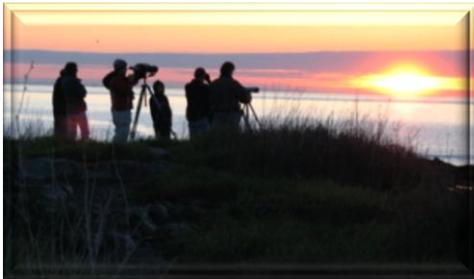


MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

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BEST NESTS Newsletter **Volume 1 – April 2010**

The Creation of the Maine Birding Trail



In 1993, Texas launched a \$1.5 Million project to create the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. Within a year, the Central Coastal section was ready to attract birders from all over the globe. By 2000, the entire coastal birding trail was finished. The project was so successful that Texas Parks and Wildlife continued developing other trail itineraries throughout the state.

As word spread, other states began to develop their own birding trails. To date, more than half the states in American have some form of birding trail. The partnerships and collaborations are unique in each state. Often a state agency takes the lead. At other times, it might be a wildlife organization such as Audubon. In several states, it has been the work of the local chambers of commerce. Occasionally, Federal agencies such as US Fish & Wildlife and the Bureau of Land Management get involved.

Several Maine Audubon board members started talking about the potential for a Maine Birding Trail in the late 90s. However, resource constraints stymied action. In late October 2003, Bob Duchesne approached Maine Audubon and offered to spearhead the project. Duchesne had retired from a career in radio broadcasting the previous month and saw opportunities for economic development through enhanced nature-based tourism in the state. The timing was fortuitous. The Maine Legislature had just passed a bill to commission a study of rural ecotourism potential. The company chosen to conduct the study was Fermata, Inc. founded by Ted Eubanks, the creator of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. Meanwhile, Governor Baldacci was also interested in improving Maine's economy through better promotion of its natural resources, and convened a Blaine House Conference on Natural Resource-based Industries on November 17, 2003.

The first step in creating the Maine Birding Trail was to build an inventory of good birding sites upon which to create an organized itinerary for visiting birders. During the next five years, Duchesne logged over 40,000 miles, researching publically accessible sites across the state. He also worked with selected inns to test market guided birding packages and established a web site to track Internet traffic on topics of interest to birders planning a visit to Maine. By the summer of 2008, most research was completed and an oversight committee was created consisting of representatives from the Maine Department of

Conservation, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife, The Maine Office of Tourism, and Maine Audubon. It culled the list of 300+ researched sites down to 82 prime sites that were to become the official Maine Birding Trail. In May of 2009, the initiative rolled out the first birding trail guide. It was an instant success. Within a month the first printing was exhausted and a second printing was ordered. By the end of the year, a third printing was necessary. The free brochures are available through the Maine Office of Tourism.



Meanwhile, parallel initiatives continue. As a result of the Blaine House Conference, the Governor set up a task force to monitor three regional efforts in Western Maine, the Central Highlands, and Downeast/Acadia. Each region has taken a different approach. The Downeast region has focused on providing information resources to businesses. The Central Highlands has created organized itineraries and became the first region in Maine to install location signs for specific sites. The Western Maine region has focused on creating better coordination through its Chambers of Commerce. The Maine Birding Trail features prominently in the plans of all three rural regions.

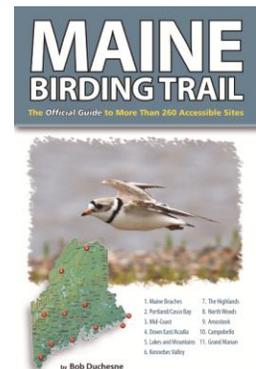


Three birding festivals are now well established in Maine. The 12th Acadia Birding Festival will take place on Mount Desert Island June 10-13. The 7th Annual Down East Spring Birding Festival will occur over Memorial Day Weekend in the Cobscook Bay area and early registration suggests that this year may be its best year yet. The *Wings, Woods, and Waves Festival* in Deer Isle – Stonington is going into its fourth year and will transpire on May 21-23. Private enterprises are flourishing. Derek and Jeannette Lovitch have built a number of trips, tours, and packages around their Freeport Wild

Bird Supply. Rich MacDonald and Natalie Springuel are opening The Natural History Center in Bar Harbor in May, with a heavy emphasis on birding in the Downeast/Acadia region. Even Exploritas (formerly Elderhostel) has gotten into the act and is offering six tours in Maine this summer that focus specifically on birding.

Some of the early experiments in tour packages built around the Maine Birding Trail continue. This June, Bob Duchesne will be leading a tour of the Moosehead Lake area in conjunction with Evergreen Lodge in Shirley for the fifth straight year. For the fourth year, two tours of Baxter State Park are built around a comfortable stay at the Big Moose Inn in Millinocket. A new tour is currently being designed for Historic Pittston Farm in the North Maine Woods. Packages built around a search for puffins and northern forest birds are in the works for Washington County this summer.

Economic development has always been the goal of the Maine Birding Trail. The web site (www.mainebirdingtrail.com) has been redesigned to serve as a clearing house for information on birding in Maine and now gets about 60,000 unique visits per year. Web traffic has been growing steadily since last summer. While the Maine Birding Trail consists of 82 prime sites, a great many other sites are also excellent. Over 260 of those are described in a new guide book published by Down East Books and is available at all book stores. And, beginning this year, a new initiative called *Best Nests* is slowly rolling out to identify and build business for inns that are well suited and well sited for enhanced ecotourism along the trail.



Coming next month: *Mistakes Made; Lessons Learned*