The Popularity of Birding Is Still Growing

H. Ken Cordell* and Nancy G. Herbert†

What are the "field marks" of the entry-level birder of the past few years?

She is probably between 40 and 59 years old and is white. She puts in about 10 birding days or fewer per year, trying to squeeze birding into a busy life, although she also finds herself engaged in related activities: walking for pleasure, attending family outdoor gatherings, and visiting nature centers. This female birder lives in the South in a suburban area, has a modest-to-middle-income standard of living ($15,000–$50,000), and may not have a college degree.

This profile and the data that document the recent growth in birding come from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). They address only birding that takes place when the participant purposely goes outside or takes a trip away from home for birding and other recreation pursuits.

How times have changed! In the late 1800s, birds seemed to be the interest of a relative few. Early ornithologists, hobbyist egg-collectors, artists, and field naturalists made up most of the American bird enthusiasts in those years. It was not until the early 1900s that bird clubs came into being, many of them organized by like-minded nature lovers in Eastern cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The field was still dominated by Yankee gentlemen. With the publication of Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Birds* in 1934, there emerged a new burst in birding interest. The guide provided an essential system for identifying key markings of the many different bird species. After World War II, binoculars became more available to the average American, and interest in the activity continued. Further advancements in books, equipment, and the social aspects of birding over the past 50 years have led to an explosive growth in interest in birding that we revisit in this article.

Recent growth in interest in birding (Cordell, Herbert, and Pandolfi, 1999) is evident in a number of ways. Consider, for example, that more than 500,000 copies of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* have been printed since the book was released in October 2000. This guide has become the fastest-selling bird-book ever. As well, birding festivals are popping up all over the continent. In the early 1990s there were only a dozen or so birding festivals around the U.S.; now there are about 200 in the U.S. and Canada. Serious birding trails are being developed, following the successful example set in Texas. In short, communities from Fort Myers, Florida, to Nome, Alaska, are exploring sophisticated ways to attract birders to their towns. The communities know that birders spend money on transportation, hotels, restaurants, local guides, and souvenirs; and while this means that the birders take memories home, it also means that they leave behind income for local businesses.

Birding also has been assuming a different role than in the past, that of catalyst for ecotourism. A recent conference in Essex County, Massachusetts, is a case in point. It brought together experts from local communities, state and federal agencies, resorts, and parks to explore the issue of how to combine wetland conservation and birding opportunities for both economic and ecologic gains. This workshop on "Wetlands, Migratory Birds, and Ecotourism" celebrated recent

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successes and explored ways to highlight the economic benefits associated with ecotourism, especially in more rural areas searching for ways to share in the U.S. economy. This connection between birding, the future of our environment, and continued responsible economic growth is sure to wax stronger as more birders become active in environmental issues, locally and globally.

NSRE

To keep track of the growing interest in outdoor activities, every five to ten years our research group in Athens, Georgia, along with several federal agencies, professional associations, and private organizations, works to survey the recreational interests of Americans. One of the recreational interests which we survey is birding. The most recent of these national studies indicates that almost 97 percent of people 16 years old or older participate in some form of outdoor recreation sometime during the year. The study shows that 33 percent of Americans, fully one-third of all who are 16 or older in this country, participated at least at a mild level in outdoor birding at least once in the last year. Using our most recent survey, covering 2000 and 2001, and comparing its results with results from previous surveys, let us see how birding has been changing over the long term, as well as more recently.

We last reported on American's interest and participation in birding in the April 1999 issue of *Birding*. Just like that last report, we cover in this article trends in participation across the country, who is out there birding, and who is responsible for most of the growth in birding as an outdoor activity. Our primary source of data is the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) (Cordell et al., in press). The most recent application of NSRE as a survey of the country's population of people 16 years or older ran through 2000 and continues in 2001 with a goal of interviewing 50,000. In our survey, we address only birding that takes place when the participant purposely goes outside or takes a trip away from home for birding and other recreational pursuits.

