

# MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

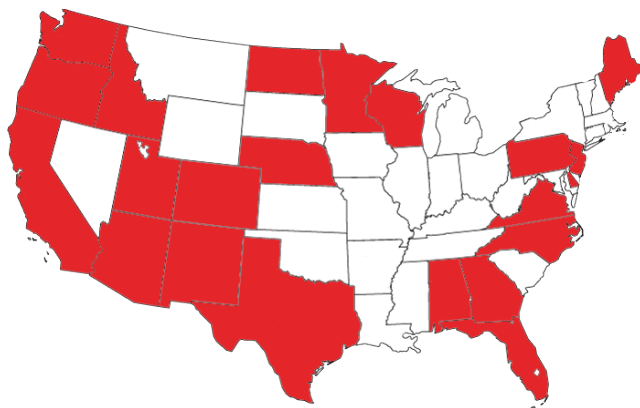
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**BEST NESTS Newsletter**

**Volume 15 – December 2011**

## Lessons from Florida

First, some interesting news: I am now the birding columnist for the Bangor Daily News. This is an exciting opportunity to spread the word about ecotourism in the state. While most of the weekly ink will talk about the birds and how to identify them, it will also have some focus on where to find them and how to enjoy the experience. Don't be surprised if some *Best Nests* show up in the column from time to time. I stayed at the *Inn On The Harbor* in Stonington last weekend, and I've already written a column about the adventure that will appear in January.



Major birding trails now exist in a majority of the states. For those states in red, the trails are either statewide or span a significant portion of the state. Several other states have smaller regional trails not shown on the map. At least two states – Louisiana and Connecticut – have gone back to the drawing board. In the case of Louisiana, hurricanes redrew the state map in several essential places. In the case of Connecticut, state resources dried up and the project is now resuming with help from the US Fish &

Wildlife Service and the Connecticut Tourism Industry, under the auspices of Audubon Connecticut. Meanwhile, the Great River Birding Trail is also not shown on this map because it is not a state trail. It is a National Audubon project that includes hundreds of sites from the headwaters of the Mississippi River in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans. In short, there are now few places in the country that haven't taken advantage of birding trails to embellish tourism promotion.



If ever there was a state that could rest on its laurels, it's Florida. The Sunshine State has already established a massive birding trail system, organized in four separate regions. The East Florida Region was rolled out in November 2002. It took several more years to finish the project, finalizing the South Florida Region in January 2006. But progress did not stop there. Building on the initial success, more sites were added to each of the four regions, with an addendum for each region available online until the next printing updates the maps.

Now Florida is pushing beyond even those updates. The state has launched a Rural County Initiative. In an effort to assist Florida's rural counties and Rural Areas of Critical Economic Concern with their nature-based tourism programs, the state is seeking additional birding and wildlife sites away from the popular tourist areas. Florida's problem is not that different from Maine's predicament. While the Florida coast and retirement communities have been economically booming for years, interior counties and rural areas need help. Their trials and tribulations are akin to those faced by our state's rural rim counties, though not to the extent that Maine is challenged. Nominations for new trail sites are being accepted in the 32 rural counties until mid-February next year.

To be sure, Florida has many more resources than Maine. The Florida Birding Trail is a project undertaken by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and it is funded and staffed by the state. By necessity, Maine's trail is a collaborative effort that is dependent on the good will of state government and the cooperation of several key stakeholders. While Florida has been able to invest significantly in its trail, that state has not been immune to the national economic downturn. Except for the rural areas, new site nominations and subsequent maps have been pushed off to 2013. Florida is way ahead of Maine in installing road signs, but even they delayed signage for the South Florida region until more funds became available, and 48 newly added sites in the East Florida region have not yet been signed.



Why does Florida continue to forge ahead? From the [www.floridabirdingtrail.com](http://www.floridabirdingtrail.com) web site, these FAQs tell the tale:

**Q: Where did the idea for a trail come from?**

A: Texas created a successful series of coastal birding trails (and later other birding and wildlife trails across the state) that have been immensely popular and have motivated conservation in that state. Florida's Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail is modeled after this successful predecessor, and is incorporating more grassroots involvement in the nomination of, maintenance of, and advocacy for sites. The Great Florida Birding Trail officially became the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail in 2011.

**Q: What kind of economic impacts do birders and wildlife watchers have?**

A: Birders and wildlife watchers spend money on gas, hotels, souvenirs, meals, books and other travel necessities while they are enjoying their hobby. Unlike traditional tourists, the FEWER capital improvements to an area, the more likely they are to visit, so they generate more economic impact with less capital investment than almost any other demographic group! When you're birding or watching wildlife, be sure to flex your economic muscles to support conservation! In 2006, birders and wildlife watchers generated \$3.1 billion for Florida's economy.

**Q: Why did the state of Florida organize a birding and wildlife trail?**

A: A growing constituency of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission are wildlife viewers, specifically, birders. The Trail serves this constituency by making it easier to find places to enjoy this great hobby. By encouraging people to enjoy the outdoors, the Trail builds support for conservation. Lastly, the Trail brings needed economic motivation to conservation efforts around the state in the form of tourism dollars.

In a big tourism state like Florida, it's not surprising to see big successes. A 2009 study of the Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival showed an impact of \$996,679 in sales output in Brevard County, another \$386,000 in labor income generated, and more than \$104,000 in government tax revenues accrued. That's in one weekend.