

MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

BOB DUCHESNE, 478 BEECHWOOD AVE. OLD TOWN, ME 04468

BEST NESTS Newsletter
Volume 10 – March 2011

What's your package?

Believe it or not, migrant birds are already returning. Red-winged Blackbirds, Turkey Vultures, American Robins, Ring-necked Ducks, and a host of other species are sneaking back into Maine right this moment. An 8-week long annual hawk watch has begun on Bradbury Mountain in the state park in Pownal. More migrants will follow in April and the deluge begins in May. The birding tourists are right behind them. Three birding festivals are set to entice these visitors this spring. The Wings, Waves & Woods Festival in Deer-Isle/Stonington enters its fourth year on May 20-22. The 8th Down East Spring Birding Festival in Washington County occupies the entire Memorial Day Weekend. The 13th Acadia Birding Festival spans the weekend of June 2-5. Several Maine state parks now offer one-day birding festivals in June, too.



The Maine Birding Trail project is designed to attract more tourists to the state and funnel them to desirable locations. But to understand what the Maine Birding Trail is, it's important to understand what it isn't. Some of the world's most famous birding destinations are very small or very seasonal. Cape May, New Jersey, is famous for its hawk migration and attracts many visitors, but only in September. High Island, Texas, and Point Pelee, Ontario, are famous for about two weeks a year during intense migration periods in the spring. There are many resorts in the tropics that make their fortunes off birds and other wildlife, but these are stand-alone lodges that cater to a very special tourism niche. Maine birding tourism is more subtle. The season is longer and the opportunities are spread across the state. Most innkeepers won't see a huge influx of birders, except for a handful of accommodations that are located in just the perfect spot. The opportunity for most innkeepers is to try and grab a bigger piece of this pie through niche marketing and packaging, boosting their occupancy in shoulder seasons and non-peak periods.

(The **Best Nest** program is an initiative to improve niche marketing.) Packaging is one way to achieve this goal, and it doesn't have to cost anything. Creating a package and putting it on your web site is a first simple step. Assuming you are tracking your web site visitation statistics, it's a good way to see if experiments are working. If one package isn't getting much attention, move on to another idea.

When considering a package, there are three elements to consider.

- 1) What can the inn do on its own? It can be a pricing package, especially during periods when full occupancy is a challenge. (Song birds are most easily found when they are singing, which is mid-May through June – before the heart of summer.) It might include certain services, such as brown bag lunches or early breakfasts. It can include resources, such as a species list or a printed bird-finding guide to the area. (I'm currently working on such guides for many **Best Nests** as I find time.)
- 2) What resources are nearby? In southern Maine, it may be key destination sites, such as Scarborough Marsh, Marginal Way, or Kennebunk Plains. Along the coast, it may be puffins. In northern Maine, it may be proximity to Acadia, or Baxter, or Moosehead. Or it can be nearness to highly desirable northern species. Perhaps there is a cooperative land trust or a national wildlife refuge in the vicinity.
- 3) What local partnerships are available? Many innkeepers already work with local businesses that provide such services as puffin tours, whale watches, ocean kayaking, moose watching, wildlife photography, etc. It would be a relatively simple matter to formalize a package with these businesses sufficient to advertise on a web site. Get creative. Maybe there's a microbrewery nearby and a Birds & Beer weekend would be a fun package.



There are vast differences among the **Best Nests** featured on mainebirdingtrail.com. The average visiting birder is seeking a variety of experiences in the state and may be reluctant to commit to more than a couple of nights in one location. For inns that attract this type of birder, a package that caters to this on-the-go style is important. Often, the birding attraction is obvious - such as a puffin tour - or the birding hot spots are obvious, as they are in southern Maine. In such cases, it is less important to inform the tourist where to go and what to do. Packages can be more about amenities or discounts.

However, in northern and interior Maine it is very important to help guests find the birds and experiences they are seeking. The desirable birds are difficult to locate and northern

Maine can be hard to navigate. A package that links birders with guiding resources (including maps) becomes more important. Some **Best Nests** are destinations themselves, offering a broader experience that requires a longer stay. It may mean waking up to loons or a morning of paddling near them. It may mean driving distances on dirt roads. It may even require “mosquito management.” A birding package that manages some of these logistics can be appealing.

For free advice on package potential, just get in touch: duchesne@midmaine.com or 207-827-3782. I also recommend keeping me informed about any birding packages you put together. I’m planning revisions to the web site to promote these packages.

For innkeepers in the Downeast/Acadia region, be aware that the Puffin Tour out of Jonesport has announced that it is not operating this summer. The family is reorganizing management of the tour and may return in 2012. For now, Captain Andy Patterson’s Bold Coast Tour is the only trip out to Machias Seal Island, the granddaddy of puffin islands: www.boldcoast.com.



Razorbills on Machias Seal Island