalks, blinds and structures which allow for improved birding and wildlife viewing opportunities. Well-planned visitor facilities direct visitors to appropriate areas, ensure access for all, often provide protection from the elements, and may minimize wildlife disturbance.

#### *3. After-hours contact point*

When the visitor center is closed, or if one is not available, an information kiosk at the refuge entrance, fee booth or outside the visitor center is essential to communicate important birding and other useful information for all visitors (rules and regulations, hours of operation, emergency contacts). Birders appreciate copies of bird checklists, maps, sightings list, and, if available, a refuge birdfinding guide. (See #1 & #14.)

#### **4. Clearly state/publicize why areas are closed** (nesting, hunting, management, etc.)

Birders want to know why they cannot enter a particular part of the refuge. If they know the reason, they will be more likely to be supportive of the refuge goals. If comparable alternate sites are open and available, these should be highlighted through posting.

### On-site programs and activities

#### *5. Offer bird walks for families, school groups, etc.*

To introduce the next generation to birding and bird conservation, refuges can work with Friends, volunteers, or local bird clubs to schedule walks and other interpretive programs for individuals, families and school groups. Consider loan programs (see #8).

#### *6. Active birding (feeding) station at the visitor center*

Feeding stations – appropriately maintained and with accompanying interpretation – are an ideal introductory feature at many refuges. These will often attract species that are less visible to inexperienced visitors (e.g., quail, thrashers, towhees, and sparrows) and provide an opportunity for interpretation. Feeding stations also serve as ideal bridges for backyard birders to enjoy wild birds at refuges.

#### *7. Identify ways that adult visitors, birders, and kids can contribute to conservation efforts*

Any real contributions – at all levels of complexity – are important. Visitors/volunteers can help staff in avian inventory and monitoring (in following with the refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan); involving volunteers in citizen science projects; removing invasives; or, as simple as buying and promoting the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation (Duck) Stamp.

#### *8. Optics and field guide loan program*

Loan programs (including binoculars, bird guides, backpacks, etc.) should be considered. This is particularly helpful for family groups (see #5). A loan program, in conjunction with a refuge map, bird checklist (see #1) and a refuge birdfinding guide (see # 14) are much appreciated by visitors.

#### **9. Identify local birder resources**

The community, region, or state will probably have a set of birding organizations or networks with which to partner on specific projects. They might be the local bird club or Audubon society, the regional listserv (see #18), or even a bird observatory. A list of local birding resources for visiting birders should be made available, i.e., rare bird alerts, schedule of bird club meetings, schedule of local bird club field trips, etc.

#### **10. Have field guides, other books, and other birding tools available to buy at the refuge**

If the visitor center has a retail store area, appropriate bird-oriented books and tools should be available to buy. (See also #1 and #8.)





### **11. Nest-box program (multi-species) involving volunteer stewards**

Many refuges engage in nest boxes and platforms for wood ducks, swallows, bluebirds and raptors. These are good projects for volunteers to be involved when there is a commitment from staff and volunteers to long-term monitoring/care. (See #7.) Nest-boxes for other species (e.g., prothonotary warblers in the Southeast, American kestrels in the Northeast or burrowing owls in the West) can also make real conservation contributions to species involved.

### **12. Birding information podcasts, apps or other technological aids**

Podcasts, cell phone mini-tours, smart phone apps and electronic field guides are great ways to highlight birding opportunities (including bird sounds) and can be spin-offs of the refuge birdfinding guides (see #14). They are easier to create than many people think. Specific instructions are being developed.

### **Outreach**

#### ***13. Current, accurate information on refuge website***

Many birders plan their visits using the internet and appreciate an easily-found checklist, refuge map, and location/directions. Recent bird sightings, seasonal events, and helpful birding advice on the website are a bonus.

#### ***14. Availability of "Birdfinding Guide to XXX Refuge"***

Develop a three- or four-page summary of exactly where to go on the refuge to observe bird concentrations, specialties, or other highlights. Seasonal hints, combined with specific directions, will give the visitor the best information on how to maximize a birding visit. The guide should incorporate a map and supplement the refuge checklist. (See also related podcasts in #12.)

#### ***15. Refuge Friends group which embraces birding elements***

An engaged Friends Group can provide funding, volunteer, and partnership support to local and visiting birders, implement conservation projects, and work with communities to enhance facilities for birders. Recruiting birders for Board or committee positions may be an effective way to establish relationships with the birding community. Friends-operated stores may carry birding supplies (see #10) and/or operate optics/field-guide loan programs (see #8).

#### **16. Active participation in birding trails and Scenic Byways**

Many refuges are on birding-trail routes in over 20 states, but don't necessarily get the full exposure they deserve. The idea is to raise the profile of the refuge in the context of the route. The same goes for increasingly important Scenic Byways.

#### ***17. Participate in bird-related "celebration days"***

Every opportunity to broaden the exposure of the refuge during a particular celebration is important. Such events could include a Christmas Bird Count (for adults and/or kids), International Migratory Bird Day (in May), The Big Sit! (in conjunction with Refuge Week), or local birding/nature festivals.

#### **18. Refuge staff visibility to birder groups**

Staff should be engaged with and recognized by local birder groups at their meetings, conferences, and events. Visibility through the state- or region-based listserv (reporting on local bird sightings) is also very important. (See #9)

#### **19. Promote refuges that are particularly good for beginners**

Most refuges can be ideal locations to learn about birds, but some are better for beginners than others (e.g., Ding Darling NWR, where the long-legged waders are easily observed). Often, waterfowl in numbers and near existing public use facilities can provide the same kinds of close study and identification opportunities for visitors. Remember that most birders in the United States are casual bird watchers, so plan refuge birding program elements accordingly. Try to offer elements for several categories of wildlife watchers.

#### **20. Publicize refuges that are Important Bird Areas, WHSRN sites, etc.**

The special status of refuges – Important Bird Areas (IBAs), Western Hemisphere Reserve Network (WHSRN) sites, Ramsar sites, and other classifications -- should be highlighted and celebrated.



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For More Information:

[www.fws.gov/refuges/birding](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/birding)

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