

FLIGHT PATH

TRACKING THE WORK OF THE ABA



Birding Festivals

Large numbers of migrating raptors, passerines, and seabirds—along with the always-strong possibility for a rarity or two—are what draw participants to the Cape May Birding Festival. Cape May, New Jersey; October 2002. © Kevin T. Karlson.



To the east rise the awesome 14,000-foot, snow-capped Sangre de Cristo Mountains, extending as far north as the eye can see. To the west, the picturesque San Juan Mountains roll off deep into the south. At 7,500 feet, I am surrounded by a valley of winter-browned marsh grasses, with small groves of cottonwoods haphazardly scattered throughout. The adjacent, light green, almost gray, tones of sagebrush extend clear to the base of the surrounding mountains. The sun has just descended beyond the westernmost peaks, painting the sky with the lightest of red washes. From somewhere off in the distance, the gurgling calls of Greater Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis tabida*) traverse the evening sky, breaking the stillness of the crisp, tranquil air. The din crescendos as countless skeins of cranes begin descending upon the marsh to find their place in the nighttime roost. Dancing like stringless marionettes, the seemingly gravity-defying performers gradually wind down for a night of rest. I am enchanted by this ancient ritual.

The following morning, a thick fog has filled the valley; and the cranes, roosting just as densely, cover the landscape where I left them the night before. As the haze lifts, so too does the flock, dispersing out of sight for another day of feeding.

Here I am in the San Luis Valley of the Colorado Rocky Mountains at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. This place is a favored staging area for the Greater Sandhill Crane. An estimated 20,000 cranes arrive here in March from their wintering grounds at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. These cranes will spend a few weeks fattening up on grain from many of the local fields, before departing for the summer to their northern breeding grounds.

This annual event is so spectacular that twenty-one years ago a festival was organized in honor of it. It is the reemergence, the echo of an ancient celebration. Painted on a canyon ledge nearby, a 2,000-year-old depiction of a Whooping Crane links different cultures and times to this timeless tradition.

Across America there are hundreds of festivals like this one, taking place throughout the year. The number and popularity of birding festivals have risen sharply over the past decade, as communities realize the economic, educational, and conservation-related benefits of hosting one.

From providing tour guides and workshop leaders to feeding and housing attendees, a highly successful festival requires the cooperation of many businesses and organizations. The modern festival is rarely organized by just one bird club or conservation group. As detailed papers analyzing the economic benefit to a specific community or state proliferate, local chambers of commerce are taking a huge interest and are teaming up with bird clubs and conservation groups to put on fantastic gala events. Even the most weary-eyed warbler watcher can see the economic benefits brought to a community as evidenced by long restaurant lines, hotel signs that read “Welcome, Birders—No Vacancy”, and many consecutive years of ever-increasing attendance. Businesses located near the festival grounds are not the only ones to realize the economic benefits of a birding festival. It is not uncommon to find a vending area set up where artisans are exhibiting their homemade crafts and paintings, where authors are signing books, where optics companies are demonstrating the latest advances in prismatic technology, and where folks like Bubba Hyde of the Monte Vista Crane Festival are

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selling time-tested hamburgers and brats.

Intermixed with the tables of arts and crafts are representatives from all sorts of bird-related organizations who like to talk with anyone who is willing to lend an ear. Federal agencies, state wildlife departments, non-profit organizations, and private tour-companies all have educational material on display. And, often, a raptor-rehabilitation organization will have on hand live birds for up-close views of seldom-seen owls and magnificent hawks. Much can be learned by taking a stroll around the vending area.

Birding festivals are rooted in education. Many of the larger festivals offer daily workshops, lectures, and field trips, designed with every skill level and interest in mind. Led by professional ornithologists, expert birders, and conservationists, workshop topics can range from the simple to the sublime or just simply abstract. Like most festivals, Washington's 9th Annual Grays Harbor Shorebird Festival offered a lecture titled "Introduction to Bird Watching". Unlike most festivals, New Mexico's 16th Annual Festival of the Cranes offered a workshop titled "Avian Spirituality". And then pushing the envelope even further, Texas's 10th Annual Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival offered a workshop titled "Birding in Outer Space".

Field trips can range from an hour-long bird walk around the festival grounds to an all-day event complete with buses, from which knowledgeable guides discuss everything from flora and fauna to local history over state-of-the-art public address systems. Nevada's 7th Annual Spring Wings Bird Festival went so far as to take attendees back to another age by offering a field trip titled



Attendees at the Rio Grande Birding Festival listen to Bill Clark and look at an adult male American Kestrel. Harlingen, Texas; November 2003. © Kevin T. Karlson.

"Birding by Horseback".