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National Growth Trend for Birding

By comparing our recent survey results with those from the 1983 survey, we discovered that participation in many of Americans' outdoor activities, especially birding, has been growing much faster than the population in the 18 years since that earlier survey. To learn how rapidly population has been growing, we looked at the most recent three of the United States' population censuses. From 1980 to 1990, population grew almost 10 percent, reaching about 248 million at the end of that decade. From January 1990 to mid-2001, the resident population grew even more, going from around 248 to its current level of almost 285 million—an increase of nearly 37 million in just over 11 years. Combined with growing incomes, greater interest in the out-of-doors, and other growth factors, population growth has added tremendously to the numbers of people participating in outdoor recreation activities. The five fastest-growing activities in the country, in order by rate of growth since 1983, are birding, hiking, backpacking, snowmobiling, and walking. The number of people birding in 2001 grew 232 percent above the number involved in birding in 1983.

Measured in millions of persons reporting participation, the eight most popular activities currently are walking for pleasure (number one and attracting almost 85 percent of people 16 or older), attending family gatherings out-of-doors (74 percent), visiting nature centers (59 percent), picnicking (57 percent), viewing and photographing natural scenery (55 percent), sightseeing (54 percent), driving for pleasure (54 percent), visiting historic sites (49 percent), and swimming (44 percent). By "most popular", we mean the activities that involve the largest percentage of people 16 or older.

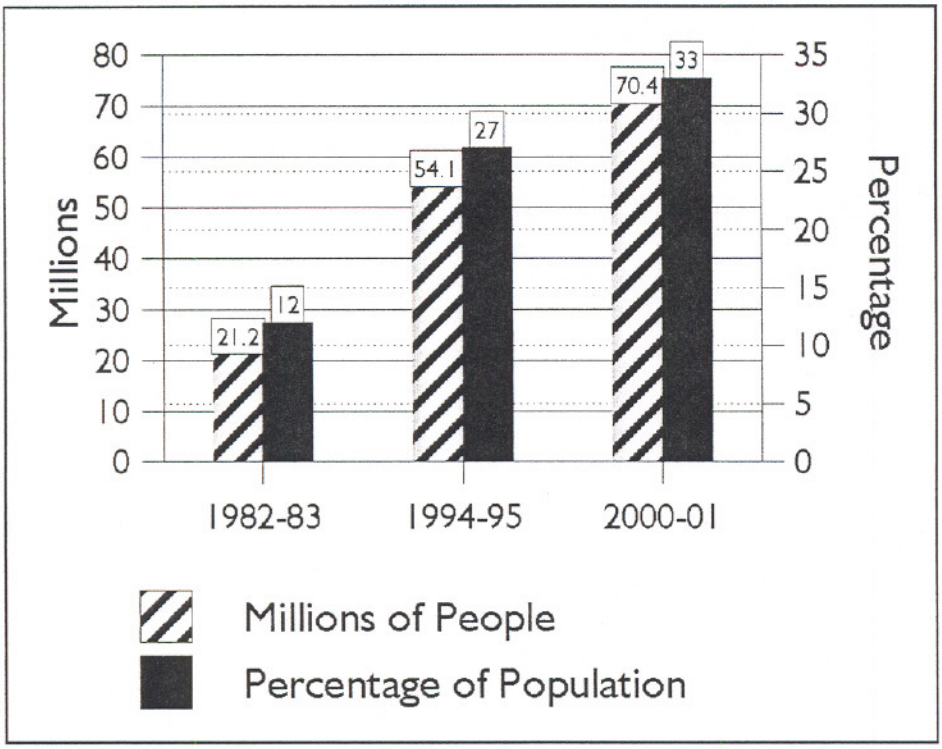

Figure 1.

