

GUIDED BIRDING TOURS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MARKET, IMPORTANT TOUR PARAMETERS, AND PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

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Abstract: Demographic and psychographic trends favor the future growth in the number of birders and their associated expenditures. Highly-committed birders, a subset of the larger bird watching population, are the target market for specialized guided birding tours marketed by commercial and non-profit entities. One non-profit entity, the Kalamazoo Nature Center (KNC), offers a limited number of guided birding tours to service current members, attract new members, and support its programs. With an eye towards increasing the number of participants on its current tours and potentially increasing the number of future tours, a study of regional (Great Lakes), national, and international birding tours offered by commercial and non-profit entities was conducted. Specifically, this study examined guided birding tours in terms of a number of parameters important to birders, including group size, guide experience, time spent birding, cost, services provided, and tour operator size and length of operation. This paper will present findings on those parameters as well as the participant demographics on the examined birding tours.

Introduction

Birding is a popular outdoor recreation activity in the U.S., which offers a setting for participants to interact with nature and with fellow birders, friends, and family members (Leo 1987). For some, it also provides a medium for competition in the sport of listing sighted birds. This paper will examine the participation and dollars involved in this popular, growing outdoor recreation activity, guided birding tours which appeal to a specialized subset of birders, important parameters in assessing birding tours, and international, domestic, and regional birding tours based on these parameters.

Birding: A Popular Outdoor Recreation Activity in the U.S.

Wildlife watching involves millions of people and generates billions of dollars in expenditures in the U.S. alone. According to the most recent 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, more than 66 million US residents, or 31% of the U.S. population 16 years old and older, fed, photographed and observed wildlife. They spent \$38.4 billion doing so, which equaled an average of \$738 per spender. 63 million people participated residentially or within one mile of their homes. Activities included feeding birds and other wildlife (54 million), observing wildlife (over 42 million people), photographing wildlife (14 million), and managing plantings for the primary purpose of benefiting wildlife (13 million). One-third of all wildlife watchers, or nearly 22 million people, took trips away from their homes for the primary purpose of participating in wildlife-watching recreation. In 2001, wildlife watchers spent \$8.1 billion on these trips, with food and lodging, transportation, and other trip costs such as land use fees and equipment rental respectively accounting for \$4.8 billion, nearly \$2.6 billion, and \$.75 billion of these costs (U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Department of Commerce 2002).

Wild birds in particular are the focus of much wildlife watching. In 2001, nearly 46 million of all wildlife watchers (69%) were wild bird observers. They spent almost 5.5 billion total days watching wild birds, which predominantly occurred at their residences (5.2 billion days). Still many traveled to observe birds. More than 18 million individuals took trips to observe, photograph, or feed birds, with 5.8 million traveling out-of-state. Of these out-of-state travelers, nearly 3.9 million viewed songbirds, 4 million viewed birds of prey, 4.3 million viewed waterfowl, 3.2 million viewed other waterbirds (i.e. shorebirds, herons), and 2.2 million observed other birds (i.e. pheasants, turkeys, etc.) (U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Department of Commerce 2002).

Not surprisingly, birding has become an economically important activity to states that host a large number and/or rare bird species. For instance, birders spend \$400 million annually in Texas, which hosts 600 bird species and which has

aggressively developed its bird-oriented tourism. In 1995, it established the 624-mile Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, with marked birding sites and viewing areas, some of which have boardwalks, kiosks, and observation platforms (Barlow 1997; Crable 2001). The trail is the basis for the Great Texas Birding Classic, where teams from around the U.S. spend a week competing to spot the most bird species (Laird 1997). Birders' expenditures in areas near specific birding attractions are economically important too. A study of Texas' Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, High Island Audubon Sanctuaries and the Rockport Hummer/Bird Celebration found that out-of-state visitors spent \$168.3 million in a single year, generating a greater economic impact in the Rio Grande Valley than the citrus industry (Barlow 1997). Similarly, a Kirtland's Warbler festival brought 7,000 people who each spent \$50 a day on food, accommodations, and souvenirs to Mio, Michigan, the gateway town to the Kirtland's Warbler habitat in the Huron-Manistee National Forest where the per capita income is \$8,000 (Miller 1995). Birding tends to generate higher revenues per visitor than other forms of rural tourism as it necessitates overnight stays, since the best time to see birds is in the early morning and late afternoon (Leones, Colby, and Crandall 1998).

