

BIRD-RELATED ECOTOURISM CASE STUDIES

Series of training resources for bird-related tourism

Introduction

Birdwatchers have been identified as a growing segment of the global ecotourism market. In the United States and Canada, millions of people engage in birdwatching, from the casual observers to the extreme “twitchers”. They may observe birds locally, or travel by car or plane to areas known for wildlife viewing (see Brochure #2 on Marketing Ecotourism for Wildlife and Bird Watching).

To cater to this segment of ecotourists, bird-centered festivals and fairs have cropped up across North America, with over 175 events registered in 2019.¹ Such offerings can be an important source of income for rural communities located in proximity to high-conservation value areas in North America (see Brochure #6 on Bird Festivals as Ecotourism Experiences).

This brochure presents a review of the lessons learned in two case studies where bird festivals and bird tourism have promoted greater local interest and have been relevant for generating economic and social benefits,

as well as for garnering attention to the conservation of important sites and habitats for migratory shorebirds.

The sites identified for these case studies are the Delaware Bay in New Jersey and the Copper River Delta in Alaska. Both sites are important for the conservation of shorebirds at a hemispheric level and are examples of good practices in designing and coordinating bird festivals and wildlife tourism.

In preparing these studies, interviews were conducted with volunteers, board members, wildlife agencies, and nonprofit organizations, as well as with the Chamber of Commerce in Cordova, Alaska. Testimonials from 10 key informants were collected. The results were complemented with information from festival websites or provided by festival organizers. Other information was obtained from the review of previously published documents and studies and available online reports.

Cordova, Alaska is a remote community, difficult to access and with an economic activity mainly based on fisheries and on the use of natural resources. In the case of Cape May, New Jersey, and of the entire Delaware Bay, tourism is the main activity; the destination is visited annually by thousands of people and offers a variety of accommodation and gastronomy options. Cape May also

has access to a potential market of more than 30 million people living within a 500 km (300-mile) radius.² These cases demonstrate two extremes in terms of geographic and economic context, but offer lessons that can be applied in diverse geographic, social, and economic conditions.

» Cape May, Delaware Bay, New Jersey

Cape May is one of the places with the highest influx of bird watchers in the United States due to its location within one of the most important migratory routes in North America. During the spring and autumn, more than 400 bird species can be observed, including a considerable number of peregrine falcons, merlins, ospreys, and sharp-shinned hawks. In addition, an extraordinary phenomenon takes place during the month of May when the horseshoe crab's spawning season coincides with the migration of shorebirds.

Birdwatching has a long history in Cape May, with hawk counting activities going back to at least 1931.³ In 1976, the Bird Observatory of Cape May, New Jersey, was established as a result of efforts to organize groups of birdwatchers to count bird populations on transit and rest points in the Bay. Pete Dunne, founder of the Observatory, identified the best observation sites for hawks and raptors. In addition, with Roger Tory Peterson he created a unique concept for this time, the World Series of Birding. Taking place in the month of May, it is a contest to count the largest number of species observed within 24 hours. Globally, there are several such bird counting "bird-a-thons", including the Global Big Day.

New Jersey Audubon, a non-profit organization dedicated to conservation, has been a key actor in the institutionalization and local adoption of these activities. In May 2019, the 36th event of the World Series was held, attracting American as well as international observers. Central to the activities are two bird festivals organized annually by New Jersey Audubon: one in the fall (October), and the other in the spring (May). The autumn festival is the longest-running birding festival in the United States, since 1946. The festival began as an informal



The migration of shorebirds on the Atlantic route can bring more than half a million birds per day in the Delaware Bay over a period of less than a week in May. The birds stop over to rest and feed as hundreds of thousands of horseshoe crabs spawn on the beaches. The horseshoe crab's tiny eggs will sustain the shorebirds on their trips to their own breeding areas, when they will complete their 8,000-kilometer (5,000-mile) journey north. The main species of shorebirds that stop over in the Delaware Bay are the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*), the Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*), the Sanderling (*Calidris alba*), and the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*).

