

A large flock of birds, likely terns, is gathered on a sandy beach. In the background, a person wearing a blue jacket is standing on a tripod, taking a photograph of the birds. The scene is outdoors with a blurred background of trees and a clear sky.

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BIRDING FESTIVALS AS ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCES

Series of training resources for bird-related tourism

Birding Festivals and Events

Festivals are organized to attract certain segments of the population and are usually targeted at specific interests, such as gastronomy, the arts or music. By attracting local and regional participants, successful festivals serve strategically not only to foster a sense of community, but also to generate income and boost local economies, thus becoming an invaluable tool for promoting tourism and placing a region on the map for prospective niche markets.

Birdwatching and wildlife tourism are components and sectors of ecotourism, an industry that continues to grow in popularity worldwide. A great number of birdwatchers become “avitourists,” traveling to wildlife areas, both in their own countries and abroad, with the specific intention of increasing the number and diversity of the species they observe, adding them to their “life list” (see Brochure #2 for more information on bird tourist profiles).

In various regions around the world, festivals and fairs are oriented specifically towards birdwatching and related activities. In international bird tourism, the British Birdwatching Fair, or Birdfair, is one of the world's most popular bird-centered events, attracting nearly 25,000 participants annually. In North America, over 175 festivals of different sizes have been registered.¹ Even relatively small festivals can have a significant impact on the local economy² (see Brochure #8 for successful bird festival case studies).

Apart from bird festivals, other opportunities for bird tourism include tours and group travel opportunities during specific periods, such as during reproduction when birds communicate with calls and trills while building nests, which makes them easier to spot and observe.

Ecotourism Experiences

Based on how they are designed, bird festivals may be considered ecotourism products or experiences and have been shown to have positive impacts on the economy². Festivals allow the creation of a diversified offer for participants with varying levels of skill and interest in bird observation, while also complementing the experience with family activities. Conversely seasonal bird observation tours usually

represent specific experiences targeted towards very committed and experienced bird observers. Festivals can include cultural, culinary, and musical events, as well as wilderness activities, such as hiking, kayaking, biking, and nature photography. This diversity of activities can make a bird festival an excellent starting point for young people interested in wildlife observation.

Key Elements of a Bird Festival





Define the Focus of the Festival

The most successful bird festivals generally take place in locations where, during certain seasons, an extraordinary natural event occurs, attracting a great number of observers and people interested in nature. Usually this consists of an enormous gathering of birds during the migration season in the spring or fall. Some examples are the migration of the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and the spawning of the horseshoe crab in the Delaware Bay, or the migration of the Sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*) through the Rowe Sanctuary, in Kerney, Nebraska.

There are also bird festivals focusing on the diversity of species during the reproductive season rather than a gathering phenomenon. A good example is the TOH Festival that takes place annually in the State of Yucatán, Mexico, where archaeology, culture, and gastronomy converge with bird observation tours involving local communities.

Define the primary focus of your bird festival and choose the best season to offer a unique and special experience.

A Local Support Base: The Festival Committee

As is the case with any event, the creation of a bird festival requires a committed group of individuals and institutions contributing resources and time to plan and coordinate activities, attend to visitors and conduct evaluation and follow-up. Generally, committees are established in collaboration with local chambers of commerce that encourage hotel associations, the general tourism industry, and representatives from nature-based businesses to become involved. Other key actors are conservation organizations, which typically involve educators and specialists. The participation of experts is crucial if scheduling lectures and to help ensure the quality of guides. It is also best to involve representatives from museums and interpretive centers, as well as local artists and craftsmen.

Another possibility is to have the festival designed and coordinated by a single institution or ecotourism company, which in turn would form collaborative agreements with various service providers and local organizations.