Birders include people from a wide range of commitment levels and income and age groups. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service categorizes birders as 1) highly committed birders, who watch regularly, use a field guide, keep a life list of birds seen and are able to identify a hundred or more species of birds; 2) interested birders, who are able to identify at least 40 species; and 3) casual watchers (Leo 1987). Residential bird watchers, who may fit any of these three categories, include both higher-income suburbanites who watch A&E and The Discovery Channel, as well as a larger, less-affluent group of customers who watch The Nashville Network and The Family Channel. Highly committed birders, most of whom would be both nonresidential and residential birders, skew toward higher income, age, and education levels. The American Birding Association (ABA) counts among its members the most committed birders, as 39% of its 14,000 members in 1994 had spent at least 51 days birding in the past year. 62% of members had family incomes over \$50,000. Their average age was 53 years (Dickinson 1996), a

figure that mirrors recent USDA Forest Service survey findings (Parker and Carpenter 2003). Surveys conducted at particular birding sites in the U.S. and Canada illustrate that birders are more educated and affluent than the general population (Hvenegaard, Butler, and Krystofiak 1989; Leones, Colby, and Crandall 1998).

Certain demographic and psychographic trends favor the future growth of birding as an activity and form of tourism. Two important market segments, baby boomers and seniors, have fueled upward trends in nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation, including birding. A Values and Lifestyles (VALS) survey conducted by Stanford Research International found that 30 million of the total 75 million American "baby boomers" born between 1945 and 1963 have psychographic characteristics emphasizing environmental concern, social awareness, a global view and personal growth. These "green" consumers, who are well-traveled, well-educated, professional, and have high income levels, are considered the core of the U.S. ecotourism market, of which bird-related tourism is a subset (Center for Tourism Policy Studies 1994). The aging of populations in advanced industrialized countries such as the U.S. also favors increased participation in soft adventure activities such as birding. As the median age of the population increases, active, dangerous recreational activities like skiing and rock climbing will become less attractive, while appreciative and passive outdoor recreational activities like bird watching, pleasure walking, pleasure driving, and sightseeing will become more popular. Out of all the forms of nature travel, "soft" adventure or "soft" ecotourism which most bird-oriented tourism can be categorized as will grow most from the aging population and its increasing demand to have contact with nature. Seniors are also a key market for bird tourism, given their disposable income and leisure time (Eagles 1995). While one estimate claiming that the number of American birders will grow to 127.8 million by the year 2050 (Hamilton 1997) may be overstated, demographic and psychographic factors will favor the growth of birding.

Guided Birding Tours

While the number of current birders is large and is expected to grow due to the aforementioned psychographic and demographic trends, the market

for guided birding tours is a smaller, specialized subset of the larger bird watching population. Mary Beacom Bowers, editor of *Birdwatcher's Digest*, estimates the potential market of "really hard-core birders who will pay money to travel to see new birds" is nine to ten million (Field 1992), not the significantly larger number of casual, residential birders. The hard-core birders may join specialized bird tours that cost thousands of dollars and involve traveling far off the beaten track, birding from daybreak into the evening in order to see nocturnals, and staying in modest accommodations available near where desired life-list birds can be seen (Field 1992).

