



Birdwatchers flock to year-end bonanza

More than 2,000 birds, representing more than 100 species, seen in Grand Bahama's annual bird count.

BY CATHERINE MORRIS

As the sun rises on a warm winter morning in Grand Bahama, a group of eager bird lovers gather, notebooks at the ready and pencils poised. They're there to count birds, and the information they collect is vital not only for local conservation, but also global research efforts. The first Christmas Bird Count took place in the United States more than 100 years ago and has now become a tradition all over the US, the Caribbean and Canada, conducted by more than 50,000 birding enthusiasts. In The Bahamas, the count takes place every year on Grand Bahama, New Providence, Abaco and Andros.

Grand Bahama's 2014-15 count was held on January 4 and the "45 eagle-eyed participants worked hard, counting more than 2,000 birds (104 species) from sunrise to sunset. The festivities began the night before when counters gathered for a meal and a strategy meeting at the home of organizer and lifelong birder, Erika Gates. Gates, who is also president of the Garden of the Groves nature reserve and owner of Grand Bahama Nature Tours, is a veteran of



Birding group at work in Grand Bahama

the count, having organized it for the past decade. She divided the participants into five teams, each led by a birding expert and each assigned a different area within a 14-mile radius, stretching from Eight Mile Rock to Barbary Beach. The teams record not only the species sighted in their areas, but also how many birds of that species they see. At sunset counting ceases and the teams converge on the Garden of the Groves for the “tally rally,” where the numbers are given to compiler Bruce Purdy. Purdy subsequently submits the figures to the National Audubon Society (NAS) and they are fed into its database. “It is a fun day and it is very exciting, especially for the people just getting into birding, but it is work,” says Gates. “We have to be accurate. We are making a contribution to the longest-running database in the world. It is very important.”

Gates says the atmosphere at the tally rally is good natured but can get boisterous as the teams become competitive about their numbers. “It is a little bit competitive. I present the new



Erika Gates, left, and her mother, “Mutti,” Erika Stoecker, also a dedicated birder until her death at age 100.

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Cuban emerald hummingbird

birders with a Birds of The Bahamas Certificate if they see more than 50 species and they get really excited and hooked on birding. It is a good time and very educational.”

Niche market

During its 15-year history, Grand Bahama’s Christmas Bird Count has always attracted birders from Europe, the US and Latin America, along with Bahamians.

It’s a special event on the island’s ecotourism calendar and adds to the destination’s reputation as a birding centre.

“It is not only local people, visitors come in too. We include these people and we embrace them,” says Gates. “It is a big part of birding tourism because every birder knows where the counts are held [and] birders like to travel to places they have not been before. Birders have a ‘life list’ and they always like to add new species to their list.”

Bird tourism is a growing market, according to NAS, which says the US bird-watching industry was worth \$82 billion in 2006 and was projected to grow by eight per cent annually. Gates, who has more than 25 years experience in ecotourism, says she has also noticed a definite upswing in the number of birders since launching Grand Bahama Nature Tours in 1998. Although she always incorporated her love of birding into the company’s early tours, it wasn’t until 2003 that she offered excursions dedicated solely to birding. Now she leads half-day and full-day tours two or three times a week and runs the Grand Bahama Birders’ Bed and Breakfast in Freeport. “I saw a demand for it and I saw big birding companies getting interested,” Gates says. “People have become more aware of nature tourism.



Thick-billed vireo fledglings looking for a snack

Bird tourism is important because we are making people aware of the beauty and the natural treasures we have on Grand Bahama island. It has always been a niche market but it is expanding.”

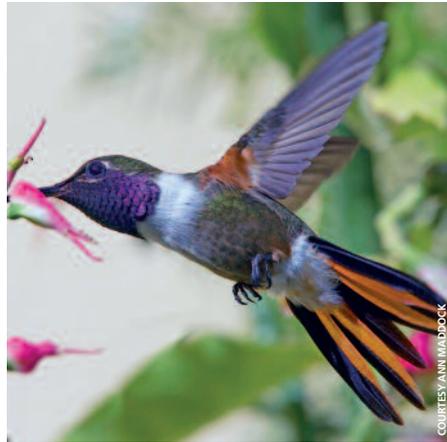
In 2015, UK eco-travel firm MotMot Travel contacted Gates about adding The Bahamas to its Caribbean birding portfolio. The company hopes to begin offering birding tours on Grand Bahama in 2016 and is working with Gates to develop these programmes. She says it’s a sign that word is getting out about Bahamian birds. Gates believes the country’s best marketing tool is the online database eBird, launched by NAS and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. eBird collects sightings from birders around the world to produce a real-time, constantly shifting map of birds and their habitats. Gates logs in to contribute as often as possible and encourages her birding groups to do the same.



Hairy woodpecker

Thanks to these efforts, Grand Bahama is a hotspot on the site with 248 species logged. The global birding community uses eBird to plan trips and track species, according to Gates. “It is a very good tool for getting people to visit Grand Bahama [because] birders look at eBird. That is how they make up their minds where to travel.”

In May 2015, Gates recorded a particularly unusual sighting of an Egyptian Goose at Discovery Beach in Freeport. Within days, a birder from New York contacted her. He asked if the bird was still there because he wanted to travel to Freeport to see it. “This is how birders are ... they are listeners,” says Gates.