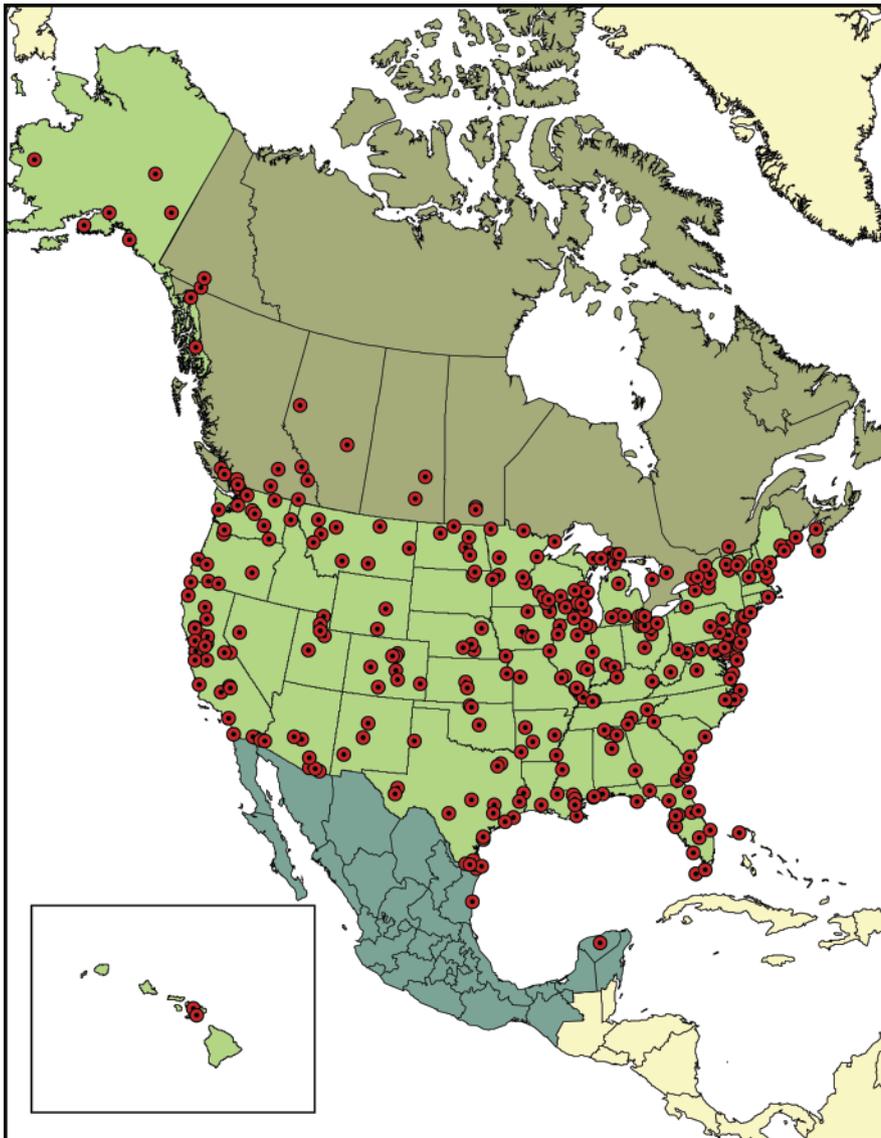
Most festivals are organized to celebrate a group of birds like waterfowl or perhaps a seasonal event like spring migration, but when it comes to throwing a celebration for an individual species, British Columbia takes the cake. During the past few years, this Canadian province has held at least nine recurring, species-specific festivals, honoring the Bald Eagle, Brant, Great Blue Heron, Western Meadowlark, Osprey, Snow Goose, Trumpeter Swan, Western Grebe, and Wood Duck.

Well-established festivals, almost by default, can become an important part of maintaining a region's overall environmental health. Because of the economic benefit and name-recognition that a birding festival can provide to a community, there develops a communal sense of pride and ownership of the birds in the area. Some of the most unlikely candidates find themselves staunch bird advocates after hundreds or in some cases thousands of people descend upon their town for a festival. This unified interest can become the catalyst for protecting or rehabilitating large areas of habitat to ensure healthy bird populations for future festivals.

It is part of the American Birding Association's conservation initiative to promote birding festivals. Throughout the year, ABA staff and representatives can be found passing out information, leading bird walks, and heading up workshops at various festi-



Birding festivals can be big business for small towns such as Lamar, Colorado, home to the annual High Plains Snow Goose Festival. Here, participants gather at dawn to marvel at the passage of tens of thousands of Snow Geese. Lamar, Colorado; February 2004. © David Hartley.



North American birding festivals in the ABA database. *Map by Kei Sochi.*

vals. We maintain a directory of birding festivals on the ABA web site at <www.americanbirding.org/festivals> that can be searched by state, month, or keyword. This directory is extensive, but by no means complete. If the reader is aware of a festival that isn't listed, please bring it to our attention by filling out the form at <www.americanbirding.org/resources/evntfestform.htm>. Also available on the web site is an excellent step-by-step manual titled "How to Organize a Birding or Nature Festival". This essential resource was produced by Nancy Millar,

Director of the McAllen, Texas, Visitors and Convention Bureau and organizer of many highly successful birding festivals in the Rio Grande Valley.

Birding is fun. Festivals are fun. Birding festivals are a blast. They are good for communities, bringing together a wide gamut of local businesses that all work together to achieve a common goal. They are highly educational, loaded with field trips, talks, and workshops. Most importantly, they are good for birds, as communities develop a strong interest and sense of pride in the natural world around them.