

The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail: A Tool for Avitourism

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Abstract—When completed, the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail will cover more than 500 miles, link users and stakeholders, and provide an economic source for dozens of businesses. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department began the trail in 1993 by marking the trail and by using highway turnoffs, viewing blinds, and observation stations. The project has expanded into trail products and events, a newsletter, and computer link-ups. The trail is a successful and excellent example of avitourism—a part of the growing worldwide ecotourism movement.

Birdwatching is a popular form of outdoor recreation, and avitourism—overnight travel to experience birds in a natural setting—is an important part of the worldwide growth in ecotourism. Recognizing these facts, and knowing that the Texas Gulf Coast is a major destination for many birdwatchers and avitourists, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT), other government agencies, communities, and tourism industry leaders are assisting the development of Texas Gulf Coast avitourism. Their goal is to promote sustainable economic development while conserving habitat for Texas birds. Projects currently under development, including the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, are designed to bring a portion of the \$238 billion spent on ecotourism each year, worldwide, into Texas coastal communities. Through conservation management, nature tourism development, and marketing, coastal communities can gain economically while protecting some of the habitat necessary to sustain the rich array of birds found in Texas.

Tourism Economics and Recreational Trends

Annual expenditures shown by the United States tourism industry amount to \$417 billion, providing \$58 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues. The U.S. tourism industry is the second largest employer in America, providing 14.3 million jobs and \$110 billion in travel-generated payroll (Eubanks and others 1995).

In a 1992 report by the World Tourism Organization, ecotourism is shown to be the fastest growing segment of the world travel industry, with growth averaging 30%

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each year since 1987. Global sales totaled \$238 billion (WTO 1992). A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey showed that in 1991, 35.6 million people fished and 14.1 million hunted, while 76.1 million people 16 years or older enjoyed nonconsumptive wildlife recreation, spending \$59 billion observing, feeding, or photographing wildlife. Thirty million took trips for the primary purpose of enjoying wildlife, spending \$22.2 billion on trip-related costs including food, lodging, and transportation (USFWS 1993). The National Trust for Historic Preservation found that travelers who journey to experience cultural, historical, and natural history sites spend an average of \$62 per day more than the average traveler (National Trust for Historic Preservation 1994). A Roper Starch Worldwide survey for the Recreation Roundtable, which interviewed 1,993 adults in person from April 16-23, 1994, revealed that 14% of Americans involved in recreation were birdwatchers, more than the number who golf or go motorboating.

According to the Texas Department of Commerce, in 1994 tourism was the third largest industry in Texas. Collecting \$24.5 billion from direct travel expenditures, the state ranked 4th in the nation, with \$21.5 billion derived from domestic travelers, and \$3.0 billion from international travelers. This represented a 5.3 per cent increase from 1993. Texas travel expenditures generated 435,000 jobs in 1994, representing 5.6% of the total state nonagricultural employment, up from 3.8% in 1993 (Eubanks and others 1995).

Recent studies at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge showed that 75,000 people visit annually to view wildlife, to fish, and to hunt. At Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, 99,000 of the 167,808 visitors in 1994 were bird watchers. Avitourists interviewed in a survey there were middle-aged (70% in their fifties and sixties); well-educated (76.9% had attended some college); and wealthy (49.5% had family incomes in excess of \$50,000 per year). A majority did not fish (63 percent) or hunt (89.1 percent). They spent \$14.4 million in the local communities: \$6.16 million on lodging, \$2.18 million on meals, \$0.44 million on fuel, and \$5.64 million on other purchases. The average visitor contributed between \$88 and \$145 to the local economy (Eubanks and others 1995).

The Texas Coastal Advantage

A 1991 survey showed that since 1988, more members of the American Birding Association have pursued their hobby in Texas than in any other state (Wauer 1991). Four of the top 12 birding destinations in North America are in Texas: Two on the Texas Gulf Coast (High Island and Central Coast), one in South Texas adjacent to the Gulf Coast (Lower Rio Grande Valley), and one in the Trans Pecos (Big Bend National Park) (Kerlinger and Weidner 1994).

Birdwatchers travel to Texas because the state has documented 596 bird species, one of the largest numbers in the U.S. The Texas Coast alone has more birds than most other states, with more than 400 species possible during the year. This bird richness results from the diverse habitats found in Texas, from the woodlands and prairies on the Upper Coast, to the South Texas thorn shrub and Rio Grande riparian forests on the Lower Coast. Indeed, Texas and the Texas Gulf Coast are known worldwide for their excellent birding experiences.

The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail: Linking Users and Stakeholders

In 1993, TPWD began the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, a sustainable development project designed to capitalize on the potential for Texas to attract birdwatchers. The trail unifies existing and potential birding sites into a cohesive and marketable unit. When completed, the more than 500 mile highway trail network will link the users (birdwatchers) with the stakeholders (private landowners and community business interests). Ranches, lodging establishments, restaurants, and other providers of goods and services will become part of an organized network that will serve and market to traveling birdwatchers. With increased attention from the economic side, wildlife (or bird) habitat will be considered part of the economic base for communities along the trail—a new concept for many coastal community leaders.

The \$1.5 million dollar project, with Phase I funding through the TXDOT Intermodal Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, is sponsored by the TPWD. Sites on the trail are marked with a universal logo sign (Black Skimmer) and

corresponding numbers that identify the site on a trail map. Some sites have received enhancements, such as highway turn-outs, boardwalks, viewing blinds, observation stations, and hummingbird gardens. A trail map distributed by TXDOT and TPWD are available for purchase.

Proceeds from ongoing marketing will be used for maintaining the trail. In addition to a trail guide, marketing will include a trail-sponsors program, trail products and events, a quarterly newsletter, computer link-ups, and a quality trail-experience. Marketing and trail maintenance are coordinated by TPWD through communities and siteholders.

The trail project, which has completed its first phase on the Central Texas Coast, has been extremely popular with communities and birdwatchers alike. More than 95 sites are included on the Central Coast section. Three private ranches have been listed, and 13 site holders have provided many in-kind habitat and site enhancements. On September 8, 1994, Roger Tory Peterson helped with dedication ceremonies in which the first trail sign was unveiled at the Connie Hagar Cottage Sanctuary in Rockport, Texas.

Funding to complete the Trail has been obtained from TXDOT. TPWD is encouraging coastal communities, landowners, and industries on the Upper and Lower Coasts to get involved in this valuable endeavor. The Upper Coast opened in the spring of 1999, and the Lower Coast opened in the fall. The Upper Coast houses 30 sites with more than 100 sites planned for the Lower Coast.

When completed, the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail will provide a model for other areas interested in avitourism. TPWD and all site holders plan to provide a quality experience for trail users with good habitat, birding enhancements, conservation management, ongoing monitoring, and marketing. The Trail has generated a great deal of excitement and attention from both users and communities. Trail planners and participants eagerly await its completion, and hope that it will deliver both conservation and economic development.