Identity, Brand and Message

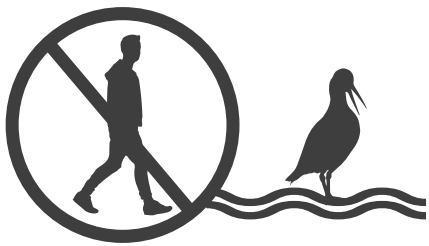
As part of their branding, most bird festivals adopt the name of a species (for example, "Stork Festival"), the host location (such as the "Everglades Bird Festival") or an evocative name (*Río de rapaces* – "River of Raptors", for example). When choosing a name that will attract your target audience, consider your main product (for example, a natural phenomenon or species diversity), the type of experiences on offer (will birds be the main focus or will the festival also encompass other nature-oriented activities?), and whether or not the name of the location is already recognized by tourists outside of the birding community. If your target audience is committed birders, they will respond favourably to

the name of a bird species, but if the audience is broader, consider naming the festival based on other values the site is known for or on the type of experiences you are offering. Once you have decided on your identity and image, maintain it for several years with a view to positioning yourself in ecotourism itineraries. Themes can change each year, injecting new energy into the event each time. However, it is important to maintain the same label in all communications concerning the festival. As in all marketing activities, it may prove very useful to create a focus group of potential festival clients to provide feedback on identity and image.



Festival Size and Capacity

The potential size and capacity of the festival depends on several factors: the natural capacity or space at the site, institutional capacity limits, support available to host visitors, and the capacity of local infrastructure.



With natural capacity, it is important to bear in mind that some sites are unsuitable for large concentrations of people, since this could affect habitat conditions or bird behavior. You must determine limits regarding visits to the site or region, as well as the size and number of groups that may enter the site each day without harming its natural conditions.



The institutional capacity will depend on the human and financial resources available to carry out the festival. Determine the number of work hours required prior to, during, and after the festival, and identify the persons or institutions willing to join in. The festival budget must include the cost of remuneration for key people. Consider additional assistance from volunteers for various supporting activities.



The location's hosting capacity for a festival may appear ideal, but some places with natural attractions might be too remote and isolated for the installation of adequate visitor infrastructure. Verify the region's ability to accommodate festival visitors in terms of lodging and restaurants, including the accommodation offered by private persons (such as bed and breakfast) and short term rentals offered through websites, as well as camping and RV sites.

It is important to examine these issues with the festival committee, as this will inform decisions regarding the scope of the event and the development of a realistic schedule of activities. Always keep in mind that the purpose of the festival is to generate social, environmental and economic benefits for the location.

Design the Program

The program is key to the festival's success. When a festival's capacity is limited and only a simple program can be offered, scheduling a variety of parallel activities can help provide entertainment for all visitors while avoiding overcrowding at the observation sites. Once you have tested and evaluated the activities and you have gained a good understanding of the demand, the festival program may be adapted from year to year.



Bird Observation

The main activities of birding festivals are guided observation visits to predetermined sites. These take place in the early morning (during the three hours after sunrise), in the afternoon (before dusk), or in the case of coastal areas, according to the tides.

These birdwatching visits may take place at specific sighting spots, such as observation decks for watching shorebirds; bird blinds specifically created for taking photos whilst minimizing the risk of disturbing birds; nature trails for hiking; or waterways for canoe tours. The festival program must be designed to avoid saturating the places visited. Furthermore, the tours should be divided according to the skill level of participants; with the most specialized guides assigned to the knowledgeable bird tourists, and more accessible tours for beginners or families with children. The duration of the activities will depend on the activity's specific goal. Each activity should have a specific schedule and route map, depending on whether the visit has been organized for nature photography, observing an endemic or elusive species, or appreciating a natural phenomenon.

Lectures and Exhibitions

Bird festivals are often enhanced by lectures and exhibitions relating to birds, the region, or site conservation efforts. Having identified its main audience and the type of birder that will participate in the festival, the committee can determine the level of expertise of guest lecturers and the type of presentation they will offer. Bear in mind that not all participants are experts, and if you aim to invite

renowned scientists or conservationists as guest lecturers, make sure to involve local universities. Exhibitions can be organized as educational, historical, or cultural displays about birds. Local museums and interpretation centers may oversee the creation of temporary exhibits. The planning committee should determine the approach and central themes.



Courses

Some successful bird festivals (such as New Jersey Audubon's spring and fall festivals) offer courses for an additional fee. These courses aim to teach a variety of skills and may be offered before, during, or after the festival. Examples include how to observe and identify birds in their different habitats; photography; outdoor painting; canoeing; and even languages.

