

A large flock of birds, likely shorebirds, is gathered in a shallow, reflective wetland. The scene is captured during the golden hour of sunset, with a warm, orange glow illuminating the sky and the water's surface. The birds are silhouetted against the bright background, and their reflections are clearly visible in the still water. In the distance, dark, rolling hills or mountains are visible under the fading light. The overall mood is serene and naturalistic.

FLOCKING EFFECT

Phil Norton fled to Bosque del Apache and its birds for renewal.

Based in Denver, where he was supervisor of United States Fish and Wildlife Service programs in three states, Norton often felt caught in a round of endless meetings. The urban streets, covered with dirty snow in winter, didn't lift his spirits.

"Then a friend said I had ignored him—in a big city you don't look at people, you look through people. That did it." Norton pulled his last strings as a supervisor to become manager at the Bosque in New Mexico. A national wildlife refuge on the Rio Grande south of Albuquerque, it is home to 100,000 waterfowl in winter—including most of the 17,000 Sandhill Cranes of the Rocky Mountains and the handful of Endangered Whooping Cranes that migrate with them.

Norton found no paradise. The Bosque had too many roads, and too few trails. Farmers considered it a refuge for pests: Unsatisfied with pickings on the Bosque, cranes pilfered green chili peppers from carefully irrigated fields. "I was appalled at how it had been allowed to deteriorate," Norton says. The bureaucrat

SMALL TOWNS LEARN TO LOVE BIRDERS WHO DESCEND ON "HOT-SPOTS." BY JIM POLSON

in him knew lobbying Washington for improvements was pointless. Phil Norton decided to put on a show.

The Festival of the Cranes, now run jointly by the refuge and the chamber of commerce in nearby Socorro, draws more than 4000 people annually for guided tours, birding classes, an art show, and lectures by the likes of Roger Tory Peterson or George Archibald, founder of the International Crane Foundation. Norton is building what he calls "our audience."







So impressed were the people of Socorro that in 1992 volunteers built five observation decks and blazed three nature trails at the Bosque. Their 13,000 hours of free labor left staff available to lead tours or attract birds. Breaking off corn stalks three feet high gave foraging cranes a clear field of view, but discouraged the more numerous Snow Geese. With a field safely their own, the cranes are less ravenous for chilies. Phil Norton is winning friends, and losing enemies.

"I can't say anything bad about whoever managed the Bosque before," says Mary Gillard, president of the Socorro Chamber of Commerce, "but we hope Phil gets to stay here forever."

Norton has tapped into—and is helping propel—a dramatic change in the way North Americans view wildlife, one that has profound implications for conservation. Community festivals centered on bird watching have fledged throughout the continent—from Virginia's Eastern Shore to the Washington coast, from steamy south Texas to the northern shore of Lake Erie. Alaska has at least two. They are vivid examples of a deeper trend.

Ecotourism in North America, although not as lavishly promoted as birding in Belize or safaris through the Kalahari, grew rapidly over the past decade. The number of Americans who travel to look at wildlife (eight in ten say they watch birds) rose 63 percent in the 1980s. By 1990, they totaled 37.5 million and outnumbered hunters two to one, according to a survey by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service and the Bureau of the Census. By other estimates, 80,000 visitors follow mid-continent cranes each spring to the National Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary and other staging areas along

Nebraska's Platte River. A hundred thousand visitors, ranging from serious birders to parents with children, track migrants at Cape May, New Jersey. As exhausted songbirds alight in the woods of Point Pelee, Ontario, after crossing Lake Erie, they're gawked at by an audience that reaches 57,000 each year.

Increasingly, communing with nature is a commodity, touted like pork bellies or timber from Douglas firs



The Elegant Trogon can be found in Arizona, with its wide variety of avifauna. Left, birders scout riparian habitat near Sierra Verde for rare species.

How much money can birders add to a local economy? How many of them can the birds withstand? The answers "have profound implications for conservation," says Paul Kerlinger, director of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory. The questions are by nature local, and the answers must be found locally as well.

