



GREAT BIRDING PROJECTS



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

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So, who are these "birders"? - a look into the recent USFWS study

Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis

*Addendum to the 2011 National
Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and
Wildlife-Associated Recreation*

Report 2011-1



Every five years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) comes out with its much-respected *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*. It's packed with fascinating data. The most recent study was for 2011.

Starting in 1980s, the survey has included details on wildlife-associated recreation, an added feature that has made the report that much more significant. The most recent 2011 report indicated that 30 percent of the U.S. population, 16 years old or older, enjoyed and participated in wildlife-watching activities. That comes to 71.8 million Americans, including those who watched from home. Still, those Americans who took trips away from their homes for wildlife-watching activities numbered 22.5 million.

Of course, these 71.8 million overall wildlife-watchers and even those 22.5 million away-from-home wildlife watchers are not simply bird watchers or birders. While there is overlap in these categories, it is instructive to examine bird enthusiasts as a distinct group.

Thankfully, ever since the 2001 *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-associated Recreation*, an addendum has appeared, usually a couple of years later, titled, *Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis*. These bird-watching reports have appeared for 2001, 2006, and, now, 2011. The lag-time between the main survey and the birding addendum is unfortunate, shortening the useful shelf-life of the data in the birding report, but it still remains an extremely valuable snapshot.

The most recent version of that birding report was just released last month. You can download the informative document [here](#).

Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis is just over a dozen pages, and all active birders and those interested in the birding culture - and the birding market - would do well to spend some time perusing its page. Among those who might be interested in the report could be festival organizers, avitourism specialists, backyard-birding companies (feeders, seed, birdbath, etc.), optics firms, wildlife-associated land managers, and all wildlife conservationists with a serious interest in appealing to the public.

The birding report indicates that there were about 18 million "away-from-home birders" and 41 million "around-the-home birders" in 2011. (The precise numbers are 17.8 million away-from-home birders and 41.3 million around-the-home birders, but no matter.) To be counted as an away-from-home birder in this study, an individual must have taken a trip *one mile or more* from home for the *primary purpose* of observing birds. To be counted as an around-the-home birder in this study, an individual must have *closely observed or tried to identify birds* around the home.

As a whole, the report indicates that birders in 2011 were generally middle-aged, fairly well-off, well educated, and roughly gender-balanced. But there is much more revealed in the report.

AGE

The average birder in 2011 was 53 years old. This is an average age which increased by three years since 2006. Yes, the average birder went from 50 to 53 years old in the course of five years



Central Park NY Birders - Ralph Hockens

Moreover, the greatest number of birders in the 2011 report could be found in the 55-plus age group. Almost half of these birders, or 48.8 percent, were in this category. Looking at this slightly differently, Americans over the age of 55 had the highest birding participation rates, and the older you were, the more likely you were to be a bird watcher of some sort. This means that the next-highest level of participation was among those American between 45 and 54 years of age.

The highest interest levels, and for that matter, the most concentrated birding market, currently reside with people in these two older age categories.

At the same time, the participation rate was particularly low for people ages 16 to 24. If anything, this participation rate has dropped since the 2006 birding report.

INCOME

We birders are fairly well off.

More than half (51.9 percent) of all birders lived in households earning over \$50,000 yearly. And just over a third (33.9 percent) of all birders in 2011 hail from households that were better off, with \$75,000 or more yearly earnings.

As the data in the report indicate, the higher the income, the more likely a person is to be a birder. All avitourism, optics, and bird-feeding businesses should take note.

EDUCATION

Likewise, education has been strongly correlated with income in the past, and this also seems to be valid for bird watchers. Of course, correlation is not causation, so one must be careful in interpreting the data. This warning is especially valid in today's economy, particularly when considering younger workers under 25 (whose unemployment rate runs double the overall official rate) and even older workers.

Regardless, the USFWS birding report indicates that the more education someone has, the more likelihood he/she is to be a birder.

About two-thirds of birders (or 66.1 percent) had at least some college education in 2011. This is a just few percentage points higher than the 2006 birding figure. And 43 percent of all birders had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2011. Birders were clearly ahead of the general population, since the U.S. Census Bureau reported in March 2011, that U.S. adults (25 years of age or older) with at least a bachelor's degree had just crept over 30 percent.

GENDER

The good news is that birders exhibit an admirable gender balance.

