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# FEATHERING YOUR NEST

## A Travel Special Interest Takes Flight


Steve Gillick

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13 JUN 2016: After a long and arduous journey and with an eye for finding the triple vacation ideal of “location, location, location”, they finally see three islands of tranquility on the horizon, each complete with all the components of a dream holiday: rest, food, trees - and bugs galore! Of course I’m referring to the annual migration of

birds in Southwestern Ontario, and specifically to the North American birding meccas of Point Pelee National Park and Rondeau and Long Point Provincial Parks.



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While it's difficult to quantify the number of birders, one statistic for the United States noted that out of a population of 320 million, 60 million considered themselves to be 'bird-positive' in terms of admiring, photographing, feeding, hosting (pets) and actively watching through binoculars and field scopes. This means that there's an excellent chance that your database is flocking with birders. While many destinations talk about birding opportunities, many travel consultants don't really know what to do with this information. Here's a brief primer.

If you have a stereotyped image in your mind of a frumpy middle-age couple, bedecked in shorts, birding vests and Tilly-style hats, wearing necklaces of binoculars and cameras and waving a copy of the latest field guide for birds, then you're in for a shock. Birders are cross-generational: Gen Z, Y, X (Millennials), Boomers and the mature

crowd. Birders cover the gamut of physicality from being carried (youngsters) to hiking and trekking, to canes, walkers and wheelchairs.

Birders are also techno-savvy like you would not believe, with 4-5 dedicated birding apps on their smart phone that may include:



- Radar App for weather forecasts and wind conditions (head winds can 'ground' migrants who don't want to struggle against them, as well as keep insects away).
- Bird Listing Apps. Birders are the epitome of relationship-builders. They tweet (literally) about common and rare birds they've seen, and share locations for others to find visual and auditory treasures amongst the trees. Birders have a keen sense of humour and often refer to birding lists as "the book –or app–of lies" as some (cynically referred to as 'stringers') may have a propensity to exaggerate rare bird sightings.
- Bird ID apps. Sibley's Field Guide is one example of an online app that helps to identify birds, for example it will show all the Warblers in Ontario and you can identify the 25 or so you may have viewed. You can see the difference in colour between the males (usually bright, vivid colours to attract females), females (usually muted colours to detract attention while they are nesting) and junior or fledgling birds (colour of feathers may also be muted as a means of protection).



- Bird Song apps. These apps will play the 4-5-6 standard tunes of each bird, as well as their “I’m here” call, and their distress calls. Most experienced birders, as a matter of fact, identify birds on the 80-20 ratio. 80% visual and 20% auditory - but some are the opposite where they will they hear the birds before they actually see them. Examples include the ‘hoo hoo’ call of the Mourning dove; the “zee zee zee zoo zee sound of the Black-throated Green Warbler and the “sweet sweet sweeter than sweet” call of the Yellow Warbler.

While Southwestern Ontario is bursting at the seams during the migrations in the Spring (late April to late May) and Fall (starting in July but centered around September and October), birders will travel for value - and birder-value means sightings that add to their Life List (the list of all the birds they’ve seen during your entire Life) or opportunities and experiences that involve the outdoors, photography, conversation and the sharing of information with other enthusiasts.

Birders come in singles (solo travellers), doubles (couples, a surprising number of whom met, while birding), families (kids, parents, grandparents), discovery groups (match us up with a destination and a guide as part of a larger itinerary of activities), and dedicated groups (we know exactly what we want and where to stay (Birder-friendly

lodges with feeders)—you just arrange the flights and land transportation.

Which clients in your database may be into birding?

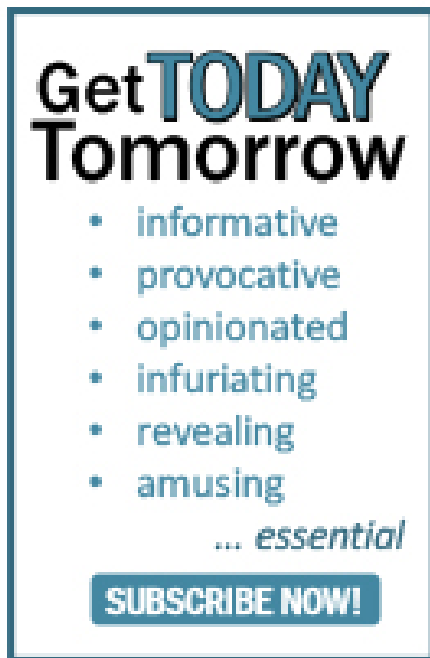
- **Adventurists:** Outdoor types who are described by birding expert Tom Hince as those who love to ‘walk the land’ to hear a dawning chorus or a dusking symphony of bird calls. We were privileged to have Tom as our guide, not only for his affable personality and passion for the outdoors, but also because of his past roles as Park Naturalist at Point Pelee, bird host and producer on the Discovery Channel and his continued dedication to educating the public about birding.
- **Art Lovers:** The intricate details and colouring of bird feathers are incredibly beautiful, especially when seen up close.



- Introverts: there is the opportunity to be silent, be by yourself and commune with nature.
- Extroverts: social relationship builders and sharing experiences (they even go to local watering holes for refreshment, just like the birds they study).
- Social Media Cohorts: tech savvy, tweeting, posting on Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram etc.



- Photographers: birds, animals, trees, forests, landscapes, waterways, other birders.
- Audiophiles: nature tune-smiths who love to listen to melodic bird songs and calls.
- Fashionistas: you can look as comfortable as you wish or wear top of the line bird vests, pants and hats.



- Listers: from casual to compulsive. Some don't even take time to admire the esthetics of the birds they see. They just want to identify the bird and list it.

- Travellers: Top birding destinations other than Canada, include Peru, South Africa, Ecuador, Spain, New Guinea, Australia, Panama, Bhutan, Brazil, the US, Antarctica, Costa Rica, Romania, Finland, New Zealand, Brazil and Colombia.

How do you broach the topic with your clients?

1) When interviewing a client about their needs, mention birding as one of the attractions at the destination. This can open the door for amateur birders or those with just a passive interest to want to explore this further.

2) Visuals tell stories. Tom Hince noted that a poor bird picture "is like showing a bottle of grape juice to sell a wine tour". A high quality photo of a brilliantly coloured Scarlet Macaw flying over a Guatemalan jungle will cause most clients to say "wow...where is that?" .

3) Don't be intimidated. Ask them what kind of experience they want: a one-off event? a multi-day immersion? Ask about physical expectations as well as life-style preferences: B & Bs, tent, 5-star hotels, marsh blinds, cruise, luxury etc.

4) Ask what they would ideally like to accomplish (the value proposition): I want to see a Puffin in Newfoundland or a Grey-headed Chachalaca in Panama or "I just want to see birds".

Birding is a travel 'product', sold by generalists, specialists and even super-specialists who cater to very specific needs (I NEED to see a Prothonotary Warbler at Point Pelee!)

For those looking to add a sense of excitement and colour to their niche travel offerings; for those looking for a flock of new clients, put a feather in your cap and think of birding! You may be surprised at how your client interest and business takes flight.

## FINE FEATHERS





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)