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Research paper

# Birding blogs as indicators of birdwatcher characteristics and trip preferences: Implications for birding destination planning and development

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## ABSTRACT

Birdwatching has evolved into one of the most popular nature-based recreational activities and a significant niche tourism sector, yet literature on birding destination development has been limited. Through a four phase, mixed-methods approach, coupling thematic content analysis, word frequencies and applying the recreational specialisation framework, 200 birding blogs were analysed from five English speaking countries (UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) to determine birdwatcher characteristics and trip preferences. The study identified seven birder sub-populations, including previously overlooked segments, such as family and couple birdwatchers. The results also illustrate that birding is much more multi-dimensional than previously thought, requiring a strategic planning approach that incorporates all features required to make a birding destination a complete tourist experience. Four figures are provided that demonstrate the necessary components family, couples, friends and individual birdwatchers identify as the most important features of a birding destination.

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## 1. Introduction and research rationale

Birdwatching is the activity of spotting, observing and listening for birds in their natural habitats for the purposes of recreation, wildlife appreciation, education and photography (American Birding Association, 2013; Kellert, 1985; Şekercioğlu, 2002). Birding is a relatively newer tourism niche that first began emerging in academic literature about 25–30 years ago (Applegate & Clark, 1987; Kellert, 1985; Kerlinger, 1992). Nowadays, birding has evolved into a serious leisure activity and viable tourism sector, as it is often considered to be one of the most popular and fastest growing nature-based tourism activities (Carver, 2013; Cordell & Herbert, 2002).

Indeed, Scott and Thigpen (2003) point out that in the two decades following 1982, the number of birders has risen by 225% in the US. Moreover, between 2005 and 2009 it is estimated that 20 million Americans took away-from-home birding trips, with an average stay of 14 days (Robinson, 2012). Although the exact number of international birding trips is hard to determine, it is estimated that there are three million overseas trips taken annually worldwide for the primary purpose of birdwatching (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2008; Center for Responsible Travel,

2014). Such trends reaffirm the significance of birding as a niche tourism sector and also illustrates the need for proper planning, development and marketing of birding destinations. Birdwatching has the potential to provide new development opportunities for many countries, regions and local communities (Şekercioğlu, 2002; Vas, 2013). Moreover, as with other forms of tourism, the birdwatching sector is also very competitive and those destinations that are most prepared, best understand their market and develop specific products and programs to cater to their clientele will likely enjoy the most benefits.

Although the tourism potential of birding can be significant, prior to this article, there were limited studies specifically focused on birding destination planning and development. Previous studies often incorporated birding into either ecotourism planning (Drumm & Moore, 2005; Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998; Hvenegaard, 2002b) or wildlife tourism development (Curtin, 2013; Higginbottom, 2004), or else tried to examine and understand birdwatching through the scope of recreational specialisation (Hvenegaard, 2002a; Lee & Scott, 2004; McFarlane, 1994; Scott & Thigpen, 2003). Although these three approaches provide viable ideas and recommendations for birding destination development, they are also sometimes restrictive, tend to over-generalise or simplify birding, and are not always directly applicable or transferable to specifically birding tourism destination planning. As pointed out by Scott, Ditton, Stoll and Eubanks (2005), utilising the

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recreational specialisation framework, which in large part is based on long surveys and cluster analysis, often provides results, that at best are difficult to apply to managerial scenarios. This study undertook a more nuanced approach by analysing birding blogs from five English-speaking countries (UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and looking at how birders described their trips, to gain a better understanding of what birders really look for in a birdwatching destination. The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) What are the profiles and characteristics of birdwatchers who write birding blogs?
- 2) Can such birders be segmented through the scope of recreational specialisation?
- 3) Do birdwatcher characteristics influence trip preference?
- 4) Does price play a role in trip planning and destination choice?
- 5) Is rich avian wildlife the only important feature of a birding destination?
- 6) If not, what other necessary components/elements should be incorporated into birding destination development?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Birdwatching: size and scope of the activity

Since the 1980's, birdwatching has been steadily gaining popularity, especially in the US where it is often identified as one of the most popular recreational activities (Cordell & Herbert, 2002; Tennessee State Parks, 2013). Indeed, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (hereafter USFWS) tracks trends in birding on a five-year-interval basis (2001, 2006, 2011, etc.) and their last survey indicated that in 2011 there were an estimated 47 million birdwatchers in the US, representing roughly one in five Americans (Carver, 2013). Participation in birding was also greater than in any other wildlife-associated activity (i.e. fishing, hunting and general wildlife-viewing). Such a vast number of birders can also generate considerable economic impacts, as exemplified by American birders whose 2011 total expenditures were \$40.9 billion, which created 666,000 jobs nationwide and contributed \$13 billion in state and federal taxes. Moreover, once the multiplier effect of indirect and induced economic impacts is tabulated, the overall economic output of birdwatching in the US was nearly \$107 billion (Carver, 2013). Certainly these figures can be scrutinised and debated and the methodology of the USFWS can be called into question, especially since the majority (62%) of birders captured by the survey were stay-at-home or backyard birders, making them non-tourists as per the UNWTO definition.