The numbers over the years in the USFWS birder surveys have been close to equal:

- 2001 - 46 percent male, 54 percent female
- 2006 - 51 percent male, 49 percent female
- 2011 - 44 percent male, 56 percent female

Over all three USFWS birding surveys, this averages to 47 percent male, 53 percent female. Basically, you are as likely to encounter a male as a female birder in the field or backyard.

In contrast, the two other main outdoor activities examined in the overall *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, hunting and fishing have gender figures that are highly skewed toward the male side of the equation.

Hunting was 91 percent male in 2006 and 89 percent male in 2011. Yes, for every 10 hunters, 9 are men.

Fishing was a bit better, but, still, for every four participants in fishing, three were men. The exact figures are 75 percent male in 2006, and 73 percent male in 2011.

Not surprisingly, the equitable gender balance among birders has been acknowledged in virtually all published studies on American bird watching. If anything, this is a highly comforting statistic.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

What is not comforting is the fact that birders are extraordinarily white and that the situation has not been getting much better.

The 2011 report indicates that fully 93 percent of birders were self-identified as white. This is even more troublesome than the 2006 report figure of 88 percent.

Frankly, birding does not look like the rest of America, nor is it in the process of reflecting some important related cultural changes across the country. By 2025, at least nine states (including Texas, California, Florida, Colorado, and Georgia) will have minority-majorities adding up to actual majorities.

Clearly, birding has some serious catching-up to do.

Is bird watching exclusionist?

Well, that would be an exaggerated accusation.

The better question might be: "Is bird watching welcoming?"

This is an important question to consider, one for another *GBP* bulletin. But it has been raised before here and elsewhere, particularly at the bird-oriented [Focus on Diversity](#) meetings.

TRAVEL

People who took trips away from home for the specific purpose of watching birds averaged 13 days of birding in a year. That's not a bad number.

But, remember, such a trip does not automatically indicate a high level of avidity, just a relatively high level of curiosity or interest, interest enough to leave home for a trip to see birds.

Some insight into this is introduced when the report raises the question: "What are they watching?"

The most popular group of watched birds was waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans), and 75 percent of away-from-home birders reported watching them. This was the most popular bird-group. The next most popular was birds of prey (hawks, eagles, falcons) coming in at 72 percent.

This is not very surprising. Waterfowl are not terribly difficult to observe, especially in grand flocks. Geese in numbers can be attractive, if not astounding. Wintering swans can certainly attract curious avitourists. Ducks always seem to please. Not insignificantly, the most recent [North American Waterfowl Management Plan](#) (NAWMP), revised in 2012, articulated a special emphasis to "build support for waterfowl conservation by reconnecting people with nature through waterfowl." The NAWMP report further indicated that:

The number of people who make a dedicated effort to view waterfowl is now ten times the number of waterfowl hunters, and their numbers continue to grow. This phenomenon creates an opportunity to increase support for conservation as well as a responsibility to ensure the needs of this growing clientele are being addressed.

Clearly, waterfowl avitourists are becoming increasingly important for thoughtful waterfowl conservationists.

The raptor category is also of interest. Consider, if you will, the delighted hoards of viewers in winter who will watch gatherings of Bald Eagles at dams, harbors, and power plants. Or just recall the many curious folks who left their homes this winter to witness the remarkable Snowy Owl invasion. Many gathered at airports, barrier-beach dunes, or farm fields in the Northeast and beyond.

However casual their interests, these people are all "away-from-home birders," according to the USFWS report.

The number of these away-from-home birders, however, has actually dropped since 2006. According to the report, they have dropped by 10 percent, a figure that the USFWS regards as significant, at the 95 percent level. Fewer birders, according to the 2011 numbers, were traveling to watch birds. This is, perhaps, not that surprising, given the slow recovery since 2008 from the Great Recession.

The Great Recession may have dampened travel for birding, but according to other researchers, the interest in birding remains high. In fact, looking at figures from the twice yearly "[State of the American Traveler](#)" by Destination Analysts, birding is doing well. The percentage of "leisure travelers" (in this case, traveling 50 miles or more one-way) who in the year prior to the 2011 interview engaged in some bird watching were 7.4 percent in January and 9.7 percent in July. In either case, this is higher than the number of leisure travelers who engaged in canoeing or kayaking, horseback riding, ATV or off-road vehicle driving, mountain biking, hunting, or taking a hike which included one or more nights on the trail.

Yes, birders and birding are still holding fast.

OPTICS

Unfortunately, the USFWS birding study did not pursue a few other potentially significant indicator numbers from the larger *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*.