gathering and celebration of bird lovers under the umbrella of the organization. Due to the success of the autumn festival, a spring festival was promoted, where all migratory birds can be observed and, notably, the convergence of shorebirds and horseshoe crabs. Besides the birds, other attractions include the migration of butterflies and dragonflies, particularly of the monarch in September.⁴ In 2017, the World Series of Birding and the Cape May Spring and Fall Festivals attracted more than 3,000 visitors.⁵

➤ Economic Impact

Cape May County is the second most important tourism destination in the state of New Jersey, based on direct tourism spending. In 2018, the county received 9.82 million visitors, which generated a revenue of US\$6.6 billion as well as tax revenue of US\$554 million. Tourism directly employed over 26,000 people.⁶

Nature-based activities, and birding in particular, are major attractions for visitors and are estimated to contribute significantly to tourism growth in the “shoulder” season (spring and fall). Nature-based tourism generates nearly \$600 million annually, accounting for approximately 9% of total tourism spending; more than half of this amount (68%) comes from birding and wildlife watching activities. Additionally, a 2018 survey conducted by the Cape May County Tourism Department found that 17.5% of visitors had engaged in nature-based activities and 16.2% in birding specifically.⁷

Annual Ecotourism Spending in Cape May County	US\$600 million spending in nature-based activities	US\$408 million spending in birding and wildlife watching
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For example, the arrival of migratory birds, especially during the spawning of horseshoe crabs, has a significant impact on the economy, since it has generated events, festivals and activities that attract visitors to the Delaware Bay, and that diversify regional recreational activities.

Examples of Birding Events in the Delaware Bay Area

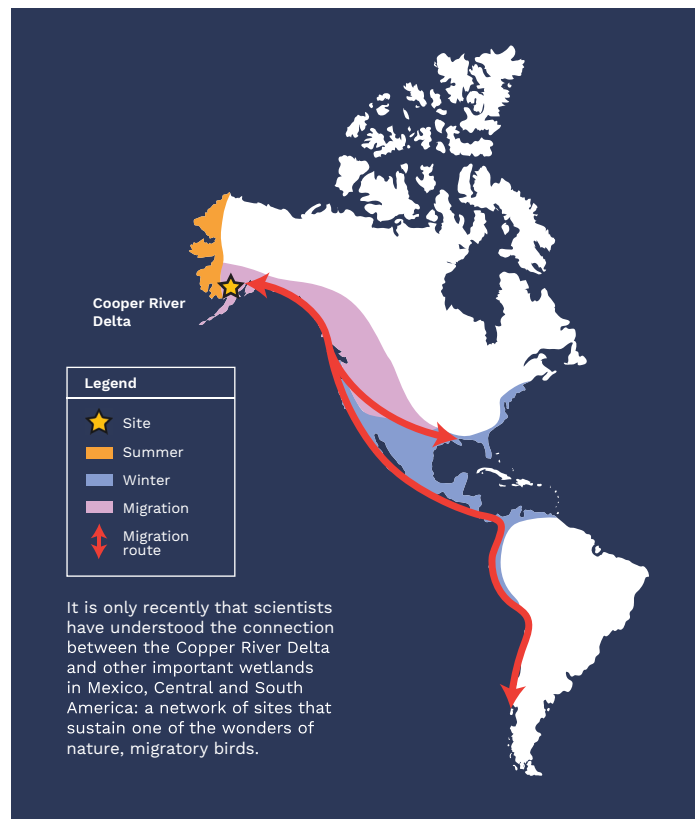
Festival	Organizer	Month	Location
Winter Eagle Festival	Several partners	February	Cumberland County
Horseshoe Crab and Shorebird Festival	Milton Chamber of Commerce, Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge	February	Milton
Annual Spring Shorebird and Horseshoe Crab Festival	Wetlands Institute	May	Cape May
Cape May Spring Festival	New Jersey Audubon	May	Cape May
Peace, Love and Horseshoe Crab Festival	DuPont Center	May-June	Milford
Purple Martin Migration Spectacular	Several partners	August	Cumberland County
Cape May Fall Festival	New Jersey Audubon	October	Cape May