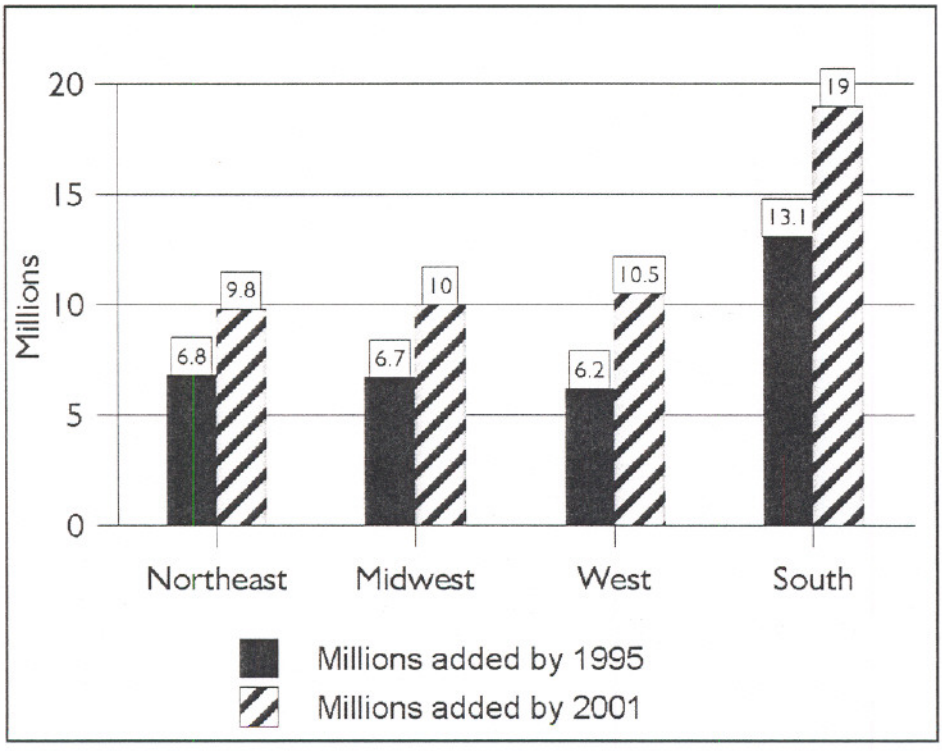

Figure 2.

Birding, among the 51 activities that we track in the NSRE, sits now at number 15, attracting 33 percent of persons 16 or older. This amounts to an estimated 70.4 million people who now go out-of-doors to watch birds one or more times per year. With this number reporting participation, birding continues to move toward attaining the status of being among Americans' most-favored activities.

Figure 1 shows the dramatic growth between 1983 and 2001 in both percentage of the population (of persons 16 and older) and millions of people participating in birding. We use the term "birding" here to include *all* kinds of birdwatching regardless of the level of dedication to the activity. As we have defined it, persons are counted as having participated in birding if they participated out-of-doors at least once during the preceding 12 months covered by each of the three surveys, either at home or at some other location. From just over 21 million in 1983, and 54 million in 1995, the number of people 16 or older who reported that they participated in birding has grown to over 70 million in 2001. This means that the percentage of the population reporting that they participate in birding has almost tripled since the early 1980s, going from 12 percent in 1983 to 33 percent in 2001. Admittedly, our standards for defining what constitutes participation in birding are *very* broad, but the casual birders, which they include make up a substantial base from which future activity and serious interest may emerge.

The region with the largest and most rapid growth in birding participation is still the South, the same as we saw in the 1995 survey. Of the over 49-million-participant increase nationally between 1983 and 2001, nearly 40 percent, about 19 million, live in the South. In Figure 2, we can see that growth in millions of people participating was nearly equal among the other three regions at around 10 million additional participants each since 1983. In terms of percentage growth (not shown in Figure 2), howev-

er, these regions were quite different with the Midwest growing slowest (139 percent since 1983), the Northeast growing next slowest (199 percent), and the West growing second fastest at 250 percent (the West extends generally from the Rockies to the Pacific Coast and includes Alaska and Hawaii). Growth in the South, since 1983, was an astounding 388 percent!

While the total number of persons interested in birding is growing very rapidly, the number of most-active participants is rising more modestly. As the percentages across the bottom of Figure 3 show, 42 percent of birders in 1983 put in more than 25 field days that year (a day equaling participation for any amount of time on a given day). Slightly less, 41 percent, put in more than 25 days in 1995. By 2001, just 34 percent of participants put in more than 25 days, resulting in only a slight rise in numbers of the most-active participants, from 22.2 to 24 million, between 1995 and 2001.

