

THE GREAT TEXAS BIRDING CLASSIC: A BIRD WATCHING TOURNAMENT THAT PROTECTS AND PROMOTES CRITICAL TEXAS GULF COAST HABITAT

CAROL A. JONES,^{1,4} SHELLY PLANTE,² AND CLIFFORD E. SHACKELFORD³

¹*Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, 103 West Highway 332, Lake Jackson, Texas 77566, USA;*

²*Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744, USA; and*

³*Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, 506 Hayter Street, Nacogdoches, Texas 75965, USA*

Abstract. The first Great Texas Birding Classic—a birding tournament and outreach program designed to reach every type of birder and conservationist—was held in 1997. The Classic encompasses 41 Texas counties and stretches 600 miles from the state line in east Texas to the tip of Brownsville. Since its inception, \$578 000 has been raised and contributed to 39 conservation projects. One of the goals of the Birding Classic is to conserve and restore habitat that otherwise would have been lost to development or left unmanaged, and would therefore be unsuitable habitat for Nearctic-Neotropical migrants. Raising funds and then awarding grants to conservation projects selected by the winning teams has proven to be a sustainable and viable program. Projects have varied in size from a city block to hundreds of hectares. One of this program's most significant successes has been the participation and engagement of young birders from across the U.S.

Key Words: birding, conservation, habitat, birding classic, birding trail, birding tournament.

EL GRAN CLÁSICO DE TEXAS: UN TORNEO DE OBSERVACIÓN DE AVES QUE PROMUEVE LA PROTECCIÓN Y CONSERVACIÓN DEL HABITAT COSTERO

Resumen. El primer Great Texas Birding Classic—un concurso de hallar y identificar aves y también un programa de comunicación público entre pajareros de cualquier nivel de interés y conservacionistas—se realizó en 1997. El Clásico cuenta con 45 condados en Texas y se alcanza 600 millas por el litoral del Golfo de México desde la frontera con el estado de Louisiana hasta la frontera con México. Desde el principio del concurso ha sido recabado un monto de \$578 000. Este monto se contribuyó a 39 proyectos de conservación con el fin de conservar y restaurar hábitat adecuado para aves migratorias nearctic-neotropicales. La recaudación de fondos para distribuir entre proyectos de conservación por los equipos ganadores ha sido un éxito. Los proyectos ha variado desde el tamaño de una caudra urbana hasta propiedades de cientos de hectáreas. Uno de los éxitos más llamativos ha sido el entusiasmo y la participación de pajareros juveniles de todo el país.

INTRODUCTION

The first Great Texas Birding Classic (Birding Classic) occurred in April of 1997 with a primary mission of promoting the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, the first birding trail in the U.S. The Birding Classic is a birding tournament that is comprised of tournaments divided by age groups and length of time the teams are out birding. From very serious and fiercely competitive to laid back and casual, the Birding Classic covers the gamut of experience level and intensity. While the mission has remained the same—to increase public awareness of Texas

birds and the habitats that support them, promote community level nature tourism, and fund avian habitat conservation projects along the Texas Gulf coast—it is today promoted as a competitive “birdwatching for conservation” tournament and is co-sponsored by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

With the commissioning of the first birding trail came the task of promoting it. There was a vision that birders from all over the world would want to come to Texas to experience its excellent birding opportunities. Because Texas is billed as a top birding destination (Konrad

⁴E-mail: cjones@gcbo.org

1996), especially during spring migration, creating an event that both highlighted the Birding Trail and the spectacular birding during migration was initiated. The launch of the Great Texas Birding Classic was billed as "the biggest, longest and wildest bird watching tournament in the US." The first year was successful, with 27 teams competing.

The Birding Classic consists of teams of birders who count all the species of birds they can see or hear over various time periods and sections of the coast depending on the tournament they have chosen to participate. The top teams in several tournaments at the end of the week earn the privilege of deciding which habitat conservation projects will be funded by the Conservation Grant Awards. With the generous support of our partners, the Birding Classic donates at least \$50 000 each year directly to habitat conservation on the Texas coast.

