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Birding Trends¹

A Research Brief in the IRIS Series²

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² The Internet Research Information Series (**IRIS**) is an internet accessible science report series covering outdoor recreation statistics, the National Kids Survey, natural lands research, and other human-dimension and demographics research related to natural resources.

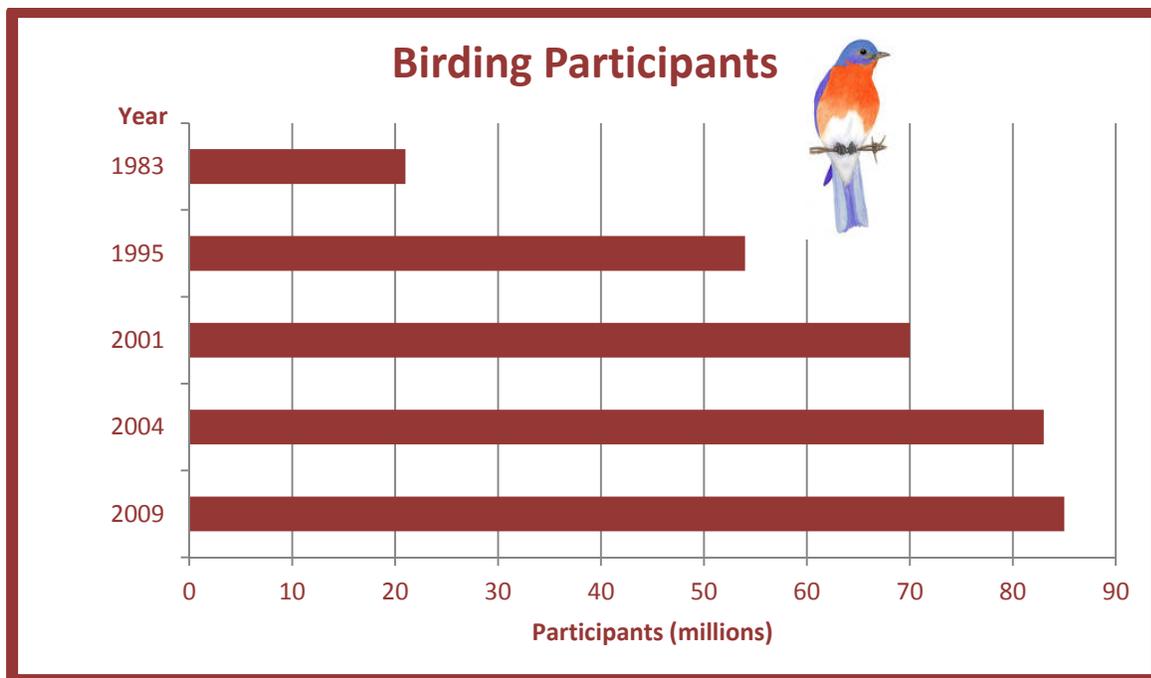
Birding Trends



Public Participation in Birding

In October, 2011, a film, *The Big Year*, opened to tell a story about 3 men looking to set a new record for seeing or hearing as many bird species as possible in a single calendar year. Kenny, Stu and Brad travelled the country competing to be *the* one to set a new record for the most species by one person, ever. This film underscores the unfolding story of growth in birding (bird watching mostly) in the U.S., and elsewhere.

In a Cover Story in *Birding Business* (February, 2006, pages 16 – 21), we gave results from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment that highlighted the significance of this growth phenomenon. Reported were results from an earlier survey that estimated there to be 21 million birding participants in the U. S. in 1983. By 1995, new surveying indicated the number of participants had grown to 54 million. By 2001, the estimated number was 70 million. By 2004, the number had reached 83 million. Although growth continues, it appears to be slowing, reaching nearly 85 million participants by 2009.



Clipart from <http://www.fotosearch.com/clip-art/songbird.html>.

Interest in birding cuts across the demographics of the U.S. population. It is not just one group that is involved—there is broad participation. Birding 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.

Forecasts of Future Participation

In research just published last year (Bowker et al 2012), birding was forecast to continue growth. Projected number of people 16 or older in the U. S. expected to participate in birding increases between 4 and 8 percent over the next 50 years to more than 36 percent, or 117 to 150 million people by 2060. This range of projected growth reflects testing for the possible effects of climate, income and population change scenarios over the next 50 years. The number of times (days) per year each person participates is projected to decline between 1 and 7 percent, which is a decline of about 4 days per participant. Given that adult birders average nearly 98 times per year, an annual decline of 4 days does not have much of an effect on the annual total days of birding. The rise in number of participants of between 37 and 71 percent by 2060 is enough to override this decline in days per year.

To put these projections into perspective, the 2012 recreation projections showed the greatest anticipated increase in participants from 2008 to 2060 to be developed site use (112 to 116 million), nature viewing (112 to 114 million), interpretive site use (104 to 106 million), and swimming (99 million). Those are the four most popular activities we examined. Activities with participant increases of at least 40 million include day hiking (50 to 55 million), birding (47 to 53 million), primitive area use (42 to 47 million), and motorized boating (35 to 40 million).

Averaged over all futures scenarios and climate alternatives, the five activities for which days of participation increase the most over the next 50 years are nature viewing (13,597 to 14,635 million days), swimming (2,298 to 2,446 million days), hiking (1,366 to 1,470 million days), developed site use (1,185 to 1,294 million days), and birding (3,764 to 4,859 million days).



References

Bowker, J.M.; Askew, Ashley E.; Cordell, H. Ken; Betz, Carter J.; Zarnoch, Stanley J.; Seymour, Lynne. 2012. Outdoor recreation participation in the United States - projections to 2060. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report, http://www.srs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs160.pdf

Cordell, H. Ken. 2012. Outdoor recreation trends and futures. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report, http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs150.pdf