To meet the demand of these highly committed birders, commercial and non-profit entities offer guided birding tours. The nature tourism industry, of which birding tourism is a subset, is dominated by large operators. The 35 largest outbound nature tour operators had 90% of the market. The five largest operators alone held 40% of the total market. Similarly, the market for specialized birding trips is currently dominated by three U.S.-based commercial operators: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT), Field Guides Incorporated, and Wings (Field 1992). In addition to the commercial operators, non-profit organizations, which include national organizations such as the ABA and the National Audubon Society, affiliated state Audubon organizations, and local zoos, nature centers, and museums, offer birding tours. These tours are offered to reward key supporters, service current members, attract new members, and support the institutions' activities through donations built into the tour fee. The birding tours offered by non-profit entities may have been developed in-house as in the case of larger institutions like the Audubon Society or by commercial entities. VENT has organized tours for non-profits like The Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund, the National Audubon Society, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, the ABA, local Audubon clubs and birding clubs, and Conservation International (Victor Emanuel Nature Tours 2001b). Given these linkages, commercial and non-profit birding tour operators cannot be considered direct competitors. Local non-profits, which have geographically localized memberships and customer bases for birding, likewise do not directly compete with commercial

operators that draw from a broad national and international market.

One local non-profit entity, the Kalamazoo Nature Center (KNC), offers approximately two to three guided birding tours per year. Tours provide a service to current members, which help support KNC development efforts; attract new members, as any non-members tour participants get a KNC membership; and support its Community Wildlife program through a tax-deductible donation. The tours are directly related to the KNC's mission, which is to inspire people to care for the environment by providing experiences that lead them to understand their connection to the natural world. The KNC has both developed its tours in-house as well as contracted through commercial operators. These tours, which are predominantly patronized by members of the KNC and/or the local Audubon chapter, have had a small set of loyal, repeat customers. When the KNC offers a tour, notice of that tour goes out to an approximately 75-person mailing list made up of past KNC tour clients and other self-identified interested birders. This mailing is sent to a fraction of the KNC's 3300-3500 members, the vast majority of whom have never gone on one of its birding tours and may not even be aware the KNC offers them. The KNC would like to expand its tour clientele, in part because the average age of its current birding tour participants is 68 years. From the KNC tour leader's and tour participants' past experiences, by the age of 75 many people find tour-associated walking and hiking for more than a mile very difficult.

With an eye towards increasing the number of participants on currently offered tours and potentially increasing the number of future tours, the KNC was interested in comparing its tours to those of commercial and non-profit entities in terms of a number of parameters important to birders. For instance while birders' proclivity to pay thousands of dollars for specialized, expert-led guided birding tours to see particular species is well-known, cost is still a factor when choosing a tour. But when looking at various birding tour operators' brochures, one cannot quickly assess the entire tour cost since the services included in the advertised tour prices vary. Some tours may include all meals, transportation costs to/from the

tour beginning and ending points, and all tips, but many do not include all of those services. As a result, the out-of-pocket expenses would increase the overall trip costs. To assess what other commercial and non-profit tours offered, as well as to evaluate commercial operators that may be used for future KNC tours, a purposive sample of commercial and non-profit tour operators was initially identified by the KNC's birding tour organizer/leader as industry-dominant or regionally-important. Additional commercial and non-profit operators were added to supplement the sample. In total, information on 52 regional (Great Lakes), continental U.S., and international¹ birding tours offered by 16 commercial and 8 non-profit operators was collected by examining brochures/printed marketing literature, web sites, and interviewing tour leaders and operator representatives.² Important parameters used to compare birding tours were identified from the literature, by the author, and by the KNC's birding tour organizer/leader. Information collected on these birding tour parameters is detailed below.

