

# North Dakota Birding Success Stories

Since the turn of this century, some North Dakota community leaders and state officials have initiated programs that promoted birding and created birding attractions. Collectively they have produced the beginning of a birding-based tourism infrastructure in North Dakota, including a number of publications, a network of advertising and promotions, a series of birding drives and a number of birding festivals that offer a wealth of opportunities for birders interested in exploring this region of the Northern Great Plains. And who can resist a state dominated by the wildlife-rich Prairie-Pothole Region and featuring such dramatically different biomes as the Badlands, Turtle Mountains, Missouri River Valley, Pembina Gorge region and Sheyenne Grasslands, plus the 62 national wildlife refuges operated in North Dakota (more than any other state) and the wealth of other public lands we so thoroughly enjoy in the Peace Garden State.

Although some birders will seek out birding locations on their own, we ultimately need to offer some basic information about where to go, how to get there, when to visit and what to expect during field trips during each season. These interests are well-addressed by the new birding drives and birding trails that have been developed by several far-sighted communities. In addition, some communities have developed a weekend event, specifically a birding festival that offers a menu of guided field trips, sometimes coordinated with seminars and keynote presentations that are designed to attract new birders to an area.

While birding-based tourism is still in its infancy in North Dakota, we have initiated a great base to build on with interest spreading from the heart of the state in Bismarck and Steele to other communities including Bottineau, Williston, Devils Lake, Carrington and many others, large and small. Below is a short review of a number of birding-based attractions that have been developed in the state to date with some inside information about who's involved, how they operate and how they are prospering, along with a few helpful hints to increase success rates:

- The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has published an exceptional birding guide, entitled ***Birding North Dakota***, written by Ron Martin and Dan Svingen. This booklet provides a wealth of information about 63 of the top birding locations statewide and represents a significant publication for developing birding-based recreation as well as birding-based tourism in North Dakota. (You can get a free copy of *Birding North Dakota* by calling 701-328-6300.)

NDGFD also offers a variety of other publications about the birds of North Dakota, including small booklets about the state's hawks, sparrows, bluebirds, etc. They also published a series of bird posters that can help to raise awareness about birds in your community, business or classroom. All these publications are great resources from which anyone can benefit.

- A series of **Birding Drives** have been developed by a group of communities in North Dakota, including Steele, Bismarck-Mandan, Drake-Anamoose and Jamestown-Carrington, while Devils Lake and Williston have produced similar birding trails. Birding drives and birding trails provide birders with a map or series of maps that direct people to choice birding sites along the best birding routes. They also offer information about the sponsoring communities, contact information and info about the kinds of birds that people can expect to find within a given season.

Birding drives and trails are considered the best of developments for communities and other organizations to sponsor because they offer year-round access to birding recreation, and they provide potential economic benefits year-round. They are relatively economical to develop (a minimum of about \$10,000, which includes the printing of 10,000 color booklets), and this important infrastructure can be used for decades.

Promoting a birding drive is all-important! While there are some fairly cheap ways of promoting on a local and even statewide level, realistically you must promote a birding drive in the national birding media, in web sites, newsletters and magazines; even classified advertising makes a big difference. Planning and implementing a marketing plan has been a problem for some smaller communities, but has been utilized by larger communities, such as Bismarck-Mandan.

During two of the past three years, the Bismarck-Mandan Convention & Visitors Bureau has advertised the Bismarck-Mandan Birding Drive in such national birding publications as *Birding*, *Birder's World* and *Minnesota Birding*. They expect to resume their ad campaign next year, understanding the need to attract new people each year and to build on past advertising efforts. One concern is that tracking advertising success is very difficult, and this is especially true when it comes to tracking the number of birders who visit a community as a result of advertising. Birders tend to look and act like anyone else who stops at a restaurant or hotel or another business, so somehow, we need to make birders more vocal or at least more identifiable to show that they are an important part of the tourist economy in North Dakota.

Smaller communities (and larger cities too) need to fully understand that marketing promotions must be an annual investment even before they create a birding drive or trail. They must make a concentrated effort to fund an annual marketing plan by organizing an annual fund drive, applying for grants, searching for corporate sponsors or another means of fund-raising. Without adequate annual promotions, any birding attraction will undoubtedly falter or fail.