Some buying-behavior changes between 2006 and 2011 were very interesting, especially in the areas of optics and backyard-bird expenditures.



While appreciating that optics are used by many varied people - including NASCAR fans, hunters, and yachtsmen - the use of binoculars and spotting scopes is a classic "field mark" of the out-of-doors birder.

The increase in sales of binoculars and spotting scopes between 2006 and 2011 has been remarkable. There was an increase of almost 40 percent (actually, 39.9 percent) between 2006 and 2011, from \$656.4 million to \$918.5 million. Note: some of this increase may be attributed to away-from-home birders and at least suggests a possible increase in avidity. If fewer birders are traveling afield (see "Travel" above), they may still be leaving home better equipped.

SOME BACKYARD NUMBERS

The USFWS birding report indicated that 88 percent of birders are backyard birders. This means that while they are engaged in backyard watching and feeding, they don't leave their own homes to encounter birds. Still, they spend a startling 119 days engaged in their backyard activity.

Most may be "limited" to recognizing American Robins, Downy Woodpeckers, chickadees, grackles, and "snowbirds," but this is usually the prerequisite to leaving their home to appreciate other birds.

Some of the away-from home birders who decided not to go afield between the data collection for 2006 and for 2011 may have decided to save their travel dollars and simply watched their birds at home.

And those bird watchers still staying home to watch birds spent more money in the 2011 report compared to the 2006 report. Bird food sales went up 21.4 percent, from \$3.35 billion in the 2006 report to \$4.07 billion in the 2011 report.

And, very similarly, nest boxes, feeders, and baths went up 22.76 percent, from \$789.9 million in the 2006 report to \$969.7 in the 2011 report.

These are probably indications that when it comes to birds, some folks have recently been spending more money staying at home.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The USFWS reports certainly can't answer all the important questions about bird watching in the U.S.

For example, what none of these USFWS reports has asked is: "How fast is bird photography growing?" It is a question that nobody might have imagined when the *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation* started

asking those serious non-hunting and non-fishing questions in the 1980s.

Who knew?

Well, we know now, and it's time to catch up with some numbers. Digital photography has revolutionized photography and given an enormous boost to bird photography, but this particular growth has not been measured.

Clearly, and as previously indicated, there are other issues that arise from the report's findings.

The report's bold introduction declares that it "provides up-to-date information so birders and policy makers can make informed decisions regarding the management of birds and their habitats... [and allows] resource managers and policy makers to demonstrate the economic might of birders, the value of birding - and by extension, the value of birds."

What it doesn't say is that this is the opportunity for birders themselves to assert their presence. If, for example, away-from-home birders are close to being 18 million in number, well-educated, fairly well off, and holding their own in world of outdoor activities, birders are also surprisingly mute when it comes being heard as a group articulating conservation issues, access concerns, and bird-and-nature education needs.

Perhaps by the next report, in 2016, this will be changed.

80th Anniversary of the "Duck Stamp"

FDR signed the bill on 16 March 1934



Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling - USFWS

In 1934, after many years of public and Congressional debate - mostly among decent conservationists of good will - the U.S. House and Senate passed a bill to create a funding mechanism for wetlands and waterfowl through the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act. On 16 March 1934, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the bill into law, and thus began the process that has collected almost \$900 million through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF). This money has gone to build over 250 National Wildlife Refuges and more than 3 million acres of wetlands and grasslands as part of the parallel Small Wetlands Program.

When Ding Darling sat down to draw the Mallards to grace the very first Stamp, nobody knew the program would be that successful. In the 1930s, harsh critics predicted that the program could not raise \$1 million per year. But it broke the million-dollar-mark by 1938-39.

The effort now represents 80 years of success. Anyone who seeks the solid evidence can visit the wetland, riparian, and grassland habitats in the National Wildlife Refuge System that have been secured through Stamp funds. Waterfowl may have been the principle and original beneficiaries, but the species that have benefited include our shorebirds, long-legged waders, raptors, and songbirds. These species might otherwise have severely suffered without vital Stamp fund investments.

At the same time, land-conservation costs for birds is getting more expensive, and an increase in the Stamp price up from the current \$15 - where it has been since 1991 - is overdue.

As we approach this Stamp anniversary, we can all [review](#) how it was achieved and we can certainly celebrate after these 80 years.

Words to Consider:

"Birding, after all, is just a game. Going beyond that is what is important."

- Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996)

The Daily Reflector, Greenville, North Carolina, 6 Nov1988

GBP Bulletin Archives

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