Only 15 percent in 1983 participated just one to two days per year. By 2001, this percentage had grown to 21 percent. This means that many of the newest birders were participating only occasionally. In 1995, the percentage participating 10 or fewer days grew to just below half of all birders surveyed, while the percentage participating on more than 10 days dropped several percentage points. By 2001, well over half (54 percent) of birding participants put in 10 or fewer days. (Adding the 21 percent who participate 1 to 2 days to the 33 percent participating 3-10 days gives this 54 percent). Most of the drop in the percentage participating on more than 10 days was attributable to lack of growth in numbers of the most active of birders, those who put in more than 25 days per year.

What we have now are many more birders who are in the field for just a few days. These birders are sometimes called "casuals" by ABA members, "uninitiated" and "casual" (combined categories) by other researchers (T.L. Eubanks, pers. comm.), and called "occasionals" by our NSRE survey. While the number of birders has risen across all levels of participation, the bulk of added participants fall into the lower levels of participation. Since 1995, birders participating 1 or 2 days grew by 4 million, and those participating 3-10 days rose by over 8 million. Over 12 million of the 16.2 million who took up birding since 1995, or 75 percent, participate 10 or fewer times per year.

Who Are "Those" Birders, and Has Their Makeup Changed?

In comparison with non-birders, we find that more birders are female (56 versus 51 percent), are between the ages of 40 and 59 (37 versus 29 percent), have a college degree (28 versus 18 percent), are white (77 versus 64 percent), and earn over $50,000 per year (47 versus 38 percent). On the other hand, fewer birders are between 16 and 24 years old, have less than a high-school education, or are from Black or Spanish-speaking backgrounds.

How has the demographic profile of birders changed since 1995? As Figure 4 shows, females continue to be the larger share of birders, around 56 percent; not much change in that percentage. But the rest of the demographics has shifted substantially. (Follow these shifts by comparing percentages between the first two columns of numbers in Figure 4.) The profile of birders is getting younger, as we had forecast in our last article in this magazine. Participants 16 to 24 years old went up from 10.5 to 15.5 percent, while those 25–39 went down from 31.8 to 24.3 percent. Older age-group percentages stayed pretty much the same. Apparently, the busy family-rearing years of 25 to 39 years old do not permit as much involvement in birding as they did a few years ago. Another switch of seeming significance is that persons with less than a high-school education are much more numerous as birders now compared with 1995. College-degree holders have diminished from almost 35 percent to just over 28 percent. This trend is consistent with the age trend in that most of the teenagers in this 16-to-24 age category have yet to receive their high-school diploma. Further, while the percentage of birders