Birding Drives Dakota, centered in Jamestown and Carrington, advertises extensively in national birding magazines to promote their weekend birding festival. As a result of their advertising, BDD attracts 50 to 112 people to their festival each year.

- Several **Birding Festivals** have been initiated in North Dakota. Some offer free admission while others charge as much as \$350 per person. Birding festivals tend to be short events, usually an elongated weekend affair with guided tours, seminars and a keynote speaker. They require a remarkable amount of work and a healthy budget to plan, promote and, ultimately, to produce the event, which requires as many as 35 people, mostly volunteers.

- ♦ The first festival in the state: Sullys Hill Birding and Nature Festival, centered at Sullys Hill National Game Preserve near Fort Totten and Devils Lake, remains by far the most successful event to date. It is operated by the Friends of Sullys Hill Preserve with the help of the Devils Lake Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and many volunteers, and it features free admission. As many as 2,094 people (in 2005) participate in this annual event, including many local residents. Perhaps an even better gauge of the interest in this festival is the fact that it has attracted as many as 170 out-of-state birders for the weekend agenda, including people from 20 different states and four Canadian provinces! Attendance during other years dating from 2004 back included 806, 1110, 456 and 739 overall.

The support and attendance of local residents is an important element of any such festival because the community should be aware of the wildlife resources in their area, as well as the importance of habitat to wildlife, and the importance of these resources to the local economy; the Sullys Hill festival has obviously caught the attention of the Lake Region populous. A spokesperson noted that people especially enjoy the guided bus tours to area birding sites and the self-guided auto drive through Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

How in the world do they attract so many people? This year, the festival promoters doubled the advertising money spent, advertising in such national birding publications as *Birding*, *Winging It* and *Birdwatcher's Digest*, as well as *AAA Living* magazine. Distributing informational post cards at travel kiosks through North Dakota Tourism's Literature Distribution Program was also an instrumental promotion.

- ♦ Another popular birding festival is the Potholes and Prairies Birding Festival, which centers in Jamestown and Carrington during alternating years. The high visitor total was set during the 2005 event held in Carrington, when 112 birders from 25 states attended. The previous year, about 85 birders registered when the event was held in Jamestown. This festival is operated by a non-profit corporation, Birding Drives Dakota, which includes a board of directors and one part-time paid employee. Each person is charged \$250 or \$275 for the festival activities, which include guided bus tours, four seminars and a keynote speaker. Promoters advertised in four national birding magazines plus *Audubon* magazine to attract birders. Registration funds are spent on promoting and producing the event each year. In addition to registration funds generated, local and regional businesses are benefited by the sales of food, lodging, gasoline, equipment, souvenirs, airline flights, car rentals and more.

- ♦ In addition to being costly to produce and very work intensive, birding festivals are becoming extremely competitive with more than 600 birding festivals nationwide now. Even within the state of North Dakota there is considerable competition, partly due to the fact that all current festivals are scheduled during a few weeks during late spring. But why not a fall event? Fall offers better birding than spring in some areas. Summer is good too, and North Dakota certainly can offer a host of winter rarities with birders even during the coldest months. But birding festivals should not stand alone as a one-weekend wonder; instead, they should really augment or emphasize a birding drive or trail, a refuge or another year-round birding attraction.

- Several **Birding Clubs** have been organized across the state, mostly in the larger cities – Grand Forks, Fargo, Minot, Bismarck-Mandan – and one active club in the smaller town of Edinburg. Like any other birding activity, it takes at least one individual – sometimes more – to organize such a group. Back in 1953, Robert Randall was just such a far-sighted person who was aware of a number of people interested in birds in the capitol city area, so he initiated the Bismarck-Mandan Bird Club more than 50 years ago! Today, the bird club prospers as much as ever, with a core of about 30 birders attending regular meetings, and drawing crowds of up to 130 when special presentations attract the attention of the public. Members and visitors also enjoy monthly field trips to area birding hotspots that are guided by some of the best birders in the state. Any community would be richer to have such a club – some do – and Bob Randall, who recently celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, still enjoys the camaraderie of other birders at Bismarck-Mandan Bird Club activities.