Nevertheless, similar trends illustrating the popularity of birding are also evident in the UK, where it is estimated that there are six million birders (nearly 10% of the population) (Centre for the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2013). Moreover, around 50 tour operators in the UK offer specialised birdwatching tours and together account for 20,000 bookings annually (Centre for the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2013). The expenditures of UK birders is estimated to be €377 million annually (Centre for the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2011).

The popularity of birding is also evident in smaller countries such as the Netherlands, where there are an estimated 40,000 birders and the Dutch Association for the Protection of Birds (Vogelbescherming Nederland) has over 140,000 members (Centre for the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2013). Moreover, Costa Rica heavily relies on birding to drive its tourism industry, as it is estimated that 29% of all tourists visiting this tropical Central American country participate in birding (Solis, 2012). As a result, birding is credited with contributing US\$410 million annually to the Costa Rican economy (Şekercioğlu, 2002).

Lastly birding can also provide positive economic benefits even for a single site or small community. A good example of the local economic impact of birdwatching is the Scottish Seabird Centre. The birding centre was built in North Berwick, Scotland in 2000 after the local community was awarded funding from the National Millennium Lottery (Big Lottery Fund, 2009). This educational centre and bird observatory generates an annual income of £2 million and is directly responsible for 50 jobs in the community and indirectly created another 25 positions (Big Lottery Fund, 2009). These are significant earning and employment opportunities for a small local community. It is also important to note that the investment cost of £3.2 million for developing the birding centre was recovered within two to three years and the centre now operates as a profitable business.

From these examples, it is clear that birding has a strong following, especially in Anglophone countries (Connell, 2009) and can induce significant economic impacts. Undoubtedly such a vast number of birders from Western countries has the tendency to travel, especially to overseas and exotic destinations in pursuit of rare and endemic species (Centre for the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2013), which creates the opportunity for the establishment of many new birding destinations.

### 2.2. Birding destination planning and development

Regardless of what shape, form or exact planning approach birding tourism developers undertake; one certainty that cannot be changed is that tourism is still fundamentally based on a destination (Stange, Brown, Hilbruner & Hawkins, 2011). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (2014) describes a tourism destination as being a central place in the conscious decision and planning process of tourists to take a trip. Thus, a tourism destination can really encompass any geographic scale; from an entire country, to a region, a local community, a protected area or national park, down to a specific and small location, such as a mountain peak or secluded beach. Ultimately the boundaries of tourism destinations might be decided by the nature of the market (Stange, Brown, Hilbruner & Hawkins, 2011), specifically push and pull factors (Kim, Lee & Klenosky, 2003; Klenosky, 2002) or perhaps by the way a destination is marketed (Heath & Wall, 1992). In the context of this research, a birding destination refers to a physical place or geographic location that tourists visit for the purposes of birdwatching.

Although tourism destinations have become a well-discussed and documented topic within academic literature in recent years, papers specifically addressing birding destination planning and development are very limited. Most often birding is placed under the wider umbrella of more encompassing tourism sectors, such as ecotourism. Undoubtedly birding is a viable form of ecotourism; however, it is a very specialised activity and its participants often have different characteristics, motivations and commitment levels from general ecotourists (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998; Hvenegaard, 2002b). Thus, it would be unwise to assume that birding and associated destinations could be developed the same way as other ecotourism activities, such as perhaps whale-watching, dive tourism or mountaineering.

Although such activities might share some common developmental guidelines, they cannot all simply be considered as ecotourism, as even the physical environments where such activities take place are innately different. Specific studies differentiating ecotourism and birdwatching are also limited; however, Lawton (2009) illustrated how birding festival organisers in the US did not identify their events as ecotourism nor did they necessarily oblige by ecotourism guidelines. Similarly, Jackson (2007) pointed out that birding tour operators in the U.K. also did not always work within ecotourism principles. Thus, it is clear that there is no such

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