» Cordova, Copper River Delta, Alaska

Alaska is an important destination for wildlife viewing and outdoor recreation activities. In 2016, approximately 45% of visitors to Alaska engaged in wildlife viewing and 34% in hiking/nature walks. The state received a total of 1.8 million visitors, who spent approximately US\$2 billion in the summer season alone, excluding the cost of transportation to and from Alaska.⁸

Cordova is a community located in the Southcentral region of Alaska, near the mouth of the Copper River. The Copper River Delta is known for offering essential habitat for wildlife and welcoming the largest gathering of shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere during the spring migration season. It is no surprise that the delta is ranked by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game as one of the state's top ten birding hotspots, along with world-famous wildlife destinations such as Denali National Park, Kenai Fjords National Park, and Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge.⁹ However, Cordova, with its population of 2,300, receives less than 1% of all visitors to Alaska, amounting to an estimated 9,000 visitors in 2016.¹⁰ A partial explanation can be found in the town's remote location: no roads connect Cordova to other Alaskan towns and visitor must therefore rely on transportation by air or ferry. Compared to Delaware Bay, the context in which the Copper River



Delta Shorebird Festival takes place is very different; given the difficulty to access the site and the distance, it implies a greater investment of time and resources for visitors.

The Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival

The Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival was the first of its kind to be established in Alaska and has been held every year during the first days of May, since 1990. The festival was established as a serious economic endeavour following the environmental impact caused by the Exxon Valdez oil spill that affected an important part of Alaska. Festival founder Sandy Frost, an environmental education specialist from the U.S. Forest Service, came to the site during the environmental crisis. Fishing, oyster farming, the culture, and the entire society had been disrupted and the main economic activities were impaired by pollution. At the same time as the disaster was being managed, the great importance of the site for the conservation of shorebirds was acknowledged in 1990, when it was established as a Site of Hemispheric Importance as part of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Thus, the same year a small group of people met in the local chamber of commerce with the

U.S. Forest Service to discuss ways to help the community overcome the economic and environmental crisis. The idea was to generate a feeling of local pride and to inform the local population, visitors and birdwatchers of the great value the site has for more than one million shorebirds that arrive there annually.

The basis of its success was on the certainty of the migration cycles and the possibility of predicting the arrival of shorebirds in Cordova each year. Frost's goal was for Cordova to be known not only for its fisheries, but also for its importance to shorebirds. This festival was the first in Alaska and it influenced the creation of other festivals in the region and in the United States. In the beginning, participants were mainly ornithologists, scientists, and students. However, over the years, the profile of the visitors has diversified.



For tourists, the appeal of Cordova was also enhanced by distance-education programs created by the U.S. Forest Service, including programs to promote links between important sites during the migration of shorebirds.¹¹ Once the festival was established in the community, it was able to expand its reach every year. Annually, the festival draws between 200 to 300 people, of which at least 50 travel to Cordova from other US states to participate in the event.

There are no specific data on the contribution of bird tourism to the economy in Cordova since, unlike Cape May, the locality is not a tourist destination; or rather, its economy is based on fisheries. In this sense, the bird festival is a relevant activity that generates local income that complements and stimulates tourism services before the start of the summer, but it does not have a substantive role in the overall economy.

The Cordova Chamber of Commerce coordinates the festival with the institutional and financial backing of the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, there is a local committee with a diversity of members, including guides, scientists, representatives of the fishing community, hoteliers, and artists. In 2016, a survey was conducted in the community to learn more about the situation of local businesses, by analyzing the relative impact of activities and events perceived by the establishments. Ninety-six percent of businesses reported positive impacts from the festivals (including the shorebird festival).

In addition, some tour operators of small cruise ships are developing wildlife photography packages in the spring, which include a visit to Cordova for shorebird photography. Some of these trips cost between US\$3,000 and US\$4,000 per person for five days.