- We are also fortunate to have a statewide birding group, the **North Dakota Birding Society**, that provides statewide birding activities, keeps record about rare birds and population trends and offers information about birding attractions and sites. Hooray for all the people in North Dakota who enjoy birding and birds and who are concerned about the welfare of the lands and varied habitats that birds and other wildlife share.

- In response to the growing interest in birding in the state, **North Dakota Tourism** has helped in a variety of ways to help birding-based tourism to prosper more and more. This year, Tourism produced a full-page color print ad that ran in the 2 largest birding magazines, *WildBird* and *Birder's World*. This impressive advertisement, especially when combined with local and regional ads by Minot, Bismarck-Mandan, Bottineau and Jamestown-Carrington add a great deal of outreach value to the segment of birders who actively travel to enjoy birds and birding activities. Another great birding promotion is found on ND Tourism's web site, where there is a full-blown birding section with information about the birds found at the best birding locations in North Dakota, birding drives, birding festivals and other birding-based attractions around the state. The annual *Travel Guide* also promotes birding opportunities and locations in North Dakota. Also, ND Tourism encourages writers and editors to visit the state to experience and write about birding and other travel-related opportunities in North Dakota. And now, the 10-part Birding-based Tourism Marketing Series has been distributed via email to interested parties across North Dakota and all of this series is available for easy reference on the Tourism website.

The Tourism Grants Program has provided matching funds for several birding attractions during recent years, and North Dakota Tourism provides a Literature Distribution Program to help distribute brochures and similar publications at tourism kiosks at highway rest areas and other locations around the state. A similar program is also available for internet distribution via the online brochure fulfillment program. Overall, North Dakota Tourism's promotions improve and grow each year.

- One popular birding hub, Minot, has no birding festival or birding drive, but it has advertised the region's birding opportunities extensively on a national level for many years. Minot has the distinction of hosting the American Birding Association's national conference *twice*, including the first-ever ABA conference, so it has an impressive reputation as a birding destination. Its proximity to 5 of the best wildlife refuges in the Northern Great Plains make Minot a go-to location for birders – "Why not" says the Minot Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Certainly, Minot has great **potential for developing birding attractions**, along with other North Dakota communities including Dickinson, Bowman, Medora, New Town, Walhalla, Grand Forks, Valley City, Lisbon, Garrison, McClusky, Hazen, Hettinger, Harvey and others, while cities like Williston and Bottineau can easily build on their initial efforts to attract more birding-based tourism. Without question, the greatest North Dakota birding success stories will be produced in years to come, and we can't wait to enjoy all the fun and prosper from the experiences!

## Some North Dakota Birding Successes:

### ***Birding Drives***

**Bismarck-Mandan Birding Drive** - Bismarck and Mandan offers three impressive birding routes that lead you through the Missouri River Valley along the Lewis and Clark Trail including Cross Ranch State Park and Nature Preserve, then into the prairie-pothole realm to McKenzie Slough and Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

*Benefit communities: Bismarck, Mandan, Washburn, McKenzie, Moffit and Sterling; 800-767-3555;*

[www.bismarckmandancvb.com/birding](http://www.bismarckmandancvb.com/birding)

**Steele Birding Drive** - Kidder County has received national exposure as one of the Top 10 Birding Hotspots in North America, and beginning in the town of Steele you can easily explore this remarkable region that features three exceptional national wildlife refuges – Chase Lake, Slade and Long Lake Refuge plus the areas surrounding Horsehead, Kunkel and DeWald Lake and beyond.

*Benefit Communities: Steele, Dawson, Tappen, Pettibone, Robinson and Sterling; 701-475-2133;*

[www.birdingdrives.com/steele](http://www.birdingdrives.com/steele)

**Lake Region Birding Trail** - A circular route leads you on a tour of 11 regional birding sites ranging from Graham's Island State Park to Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge and Sully's Hill National Game Refuge in this bird-rich section of the state where overflowing Devils Lake dominates.

*Benefit communities: Devils Lake, Cando, Leeds, Lakota, Fort Totten and Minnewaukan. 800-233-8048.*

**Central Dakota Birding Drive** - Drake and Anamoose invite you to visit the Souris and Sheyenne River Valleys and explore Lone Tree Wildlife Area, Wintering River National Wildlife Refuge and Sheyenne Lake National Wildlife Refuge along their triad of birding routes.