Birding Tour Parameters

Size of group factors

Keeping the size of the group small is important to birders as it will generally ensure that all clients will have a window seat on the ground transportation provided. Smaller groups also mean shorter lines to the spotting scope (Dunne 2001) and lower leader-to-client ratios which allow "everyone to pick the expert's brains." Unlike average tours, where there will be one expert for two bus loads of guests, luxury bird-watching trips provide "greater access to experts and their degree of expertise" (Field 1992). In addition to being desired by birders, small group size is important in limiting the environmental impact of this tourism. The National Audubon Society's Travel Ethic for Environmental Responsible Travel recommends that the leader-to-group size ratio never exceeds one to 25, and should be a lower one to ten,

¹ Including Hawaii and Alaska, given their higher costs than continental U.S. destinations

² Undergraduate students enrolled in the course, Geography of Travel and Tourism, during the Winter 2002 Semester assisted in collecting data on birding tours as part of their learning experience and class research.

depending on the fragility of the habitat (National Audubon Society 1995).

All except one of the 49 tours providing information on the number of tour participants kept them below the Audubon-recommended ratio for environmentally-responsible travel. The two tours with group sizes exceeding 20 participants were birding-oriented cruises. Keeping the group sizes small also facilitates each participant getting a window seat. Of the 33 tours that provided information on window seats, 25 noted that all participants would have a window seat. Six of the tours had the policy of rotating window seats among clients. Four other tours did not provide ground transportation, either requiring that participants use their own cars or carpool or that they walk from the accommodations used for the entirety of the tour. In addition to limiting group size, Field Guides and VENT used two 15-passenger vans if the group size exceeded seven and approached the specified maximum group size of 14 or 16 so that each client would have a window seat. The all-important leader-to-client ratios were small, with an average ratio of one leader to nine clients, thus facilitating client access to leader expertise. In particular, Field Guides noted it would add a second guide as tour size warrants for those tours that allowed up to 16 clients.

Tour leader experience

Tour leader experience in leading tours, with the visited habitats, and on the offered itineraries is crucial to helping guests achieve their primary goal of seeing birds. According to top bird lister Cliff Pollard, "A good (leader) can get you to see the bird really quickly, but can also handle the non-birding parts of the trip" (Koeppel 2000). Experienced leaders can help sort out look-alike shorebirds or the variety of different flycatchers as they are familiar with bird songs, calls, and subtle differences in plumage (Tveten and Tveten 1998). In dense forested habitats, the experience of the guide is vital. Limited guide experience and knowledge have affected the development of ecotourism in the Amazon, since about 70% of tourists to the Amazon want to see wildlife, but in the dense Amazon they may not see the rare birds they traveled thousands of miles and spent thousands of dollars for. Guides who may know less than the foreign amateur bird watchers contribute to this problem (Schemo 1999). The

National Audubon Society's Travel Ethic for Environmental Responsible Travel states that naturalist-leaders should have a solid background in the various habitats to be visited so as to answer visitors' questions on the flora and fauna, present relevant conservation issues, and limit visitors' impacts (National Audubon Society 1995).

In our evaluated tours, the tour leaders' years of guiding experience were generally extensive. Over 31% of tours indicated that the leader had 10-15 years of guiding experience, while 20% and 11.4% respectively had leaders with 16-20 and 21-25 years of experience. A large 25.7% of tours said the leader had over 25 years of leading tours (not just birding). Familiarity with the visited region was harder to identify and quantify, but nonetheless was an important part of companies justifying tour quality. Highlighted information included that a leader was native to, had lived for an extensive period of time, or had conducted graduate and post-graduate research in the region.

Emphasis on birding vs. other activities

Top bird listers and guiding experts recommend that individuals considering birding tours ensure that their interests and expectations about the amount of birding match that in a particular tour. Some tours concentrate solely on birds and seeing as many species as possible, while others focus on birds and broader ecological and/or cultural themes (Dunne 2001). The amount of time spent birding versus that spent on other guided activities and free time can similarly vary. Tours that emphasize seeing as many species as possible may mean late dinners and birding for nocturnals afterwards. According to Shirley Anderson, Vice-President of VENT, most of the company's customers are interested in birds only, not in free time. "They're up and in the field by daybreak and out there until lunch. They bird all afternoon, have dinner, and then go back out for the nocturnals. On a typical international trip, they'll do this for 18-24 days in a row." Anderson recommended that people should not take their trips unless they were interested in birds (Field 1992).