Activities for Children and Families

Workshops and activities for children are another common feature of bird festivals. They may include arts and crafts, games, theatre puppet shows, and storytelling. For many families, it is very important to have play areas where children can learn and have fun.

Handicrafts and Art Markets

Festival organizers may wish to organize handicraft and art exhibits offering items at a wide range of prices that target a variety of customers. Generally, festival goers are interested in purchasing pieces that are highly representative of the region and the unique experience it offers. Product authenticity and originality are of paramount importance to attract attention and ensure sales.

Entertainment

In the afternoons and evenings, organizers can schedule social and entertaining activities, such as live music or movies. The festival program can indicate venues where visitors may find other evening entertainment.





Gastronomy

As part of the festival program, a local restaurant could offer a dish evoking the festival theme or a discount for event participants. Most festivals promote restaurants that offer traditional and local cuisine. Local wine or beer tasting sessions can also be organized.

Cultural Tours

In some locations, it is possible to combine bird observation tours with archaeological or cultural heritage tours or with experiences in wilderness areas managed by indigenous communities. Including these tours as part of a festival helps meet the diverse interests of families, travel groups, and bird tourists.

Special Events

Special events with an additional cost can be organized as part of a bird festival program. Examples include a gala dinner; a raffle for birdwatching equipment; or a photography or art auction. Special events may be used to raise funds for conservation projects or for the organization of the festival itself. Depending on available resources, these events may take place in museums, historical sites or aboard boats.

Post-festival Stays

Organizers can also schedule some activities to take place before or after the festival for a limited number of persons, at an additional fee. This option offers a broader experience to festival-goers who have invested in traveling to the location and have the time and resources to extend their visit. In such cases, it is essential to supplement and broaden the scope of activities originally included in the festival, whether through visits to more remote areas, tours of other habitats with different kinds of birds, or stays in other natural areas.



Festival Souvenirs and Merchandise

Another source of income is the sale of items that represent the festival or that bear an associated image. If the organization has an adequate budget, it could invest in items such as t-shirts, hats and other field apparel, mugs, notebooks, printed guides, pins, stickers, etc.

A Realistic Budget

Once the festival capacity limit has been determined, the committee has been formed, and the main activities have been defined, a financial analysis must be made, to consider all costs and to estimate earnings, and allow adjustments to be made to the program and the festival's scope. Some committees and organizers prefer to strictly adhere to a general budget to avoid incurring additional expenses. Whatever the strategy, it is always important to identify costs and possible income sources. Bird festival costs may include fees for venue rental, the remuneration of supporting staff and observation guides, transportation and promotion expenses, as well as the remuneration of professionals (and in some cases allowances for volunteers) for the

time they devote to the festival. Possible earnings, apart from the event registration fee, include fees for courses and special events, proceeds from the sale of festival items, auction revenues, and donations. In turn, the local economy will benefit from higher business, hotel and restaurant earnings, as well as the increased use of transportation and greater car rental demand.

Make the necessary adjustments to ensure that the cost, number of participants, and resulting income strike a positive balance to avoid any negative impact on the experience or, even worse, on the site and its natural resources.

Identify Local Constraints

As part of event planning, identify the potential challenges that could affect the quality of the ecotourism experience, such as the condition of roads, paths, and highways; the lack of parking lots; the quality and availability of drinking water; the placement of public toilets; the number of vehicles available to transport visitors; the availability of equipment (binoculars, telescopes and bird guides) for use, rent or sale; the transportation of lecturers, etc. If the festival offers the region the opportunity for economic development, it might be possible to seek contributions from the government or the private sector to finance infrastructure improvements.

It is important to note that if the festival has a modest budget and it is not possible to resolve the constraints mentioned above, the information to visitors should indicate the conditions expected during their visit; this will allow participants to have realistic expectations from the beginning.



Involve the Community and Local Businesses

When planning festival activities, it is a good idea to ask local businesses and companies that may make investments in the region to be sponsors of the event. This way, you may obtain special discounts and offers for participants, or donations that may cover part of the costs.

It is important that festival information material is made visible in key spots around the location by placing notices and signs in business establishments

and public places. Furthermore, festival information should be sent to local media, including radio stations, in order to inform the local community.