According to 2016 visitor information for the Southcentral region of Alaska, tourists to the area come mostly from Western (39%) and Southern (22%) states. A smaller proportion of visitors come from Canada (3%) or other countries (10%). The average age is over 50 years and there are slightly more women than men (52% vs. 48%), with an average annual income of \$113,000. 64% of visitors have a college degree and 22% have children at home. Thus, visitors to the region tend to be educated and enjoy a certain level of economic security. Tourists spend an average of US\$650 (not including the cost of transportation to Alaska). Average tourist spending varies greatly among the localities, mainly due to the cost of accommodation and food¹².



Other Bird Festivals in Alaska

In the town of Homer (5,000 inhabitants), the Festival of Shorebirds of Kachemak Bay, organized by the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, has also been held in May since 1993. This festival is more accessible than Cordova's, as it is possible to enter the town by car from Anchorage. The typical number of registered visitors is between 900 and 1,000 and the estimated economic benefit to the local economy is US\$500,000.¹³



Lessons Learned

The following elements of success were drawn from both case studies.

1. Institutional continuity

In the case of New Jersey, activities to promote birdwatching and organize festivals have been institutionalized into several entities, from nonprofit organizations, interpretation and science centers, and organizations such as county chambers of commerce. In the case of the Copper River Delta in Cordova, the Chamber of Commerce with the U.S. Forest Service are key promoters of the activity year after year. Festivals are part of these organization's operations, with human and financial resources assigned to them every year. This institutional continuity has kept the events' alive and the memories of past experiences have nourished continued innovation. In both regions there is a great effort to document the activities and evaluate the social and economic impacts.

2. Staff with experience in marketing

Over the years, the technical and scientific staff that organized the events has been replaced by professional staff with experience in event coordination and marketing. In the cases analyzed, both coordinators mentioned not having been fond of bird watching when they started this work, but they are now able to understand what the market needs and add value to the event accordingly. Those who have participated in the local committees also now recognize the value of employing marketing professionals, since they have improved visitor diversity, increased the number of tourists, and promoted the use of visual tools and social networks.

3. Basic scientific knowledge

In both cases, basic scientific knowledge has been key to developing of the tourist experience. The information accumulated over years of field studies has allowed managers to determine in advance the dates in which the greatest abundance of birds is expected on the site, as well

as the best observation points, feeding areas, critical resources in the habitat, and measures to mitigate the impact of tourists on birds.

4. Migratory concentrations are a central attraction

The cases analyzed are located on continental migration routes. The presence of an event such as the concentration of thousands of shorebirds or the passage of thousands of birds of prey is key to the design of a focused bird-watching experience. According to the opinions of those interviewed, a large migration is undoubtedly a product that is easier to promote to interested tourists who are willing to plan their trip in advance. Likewise, this approach ensures a high level of satisfaction and attracts both expert and casual observers, ecotourists in general, as well as nature photographers.

5. Offering a mix of activities

In both cases, positive results were reported from having a diversified agenda of activities, where event attendees can choose from a menu of opportunities according to their level of ability and interest in bird watching. This range of opportunities can include more demanding activities oriented to dedicated and experienced observers, such as walks and bird count competitions. Classes, workshops, and guided visits are examples of activities for beginner bird watchers. Social events, such as dinners on cruises around the bay, music, theater, or dance opportunities can be good activities for people accompanying birders and for non-bird watchers; there should also be activities for children. The selection of speakers is an element that can also reflect the quality of the events and can be decisive in raising the expectations of participants. In 2018, 60% of participants in Cordova reported being casual bird watchers, only 20% identified themselves as dedicated or extreme observers, and 18% said they were non-hobbyists.¹⁴ This illustrates the importance in designing activities that appeal to the different types of birders and ecotourists.



6. Diversifying the offer

Both regions continue to design new activities in their search to improve their offers. For example, in the case of Alaska, the incorporation of activities where local fishermen can share their experience of local livelihoods with the tourist has been a success. Activities catering to nature photographers are increasing as is the pairing of birdwatching with other wildlife observation, or the combination of birding and sport fishing.

7. Agreements with tour operators

For a festival to succeed, it is imperative to have agreements with many tourist services, including airlines, hotels, and cruise operators. Constant communication with local businesses via the chamber of commerce helps organizers to coordinate logistics, recruit volunteers, and increase the participation of local entrepreneurs. In Alaska, businesses place information about the shorebird festival on visible sites and windows, celebrating the arrival of the migration season and generating a sense of pride and local involvement.

8. Budgeting for marketing

In both cases, marketing played an important role. The two most widely used means of promoting activities are: 1) online media, including promotional campaigns paid on Facebook, and 2) the use of specialized magazines

dedicated to bird watchers. Maintaining websites and ensuring their good functioning is essential to good marketing and facilitates the options for reservations and online payments. Promotional videos are the most successful materials to develop. In the case of nonprofit organizations, direct mailing to members is an important strategy.

9. Importance of local and regional tourism

In the cases analyzed, the majority of visitors interested in nature-based activities and wildlife viewing were found to be from the same state or region of the United States. Locals also participate in the festivals hosted in their community.

10. Word of mouth recommendations

In the case of Alaska, according to the exit survey, half of those who attended the 2018 bird festival said they came on a friend's recommendation¹⁵. It appears to be a general rule that bird watching destinations are selected based on information circulated in informal communication networks among people interested in birds.

11. Evaluating satisfaction and economic impact

The practice of asking participants about their level of satisfaction with events glean important information that helps to reorient future activities. Monitoring the impact on the local economy through surveys with local businesses is also useful. This is particularly important in the case of bird-related tourism, to demonstrate the economic revenues generated from conserving migratory bird habitat and the phenomenon of bird congregations.

12. Mitigating the impact on ecosystems

Environmental education is an important component of bird tourism. Locals have a deeper understanding of wildlife than they had 20 years ago thanks in part to festivals, and to their involvement in wildlife-related tourism activities. The awareness of the value of this resource (for the ecological and economic benefits it provides) is one of the keys to promoting local action to protect habitats, such as preventing littering and reducing disturbance to wildlife in natural areas. In the case of Cordova, the festival's organizing committee has decided to put a cap on the number of participants, in order to avoid negative impacts on habitats and wildlife behavior. Likewise, strategies are developed to disperse the groups along the beaches and trails and minimize disturbances in the observation sites. In the case of New Jersey, the restoration of ecosystems in Cumberland County (Lower Cape May) has resulted in an increase in visits by bird watchers with an estimated increase in spending of over US\$200 million per year.¹⁶



»» Conclusions

Bird tourism is a niche market within ecotourism that could have a greater economic, educational, and social impact on the North American continent than it currently does. The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network has a good information base about dozens of potential shorebird congregation sites throughout the continent where bird festivals could be organized to attract expert observers, ecotourists, and nature photographers.

The case studies offer lessons that can be applied in diverse geographic, social, and economic conditions, since they illustrate different situations: tourism and recreation are the main activities in Cape May, which has access to a market of millions of people within a driving radius of 3-4 hours, while Cordova is a fishing community in southern Alaska accessible only by air or sea.

The case studies analyzed show that bird festivals and species counting competitions can be a good way to start promoting these sites. However, a number of resources must be considered, such as a good institutional base, and a local support network through agreements and relationships built over time with local businesses, hotels, and airlines. The economic impact on local businesses is key to achieving continuity in the medium term. Impact monitoring must be part of the activities.

The specialized human capacity and financial resources to promote, organize, manage and market events are very important assets to reach a diversity of stakeholders and offer a quality service. The limits of available infrastructure must be considered when planning logistics and activities, especially in small coastal towns.

It is important to take into account the types of birders attending (extreme, enthusiastic, casual) in order to design activities that can cover the full range of interests. This also applies to nature photographers and ecotourists in general. Since many bird tourists interact in networks, clubs, and associations, among the best ways to promote activities is through word of mouth and social networks. Activities with children and families are key to attracting the local population, as well as giving young travelers the opportunity to experience ecotourism as a family experience.

Anyone interested in starting an ecotourism activity based on bird watching must have access to the best scientific information available, and must mitigate the impact of tourism on local sites. Finally, the continuity of the events has been key to positioning the sites both among the local population, and among the networks and circuits of bird watchers in the region, the country and internationally.





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Ecotourism Series



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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Photographs and images by:

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p.2: Milo Burcham
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