

# North Carolina Birding Trail

## Strategic Plan

2005-2015



Audubon NC ♦ NC Cooperative Extension Service ♦ NC Sea Grant ♦ NC State Parks  
NC Wildlife Resources Commission ♦ US Fish & Wildlife Service

## **MISSION**

To conserve and enhance North Carolina's bird habitat by promoting sustainable bird-watching activities, economic opportunities and conservation education.

## **VISION**

From our vast coastline to our high mountain peaks, North Carolina is home to a diversity of habitats that support hundreds of species of birds and other wildlife. Our unique geographic setting along the Atlantic coast flyway provides both breeding and wintering grounds for many birds, making North Carolina a premiere bird-watching destination. Yet this rich natural heritage is largely untapped as an economic resource for promoting nature-based tourism. The North Carolina Birding Trail (NCBT) will provide a common thread to tie together bird-watching, nature-based tourism and our great natural and cultural resources for the economic benefit of our citizens.

Implementation of the NCBT will create a tangible incentive to protect and conserve our wildlife resources by demonstrating the economic value of those resources through nature-based tourism. The NCBT will not only help birders find quality bird-watching sites, it will also connect them to rural communities and the unique services and facilities those communities can offer, such as bed and breakfast inns, art galleries, historical attractions, and local restaurants. Birders visiting during the height of spring and fall migration will extend the traditional summer tourist season. Winter bird-watching opportunities, especially at the coast, may create an entirely new tourist season market. Rural areas that may currently offer little else in the way of tourist attractions will be able to enjoy these new tourist markets and may be able to partner with adjacent destinations to enhance the appeal of entire regions as a tourism destination. In realizing these expanding economic development opportunities, local communities will gain a sense of pride and ownership in the Trail.

Public support and use of the NCBT will encourage agencies and organizations to efficiently manage sites to sustain or increase bird populations. The Trail will also promote awareness about birds and other wildlife.

By 2015, individuals and communities across the state will enjoy enhanced opportunities for recreation, economic development, environmental education, and species and habitat conservation in their communities. As a result, the NCBT will cultivate a more conservation-minded populace in North Carolina, one with a heightened sense of stewardship for our wildlife and habitat resources and a strengthened conservation ethic.

## **GOAL**

To increase opportunities for bird-watching in North Carolina by unifying existing and potential birding sites into a cohesive and marketable unit that can be promoted to in-state, out-of-state, and international birders as a destination location.

## OBJECTIVES & ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increased economic development within North Carolina resulting from bird-watching related revenues
  - The NCBT will draw increased numbers of birding and nature-based tourists to North Carolina.
  - New or enhanced entrepreneurial opportunities will arise to accommodate the increasing number of nature-based tourists that will travel to the state.
- Increased recreational opportunities within North Carolina
  - The NCBT will increase the visibility of bird-watching as a recreational activity.
  - The NCBT will link visitors with other opportunities for wildlife viewing and outdoor recreation activities.
- Increased awareness of the value of natural resources and the need to conserve them as assets for the future.
  - Greater understanding of the economic value of natural resources will enhance public support for sustainable wildlife and habitat conservation and effective management practices.

## KEY STRATEGIC DIRECTION

### Administration

Coordination of the NCBT is carried out by a full-time employee of the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, who reports directly to the Partners in Flight Biologist of the Faunal Diversity Program within the Division of Wildlife Management. The Coordinator also reports to and chairs the NCBT Steering Committee<sup>1</sup>, made up of representatives from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Audubon NC, NC Sea Grant, NC State Parks, NC Cooperative Extension, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This committee provides guidance and oversight of the NCBT initiative. Each agency has one vote on the Steering Committee. Sub-committees will be established to assist on specific aspects of the NCBT initiative, such as site nominations, environmental education, and community development.

### Communications, Outreach, & Marketing

- Branding of the NCBT will be accomplished through logo development, letterhead, and maintenance of a “family” look for all publications.
- A web site has been developed to complement the physical Trail ([www.ncbirdingtrail.org](http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org)). The web site will provide information to potential birders efficiently and quickly. Additionally, given the dynamic nature of the internet, the web site will allow for fast and cost-effective dissemination of Trail information and modification of that information as needed. For example, when regional Trail guide information is completed, birders will be able to download PDF-based site descriptions and maps from the web site.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a list of representative individuals.

- The NCBT will be publicized through all possible media outlets, including agency and organizational newsletters, magazine articles, news releases, TV and radio.
- Quarterly *Trail Mail* e-newsletter updates will be distributed by the Coordinator to a list of interested individuals across the state and placed on the web site for download.
- The NCBT will be promoted and publicized at birding and other festivals and media events across North Carolina.
- A promotional brochure will be developed as a marketing tool and distributed widely among interested audiences and appropriate venues.
- Birder “calling cards” will be developed and made available through the brochure and the web site for use by visiting birders to identify themselves as a market for local businesses.

### Planning and Partnerships

Garnering statewide public support for the NCBT is the key to its success. Grassroots collaborations will be established through networking by all involved agencies and organizations. Regionally-based meetings will be held to invite participation by municipalities, local businesses, citizens, landowners, conservation groups and other regional agencies in developing the NCBT. Additional support of the NCBT will be sought through formal Partnership or Sponsorship opportunities and acknowledged on the NCBT web site.

- Partners are an associated group that offers formal support of the NCBT and provides in-kind and/or financial support in the development of the NCBT. Partners consist of non-profit organizations, associations, chambers of commerce, government agencies and similar organizations.
- Sponsors are businesses, individuals or others that provide cash financial support to the NCBT either through a direct donation or a grant. In return, they will be recognized on the web site and in printed materials that their funding supported.