Over 630 species of birds have been documented in Texas and more than 400 of those species can be found along the Texas coast during spring migration (Lockwood 2008). All of these birds rely on the diverse coastal habitat found in Texas. Unfortunately, each year more of this habitat is converted for human use. In the first ever 'State of the Birds' report (Butcher and Niven 2007), the National Audubon Society reported that almost 30% of North America's bird species are in "significant decline" and species of concern have been identified by Partners in Flight (Rich et al. 2004). And while conservation organizations and agencies are working harder than ever to preserve habitat, they all have resource limitations. It is the financial support of corporations, communities, local businesses, and individuals who enjoy birding that make additional habitat preservation, like through the Birding Classic, possible.

HOW THE BIRDING CLASSIC WORKS

The Birding Classic incorporates a mechanism that allows participants to be involved in the entire conservation process. First, each team assists with fundraising by identifying and recruiting companies, individuals or organizations to sponsor its team. Sponsorship funds and team entry fees are the source for the grants awarded each year. Participants are also encouraged to ask organizations that are actively involved in conservation work to submit proposals. This helps increase the number of high-quality projects for consideration and, at the same time, may help to increase participation. When a team of highly motivated competitive birders work together to ensure funds go directly to a project they support, the competition to earn

the privilege of selecting the winning avian habitat conservation project is heightened.

The Birding Classic staff issues a call for proposals with a deadline several months before the competition begins. Proposals are then reviewed by the event sponsors and, once approved, become part of a list of projects eligible to receive Conservation Grants. Projects may be submitted for land acquisition, habitat restoration and enhancement, and visitor access improvements. Projects may occur on public or private lands that provide some level of public access. Preference is given to those projects that have the potential to benefit bird populations and protect or enhance areas important to birds. Grant amounts are \$20 000 (acquisition or restoration only), \$10 000, and \$3000. A project proposal may be submitted for all the different levels of funding.

All proposed projects must 1) be located within the official Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail counties, 2) be in long-term or permanent conservation status, and 3) not include funding for salaries (however, contracted professional services of 30% of the total budget are acceptable). Additionally, all projects must include an avian monitoring component as a measure of conservation success and incorporate one or more of the following categories: 1) acquisition of high priority habitats in areas of importance to large concentrations of breeding, migrating, or wintering birds, 2) restoration of high priority habitats, 3) wildlife viewing enhancement projects that allow some level of public access.

Further, sites should be natural areas or have good restoration potential. There is no minimum or maximum size, but boundaries must be clearly definable and large enough to encompass birds' needs, such as areas for feeding, roosting, and nesting. Areas may be protected as a preserve, refuge, sanctuary, or private lands with a conservation easement that are managed for wildlife.

Priority habitats are designated in the TPWD Wildlife Action Plan (Bender 2005) and include Coastal Prairie and Marshes, Old-growth Bottomland Forest, Coastal Oak Motte and Cheniers, Riparian Corridors, Mudflats, Beaches and Dunes, Laguna Madre Tidal Flats, Barrier Islands, Nesting Islands, and South Texas Plains. Important Avian Sites (Bender 2005) are also criteria to consider when a project proposal is written.

All awards are reimbursable grants (i.e., work or portions of the project must be completed and reported to the Birding Classic Coordinator before funds will be reimbursed) and all dollars must be spent over a period of 12 months within the 41 designated counties.



FIGURE 1. Types of projects that receive funding through the Great Texas Birding Classic and amounts that have gone to each.

Packets of approved projects are presented to winning teams at the Awards Brunch the Sunday morning following the conclusion of the competition on Saturday night. The number of conservation grants awarded each year is determined by the amount of money that has been raised through team sponsorships, contributions and an auction. Acquisition has accounted for more of the total project funding than restoration, enhancement, or monitoring (Fig. 1).

One of the Birding Classic's most significant successes has been the participation and engagement of youth birders from all across the US. There are two youth team age classes: Roughwings, aged 13 and under; and Gliders, aged 14-18. Once a young adult reaches 19, he/she competes in the adult tournaments. The number of youth teams has grown from 8 to as many as 27 and is dependent upon the number of committed adults and mentors who are willing to make the time to teach and guide young birders. Roughwing teams bird for eight hours and Gliders for twenty-four hours. The teams compete to win donated prizes such as binoculars or birding field guides.

The Great Texas Birding Classic is an outreach program designed to reach every level of birder and/or conservationist. There are a variety of tournaments to choose from and include: Weeklong, One-Day Sectional, Big Sit!, Gliders, Roughwings, and Outta-Sight Song Birders for the visually impaired.

