

# Attracting Birders

## The Idea

### Birding Stimulates the Economy

Bird watching has been demonstrated to be of significant benefit to local economies.

### I. Falls Sewage Ponds Are An Avian Draw

The International Falls Sewage Lagoons are frequented by various species of interest to birders, especially during spring and fall migration.

### Viewing Opportunities Need Improvement

Viewing opportunities at the Lagoons are limited, but could easily be improved.

## Supporting Details

### Economy

#### Muskegon

The 11,000 acre Muskegon County (Michigan) Wastewater Management System (MCWMS) is especially attractive to migrating waterfowl, waders, and shorebirds. The MCWMS not only protects and enhances habitat for birds, but also provides welcoming access to birders. Visitors need only stop by the MCWMS office to pick up an entry permit, good for two years.

#### Sarasota

Sarasota County Commissioner Christine Robinson said during a 2013 interview that birding ranked higher than golfing in drawing visitors to the County. A 2006 study by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission concluded that wildlife viewing had a yearly economic effect of \$5.25 billion statewide.

#### Willcox

Local Willcox, Arizona, birder Homer Hansen, in a presentation to the City Council quoted statistics from a 2011 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on wildlife associated recreation. "In the 1980s, there was recognition that bird watching had grown with significant economic impact," he said. Between 1980 and 1990 the survey showed a 63-percent increase in wildlife watching activities, namely observing and photographing wildlife. He also said that a 1990 survey by Fortune Magazine showed that "twice as many vacationers preferred to watch birds than play golf." The FWS

survey stated there has been a four-percent increase in the number of birders from 2001 through 2006. A projection has been made that there will be an increase in birders of 40 percent or more between 2008 and 2060. Hansen's presentation told how other states promote birding, including examples of a South Dakota Birding Festival, Alabama's Coastal Birding Trail, and the Great Florida Birding Trail, among others. The Texas Agricultural Extension Service has developed a resource guide entitled, "Establishing a Birding-related Business."

### **Other Jurisdictions**

Kim Eckert, author of *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*, references facilities in other states that annually cater to hundreds, if not thousands, of visiting birders, including the cities of Gilbert, Sierra Vista, Tucson, and Willcox in Arizona; Austin, Corpus Christi, Edinburg, Port Aransas, San Antonio, and Uvalde in Texas; Hoquiam and Ocean Shores in Washington; and Vancouver in British Columbia.

### **Birding Trails**

#### **Definition**

According to the National Audubon Society, birding trails are most often driving trips with stops at special places where birds are most likely to be seen. Each stop describes the habitat, what birds are there in what season, where to look, and how to get from a main road to the location.

With more than 40 million people in America describing themselves as interested in bird watching, birding trails have become big business. More than twenty states now have birding trails. Birding trails and their birds attract visitors to primarily rural locations, which spurs economic development and gives local residents increased incentive to safeguard the natural areas around their communities and region.

#### **Pine to Prairie Birding Trail**

The International Pine to Prairie Birding Trail encompasses NW Minnesota and SE Manitoba. The trail is over 200 miles in length with 45 sites to view birds. These sites offer some of the most spectacular birding in the state, along with scenic beauty and friendly communities. It is a unique partnership between the NW Minnesota communities of Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, Pelican Rapids, Roseau, Thief River Falls and Warroad; Manitoba; participating agencies U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Non-game Wildlife Program, Explore Minnesota Tourism; the birding entities of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, Audubon Minnesota, Lakes Area Birding Club and the Agassiz Chapter of the National Audubon Society.

#### **Heart of the Bog Birding Trail**

Minnesota DNR is proposing to create a similar "Heart of the Bog Birding Trail" across northern Minnesota, roughly from Meadowlands northwest through the Big Falls,

Littlefork, and International Falls area, and westward to Warroad, Red Lake Wildlife Management Area, and the Big Bog Recreation Area.