It is also important to engage the support of volunteers, both during preparatory activities and the festival itself. The contribution of volunteers is an excellent way to get the community involved in an active and concrete fashion. Organizers should consider the participation of volunteers of various ages, ideally with good availability.

Promote the Festival

Promoting and marketing the festival are key elements in the event's success. This activity must be carried out months ahead, and intensify as the event date approaches. If possible, set up a web page specific to the festival, which would include all pertinent information: program updates, special activities, registration forms and online payment, sponsors, participants, and so on. Create incentives to ensure high registration, such as offering early bird or group discounts.

There are many specialized magazines and publications (printed and digital) with a broad base of birdwatching subscribers. Investing in advertising in these magazines may help ensure the festival's success. *Birding*, *Bird Watching* and *Bird Watcher Digest* magazines are examples of publications through which you can reach the US market.

Another good option is submitting the festival's information to administrators of websites or web pages, such as those of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the Nature

Travel Network, or *Bird Watcher Digest* in the United States, or Conabio's *aVerAves* site, in Mexico.

It is also recommended to use social networks (such as a Facebook page, or Instagram or X accounts), where targeted advertising may promote the festival. Try to create messages with videos of the site and birdwatcher testimonials.

To broaden your outreach, you could also contact specialized bird websites.

With your target audience in mind, contact local media (press and radio), write press releases, and organize press briefings with a view to promoting the festival's program of activities and other subjects of interest (relevant information on the species, conservation, etc.).



Manage Risks and Visitor Safety

Assess the potential risks to the health and safety of the festival attendees, and take basic precautionary measures. Include potential risks in the festival's information package, such as slippery paths or special environmental conditions (poisonous plants and animals, mosquitoes, torrential rain or extreme temperatures). Create a liability release form to be signed by all attendees, protecting organizers from responsibility in connection with accidents or thefts. Train your volunteer team and staff to assist in emergencies and establish a clear command and control structure. Inform the local services, such as fire and police, about the festival activities in advance, to help ensure their prompt response if needed. Supply all visitor transportation vehicles and the festival's main coordination center with first-aid kits. It is also important that the information package contain emergency contacts, including the names and phone numbers of local hospitals and physicians.

Environmental Practices

It is essential for a bird festival to include a strong and consistent stewardship message to protect the environment. The festival should include practices that are environmentally sound. For example, an app with the festival's general information, the program, and a species checklist, will avoid the use of paper, demonstrating a good sustainability practice.

Communicate the practice of "leave no trace" to the participants and actively seek ways to prevent visitor impact on the natural sites and the entire area. Other sustainability practices that could be included are promotion of the use of reusable bottles for water, avoidance of the use of disposable dishes and cutlery, and facilitation of opportunities for shared transportation. In your list of recommendations,

promote environmentally friendly establishments that procure local products and practice environmental sustainability. In addition, you can offer opportunities for participants to mitigate their carbon footprint by means of an emissions calculator that can be included in the registration cost.

Finally, the end of the festival should include the clean up of beaches and camp sites, either as part of festival activities or with the help of volunteers.



Reduce Visitor Impact

Inform ecotourists of their possible impacts on bird habitat and behaviour. If necessary, restrict visitor access to sensitive areas by placing signposts and markers, or

even by temporarily fencing them off. Limit the number of festival sponsored field trips to the same site.

Assessment and Feedback

It is important to solicit feedback from festival attendees through entry and exit questionnaires. Satisfaction questionnaires relating to the experience can help improve the scheduling of activities or in addressing details overlooked in initial planning. These surveys must be brief and can be done on site with the support of volunteers or made available to participants through electronic media.

To assess the festival's impact on the community, it is also important to monitor the economic benefits generated at the location. Consider creating a form to collect this information from local businesses (see Brochure #7 for more information).

Festival Checklist

Committee



- ✔ Form a diverse festival committee.
- ✔ Establish the rules governing the committee.
- ✔ Appoint a committee coordinator.
- ✔ Assign specific responsibilities and duties to sub-committees (such as marketing, scientific program, volunteers, sponsorship management and financing).
- ✔ Schedule committee meetings at least six months in advance.