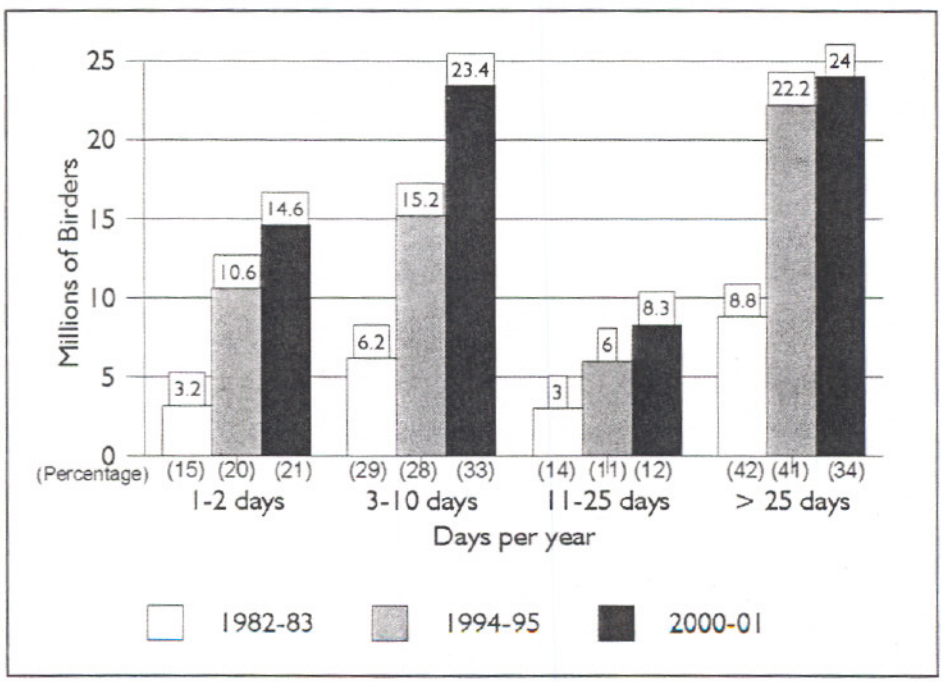

Figure 3.

The demographics of birders and of change, 1995 and 2001

Demographic Group	Percentage 1994-95	Percentage 2000-01	U.S. Population	Birding Growth
Male	43.9	44.2	47.4	45.2
Female	56.1	55.8	52.6	54.8
16-24	10.5	15.5	21.1	32.0
25-39	31.8	24.3	25.9	-0.7
40-59	34.4	36.9	31.3	45.2
60+	23.3	23.3	21.7	23.5
<HS	7.6	16.7	24.4	46.4
HS Diploma	57.7	55.1	54.2	46.0
College	34.7	28.3	21.5	7.7
White	86.3	77.4	68.6	45.8
Black	8.4	8.2	12.6	8.8
Hispanic	1.9	10.8	14.5	39.6
American Indian	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6
Asian	1.9	2.9	3.6	6.2
<$15,000	8.9	9.2	11.8	3.1
$15-$50,000	32.5	44.1	47.0	56.6
>$50,000	58.6	46.7	41.2	40.3

Figure 4.

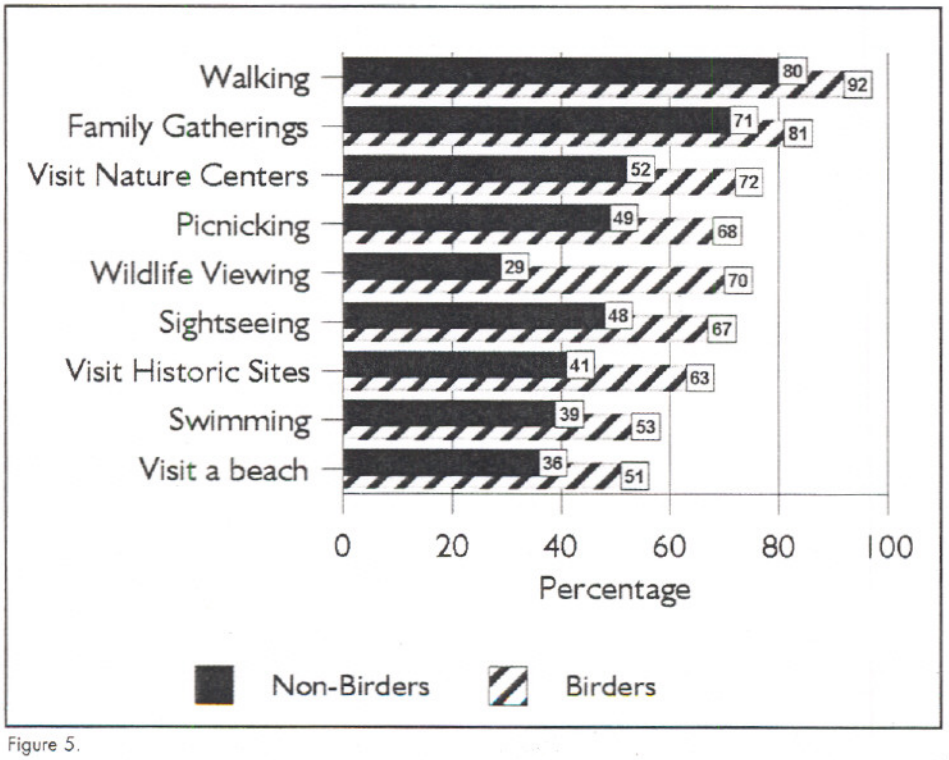

Figure 5.