As manager of mile-high Ramsey Canyon, a 300-acre

Arizona sanctuary with 15 species of rarely glimpsed hummingbirds, Tom Woods initially reacted with alarm when businessmen in nearby Sierra Vista proposed a hummingbird festival. Even without promotion, "bird watchers are coming here in droves," he says—so many that heavy use gouges trails. Some think nothing of trampling wildflowers in pursuit of a Magnificent Hummingbird.

But Woods reconsidered the proposal. His solution: Throw in with the festival. Offer classes. Charter vans. Take birders somewhere *other* than Ramsey Canyon.

From Sierra Vista, safaris scatter in four directions, seeking such rarities as brightly plumaged Elegant Trogons, magnificent Gray Hawks, reclusive Burrowing Owls, or elusive Crescent-chested Warblers. Each is found in a different reserve. To Woods, this is success—six in every ten festival visitors

never directly set foot in Ramsey Canyon. "We could double the size of the festival with no problem."

That would please Sierra Vista's businessmen. Nature tourists who linger overnight in Sierra Vista for craft fairs or live music, dawn outings or midnight owl prowls, spent up to \$63 a day—nearly ten times as much as did day trippers from nearby Tucson, according to a 1992

survey by economists from the University of Arizona. Kerlinger, who has completed three studies on the economic impact of birding and is pursuing 18 more, estimates that active birders spend \$1850 a year in their pursuit—70 percent of



Green Kingfisher is a prize find at the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (right) near Sierra Vista.

it travel. A survey of American Birding Association members suggested an even higher figure: \$3400. At home and away, nature watchers spend \$18 billion, according to the survey by federal wildlife and census researchers.

Small town businesses increasingly covet this largess. Many choice birding spots are in economically depressed rural areas of the West and Midwest. Even restaurateurs and innkeepers accustomed to tourism have found that the mix of migrating birds and their followers fill a seasonal gap between summer people and hunters.

Conservationists see affirmation that nature has economic value, and anticipate ecotourism can build political and financial support to preserve habitat—especially for songbirds that have lacked the influential constituency of game birds. "Good environmental policy is good economic policy," says Jim Pissot, Washington state director for the National Audubon Society.

But, Pissot has learned in an extreme example, environmental policy must be refined locally—and diplomatically. Pissot steps firmly and talks softly as he nurtures the Grays Harbor Shorebird

Celebration in Hoquiam, Washington. Hundreds of loggers and millworkers are out of work in Hoquiam, at least in part because of a federal moratorium on logging secured by Audubon and other conservation groups to protect the (Northern) Spotted Owl. Three years ago, loggers blocked all roads into Hoquiam when a conservationist spoke at the local library. When Pissot comes to town, he doesn't flash his business card openly.

Pissot goes to Hoquiam because of shorebirds such as dowitchers and sandpipers. Each April, en route from South America to breed in Canada and Alaska, they gorge by the millions in the salt marshes of Grays Harbor—the last major feeding stop before Prince William Sound, 1300 miles north. Dredging destroyed half of the Grays Harbor marshes before biologists discovered their importance. Pissot argues that ecotourism can help stabilize community's economy, and that eventually locals may help restore bird habitat. At best, years of delicate diplomacy may be required—local politicians won't yet be seen with Pissot in public.

In Sierra Vista, The Nature Conservancy campaigned openly this year, handing out *Ecotourism Pays* buttons to bird watchers. Ecotourism can never pay as well as the area's largest employer, Ft. Huachuca army base. But Woods says that when a thousand button-bedecked birders flocked into restaurants, motels, camera shops, and gas stations on a normally slow August weekend, merchants noticed. When Woods calls for donations to help maintain his trails, he expects businesses to open their checkbooks.