FREEDOMBIRD
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Program

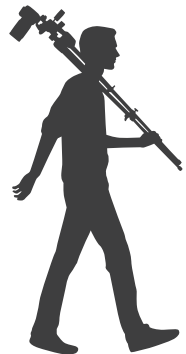
- ✔ Establish festival capacity and size (estimate the ideal number of participants).
- ✔ Create a brand and a special identity for your festival.
- ✔ Draft general program agenda.
- ✔ Prepare a budget forecast (earnings and expenses) and discuss it with the committee.

Logistics and Sponsorship Management



- ✔ Identify required logistic support.
- ✔ Identify venues for activities.
- ✔ Identify sites to be used and organize resources for logistics (transportation, waste handling services, public toilets, water supply on the sites, refurbishment of paths, etc.). Identify and
- ✔ contact potential festival sponsors.
- ✔ Create agreements with service providers.
- ✔ Manage necessary permits with local and natural area authorities.

Activity Organization



- ✔ Recruit a group of volunteers and train them.
- ✔ Confirm participation of guest lecturers.
- ✔ Confirm and book the venues needed for public and special events.
- ✔ Organize the observation visits and ensure the availability of specialized guides.
- ✔ Plan post-festival activities (courses or bird sighting excursions to other sites in the region).
- ✔ Coordinate participation in festival activities with local businesses.
- ✔ Coordinate with other supporting sectors, whether cultural or artistic, as well as social organizations not represented within the committee.
- ✔ Finalize the program and maintain agenda on website and festival app as changes occur.



Promotion and Marketing

- ✔ Place announcements in specialized magazines at least four months in advance.
- ✔ Prepare promotional and marketing material (short videos, web page, Facebook page).
- ✔ Add a web page to register participants and receive online payments.
- ✔ Post promotional material on social networks and send announcements to specific recipients.
- ✔ Prepare information material for participants.
- ✔ Design the festival's promotional material and souvenirs: tee-shirts, hats, bags, etc.
- ✔ Coordinate participation with guest artists, craftsmen and other local creators.
- ✔ If feasible, develop an app featuring the bird list, the program, and relevant logistical information.



Safety and Risk Prevention

- ✔ Hold meetings with police, fire, and other emergency services to make them aware of the event.
- ✔ Ensure the availability of first-aid kits in vehicles and other places serving visitors.
- ✔ Create waiver forms to release organizers from liability for accidents or other incidents.
- ✔ Ensure that drinking water is available on the sites of the activities.



Mitigation of Environmental Impacts

- ✔ Anticipate potential environmental impacts and offer information sessions to show participants how they can respect the area and limit their impact.
- ✔ Prepare information on the practices expected from festival participants.



Evaluation

- ✔ Prepare surveys on the satisfaction of the ecotourists, and train volunteers to conduct the surveys during and after the festival.
- ✔ Prepare questionnaires to track the economic benefits for local businesses.
- ✔ Schedule meetings with your committee, both during and after the festival, to assess the event's social and economic benefits.



Ecotourism Series

1	Planning an Ecotourism Initiative	2	Marketing Ecotourism for Wildlife and Bird Watching	3	Community and Stakeholder Engagement in Ecotourism	4	Interpretation at Coastal Bird Sites
5	Cultural Values in Ecotourism	6	Birding Festivals as Ecotourism Experiences	7	Monitoring and Evaluation of Ecotourism Initiatives at Coastal Bird Sites	8	Bird-related Ecotourism Case Studies

About this Work



The Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) project "Conserving Shorebirds through Community Engagement" aimed to build capacity in communities along North American migration routes to conserve habitat and develop ecotourism linked to bird migration cycles. Bird-related ecotourism can be a significant source of additional income for local economies, and can incentivize communities to sustain conservation efforts. To this end, the project supported the development of education and outreach materials and training to improve knowledge, increase local support and strengthen the capacity of communities to deliver bird-related ecotourism activities such as bird watching, habitat conservation, and celebratory events. For more information visit: www.cec.org

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2. Kim, Scott, Thigpen and Kim. 1998. Economic Impact of a Birding Festival. *Festival Management and Event Tourism*, vol. 5: 51-58; Measells and Grado. 2010. Economic Impacts of Two Birding Festivals in Mississippi. *Global Change and Forestry: Economic and Policy Impacts and Responses* (Mississippi State University).

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