who are white has dropped by almost 9 percentage points, the percentage who are Hispanic, Asian, or Pacific Islander has risen. Much greater diversity exists among birders now relative to just a few years ago, reflecting the greater diversity of the U.S. population. Finally, the percentage make-up among income categories shows that persons earning $15,000–$50,000 has risen substantially, while the percentage earning over $50,000 has fallen. Obviously, many more of the new birders are in the middle-income category. The percentage earning less than $15,000 has remained about the same as in 1995.

Who has contributed most to growth in numbers of birders in the U S.? In the next-to-last column of numbers in Figure 4, we show the percentage of the country's population which we sampled in each of the demographic groups. In the last column, we show the percentage of birding growth attributed to each demographic group. Females constituted 52.6 of the survey population, but they contributed 54.8 percent of the growth of birders. Among age groups, people 25 to 39 actually took away from growth slightly, while all other age groups, especially people 16–24 and those 40–59, added significantly to birding growth relative to their proportion of the survey population. While persons with less than a high-school education make up only 24 percent of the population, they contributed over 46 percent of birding growth. Persons with college education contributed the least among the three education levels which we show. Hispanics showed a significant increase in interest in birding in the years between 1995 and now. Being only 14.5 percent of the survey population, they contributed 39.6 percent of the growth of numbers of birders. Among income levels, persons earning $15,000 to $50,000 contributed almost 57 percent of the growth, while they make up just 47 percent of the survey population. Those earning under $15,000 contributed just over 3 percent of the growth.

More About Birders

As is true of practically anyone who favors one particular recreational activity, most also enjoy other outdoor activities. Figure 5 compares the percentages of people who reported participating in birding in the 2001 survey with those who reported they did not participate (i.e., non-birders). Our focus was on identifying other outdoor activities in which more than half of birders reported participation. The first general conclusion was that a much higher percentage of birders are active in a variety of outdoor recreation pursuits as compared to people who do not bird. The darker horizontal bars in Figure 5 indicate the percentage of non-birders who participate in each of the nine activities listed. The candy-striped bar indicates the percentage of birders who participate.

Across all nine activities, much greater percentages of birders than non-birders participated. For example, 80 percent of non-birders walk and 36 percent visit beaches, but 92 percent and 51 percent, respectively, of birders participate in these two activities. Comparisons across the other seven activities show a similar pattern of greater participation by birders. That pattern is particularly noticeable for wildlife-viewing, where the percentages of birders participating is more than twice the percentages of non-birders.

Percentage of birders among demographic groups for each of three levels of participation

Characteristics	Number of Days/Year 1-5 (Occasionals)	6-50 (Actives)	>50 (Enthusiasts)
Female	53.3	50.7	61.9
Age			
16-24	20.8	13.8	8.7
25-39	30.4	26.7	16.0
40-59	34.9	41.6	36.2
60+	13.8	17.9	39.0
Education			
Finished HS	50.3	54.4	60.8
4+ Years College	27.4	35.3	24.3
Race			
White	65.4	84.2	84.5
Black	11.2	5.8	6.9
Hispanic	18.7	7.0	5.4
Others	4.7	3.0	3.2
Income			
$15,000-50,000	28.3	29.7	29.1
Over $50,000	31.2	36.0	25.8
Population of Resident County			
Under 25,000	6.0	9.1	12.9
25,000-99,999	15.1	18.9	23.9
100,000-999,999	55.4	54.7	51.9
1 million +	23.5	17.4	11.4

Figure 6.

Birding Enthusiasts

As all ABAers know, persons involved in birding can differ a great deal in their level of enthusiasm for the activity. One measure of enthusiasm is the number of days during the year on which they do some birding. Using birding days per year to measure level of enthusiasm, Figure 6 examines birders by three levels of enthusiasm and looks for differences in demographic characteristics among these three levels. Those who participate least we call the "occasionals", and they are the most numerous (41 percent of birders, 28.8 million, participate just one to five times per year). Those who participate most we call the "enthusiasts", and they are the least numerous (28 percent of birders, 19.7 million, participate more than 50 times per year). Those who participate at mid-level we call the "actives", and these birders participate 6–50 days per year.