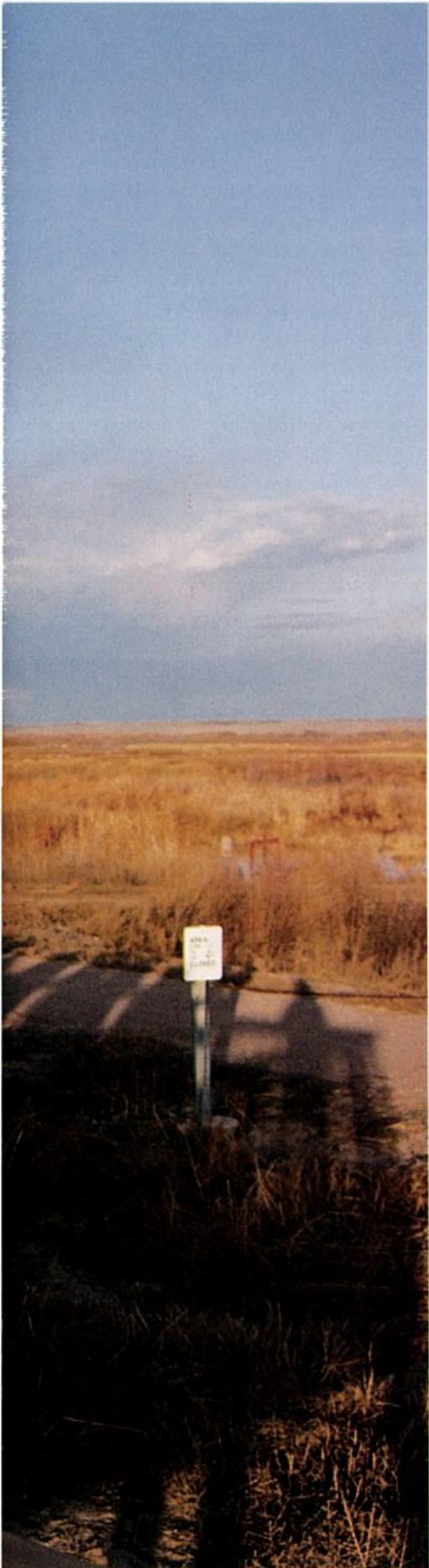
So long as the money goes to local conservation, all may be fine—but organizers beware of sending donations to causes based elsewhere. The Festival





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of the Cranes donated part of its proceeds to a national conservation group several years ago. Furious farmers and real estate brokers—who saw the money supporting more federal control of land in New Mexico—quit the chamber of commerce, said president Gillard. Subsequently, the festival sent its check to the Central New Mexico Audubon Society, which runs a nature center in Santa Fe. No one objected, though some former members are so steamed they may never rejoin, Gillard said.

Ecotourism's explosive growth may highlight a darker trend in the relationship between Americans and nature. Response to a 1992 ethics survey by the American Birding Association chilled many. *Winging It*, the ABA newsletter, asked readers whether they would knowingly trespass to examine the nest of an Endangered Kirtland's Warbler. More than half, 53 percent, said they would break the law and disturb the nest—interference that could be fatal to offspring. Editor Cindy Lippincott called the results “incredibly discouraging.”

How can some of the most active birders care so little for the birds themselves? The same federal survey that found 14 million more ecotourists in 1990 than in 1980 is suggestive. Researchers also found that the number of backyard and neighborhood nature lovers fell by 15 million in the 1980s. If so, then increasingly suburban America must be ignoring the wildlife habitat its denizens can most immediately control—their own back yards.

Arguably, nature's most profound lessons can be learned at close hand. Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond was only a mile outside of Concord, Massachusetts. Ralph Waldo Emerson's

Nature stemmed from a revelation that struck him while crossing the town common at midnight.

By pursuing wildlife as a commodity to be listed or photographed, rather than as a respected co-inhabitant, are birders and others simply looking through, rather than at, nature? The question has profound implications.

Many advocates of ecotourism believe education will address these concerns. The Hummer/Bird Celebration in Rockport, Texas, grew out of a backyard epiphany in 1988, and its emphasis remains there. “We were out birding one day—we're not lister types, we just like to look,” recalls Jesse Grantham, then Texas sanctuary manager for the National Audubon Society and currently the Society's assistant manager for sanctuaries (west).



Birders and others interested in wildlife come to the Festival of the Cranes at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. Above, a Sandhill Crane.

