



GREAT BIRDING PROJECTS



An approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing

1 May 2013

Birding Trends

From the USDA-FS and IRIS



Birders at Ottawa NWR in 2012

Last month, the Athens Research Group for the U.S. Department of Agriculture - Forest Service, a project led by Ken Cordell, released a research brief on birding trends in the United States. It's part of their Internet Research Information Series (IRIS).

The review indicates that birding continues to grow, but not necessarily as steeply as in the past.

Birding, the review summarized, is an activity that cuts across most U.S. demographics. It ranks about

15th on the list of most popular activities included in the most recent National Survey on Recreation and the Environment ([Cordell 2012](#)). "As an activity, birding ranks just below visiting a beach, swimming in lakes/streams/etc., and bicycling. Birding ranks just above day hiking, visiting natural areas, and gathering mushrooms/berries/other nature products."

Also, in [associated research](#) published last year by the USDA-FS on multiple outdoor recreation projections into the future, birding was forecast to continue in long-term growth. The projected number of people 16 years of age or older in the U.S. engaging in birding was expected to increase between 4% and 8% over the next 50 years.

The NSRE birding figures certainly are higher than those of the Fish and Wildlife Service's "[National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation](#)." Much of this can be attributed to the definition of what birding constitutes in the two surveys, whether birding is the primary purpose of a trip or whether it is one of many activities in which participants engage on a trip.

For a look at last month's short USDA Forest Service report on birding trends, see [here](#).

The American Bison

Making it our National Mammal?

In many respects, American Bison became a symbol of the American frontier. Of course, they were intimately linked to the economic, physical, and spiritual lives of the Great Plains Native Americans. Vast and awe-inspiring herds of American Bison once roamed the Great Plains - between 30 million and 200 million bison depending on your source - between the Mississippi and the Rockies. But these creatures were slaughtered by trappers, traders, commercial hunters, and others among the wave of white settlers moving West. By 1880, probably fewer than 2,000 of these American Bison remained in the U.S.

Soon thereafter, however, men and women from all walks of life - ranchers, Native Americans, industrialists, sportsmen, and, especially, President Theodore Roosevelt - launched an effort to save the American Bison from extinction. This effort - starting around a series of refuges in Oklahoma, Montana, and South Dakota - probably represents the world's first successful wildlife restoration project.



American Bison
(Jesse Achtenbach/USFWS)

These are iconic mammals, depicted on our coins, federal seals, and sports team logos. Three states have already designated the American Bison as their official state mammal. And many Americans now feel that the American Bison should be designated as the "National Mammal."

If the Bald Eagle is our national bird, why not have a national mammal? And why not the American Bison?

This mammal also represents a species whose presence on the landscape was a factor in creating an environment of sustainability, especially for soil, vegetation, and birdlife. (Indeed, one fine way to support the survival of prairie birds, is to include in one's diet range-fed American Bison!)

There is serious activity to back a National Bison Legacy Act, and public support has been growing. Find more details [here](#).

Passenger Pigeon Documentary

From Billions to None



Passenger Pigeon
by Louis A. Fuertes (1907)

If the American Bison made it, avoiding extinction in North America, the Passenger Pigeon didn't.

At one time, Passenger Pigeons were so numerous that their enormous flocks could cover the sky, and they might block out the sun as they flew overhead. With a likely population between 3 and 5 billion, this species was the most abundant bird in North America and probably the world.

But, alas, they are no more. They were harvested to death, to extinction. The last Passenger Pigeon known drew its final breath on 1 September 1914.

A creative effort has started to mark next year as the centenary of this species' passing. The activities marking the end of this species, and the lessons therein, are being coordinated through [Project Passenger Pigeon](#).

A team is now working on a documentary on the Passenger Pigeon, a film called *From Billions to None*. This effort includes David Mrazek, director, Garth Stevenson, musician and composer, Joel Greenberg, author and naturalist, and others. The release is scheduled for next year, the year which marks the death of "Martha," the last known Passenger Pigeon.

In the words of the team working on this project, "this story doesn't have to be depressing." There are lessons to learn and modern success stories to witness, to share. Indeed, awareness and take-home lessons are the potential legacies we can inherit from Martha.

