

MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

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Mistakes Made; Lessons Learned



Maine is not the first to create a birding trail. In fact, it's not even the 21st. Over half the states in America had a birding trail somewhere within their borders before Maine's debuted in 2009. If there were mistakes to be made, many were made a long time ago. Some of the more interesting ones:

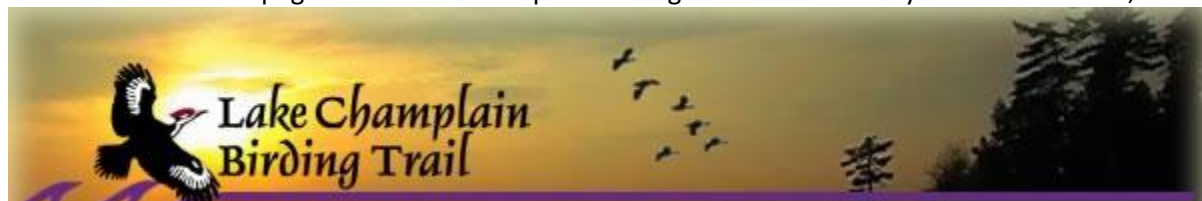
Texas: The original birding trail is laid out as a series of linked sites. Printed itineraries give directions from one site to the next, driving north to south. That's great...unless you fly into the southern part of the state and drive north, or want to skip sites. Then it can be very difficult to follow directions.

Virginia: The state's guidebooks are beautiful. They are truly works of art. They are also expensive to produce. Thus, the state is stingy about distributing them. They are hidden behind the counter in visitor centers and are generally available by request only. The Texas booklets used to be free; now they cost \$4 for each of the state's four sections.

Florida: One of the first things Florida noticed once the trail guides became available was an increase in European birders. The web's potential for attracting international travel hadn't occurred to anybody. Furthermore, like most states, there were few assessment tools to identify ecotourists. Florida worries that without adequate metrics, the more people that the trail attracts to a natural area, the more development pressure there is on the resource that draws them.

New Jersey: The state's original trail was a generalized natural history trail that included birds and wildlife. When it became clear that it was too generalized to attract specific interest tourists, it was reconceived, redrafted, and renamed the New Jersey Birding and Wildlife Trail.

Vermont: The Lake Champlain Birding Trail in Vermont got off to a flying start, with adequate grant funding and the support of Fermata, Inc., the developer of the original Texas birding trail. Then the grants dried up. The lack of a sustainable funding mechanism has reduced many initiatives to static, outdated web pages and no energy to connect the trail to the tourism economy. There is a sightings bulletin on the home page of the Lake Champlain Birding Trail. The last entry was on March 14, 2009.



This is what is currently on the front page of the Vermont web site:

Do you enjoy this website's news and current sightings? Have you received the Trail map and guide and used it to navigate to birding sites? Do you find your way to great sites by seeing the birding trail identification signs? These services and more may be coming to an end. **You can help.**

Send your contribution in any amount to:

Lake Champlain Birding Trail

PO Box 6004, Rutland, VT 05702

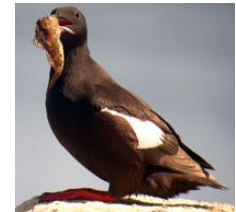
Maine avoided some of these errors. Trail development was conducted through private resources, reliant on neither grants nor government funding. A stewardship committee of state resource and tourism agencies provides oversight and much of the promotion, but collaboration with the state's tourism industry remains entrepreneurial. This public/private initiative has retained its vitality through six years of development and launch.



Some lessons were learned early. My first experience with trying to attract birding tourists occurred in the mid-90's when I was recruited to guide for a *Warbler Wave Weekend* – a joint birding package put together by Pilgrim's Inn in Deer Isle and Goose Cove Lodge in Stonington. This attempt at getting birders to visit before high season was not terribly successful. Later, I collaborated on other attempts in the Acadia and Moosehead Lake region with the same result. It became clear to me that one or two inns alone could not generate marketing sufficient to reach enough potential birding customers. I concluded that there would have to be central promotional vehicles that would attract ample attention and traffic, and then funnel that traffic to the innkeepers. Eventually, this led to the dedicated web site www.mainebirdingtrail.com and print advertising.

Nonetheless, I think there is opportunity for inns near major birding landmarks to promote packages on their own. These locations would be along the coast –primarily in southern Maine and near Acadia, and also near puffin-watch boats. It will take awhile for an inn to build a sufficient reputation and marketing effort, though, and I think it would be exceedingly difficult for an inn that is not in a popular birding destination to build business through packaging unless it is part of a larger coordinated effort.

By and large, birders will come when they want to come and go where they want to go. I've tried several packages with partner innkeepers to lure birders into Acadia National Park in winter where there is extraordinarily good birding. Many northern sea ducks and other species winter along the Maine coast, and there are birding tours that visit Yellowstone National Park in winter, so Acadia in winter seemed reasonable. However, until Maine establishes a better national reputation for its winter birding, it is clear that the target market consists of winter birders within the state or in the nearby Boston market, and not distant travelers.



It is also challenging to get out-of-state birders to experience unfamiliar parts of the state. Innkeeper packages along the coast do reasonably well and Baxter State Park is beginning to build some national interest, but areas in western and northern Maine are a tougher sell. I have nearly identical packages I've been doing with partner inns in Millinocket and Greenville for several years. The Millinocket – Baxter State Park package gets more web hits than Moosehead Lake. One of the reasons for creating the Maine Birding Trail was to add value to rural areas by establishing a track record of good birding opportunities and create a means for marketing good accommodations and amenities. It will take time.



Another pleasant discovery: midweek packages can work as well as weekend packages. These birders took advantage of a midweek tour of Baxter State Park last June, offered through the Big Moose Inn in Millinocket. Many birders display a similar pattern, traveling into and out of the area on weekends, booking passage on a puffin tour during the week, and then looking around for other midweek opportunities.

Since the Big Moose Inn enjoys plenty of weekend business, shifting birding tour packages from the weekend (as offered in 2007) to midweek (offered in 2008 and 2009) was welcomed. It also improved the experience for the participants because there is less traffic in Baxter State Park midweek. Almost all of the demand for my private guiding services comes on weekdays.

Coming next month: *What Birders Want*