### Trail Development and Maintenance

- The NCBT will be developed in three regional components: coastal plain, piedmont, mountains. Each component will require approximately one year for implementation: coastal plain - 2006, piedmont – 2007, mountains - 2008. The number of sites within each component will vary depending on the number of nominations received and the quality of potential sites.
- Physical site improvements and/or ongoing management needs will be the responsibility of the site owner or manager, not the NCBT.
- The NCBT will coordinate as much as possible with existing trail systems, such as cultural heritage and paddle trails, to maximize cross-marketing opportunities.
- Hard copy Trail guides for each of the three components of the NCBT will be designed and printed for use by NCBT visitors.
- Sign development, installation, and maintenance will be coordinated in partnership with the NC Department of Transportation.

### Site Selection

- Sites along each regional component of the NCBT are identified through an objective nomination process, which is advertised widely among agencies, organizations, and communities. Site nomination forms are available for download on the NCBT web site.
- A Site Nomination Subcommittee is responsible for reviewing site nomination forms and for recommending approval or rejection of each site to the Steering Committee. Individual sites are selected based on the potential for hosting birds and birders, for providing quality bird-watching opportunities, for habitat, access, and sustainability considerations, and for educational and interpretive opportunities.
- Site owners/managers are notified after the Steering Committee makes a decision regarding the site selection status.
- The coastal plain site nomination process closed in February 2006. The piedmont process is expected to open in fall 2006 and stay open through spring 2007. The mountain process is expected to open in fall 2007 and stay open through spring 2008.

### Funding/Development

Funding to support the NCBT Coordinator position is provided by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. All other project needs, such as design and publication of Trail guides, mailings, signage, web site maintenance and meeting costs, will be supported through grants and donations, both in-kind and direct.

### Education

- The NCBT web site will provide links to educational opportunities associated with the Trail, including age appropriate bird-related activities for download, educational program opportunities at NCBT sites, and other educational resources.
- An educational brochure will be developed to highlight wildlife-focused environmental education programs, curricula, grants, and resources for North Carolina educators.

### Community Development

- Specialized training to help businesses and communities cater to the niche market of bird-watchers and nature-based tourists will be provided through certified bird-friendly business and community training programs. Components of the training program will include:
  - Hospitality and marketing: service quality, customer service, knowing your community resources, understanding the needs of the market.
  - Birding basics: local bird-watching resources, specialty species, gear and equipment, birding code of ethics.
- The NCBT will participate in related festivals and events throughout North Carolina and will support those events through web site links and media/marketing partnerships.

## Evaluation Tools

Potential benchmark metrics and correlative statistics include:

- Annual NC Division of Tourism statistics, including visitor expenditures, economic impact by sector, leisure traveler spending totals, and visitor profiles.
- National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-associated Recreation<sup>2</sup> results. This study is conducted every 5 years and will allow us to compare 2001, 2006 and eventually 2011 data and trends regarding the number of people in the United States and North Carolina who consider themselves birders, the number of people in the United States and North Carolina who travel away from home to view birds, and trip-related expenditures.

Potential evaluation tools and procedures include:

- Birder calling card impact – Birders traveling along the NCBT will be encouraged to leave calling cards at local businesses they visit (e.g., restaurants, bed and breakfasts, motels, outfitters) to identify themselves as a niche market. Language on the calling card will request that vendors who receive the cards contact the NCBT, at which time we can assess the impact and effect of the calling cards and the Trail on the vendor.
- Certified Bird-Friendly Business and Community Programs – Evaluation components of the training program will include:
  - Provision of standardized data collection instruments to allow participants to track visitation by birders and gauge the impact of that market on their businesses and communities.
  - Pre- and post-training evaluations to assess participants' knowledge of the birder market and to gauge participant intent to incorporate ideas learned at the training.
  - Development of success stories and lessons learned.
- On-line survey of birders in North Carolina – An annual survey of the membership of Audubon NC and the Carolina Bird Club will be initiated to collect baseline statistics and to compare trends over time. Sample survey questions include:
  - How many days a year do you bird-watch away from home?
  - How long is the length of an average trip?
  - How much do you spend per trip on lodging/food/transportation, etc?
  - Over time, have you perceived a change in hospitality offerings?
- NCBT web site hits will be tracked over time.
- An economic benchmark study, conducted in partnership with university researchers, will provide baseline data from which to compare future economic impacts of the NCBT.
- On-site surveys carried out at manned NCBT sites (e.g., state parks) will allow us to quantify use by NCBT visitors and gather qualitative information about their experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. *2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-associated Recreation*.

## APPENDIX A

### Steering Committee Agencies and Representatives

<u>Agency</u>	<u>Representative(s)</u>
Audubon NC	Alan Cradick, Volunteer Andy Wood, Director of Education Lena Gallitano, Volunteer Walker Golder, Deputy Director
NC Cooperative Extension	Chris Moorman, Extension Wildlife Specialist Stacy Tomas, Extension Tourism Specialist
NC Sea Grant	Jack Thigpen, Extension Director
NC State Parks	Marie Boucher, East District Information & Education Specialist
NC Wildlife Resources Commission	Chris McGrath, Faunal Diversity Program Supervisor David Allen, Coastal Faunal Diversity Supervisor Mark Johns, Partners in Flight Biologist Salinda Daley, NCBT Coordinator
US Fish & Wildlife Service	Bonnie Strawser, Wildlife Interpretive Specialist Patty Matteson, Public Affairs & Outreach Coordinator