According to DNR a “birding trail” is a nature tourism strategy for identifying a corridor of desirable locations where nature enthusiasts can enjoy the bird life/ wildlife/ wildflowers/ and natural scenery and even the diversity of smaller creatures like butterflies and dragonflies. Birding trail destinations are typically already in public ownership like county, state, or federal lands. Compatible wildlife viewing and photography opportunities are identified in a manner that will not conflict with existing land uses, safety concerns, and hunting or forestry practices. It requires a collaborative effort of wildlife biologists and managers, foresters, tourism officials, photographers, nature enthusiasts, birders, wildflower enthusiasts, and local and county officials who are looking for ways to diversify and improve the tourist attraction of their communities.

DNR states that wildlife recreational uses like bird watching and nature photography are much bigger tourism attractions in Minnesota than people realize. Wildlife recreation outside of traditional hunting and fishing expenditures exceed \$700,000,000 per year—just in Minnesota! The Heart of the Bog Birding Trail will enhance the ability of communities along its route to share in that economic benefit.

It will be an opportunity to help diversify the economic base of the communities. Resident outdoor enthusiasts, photographers, and hunting and fishing guides might expand their services to accommodate photographers and avid birders on guided excursions to see uncommon resident wildlife, birds, and flowers. The DNR has already had indications that nationally-known photographers would be interested in bringing in groups of nature photographers for workshops where they would experience the nature of the bog country.

### **MN Birding Weekends**

Kim Eckert, a nationally-known birder from Duluth, organizes and leads Minnesota Birding Weekends and Weeks, modestly priced trips in association with the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union. They were in Koochiching County twice during the spring of 2013, with a total of 30 participants.

Minnesota Birding Weekends & Weeks is currently in its 31st season. After 30 years, they have organized a total of 375 Weekends, involving more than 7,200 registrations. They have seen 363 species seen within Minnesota and all 87 Minnesota counties have now been visited.

### **Restricted Access**

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's 2009 Recommended (Sewage) Pond Design document requires the pond area to be “enclosed with an adequate stock tight fence to preclude livestock and discourage trespassing.” They further require all access gates to be provided with locks. Nowhere does it imply that *authorized* access cannot be granted, simply that trespassing or unauthorized access must be discouraged.

## Restricted View

While many of the State's 370 wastewater treatment lagoons can be scanned for birds from adjacent roadways outside the fence line, at International Falls, that is only possible at one location and that only provides a distant view of one of the three ponds.

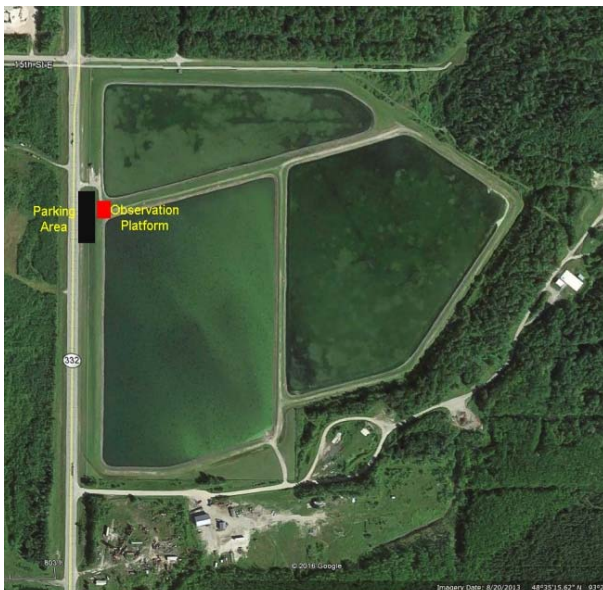
## Options

**Enhance bird viewing opportunities at the International Falls Sewage Lagoons through the construction of a parking area and viewing platform adjacent to County Road 332. Consider installation of a fixed-mount binocular.**

**Explore enhanced viewing options at other locations around the Lagoons through a trail system or other viewing platforms.**

**Develop a permit system should access within the fenced boundary be deemed necessary.**

**Publicize improved viewing options through organizations such as the Audubon Society and MN Ornithologists' Union and existing tourism publications.**



I. Falls Lagoons potential viewing area and similar site in Beaumont Texas.