Grantham and his companion, Betty Baker, discovered hundreds of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds swarming a feeder under the eaves of a suburban house. From research done decades earlier by the late Connie Hagar, a local motel owner and amateur ornithologist, they knew that a broad band of oak motte—an oak canopy shading native flowers that feed the migrating hummingbirds—narrows to a thin strip along the Texas coast, then vanishes in desert south of Rockport. For thousands of years, this had been the hummers' last chance for fuel until they were hundreds of miles into Mexico. Yet to Grantham, the birds he saw were *too* desperate for food: “These hummingbirds had evolved with food and plenty of places to rest. Here we had all these birds in a feeding frenzy because thousands of acres were barren as a winter wheat field. I said, ‘How are we ever going to stop this?’ ”

Festival of the Cranes ~ Bosque Del Apache Nat'l Wildlife Refuge Socorro, New Mexico

When: November

What: The refuge is the wintering grounds for Rocky Mountain Sandhill Cranes, and a small group of Whooping Cranes raised by "foster parent" Sandhills. Also on tap are large numbers of wintering Snow Geese, some Ross' and Canadian, 14 species of ducks, and wintering Bald Eagles.

Events: Guided tours of the refuge, guest speakers, and bird artists.



Hummer/Bird Celebration ~ Rockport-Fulton, Texas

When: September

What: The spectacular fall migration of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds passes through this area, bringing hundreds of hummers to feeders and gardens in the community. Nearby Aransas National Wildlife Refuge also has abundant fall shorebird migration.

Events: Speakers and programs include photographers, conservation specialists, and ornithologists. Topics range from how to landscape for hummingbirds to banding demonstrations.

Grays Harbor Shorebird Celebration ~ Hoquiam, Washington

When: April

What: Spring migration staging area attracts thousands of shorebirds headed for Canada and Alaska.

Events: Shuttle buses to viewing points during peak viewing times. Birds visible from parking lot (designated for handicapped); birders can walk to other spots. Guides available. Classes on life histories, shorebird identification.

Wings Over the Platte ~ Grand Island, Nebraska

When: March

What: Spring staging area for Sandhill and Whooping cranes migrating north.

Events: Crane tours and seminars. Topics include the importance of the Platte River, wetlands conservation, and crane lore.

Southwest Wings Great Birding Festival ~ Sierra Vista, Arizona

When: August

What: A wide range of habitat—mountain canyons to riparian—in bird-rich southeast Arizona. From owls to hummingbirds to the Elegant Trogon, Arizona hosts a diverse avian ecology that includes species usually found in Mexico.

Events: Guided hikes, speakers, and workshops.

Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival ~ Homer, Alaska

When: May

What: Staging area for Arctic-bound birds during spring migration.

Events: Arts and crafts show, guided bird walks, life history and ecology lectures, observation posts and field trips.

Festival of the Birds ~ Pt. Pelee National Park, Ontario

When: May

What: Spring fallout as warblers and other passerines cross a chilly Lake Erie on their migration to northern forests.

Events: Birding hikes, educational and community activities.

Baker's no-nonsense answer was to start in Rockport's backyards. Already at work on a birder's guide and checklist for the local chamber of commerce, she persuaded the chamber to sponsor a Ruby-throated festival as a tourist attraction. From there, setting out hummingbird feeders became a matter of civic pride. She won over the garden club and persuaded nurseries to stock salvia and other native flowering shrubs. At each Hummer/Bird Celebration, Baker and others taught residents and interested visitors how to landscape with native plants. She persuaded the Texas Highway Department to let the garden club and the nurseries plant a demonstration garden at the Rockport rest stop. She demanded the festival set aside money for conservation, and sought additional grants. By February 1994, The Friends of Connie Hagar Inc. had raised nearly enough to buy the ruins of his motel. Baker wants to replant it as a hummingbird sanctuary.

"One thing just adds to another," she says. She built a political constituency. When town leaders proposed an ordinance requiring that property owners mow untended oak motte ("These people around here are scared of snakes. They didn't care about the birds."), she turned out 200 allies in protest. The council struck a compromise. Her next targets are excursion boats to nearby Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, which she says earn millions of dollars showing Endangered Whooping Cranes to tourists, but contribute nothing to the refuge—except erosion from their wakes. "[Betty] is sweet, but not necessarily gentle," says Nancy Newfield, an ornithologist who has demonstrated bird banding at the festival.

"I hope if somebody starts one of these things, they know there's a danger in it, a real danger," Betty Baker says. "That's when they're run by business people who only see the dollars." That is, make sure somebody in charge is looking at nature, not through it. ♣

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