

# MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

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## BEST NESTS Newsletter Volume 14 – September 2011

*"How did you hear about us?"*

On September 6, I met with Carolann Ouellette and Phil Savignano of the Maine Office of Tourism. While we were swapping stories on the lessons learned along the Maine Birding Trail and other nature-based tourism initiatives, Carolann and Phil shared one lesson that really struck home. One of the most important pieces of marketing information that an innkeeper can ever receive is completely free for the asking: **"How did you hear about us?"** It can be asked in person, on the phone, or as one of the fields to be filled out by customers seeking info and reservations on your web site. And yet, many innkeepers overlook the opportunity to ask this simple question.



The information is crucial. Innkeepers typically spend a lot of money on marketing. Traditional print media includes newspapers, magazines, tourism brochures, and all those flyers that line the rack at visitor centers. Web sites are clearly important, and social media like Facebook and Twitter are rapidly becoming essential marketing tools. There are broad listing opportunities with the state tourism website – VisitMaine.com - and the Maine Innkeepers Association – MaineInns.com. Then, of course, there are the myriad of niche marketing opportunities such as...well, the Maine Birding Trail. Which of these marketing initiatives are working for you? Why not simply ask: *"How did you hear about us?"* Furthermore, the fastest way to learn where new customers could come from is merely to ask the old ones, since it's likely they share similar attributes. A quick survey of customers is probably the fastest and cheapest way to determine how best to spend limited marketing dollars.

But stay alert to trends. Word-of-mouth advertising has always been the most effective marketing tool. Social media is swiftly becoming the new word-of-mouth. Even if you're not seeing immediate impact from Facebook or Twitter, keep at it. The Maine Tourism Association recently informed a Bangor Chamber of Commerce event that social media now accounts for over half the new accommodation bookings in the state. Just look at what's at the top of the mainetourism.com web site. It's Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube.

Now back to a recurrent theme of these newsletters. What experiences are your customers looking for? To know the answer to this question is to know how to create packages that attract more customers. For those who track web traffic statistics, one inexpensive way is to throw as much content onto your web site as possible, then observe which pages or links receive the most attention from site visitors. For instance, are bicyclists interested in staying with you? Include content on bicycling and then watch for hits. If you don't get many, they're not interested. Focus packaging on activities that generate lots of interest.

Nonetheless, having seldom visited content on your web site can still generate traffic. On the Maine Birding Trail web site, the travelogue pages generate few pageviews. I would take them off the site and forget about it, except that there is a lot of weird content on those pages that triggers visits to the site from search engines. For instance, somehow somebody visited the site after typing this into

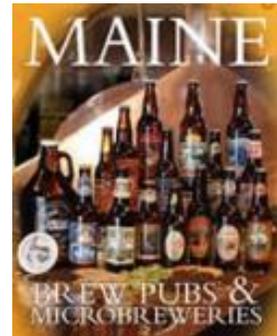
Google: *"white mountains wild river campground how crowded."* It turns out that if you ask Google that question, the Maine Birding Trail web site comes up fourth on the search engine. Over the last month, no less than 420 different combinations of key words generated Maine Birding Trail site traffic via search engines.



Here's an even simpler way to gauge what your guests are interested in. Most innkeepers keep a rack of flyers in the lobby that promote local activities and events.

Count them.

Put out 10 or 20 of each brochure and keep track of which ones disappear. Don't absent-mindedly restock the flyers (or allow them to be restocked) without keeping track of which appear to be the most popular. It might be food or art galleries or amusements or birds. Whatever is most popular becomes a good candidate for packaging. You never know. The Maine Birding Trail web site contains links to other trail web sites. These include the National Scenic Byways Program, the Appalachian Trail, The Northern Forest Canoe Trail, The Maine Island Trail, The Maine Huts and Trails, The Maine Ice Age Trail, The Maine Art Museum Trail, The Maine Wine Trail, and the Maine Beer Trail. Which link did birders click most often over the last year? **Beer.**



The Maine Birding Trail continues to show great promise as a tourism booster in the state. The Maine Office of Tourism has nearly exhausted the most recent printing of 50,000 brochures and is getting ready for a fourth printing. The Office reports that its advertising of the trail has shown remarkable results, including advertising in several national birding magazines, particularly **Audubon**.

**L.L.Bean**  
Freeport, Maine

**This Saturday, September 10, I'll be speaking at the LL Bean Fall Sports Weekend event all about the Maine Birding Trail. Come see for yourself: Saturday, 1pm, in the camping department of the flagship store.**