As most of the tours evaluated were designed for intense birders, clients should have a primary interest in birds. Over half of the tours surveyed said that birding took place all day. For these tours, almost no time was dedicated to other

guided activities or free time. Several tours mentioned occasional non-birding activities specific to the visited regions such as other wildlife watching, geology, or indigenous culture. However, the focus of the evaluated tours was overwhelmingly birding. The Asia-specialist KingBird Tours explicitly noted the importance of birding on its tours, so that potential customers would make an informed decision. It stated, "KingBird Tours exists to provide birding tours that cater to those whose main interest is to see as many of the birds as possible in the area covered. The itineraries are planned for birding to occupy most of the daylight hours of the tour, with some occasional owling as well...The main question to ask yourself when considering a KingBird tour is whether you'll be happy doing little else but birding. Your level of birding expertise is irrelevant. Our tour members range in birding experience from nearly none to extensive, with most folks falling in between. What they all share, however, is a keen interest in continuous birding. If you are not that keen, such intense birding can be boring. We've had a number of not so keen birders, and even non-birders on our tours and most were happy they came. However, those who enjoyed the experience were those who were able to derive pleasure from looking for and at birds all day, every day." While KingBird did allow individual clients to opt out of birding, it was geared towards continuous birding with rest days averaging a half-day per week on its 24-day tours, noting, "Anyone may simply take a day off from birding and relax or check out the sights or shop. We will be happy to assist any of the tour members in alternate activities...The daily birdwatch goes on regardless" (KingBird Tours n.d.).

Cost of Tour/Level of Services

While organized birding tours may present savings on a bird-for-the buck basis relative to birding independently, the cost of tours, which can run into thousands of dollars, is still a consideration in making trip decisions. Transportation costs are one factor affecting the final tour cost since some companies include transportation from the U.S., while others price them from an in-country airport/starting point. While Hector Ceballos-Lascurain wrote that birding tours to developing world destinations usually cost less than \$200 per person per day, which suggested that these tours did not featuring luxury accommodations but

rather spent clients' money on seeing birds, these prices excluded international airfare costs (Ceballos-Lascurain 1998). Likewise, some companies don't include meals for the first and last day of the tour, while others are all-inclusive and include all meals, tips, admission fees, ground transportation, etc. (Dunne 2001). In order to calculate total costs of evaluated tours, the advertised cost of a tour was obtained. Then the following estimated costs were added in if they were not included: 1) transportation costs to the starting point/from the ending point (assuming customers came from Kalamazoo), 2) any meals, 3) guide/escort tips, and 4) admission/entry fees. Then to compare tours of varying lengths, the average cost/day was calculated for our 23 international, 20 domestic, and 9 Great Lakes regional birding tours, which equaled \$326.86, \$260.54, and \$192.84 respectively.

Transportation costs to the tour starting point and from the tour ending point needed to be added for most tours. 49 out of the 52 examined tours did not include transportation costs to reach the tour. Only one tour examined, Michigan Audubon's Eastern Europe tour, included transportation to an overseas destination (from Detroit). In contrast to other international or domestic tours offered by operators with a geographically diverse customer base, only Michigan Audubon, whose members and tour customers predominantly came from Michigan, could logically offer transportation from a single location its customers could access. As such, it could negotiate a lower group airfare from Detroit to a more expensive European destination than travelers could find on their own. However, not all of Michigan Audubon's tours offered transportation from Michigan. Its Southeast Arizona one did not, in order to give customers the flexibility to use frequent flier miles, leisurely drive, and/or stay longer in the surrounding area, visit relatives or friends, or participate in programs such as Elderhostel.

