

## DEVELOPING WILDLIFE VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES CAN BRING DOLLARS INTO COMMUNITIES

According to a 2001 national survey of fishing, hunting and wildlife, wildlife viewing and birding has become the fastest growing recreational activity in the United States<sup>1</sup>. A study conducted by WMTH Corporation and the Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources<sup>2</sup> determined the following from the data:

- Over 1,081,000 individuals participate in wildlife viewing and birdwatching in Kentucky creating 11,481 jobs and generating over \$600,000,000 dollars for our economy. (A 2006 study revealed these numbers increasing to 1,362,000, creating 18,523 jobs and generating over \$1 billion in Kentucky's economy.)
- The number of participants and jobs created has increased 20% and 18% respectively since 1996 making it one of the fastest growing "industries" in Kentucky.
- Across the U.S., there are over 66,100,000 participants generating \$38,400,000,000 in revenue.

*The above are direct expenditures. The total economic impact is two times this or \$1,203,100.00 for Kentucky and \$76,800,000,000 for the United States!*

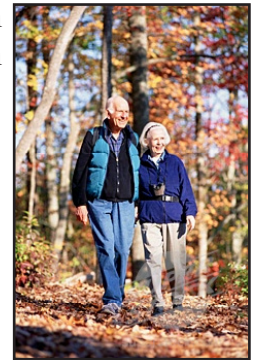
If these expenditures were the annual sales revenue of a particular company with a total of \$38.4 billion in sales, this company would rank 34th on the Fortune 500 list, just above Dell Computer (\$35.4 billion), UPS (\$31.2 billion) and Microsoft (\$28.3 billion)!

In the 2006 national survey, the numbers participating in both wildlife viewing and birdwatching had increased from 66,100,000 to 71,000,000, a 7.5% increase since 2001 revealing that is an on-going phenomena that continues to grow even today.<sup>3</sup>

## ONE COMMUNITY CAPITALIZES BIG ON BIRDERS

Texas has really capitalized on birding. In 1999, the town of Canadian, Texas began marketing birdwatching in their community. Within five years of using nature tourism as their focus for economic development in this town resulted in:

- 160 new jobs, 12 B&Bs, 4 new restaurants
- Renovation of historic downtown theater
- Renovation of 29 commercial buildings - 16 are historic downtown buildings
- Abraham Trading Company – 5 new employees
- Restoration and reopening of local motel
- 28% increase in sales tax since 1999



Arrington Ranch House Lodge is just one of the many businesses in Canadian Texas that have capitalized on nature tourism. They not only offer cowboy cookout dinners but have also developed nature tourism based trail rides.

*NOTE: For more on nature tourism based trail rides, see ECONOMIC IMPACT OF HORSE TRAILS.*

## VIRGINIA BECOMES THE FIRST!

The State of Virginia also recognized this interest in wildlife viewing and, in 2004, launched the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail across the entire state **becoming the very first statewide program of its kind in the United States!**

*Virginia has one of the highest diversities of birds in the eastern United States. "Within Virginia's 43,000 square miles of diverse natural habitat, one can find over 400 species of birds, 250 species of fish, 150 species of terrestrial and marine animals, 150 species of amphibians and reptiles and a wide variety of aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates".*

*- Discover Our Wild Side publication  
by the Virginia Department of  
Game & Inland Fishing, 2000.*

Virginia was also the first to put up trailblazing signs at the site of each of the trail locations.



Legion Park in the City of Norton



Branham Farm in Dickenson County



Sugar Hill/Clinch River Trails

The Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail (VBWT) is actually 65 looped driving tours across the state that connect one wildlife viewing area to another. Eight of the trails are located within the Spearhead Trails study area.

- Appalachian Wonders Loop (Scott and Wise)
- Big Stone Gap Loop (Lee and Wise)
- Lonesome Pine Loop (Wise, Dickenson, Buchanan)
- St. Paul Loop (Wise, Russell)
- Daniel Boone Loop (Wise, Dickerson)
- Mountain Heritage Loops (Tazewell)
- Compton Mountain /Horn Mountain Loop (Buchanan)
- Poplar Gap/Sunset Gap (Buchanan)
- Clinch Mountain Loop (Russell, Tazewell)

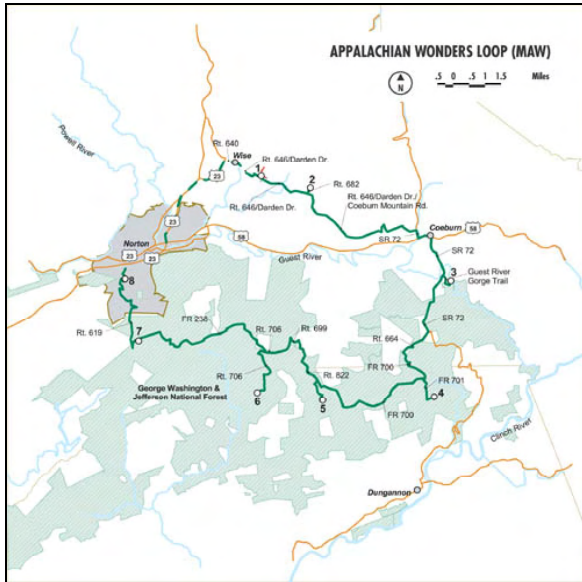


## VBWT IS MAKING AN IMPACT

Actually started in 1999 and completed in 2004, the Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail is having a positive economic impact across the state. In a 2006 national survey by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service showed that wildlife viewing travel expenditures in Virginia had increased 83% since 2001.5 In fact, according to the survey, more than 2.3 million individuals are spending more than \$960 million annually on wildlife-watching recreation just in Virginia.