Bahama woodstar hummingbird

Hotspot

It is no wonder that Grand Bahama is considered a birding hotspot. Most of The Bahamas’ 340-plus species are found on the island—including 18 species not seen in the US, Europe or Canada. On a good day, the average ornithologically-inclined tourist can expect to see 50 to 60 species on Grand Bahama. Along with four of six endemic species—the Bahama woodstar, the Bahama swallow, the Bahama warbler and the Bahama yellowthroat—are such unique birds as the migratory purple gallinule or the American bittern. The other two endemic birds, not seen in Grand Bahama, are the Inagua woodstar and the Bahama oriole.

The Rand Nature Centre is home to eye-catching western spindalis, red-legged thrushes and the endangered Bahama parrot. At the Garden of the Groves, visitors can see Cuban emeralds, loggerhead kingbirds and white-cheeked pintails. Migrants to the island often gather at Grand Bahama’s west end, including more than 30 warblers. If visiting between August and December, holidaymakers can catch Owl Hole’s winged residents—a family of barn owls that nest in the cave system.

Gates says the best time to see birds is from October to April when Grand Bahama becomes an ornithological paradise, but cautions that you need to roam all over the island to get a true picture of its diverse bird population. “There is no one best area to see birds,” she says. “There are different habitats for different birds. You have to go to the ocean, the hardwood forest, the mangroves.”

Gates—who first became interested in birds at age six, wandering the countryside with her brother in Germany—has created a number



LINDA M. HUBER/DUPUICH

White-cheeked pintails

of nature trails around Grand Bahama, including one on her property, where she has recorded 90 bird species. Her most recent efforts are focused on a 20-acre green space around the Edward St George memorial at Taino Beach. She believes this is an important wildlife habitat, and is pushing for the area to be cleared, maintained and decorated with signage.

Birder profiles

Passionate, precise and well-travelled, birders are not average tourists. They are usually well-educated, in a higher income bracket, more considerate of their surroundings and visit areas generally overlooked by other tourists. They are also prepared to spend a lot in pursuit of their passion. Gates, who trains local guides, leads tours and has worked with the Ministry of Tourism to develop birding programmes, says visiting ornithologists do their homework.



COURTESY ERIKA GATES

Red-legged thrush

“We are a subtropical climate, we have different varieties of birds and an ecotourist knows these things. These people expect a lot of experience from their guides. They are more observant and appreciative of all the things we have around us.”

Just because these guests love nature, doesn't mean they don't have standards however. Gates says birders often have specific needs and require as much attention to detail as high-end tourists. “We need more than just birds. Birders spend money, they go out to dinner and when they come on their own they want rental cars. They are spending money and they want their creature comforts.”

Many birders are repeat visitors and, as Grand Bahama offers a dazzling array of species in every season, it is a year-round industry. Growing numbers of visitors usually go hand in hand with more disturbance to the natural environment. Happily, this is not the case with birders, says Bahamas National Trust (BNT) deputy executive director Lynn Gape. “The BNT has always been a supporter of birding tourism,” she says. “It is really low impact, usually small groups very intent on seeing specific birds.”

Conservation meets tourism

Conservation group BirdLife International has identified 42 important bird and biodiversity areas (IBAs) in The Bahamas. To qualify as an IBA, conservationists look at whether the area has large congregations of birds, contains endangered species and/or if it is an important stopover for migrants. There are several IBAs in Grand Bahama, including the Lucayan National Park, home to the thick-billed vireo and the Bahama swallow; the Peterson Cay



The endangered Bahama parrot



The endemic Bahama warbler



LINDA W. HUBER/ODUPFICH

Bahama swallow

National Park, which supports a nesting colony of bridled tern, and Grand Bahama south shore, where the near-threatened piping plover winters on the beach. Identifying these areas helps the BNT in its efforts to balance conservation with tourism-based growth,

according to Gape. “There are many opportunities for conservation of bird habitats in a way that will enhance development, as long as you have the conversation in advance of the development taking place. That is sustainable tourism, and it helps sustain livelihoods. Most nature tourism businesses have a small footprint and are concerned about bird habitats.”

Gape points to the Schooner Bay resort in Abaco as an example of where tourism and conservation have successfully intersected. The Schooner Bay site encompasses some coppice hardwood, an important feeding ground for Bahama parrots, a threatened species. The BNT met with the developers and agreed on a compromise—they could thin out the coppice, but must identify and leave corridors of the canopy for the parrots. “That is important for birds,” says Gape. “Most birds like some kind of tree cover. It was [an] ideal



COURTESY ERIKA GATES

Grand Bahama birding group on a field trip

Erika Gates believes that Grand Bahama's birds can play a valuable role in promoting conservation, not just bird habitats but the entire archipelago.

[solution] and it enhanced the development. Who wouldn't want Bahama parrots on their property? They are quite stunning.”

Bird conservation in The Bahamas got a further boost in 2013 when NAS received \$2.6 million from the Inter-American Development



LINDA M. HUBER/DUPUCH

Loggerhead kingbird

Bank's Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) to support economic development through birding ecotourism in the Americas. The society selected four countries to receive funding through the initiative—Belize, Guatemala, Paraguay and The Bahamas. The project was officially launched in The Bahamas in 2014, when the BNT announced that the country would receive around \$150,000 from the MIF, together with an additional \$50,000 from NAS, over a three-year period. The first phase of the project is focusing on Central Andros and Inagua, training local guides and developing bird-based community programmes. “The

hope is that we will be successful and be able to replicate that project on other islands,” says Gape.

Gates, who won a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011 from the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (now Birds Caribbean) for her outstanding contribution to bird conservation, believes that Grand Bahama's birds can play a valuable role in promoting conservation, not just of bird habitats but the entire archipelago. “It is very important to put a value on birding,” she says. “Birds are the hooks. They draw us in because they are visible and beautiful. Then we learn to appreciate the biodiversity that goes with them.” ④