See details [here](#) on the documentary, *From Billions to None*, and consider joining the effort to make it happen.

Say NO to Bottled Water

More National Parks Getting with the Program

Prior to phasing out bottled water in March of last year, the Grand Canyon National Park estimated that plastic bottles accounted for at least 20 percent of its overall waste. Much of that plastic came from bottled water. That's why the effort to phase out bottled water in our National Parks makes so much sense. It's not only good for the environment, it's good for park budgets. Last April we wrote about [this subject](#).



Now there are 14 major properties in the National Park System that ban the sale of bottled water. Besides the Grand Canyon, these include Saguaro National Park, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, Zion National Park, Dinosaur National Monument, and Big Thicket National Preserve. Offering water stations and encouraging visitors to bring their own bottles or buy stainless-steel reusable bottles is simply smart. (The purchase of a reusable bottle for as little as \$1.99 - versus \$1.25 for vending-machine water - also seems like a smart deal for many.)

Under circumstances when only about 2 of every 10 water bottles are recycled, this trend makes sense. Billions wind up in landfills and hundreds of millions end up littering streets, streams, beaches, bays, and the ocean.

For a thoughtful statement by Congressman Raul M. Grijalva (D-AZ) on the issue of National Parks taking the lead in reducing or eliminating bottled water, see [here](#).

The American Beverage Association and others in the industry have lobbied hard against water-bottle bans, especially at our National Parks. At the same time, campaigns to "think outside the bottle" have arisen to spread the word on making National Parks bottled-water free. For example, see [here](#).

For now, if you or your organization will be planning a conference, a convention, a birding or nature festival, or a byway/trail enhancement, see about making the organizational decision to avoid bottled water. Yes: *reduce, reuse.... and refill!*

Happy Green Space

Measuring the happiness-boost of green urban areas

Do you think that living near a park, an urban park, can increase your happiness? And by how much?

According to a recent study in *Psychological Science*, a team of four researchers estimated that green urban areas provided a "life satisfaction boost" generally equivalent to one-fifth to one-quarter of the increase associated with finding a job or being married.

This was a study in the UK over 18 years that analyzed data from almost 12,000 individuals.

The increase in life satisfaction that accompanied nearby green space "was equivalent to 28% of the effect of being married rather than unmarried and 21% of being employed rather than unemployed," the team maintained. And policymakers could deliver a big happiness boost to the community by making cities greener, since the "benefits of a marriage, for example, will be fairly localized, whereas the benefits of a park may be universal."

You can read a summary and abstract [here](#). Check out the accompanying video, a little over three minutes long. And, yes, there is birdsong in the background.

Cashing in on Dancing "Chickens" *Dancing Dollars!*



Male Greater Prairie-Chickens on a Lek
(Photo: Greg Kramos/USFWS)

While the American Great Plains face a continuing threat of being plowed under for agriculture, the birdlife is similarly threatened. As a group, 41 grassland bird species have experienced a population decline of over 38% between 1968 and 2010.

Some of the iconic "prairie-grouse" - Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse - may face even greater threats, what with virtual "island-habitats" shrinking for these non-migratory

birds.

Still, interesting developments are worthy of note in the area of avitourism dollars helping keep some ranchers in business and keeping the prairie right-side-up. Festivals, birding-trails, and tours combine to showcase the displaying prairie-grouse to visitors. The display-grounds, the "leks," serve as a stage for strutting and performing male birds, aiming to draw the attention of available females. Such "dancing" is a sight to behold.

Recently, there was an excellent article on the opportunity that these ancient mating dances offers to ranchers. It was from *The Washington Post* on 21 April. See the on-line version [here](#) with accompanying photo gallery and videos.

You can also find some additional information on other aspects of prairie-chicken-tourism from southwest and south-central Nebraska [here](#).



Sketch by Bob Hines

Words to Consider:

"We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well - for we will not fight to save what we do not love."

- Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002)

GBP Bulletin Archives

Great Birding Projects is a vehicle to promote a creative approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing. GBP functions as a bridge to an innovative engagement between people and birds. You can access all previous issues of the *GBP* bulletin on the GBP website [here](#).