Below is an example of information found at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/>. This particular trail is called the Appalachian Wonders Loop located in both Scott and Wise counties and featuring eight different sites to visit. Similar information and maps have been created for each of the trails listed above.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BIRDING AND WILDLIFE



Located within the Cumberland Plateau, the Appalachian Wonders Loop is a haven for naturalists, and in particular, birders. With 24 species of breeding warblers, Wise County can be a phenomenal venue for bird-watching. It's not just the warblers that make this area a birding treasure, there are many other nesting bird species that make this region their summering home. Places like High Knob Lake can offer an evening serenade of four species of thrushes! Maturing forests juxtaposed to early succession growth of reclaimed strip mines at high elevations are likely to attract a large number of habitat-specific breeding migrants.

Look for unusual species or rarities, such as Kirtland's warbler at Wise Reservoir, during spring migration.



In addition to a rich bird life, these areas are home to a diversity of flora, salamanders, insects, and mammals, including foxes and even black bear. The Appalachian Wonders Loop will lead you to discover an area rich with history, cultural expression and outdoor recreation.

There is also a four-color publication (right) which can be ordered online or by calling (866)748-2298.

In 2007, a three part study<sup>6</sup> was conducted to assess the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail (VBWT) which included a visitor survey, a locality survey and an encounter survey. A few of the findings included:

- When visiting the VBWT, non-resident respondents indicated they traveled an average of 436 miles while Virginia respondents traveled an average of 52 miles although both reported that visiting the VBWT was not their primary reason for being in the area.
- Survey respondents also indicated that the presence of a walking or hiking trail was an important factor in determining their choice of sites to visit.
- Nearly 83% of those surveyed on site actually used the VBWT guide to locate the trail they were on and found the directions to be both accurate and easy to use. They also found the guide informative and useful in providing information regarding species likely to be observed at particular sites.
- Over 90% reported being very satisfied with their visit and indicated they planned to visit again. Due to their positive experience, most individuals reported that on average they have shared information pertaining to the VBWT with nine other individuals.

A survey of VBWT site owners, planning personnel and 159 tourism officials throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia indicated that they were aware of the VBWT however respondents for all three groups indicated that most of their websites do not link to the VBWT nor was it promoted in the majority of publications they were distributing.

*Please Note: A recent review of the primary tourism websites of those communities within the Spearhead Trails Study area also found very few were linked or even acknowledged the existence of the VBWT. This is a huge oversight on what could eventually become a major asset for their communities if people knew about them.*

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE VBWT

An intercept survey<sup>6</sup> was conducted on one weekend day between the months of April and October 2007. From this information it was estimated that 1,041 visitors are actively using each VBWT site annually for an estimated total of 642,297 visitors per year. They spent on average \$13.45 per person on food, gas, lodging, etc. for a total direct economic impact of \$8,638,895 on the local economies. This number could be greatly increased if communities marketed the VBWT trails through their communities.

A more recent study by Virginia Tech found that more than 640,000 visitors travel to Virginia annually to view wildlife on the Birding & Wildlife Trail infusing more than \$8.6 million into the state economy each year.<sup>5</sup> And more than 95% of these visitors plan to visit the trail system again in the future.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPEARHEAD TRAILS INITIATIVE:

- Encourage people to stay multiple days in the area seeking out particular birds or wildlife.
- Invite them to come back at different seasons.
- Provide nature packages that also include lodging, dining and possibly tickets to one of the local attractions or museums.
- Hold special nature related events such as a bird-a-thon, butterfly festivals, fall foliage and spring blossom tours to name a few.
- Include information on VBWT as well as other trails in the area in publications and on the website.
- Developed a more detailed website which includes a list of birds they might see along with a companion brochure that people could pick up and/or print from the web, you could make this much more enticing for birders to travel and encourage more use of the trail.
- Seek funding for interpretive signs along the trail and for marketing.

Below and on the following pages are examples of some of the interpretive nature signs being used in other areas<sup>7</sup>.



*Leslie County has an excellent wayside exhibit in front of their courthouse featuring the redbud tree which are numerous throughout the county. They have declared themselves the “Redbud Capital of Kentucky. This wayside exhibit encourages visitors to come back in the Spring to see the redbuds and dogwoods when they are in full bloom.*



Letcher County Kentucky offers one of the best interpretations for wildlife viewing around Fish Pond Lake at Little Laurel Park.



*Tree Identification*



*Hydrological Information*

# ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BIRDING AND WILDLIFE



*Geological Information*



*Plant Identification*



*Wetlands Information*



*Animal Track Identification*



*Another unique feature at Little Laurel Park is a sundial that has an interpretive sign that explains how it works.*

**RECOMMENDATION:** Every county in the Spearhead Trail System needs to determine where interpretive signs are needed and also provide detailed maps to visitors and local residents with location and information about the wildlife one might see along the trail.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>1</sup> Statistical information was derived from the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation, U.S. Department of Interior, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary findings of the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, & Wildlife Associated Recreation provided by Lynn Garrison, KDFWR, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Information provided in PowerPoint presentation presented at the National Conference on Wildlife Viewing held in Virginia Beach VA in 2005. A follow-up phone interview with the director of the Canadian Texas Chamber of Commerce on July 13th 2009 confirmed the informed.

<sup>4</sup> Phone interview with previous economic development director of Canadian Texas on July 14th 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Five Years After Completion, Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail Delivering for Local Communities, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries News Release, April 21, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenberger, A. Convery, K., Assessment of the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, Final Report, The Conservation Management Institute, Blacksburg VA, 2008.  
<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/Assesment-of-the-VBWT-2003Version-CMI-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Spencer, D. , Ross, J. & Ledford, D., 2007 Kentucky Elk and Wildlife Viewing Study, Final Report, WMTH Corporation, Bowling Green, KY, 2007.