Tours varied in the level of services included. Some provided all meals during the tour, while others only included those meals specified in the itinerary. All except one tour included admission and entry fees in the tour price. This tour, which had the lowest cost per day, did not include admission or ground transportation to Point Pelee Provincial Park. All tours did include accommodations,

which in approximately 70% of the evaluated tours were in hotels or motels, rather than in resource-based ecolodges or intimate, adventure-type accommodations that ecotourists are interested in (Wight 1997). Birding tours provide comfortable, if not rustic or first-class, accommodations that are available in the sometimes out-of-the-way places rare bird species can be found.

The inclusiveness of tips for tour leaders, local guides and escorts proved to be the most ambiguous cost. Some tours indicated that guide tips were not included or were optional. Others did not list guide and leader tips in the tips that were included in the tour price. Thus for these tours, a \$4 per leader/per day tip was added to the cost of the tour. Other tour tipping policies were somewhat fuzzy. For instance, VENT's tour itineraries noted, "Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel your VENT leader(s) or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to give them a tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional" (Victor Emanuel Nature Tours 2001a). KingBird's tipping policy also was ambiguous, stating on one hand, "All gratuities to hotel staff, waiters, local guides, drivers, etc. are included. Your tour leader is paid a salary and does not expect tips. Thus, it is not necessary to tip anyone on the entire tour." But then this statement is followed by, "However if you wish to tip anyone for special services or because you like them, it is quite all right" (KingBird Tours 2001). Given the ambiguous message on tipping, for these tours the \$4 per leader per day tip was also added. Only on tours which stated that leader tips were included, were unambiguously all-inclusive, or specifically directed that tips not be given (i.e. Smithsonian Study Tours stated that "The Smithsonian study leader and representatives are professionals who do not receive tips.") were no tips added to the advertised tour cost. While tipping is a personal choice, when expected as a norm for guides or leaders that depend on them for remuneration, tips can add a few hundred extra dollars to the out-of-pocket costs for longer tours with multiple leaders and local guides.

Company size and length of operation

The size of the birding tour company and its length of operation impact both tour costs and the

level of service. According to Pete Dunne, smaller companies can offer lower rates because they have fewer staff members and less overhead. But on the other hand, larger companies can offer a higher level of service, organization, and security. Dunne notes that large companies have the clout to obtain rooms in hot birding spots with temporal peaks in visitation (i.e. during times of migration or ideal weather). The length of time a company has been in operation is usually directly correlated to quality and success (Dunne 2001). Given the relatively low barrier to entry especially since the advent of the World Wide Web, the length of operation can separate long-term success stories from new entrants with limited expertise that stay in business for a few years. Length of business operation also reflects customer satisfaction leading to repeat business, which is important to profiting from this high-end tourist niche.

Evaluated tours included both small and large operators. On one end of the spectrum, large dominant operators such as VENT, Wings, and Field Guides, which were represented in the international, national and Great Lakes region tour categories, have been providing guided tours for 27, 30, and 17 years respectively. These operations have separate office and field staff. With smaller operators, the owners, tour leaders, and office staff were the same individuals. These smaller operators were niche players that specialized in particular regions, types of birds, or additional cultural or ecological themes. Non-profits ranged from nationwide organizations like the ABA and National Audubon Society, state organizations (i.e. state Audubon chapters), to nature centers with local membership bases.

Age/Fitness Level of Tour Participants

From the literature and our evaluated tours, birding is an activity driven by the baby boomers and seniors. While some of the surveyed birding tours indicated that adults of all ages go on their tours so as to not limit their potential clientele, overwhelmingly the average tour clientele consisted of baby boomers through seniors. On certain tours such as Field Guides' Virginia and the Carolina Capes and Montana Dude Ranch Birding, the average ages of tour participants ranged from 60-70 years and 70-80 years respectively. These individuals had the time and disposable income for birding tours.