*Benefit communities: Drake, Anamoose, Butte, Balfour and Karlsruhe. 701-465-3825;*

[www.centraldakotabirdingdrive.com](http://www.centraldakotabirdingdrive.com)

**Birding Drives Dakota** - Anchored in Carrington and Jamestown, visit Arrowwood and Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuges plus Audubon's Alkali Lake Sanctuary, Hawk's Nest Ridge and Lake Juanita among featured sites along the birding routes.

*Benefit Communities: Jamestown, Carrington, Woodworth, Pingree, Medina and Cleveland; 888-921-2473;*

[www.birdingdrives.com](http://www.birdingdrives.com)

**Birding on the Lewis & Clark Trail** - Radiating from Williston, a series of roads that lead to such interesting birding sites as Williston Marsh, Lewis and Clark State Park, the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the Little Missouri National Grasslands and Lake Zahl National Wildlife Refuge.

*Benefit Communities: Williston and Watford City; 800-615-9041.*

## *Birding Festivals*

**7th Annual Sullys Hill Birding & Nature Festival** - *Fort Totten and Devils Lake.* Centering at Sullys Hill National Wildlife Preserve, this festival offers birding presentations and guided field trips to Sullys Hill, Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge, Kelly's Slough National Wildlife Refuge, Grahams Island State Park, Fort Totten State Historic Site and other areas in the Devils Lake region (June 15-18, 2006). *Free* public festival, but tax-deductible contributions help support this birding festival; (800) 233-8048; [www.sullyshillbirdfest.com](http://www.sullyshillbirdfest.com)

**4th Annual Potholes and Prairie Birding Festival** – *Jamestown or Carrington.* Guided tours to Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge, Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge and the Horsehead Lake area in northern Kidder County (operated by Birding Drives Dakota); 4 seminars and a keynote speaker (June 8-11, 2006); \$250 or \$275; (888) 921-2473; <http://www.birdingdrives.com/ppfestival.html>

**3rd Annual Turtle Mountain Birding Festival** - *Bottineau.* Guided birding field trips to J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge and the Turtle Mountains hosted by Minot State University at Bottineau (May 19-21, 2006); \$350 all-inclusive (lodging, meals; transportation, guides); 888-918-5623; <http://www.misu-b.nodak.edu/birding.htm>

## *Birding Clubs*

**North Dakota Birding Society**, Statewide, [www.ndbirdingsociety.com](http://www.ndbirdingsociety.com)

**Bismarck - Mandan Bird Club**, Bismarck – Mandan, [tcellingson@juno.com](mailto:tcellingson@juno.com)

**Grand Forks Birders**, Grand Forks, [davidlambeth58201@yahoo.com](mailto:davidlambeth58201@yahoo.com)

**Souris Valley Birding Club**, Minot, 701- 852-1981

**Fargo – Moorhead Audubon Chapter**, Fargo, [dschneider@audubon.org](mailto:dschneider@audubon.org)

**Rendezvous Bird Club**, Edinburg, [mybros@polarcomm.com](mailto:mybros@polarcomm.com)

## *More Birding Fun*

**North Dakota Tourism** Bismarck, 800-435-5663, [www.ndtourism.com](http://www.ndtourism.com)

**Birding Adventures in North Dakota** <http://ndtourism.com/secondary/viewArticle.asp?ID=289>

**Birding-based Tourism Marketing Series** <http://ndtourism.com/Resources/>

**Minot Birding** Minot, 800-264-2626, [www.visitminot.org](http://www.visitminot.org)

**Birding Kulm** Kulm, 701-647-2451, [www.kulmnd.com/birdingkulm](http://www.kulmnd.com/birdingkulm)

**International Peace Garden** Dunseith, [www.peacegarden.com](http://www.peacegarden.com)

**North Dakota Birding Hotline** 701-355-8554

**Birding North Dakota List Serv** [www.listserv.nodak.edu/archives/nd-birds](http://www.listserv.nodak.edu/archives/nd-birds)

**62 National Wildlife Refuges** Bismarck Regional Office, 701-250-4418, <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/nd1>

**Medina Chase Lake Birding Trail** Medina, 701-486-3369

**Sponsored by the North Dakota Tourism Division**

*North Dakota*  
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