

Research Helps Keep Bird-Watching Revenue From Flying Away

By Andrea Cooper and Karen Brasher
Photos by Joe Hudspeth

*M*ore than 71 million Americans actively participate in bird watching, and they spend some \$45 million each year on the sport.

Mississippi, however, has so far flown under the bird-watching radar, ranking 45th in income from birding. Researchers at MSU's Forest and Wildlife Research Center are studying ways to improve the state's revenue from birding activities, especially in areas along the Mississippi River.

"The Mississippi River and its 30-million-acre floodplain form a vital flyway for migratory birds and provide opportunities for anyone who enjoys bird watching," said Steve Grado, natural resource economist and professor in the Department of Forestry. "The Great River Birding Trail, named for the federally designated scenic drive called the Great River Road, consists of more than 2,000 miles along the river from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico."

Bird-watching sites have been established along the trail parallel to the river on both sides from its headwaters at Lake Itasca, Minn., downstream for 1,366 miles to the confluence with the Ohio River at Cairo, Ill.

"The next step in completing the trail is to extend it along both sides of the Lower Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico," Grado said.

Audubon Mississippi and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have identified about 300 Mississippi bird-watching sites and located bird species of interest. Two-thirds of these sites are already open to the public. About 5 percent are on private lands.

"By estimating potential impacts of the Great River Birding Trail, we hope to show private landowners the value of allowing bird watching on their lands," Grado said.

Assisting Grado with the study is research associate and MSU alumnus Marcus Measells. The duo has surveyed participants at birding festivals in the state.

"Just two birding festivals in Mississippi had more than 8,000 participants and resulted in a \$107,685 impact to the state in 2006," Measells said. "And in 2006, wildlife watchers spent an estimated \$181 million in Mississippi."

The goal of their research is to help Audubon Mississippi increase private landowner participation.

"We hope the information from our study will assist natural resource and tourism agencies, as well as nongovernmental organizations in finishing the trail in the Lower Mississippi River area by increasing private landowner participation," Measells said. "Without this information as a framework, it will be difficult to evaluate the benefits to private landowners in providing bird-watching opportunities to the public."

The research will also allow rural land planners and policy makers to estimate the benefits gained from various land management options on areas related to the trail. On the basis of this research, funding for bird-watching area restoration, species sustainability, and tourism promotion can be justified from both a biological and economic standpoint.

Many of the proposed sites are public water bodies surrounded by private lands, so many of the economic benefits from the already existing lake sites would potentially roll over to the private sector if more landowners were involved.

"We will also visit birding site operators to create profiles for business owners and public sites," Grado said. "This information can be used to establish birder-related marketing and policy strategies related to ecotourism and resource management."

As the project continues, additional surveys will be conducted at other bird-watching festivals and events. That information will be combined with information about the economic impact from public and private bird-watching sites along the trail.

With just 1 year of data for the 3-year study gathered so far, Measells said it is already obvious that birding can have a significant economic impact in Mississippi.

"We have valuable natural resources here, and birding is a very sustainable, environmentally friendly way of using them," he said.