The Weeklong tournament is five consecutive days of birding for adult participants. The team with the highest species count at the end of the five days is the team privileged to choose the conservation project awarded the highest

value grant, usually \$20 000. Another adult tournament is the One-Day Sectional where teams choose one of the three sections of the Texas coast for a twenty-four hour competition. The top team from each of the three coastal sections will choose a project from the section of the coast where they competed. These grants are usually \$10 000 each.

A Big Sit! is a twenty-four hour birding competition in which teams of up to 10 individuals choose a specific 17-foot diameter circle and stay within that circle for the day. Any age birder can participate in the Big Sit! One of the unique aspects of this tournament is that the team doesn't have to have the highest species count to win the privilege of awarding a grant. The Big Sit! grant, called the Lone Star Bird Award, is by random drawing. A computer program chooses a bird from the Official Checklist. All teams that saw that species during their Big Sit! are then entered into another random drawing. The selected team chooses the project from the pre-approved Lone Star Bird Award project submissions. Youth tournaments, Roughwings, and Gliders were discussed above.

The last tournament that is part of the Birding Classic is the Outta-sight Song Birder Tournament. Participants of these teams are blind or visually impaired and therefore identify bird species by their calls. There is no age requirement and teams of up to five participants compete to win donated prizes.

Not only is the Birding Classic a conservation initiative, it is also an on-going program to reach out and help educate birders of all ages and experience levels. Observation skills and species identification are key requirements that participants learn and develop. Tied closely to this is learning the preferred habitat type of various species. Discussions that birders have during scouting and during the competition are often about the quality of the habitat and why more birds or fewer birds are at one location over another. Repeat participants see the impact of human activity on their birding routes, when one year they find certain species at a specific location and the next year they find a housing development. There is no better method of learning about and seeing first hand the impact of human activity. To this end, the positive impact of the Birding Classic's conservation grants to preserve and restore habitat that the birds can use is increasingly important. This is a way to learn about and experience all of nature.

Communities throughout the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail are important supporters and contributors to the tournament and participate as hosts for one of the sanctioned events associated with the Birding Classic such as the

Awards Brunch, or through team sponsorship and cash donations. Communities having a vision of what nature tourism, and especially avitourism can do for them, are those that are most anxious to support the Birding Classic.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Birding Classic has been through twelve successful annual tournaments. We have been able to demonstrate long-term viability and a positive impact on conservation. Our publication, *Celebrating a Decade of Avian Habitat Conservation*, (Scroggs-Plante, 2006) highlights conservation projects funded through the first nine Great Texas Birding Classics. This publication and additional information is available on our website at www.birdingclassic.org.

LITERATURE CITED

- BENDER, S., S. SHELTON, K. C. BENDER, AND A. KALMBACH [EDS.]. 2005. Texas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy 2005-2010. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. [Online.] <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/pwd_pl_w7000_1187a/media/I.pdf> (10 December 2008).
- BUTCHER, G. S., AND D. K. NIVEN. 2007. Combining Data from the Christmas Bird Count and the Breeding Bird Survey to Determine the Continental Status and Trends of North American Birds. National Audubon Society. [Online.] <<http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid/content/Report.pdf>>.
- KONRAD, P. M. 1996. WildBird's top 50 birding hotspots—the best birding locations await you throughout North America. WildBird, September 1996 (reprint; Version 02OCT1998). Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Jamestown, ND. [Online.] <<http://www.npwr.usgs.gov/resource/1998/wildbird/index.htm>> (10 December 2008).
- LOCKWOOD, M., ET. AL. 2008. Texas Birds Record Committee. [Online.] <<http://www.texas-birds.org/tbrc/statelst.htm>> (10 December 2008).
- Scroggs, S. 2006. The Great Texas Birding Classic. Conservation Cash Grand Prize Project Funding 1997- 2005. Celebrating A Decade of Avian Habitat Conservation. [Online.] <<http://www.gcbo.org/html/Conservation.pdf>> (10 December 2008).
- RICH, T. D., C. J. BEARDMORE, H. BERLANGA, P. J. BLANCHER, M. S. W. BRADSTREET, G. S. BUTCHER, D. W. DEMAREST, E. H. DUNN, W. C. HUNTER, E. E. INIGO-ELIAS, J. A. KENNEDY, A. M. MARTELL, A. O. PANJABI, D. N. PASHLEY, K. V. ROSENBERG, C. M. RUSTAY, J. S. WENDT, AND T. C. WILL. 2004. Partners In Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY.