

The North Carolina Birding Trail

Takes Flight



Starting in the coastal plain, the trail will take birdwatchers to natural areas of rural regions throughout the state

By Sidney Cruze

When Stacy Tomas moved from Texas to North Carolina to work for the Cooperative Extension Service, one of the first things she did was to explore our state's coast. While traveling the rural areas of eastern North Carolina, she was amazed by the beauty and the birds she saw. Upon return, she asked her colleagues, "Where's the bird trail?"

"I was surprised there wasn't one," Tomas says. "North Carolina definitely has the resources. People who have grown up here don't always see how special it is, but the state's ecology makes it an environmental gem—the perfect place for a birding trail."

That was nearly three years ago. Today Tomas, who promotes sustainable tourism in North Carolina, is part of a statewide effort to open the first section of the NC Birding Trail. The trail will be developed in stages, and once completed, it will have three regional components: one in the coastal plain, one in the piedmont and one in the mountains. The first loop, the coastal plain, should be open this summer and completed by the end of 2006.

Unlike a typical trail that winds its way across a forest floor, the NC Birding Trail will be a driving route that connects bird-watching sites. The goal is to have at least one site in each of the state's 100 counties. Because most potential sites are already established and open to the public, the Trail will require little in the way of new infrastructure, making it a new but low-cost tourist attraction.

It's a model that is gaining popularity across the country. Already more than three dozen states have at least one birding trail. Perhaps the oldest and most successful is in Texas. Almost 2,110 miles long, the Great Texas Birding Trail connects 300 wildlife-viewing sites in 40 counties along the Texas

Gulf Coast and the Rio Grande Valley. Since it was founded in the early 1980s, the trail has put people in touch with nature, promoted wildlife habitat conservation and boosted local commerce.

Birders tend to travel far from home to see birds during the spring and fall, a time that's considered off-season in most of our coastal communities. Economic impact studies reveal that those who visit the Texas Trail spend about \$78 per day while traveling, with an average trip lasting seven or eight days. North Carolina is located along the Atlantic Flyway—the bird migration route that extends from the Atlantic Coast west toward Ohio—making it a popular destination for birders from around the world. The coastal plain section of the NC Birding Trail promises to attract these birders to eastern North Carolina, bringing valuable dollars to a rural region that is rich in natural resources, yet economically distressed in some areas.

Initial plans for a state bird trail started seven years ago, but sputtered to a halt due to a lack of funding. Tomas revived the idea in 2003 and pulled together a steering committee that includes representatives from six organizations: the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Audubon NC, NC Sea Grant, NC Cooperative Extension, NC State Parks, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Thanks to volunteer Lena Gallitano, a long-time birder and past president of the Wake Audubon Society, the project gained momentum. Under her leadership, the steering committee developed a strategic plan, a mission statement and a Web site (www.ncbirdingtrail.org). "She's the angel of the bird trail," Tomas says. "We couldn't pay her enough for what she's done."

Above: Tundra swans in winter at Lake Mattamuskeet, Hyde County.

Benefits for rural regions

Gallitano also served as the project's public face; she promoted the concept to communities like Plymouth that stand to benefit from it. In the late 1990s, after watching many of the local manufacturing jobs disappear, people in this small Washington County town decided to focus on nature-based tourism as an economic development tool.

"As one of the most financially stressed counties in the state, we knew we didn't have a lot of money to invest in the infrastructure that would attract industry," Mayor Brian Roth says. "At the same time, we realized the nearby Roanoke River is a huge draw for tourists."

Roth was looking for ways to promote Plymouth's natural assets when he met Gallitano at the first public Birding Trail meeting. "She unveiled plans for the Trail and I thought, 'Here's a parallel effort. How can we make them come together?'"

The Plymouth Town Council passed a letter of support for the Birding Trail last fall. "We're committed to promoting it any way we can," Roth says. "We have nice hotels and restaurants here, so we're well suited to take advantage of all the Trail offers. Ecotourism doesn't require a lot of infrastructure, it just takes marketing."

As an organization, the NC Birding Trail has raised funds from the NC Department of Commerce, the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation and the GoldenLEAF Foundation to promote the Trail. Salinda Daley, the Trail's first full-time staff member, will coordinate these outreach efforts, while local communities and state agencies work together to make sure people can find and enjoy the Trail. The Commerce Department will advertise it on its Web site www.visitnc.com and place maps in visitors' information centers across the state. Communities will highlight local attractions like museums, art galleries and restaurants and prepare for tourist traffic.

"Tourism is the key to the Trail's success," Tomas says. "Without it, there's no chance for economic development, and no reason for communities to support the trail."

As the state's second largest industry, tourism attracted more than 49 million people to North Carolina in 2003, making it the sixth most visited state in the country. Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel business, and North Carolina, with its varied topography, is in the perfect position to capitalize on it.


"I don't think people realize how good it is," says Simon Thompson, the owner of Ventures Birding Tours, a Skyland-based company that leads birding and wildlife tours in locations worldwide. "North Carolina has the highest peaks on the east coast as well as the coastal swamps. Such a wide range of habitat is unusual in a state."

Conservation-minded folks will be pleased to learn that the Trail's success is likely to foster protection of this environmental wealth. "Our theory is that if you bring tourists to these rural areas, the local residents will see that their natural resources have an economic value and take steps to protect them," Gallitano says. The NC Birding Trail hopes to also

encourage environmental education in these areas by connecting educators to wildlife and bird-focused teaching resources.

"Our mission is to promote three aspects of the trail that are interrelated: sustainable bird watching, economic opportunity and conservation education," Gallitano says.

With more than 60 sites already selected in the coastal plain east of Interstate 95 and 40 more sites awaiting review, the coastal plain component of the Trail is taking shape. All of the sites offer access to birds and other wildlife as well as local attractions. Some of them, like Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge in Dare County, the Palmetto-Peartree Preserve in Tyrrell County, and Hammocks Beach State Park in Onslow County, are well-known birding destinations. But others, such as the Stewart Parkway River Walk in Washington County and the Cashie Wetlands Walk in Bertie County, are examples of our state's hidden treasures, easy-to-reach places where you can explore our coastal habitat and see the birds that live there.

"What's amazed me is that a lot of small towns have great birding sites," Gallitano says. "But chances are, if you don't live nearby, you don't know about them. The North Carolina Birding Trail will help you find them." 

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Top: The dunlin is a regular visitor on North Carolina's coast.

Above: Snow geese winter at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and the surrounding region. (Photos by Nate Bacheler)