In Figure 6, we can see that the demographics of enthusiasts differ in some significant ways from others who participate in birding at lower levels. A higher percentage of enthusiasts are female, a much higher percentage are over 60 in age, and a much lower percentage are between 25 and 39 years old (again attesting to the busyness of this child-rearing age-group). A higher percentage of enthusiasts have finished high school, but not college (in fact, many fewer enthusiasts have a college degree) and smaller percentages are of Black, Hispanic, or other non-white ethnic backgrounds. There is little difference in income between enthusiasts and other birders, except that a smaller percentage of enthusiasts earn over $50,000 per year. Larger percentages of enthusiasts live in sparsely populated areas and in small cities. A very small percentage of enthusiast birders are from cities of a million or more, fewer than any other birding participants.

Intervention

As social scientists we are observing and recording human behavior. As concerned birders, however, we see a special and additional responsibility for ourselves and our fellow enthusiasts. As we see more of our rural land converted to urban and other developed uses, it is crucial to think about the bird habitat being lost. We all need to work on mediating the effects of this trend. Encouraging people to bird is certainly one way to help. With participation—and thus appreciation—for the ecological role and the sheer beauty and mystique of birds, come increased awareness of what is happening to their habitats. Here are a couple of examples of segments of our society to whom we could reach out, those who might not otherwise think of birding as an activity of choice:

- Young people: Experienced birders should look for opportunities to share the world of birding with a young friend. An investment of time in introducing young people to birds and the natural world around them is an investment in the future of our precious natural resources. (ABA has several programs for young birders. Participate and contribute!)
- Family birding: We know that a lower percentage of active birders are between 25 and 39 years old. This is the child-rearing age-group. Facilitating opportunities for "family birding" could do wonders for opening up this arena.
- Minority groups: Smaller percentages of our fellow birders are of Black, Hispanic, or other non-white ethnic backgrounds. Any opportunity to increase bird-exposure here—from mentoring to festival activities to increasing school-oriented programs—should be maximized.
- People with disabilities: When hosting birding field trips, running festivals, or managing natural areas, be sure that these are inclusive, at locations with facilities and topographies that encourage participation by older birders or those with disabilities.

In addition to reaching out to others, we birders can and should take action to improve bird habitats, to conserve unique natural areas, and to provide funding to help maintain these areas.

- Birders do not have to purchase a license to bird, thus there is no automatic pool of funds for bird management and habitat conservation. But, there are other ways that contributions can be made toward the protection and maintenance of important natural areas in your region: direct contributions to private organizations purchasing or managing natural areas, contributing to your state's non-game wildlife fund, joining a "friends" organization associated with one of your favorite birding areas, and encouraging conservation easement programs.
- Become aware of pending legislation at the local, state, and federal levels that affect funding for bird habitat conservation and management. Make your voice heard—for the birds, for your enjoyment, and for future generations.
- Improve bird habitat in your own backyard and contribute at a very local level to the creation and conservation of bird habitats: use native vegetation, keep your cat indoors, maintain bird boxes.
- On the other end of the spectrum, contribute to the conservation of bird habitats in countries far from home. You can do this by supporting the efforts to protect natural areas and improve the local economy through responsible ecotourism. (Recent articles in *Winging It* have had some good examples in the Yucatan, in Costa Rica, and in Belize. Also, support the Birders' Exchange program to get the birding tools to where they are needed in the Neotropics.)

In addition to recruiting new birders and taking actions on behalf of bird habitats, we as birders can also contribute by showing respect for the birds that we seek and the private property of those who provide habitat for birds. Remember, you are a role model. Follow the ABA Code of Birding Ethics.

Birders can be a very powerful force in helping to assure the future of all bird species. Increasing numbers of birders and of interest in birding should reflect more people willing and eager to be active in the stewardship of this most precious of natural resources.