Given the mature clientele, tour operators indicated the level of physical activity involved in their tours so that participants could make appropriate vacation decisions. Choosing a tour appropriate to one's fitness level can foster participants' enjoyment and safety. Tours indicated physical activity consisted of moderate, leisurely walking or more strenuous hiking. In the case of Field Guides' France: Camargue & Pyrenees tour, more detailed information was provided. This tour would be easy-going in Camargue and LaCrau, but would involve some steeper sections in the Pyrenees. However, the pace would be slow enough in the latter so as to present little difficulty to anyone in reasonable health and used to some regular walking (Field Guides Incorporated n.d.). In addition to indicating the level of physical exertion, KingBird additionally noted that its tours could be tiring as one could spend a half-hour standing quietly when a special bird shows up and as there is no letup to the birding, long days, and long drives to get to birds (KingBird Tours n.d.). From the information provided, clients can decide whether the tour would be appropriate given their health and fitness level.

Policies Regarding Children on Tours

Guided birding tours have varying policies regarding allowing children on tours. The intense nature of birding tours, requiring patience, attention and quiet in order to see desired bird species, may make these tours fit imperfectly into the trend towards multi-generational travel (Gardyn 2001). Of the evaluated birding tours, 60% of respondents (27 tours) gave a conditional yes to allowing children on tours depending on children's 1) age (above 8, 12, 14, or 18 years and accompanied by adults) (21 tours), 2) not being disruptive (2 tours), 3) being interested/dedicated birders (2 tours), or depending on 4) the approval of the leader (2 tours).

Of the big three birding tour operators, the enthusiasm for having children on tours varied. Wings appeared guarded regarding including children saying, "Tours are geared to adults and adult attention spans. Most children, even teenagers, don't have the attention span or staying power to withstand the pace, activities of our bird watching tours. There is the rare teen who is a keen birdwatcher and who would enjoy our tours, and we actively encourage young birdwatchers, but

generally, we ask anyone considering bringing a child on a tour to call and discuss it with us.” Wings noted one of its tours “really isn’t a milieu that most children would enjoy or do well in.” VENT indicated that children over 14 when accompanied by their parents could go on tours, but suggested that “Most children go on designated family tours (especially the cruises) geared toward families with children 8 years and over. VENT also offers youth birding camps in the summer.” Field Guides noted that they have allowed some older children (>12 years of age) who were keen birders to go on tours, but that its tours were not appropriate for small children or children not interested in birding all day, every day. While multi-generational travel is a growing trend in leisure travel, most birding tours were planned with adults in mind. The major birding tour operators wanted to ensure the core customers indicated by 40 of the evaluated tours, couples and/or singles without accompanying children, were satisfied seeing birds. If children were not mature or dedicated birders, they could be bored and disruptive, thus scaring off birds the adults paid thousands of dollars to see.

Conclusions

Birding, one of the most popular outdoor recreation activities in the U.S., will continue to grow given psychographic and demographic trends. The subset of dedicated, affluent birders who go on specialized birding tours can select from options offered by commercial and non-profit operators that will enable them to see desired life-list birds. One non-profit offering birding tours to its geographically localized membership, the KNC, was interested in how birding tours rated on factors such as size of the tour group, leader-to-client ratios, tour leader experience, emphasis on birding versus on other activities, tour cost, and tour operator size and length of operation. Participant demographics were also examined.

In our purposive sample of regional (Great Lakes), continental U.S., and international birding tours, group tour sizes were small, which facilitated access to windows and to leaders, most of whom had more than 10 years of guiding experience. These tours were designed for intense birders, as they involved birding all day and into the night with little time devoted for other guided activities or free

time. The tour cost and level of services included in the tour price (i.e. transportation to the tour meeting point/from the tour ending point, tips, and meals) varied widely. The dominant tour operators had large staffs and longer-term operations relative to the smaller, niche operators. Average tour customers were baby boomers or seniors, traveling alone or as part of a couple without accompanying children. A majority of tours allowed children on a conditional, if unenthusiastic, basis. For the KNC, knowing what other commercial and non-profit tours offer will help it improve its marketing and development of future birding tours.

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