—H. Ken Cordell
—Nancy G. Herbert

PHOTO BY BRIAN E. SMALL

Conclusions

There are many reasons for people's choosing to start or to continue to participate in birding. Among those reasons are the opportunity to try something new to enjoy and learn about the outdoors and nature; fascination with the color, variety, and behavior of birds; relieving stress at the end of a hard day; and meeting people with similar interests. There are likely any number of additional reasons for the phenomenal growth that we have witnessed in birding participation since the 1980s and into the 1990s. This activity, across the country, stands as the fastest-growing single outdoor activity.

Our 2000–2001 NSRE shows that nationwide, there are now 70.4 million people who report *some* level of involvement in birding. This represents 33 percent of all Americans age 16 or older. In the early 1980s, just 12 percent participated. By 1995, the percentage had jumped to 27 percent. If birding participation represented growth in the customer base of an industry, market analysts would tell us that industry is doing quite well. In fact, they would probably tell us that the industry is doing great. Of course, many industries actually are benefiting from the growth in interest in birding. Sales of equipment, clothing, excursions, printed materials, and Internet information must be growing at a very healthy pace. Not only is the *percentage* of the American population that bird growing (and growing relatively rapidly), but so too are the *numbers* of birders, accelerated by overall population growth, and until recently, a healthy economy. As our population grows each year at more than 2.5 million persons, and as the percentage of that population participating in birding climbs higher and higher, the result is nothing short of startling. We have been in the business of tracking trends in all sorts of outdoor recreation activities for a number of years and have yet to see anything to top birding growth. From 1983 to 1995, 33 million new birders were added. From 1995 to 2001, another 16 million have been added.

There is little doubt that birding growth will continue. But at some point we expect that it will begin to level off. Tennis, for example, accelerated tremendously in the 1970s. Since then, this sport has remained a popular pursuit, but its growth has matured. Likewise, bicycling was a booming growth activity through the 1970s and 1980s. Driven by technology improvements and the introduction of mountain bikes, millions joined the ranks of bikers. But biking growth has been leveling off over the last 10 years. It is our somewhat informed forecast that our next survey of the American public will show continuing, but slowing growth of birding. Possibly the growth rate will slow to equal that of population growth, around 1 to 1.5 percent per year.

Growing numbers of people of retirement age will assure some of that growth. Persistent curiosity among the nation's youth should also produce continued growth. Growth in the South, relative to other regions, is likely to continue at a more rapid rate. As growth progresses, we anticipate that a greater and greater proportion of birders will be among those who participate less than 10 times per year. In today's increasingly hectic world, this expectation of less-frequent participation is not unrealistic. A core of dedicated birding enthusiasts, however, is likely always to be there.

Birders at the level of ABA interest should probably be raising two issues: how to *sustain* the popular interest and how to *increase the level of competence* among curious entrants.

In the future, undoubtedly, we will see the demographic make-up of the American birder shift and become more diverse, just like the country's population is becoming more diverse. Women likely will assume a slightly larger share of the birding participant-base, Hispanic and Asian Americans are also likely to assume a higher profile, and more of the birding participant base is likely to be made up of persons under the age of 25. This will, of course, mean that many of the new birders of the future will be at beginning levels of income-earning and thus not into expensive excursions and equipment.

Birding participants are much more active as a group than most other people. Their enthusiasm for birds makes them a very special group, and perhaps one that will help to ensure the future of birds in the wild. Our wild and natural places and habitats for birds worldwide are being threatened as never before by population growth and the accompanying pressure on natural lands and water.

We concluded the current version of the NSRE in the fall of 2001. We started that work back in the fall of 1999 with a target of interviewing over 50,000 people across the nation. One-third of those whom we interviewed were at least occasional birders, and as we analyze our data yet further, we are sure to learn more about this important activity and those who participate in it. If you would like to learn more about the NSRE and some of the things that we are finding out about American's participation in outdoor recreation, including birding, visit our web site at <*http://www.srs.fs.fed.us/trends*>. If you don't have a computer and want more information, send a request to the senior author at the Athens, Georgia, address on the title page of this article.

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Birding

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