

# Promoting Birding- Based Tourism in Coastal Harrison County, Mississippi



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## Introduction

Mississippi's Gulf Coast has a significant opportunity to improve and increase nature-based tourism. In 2019, local tourism organization "Coastal Mississippi" launched a branding campaign titled "The Secret Coast," highlighting that the area "is a truly unique and undiscovered destination."<sup>1</sup> This emphasizes the opportunity that Mississippi's coastal region has to capitalize on both appealing to new visitors and encouraging returning tourists to continue investing in the area.

Increasing nature-based tourism along the Gulf Coast will require improvements in marketing strategies and advertisement, construction of physical infrastructure along the coast, and development of new programs and events for visitors. These investments have the potential to bring significant financial benefits to the region, as nature-based tourism and bird watching (or birding) are strong economic drivers in many areas across the country. Nationally, wildlife watching contributes \$75.9 billion annually to our economy, and over 16.3 million

people travel every year to see birds<sup>2</sup>. Birdwatchers, specifically, help spend more than \$227.7 million on lodging and \$379.5 million on food<sup>2</sup>.

Mississippi's coast already offers an incredible mix of recreational activities and natural resources to visitors and locals alike. Marshes, bayous, maritime forest, and beaches provide access to "watchable



1. Painted Bunting.  
Photo: Collin Stempien/Audubon Delta

Cover: Least Tern with chick. Photo: Nancy Elwood/Audubon Photography Awards

wildlife,” including birds. For example, Mississippi hosts one of the largest nesting concentrations of Least Terns in the world, a unique experience for visitors. Man-made, public sand beaches account for nearly 56% of Mississippi’s coastline and provide protection to seawalls and coastal roadways such as Highway 90. These beaches draw both day and overnight visitors. A 2017 study<sup>3</sup> from Longwoods International found that 27% of overnight visitors and 25% of day-trippers visited the Mississippi Coast just to enjoy the beaches, far outranking the national norm. The beaches provide many different experiences including fishing, jet-skiing, aqua cycling, and sailing for people to enjoy. Moreover, the beaches are adjacent to other amenities including casinos, shops, restaurants, historical landmarks, and museums, which offer a well-rounded holiday experience.

Neighboring Gulf Coast states have recognized the economic potential and importance of birding, and visitors to these states will find a wealth of information and infrastructure in place that cater to the needs of a birding-focused trip. For example, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission maintains the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, which provides detailed information about bird and wildlife viewing at 510 sites across the state. The Trail website includes an interactive map, a trip planner function, and guidelines for responsible tourism. Most Gulf Coast states host one or more annual birding-focused festivals that draw large numbers of visitors. For example, Louisiana’s Grand Isle Migratory Bird Festival has been hosted annually in mid-April since 1998, providing economic benefits to the Town of Grand Isle, raising awareness of the threats faced by coastal birds, and providing an enjoyable experience that draws participants to return in subsequent years<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Florida’s Birding and Photo Fest has brought together renowned photographers and birders for workshops and seminars for the last 18 years.

This document outlines a set of existing resources for visiting birders, challenges and resource gaps that currently prevent coastal Mississippi (and particularly Harrison County) from realizing its full potential as a birding destination, and a list of proposed actions that would address these challenges. This document presents resources, challenges, and proposed actions that have been identified by Audubon with stakeholder input, and is intended to serve as a strategic

guide to be used by multiple agencies for promoting birding-based tourism. This document should be used to forge partnerships between Audubon and other agencies in order to plan, fund, and implement the proposed actions.

## Existing Resources

### 1. Information sources

Visitors interested in birding in Mississippi can find information online at a variety of different websites and social media pages (Table 1). Visitors whose primary interest is birding, and who are experienced birders in their own region, are likely to seek and find information about recent bird sightings using ebird or by consulting the resources linked by the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society’s website. Those with a more casual interest in birds might not seek out these websites, and instead might rely on information provided by general tourism websites such as Coastal Mississippi, or may seek information in person at Mississippi welcome centers or park visitor’s centers.



## WEBSITES

<https://ebird.org/>  
<https://mscoastaudubon.org/>  
<http://mscoastbirdingtrail.audubon.org/>  
<https://www.gulfcoast.org/things-to-do/outdoor-adventure-and-nature/birding/>  
<https://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/state/Mississippi>  
<https://visitmississippi.org/things-to-do/point-of-interest/type/birding-wildlife/>  
<https://gulfcoastoutpost.com>  
<http://msgulfcoastheritage.ms.gov/natural>

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Audubon Mississippi Coastal Bird Stewardship Program  
 Mississippi Coast Audubon Society  
 Mississippi Gulf Coast Band of Birders  
 Mississippi Birding  
 Mississippi Gulf Coast Photography Club  
 Mississippi Wildlife and Nature Photographers  
 Coastal Mississippi  
 The Mississippi Club  
 Grand Bay NERR  
 National Park Service - Gulf Islands National Seashore  
 USFWS Coastal Program  
 Mississippi Ornithological Society

Table 1. Websites and social media pages that provide information about birding areas in coastal Mississippi, including information about recent bird sightings, upcoming events, bird identification, and guidelines for responsible nature tourism.

## 2. Infrastructure for birding

There are hiking trails, boardwalks, and piers in natural habitats all along the Mississippi coast, although few are located at coastal birding hotspots within Harrison County. The newly-renovated nature trail at Clower-Thorton Nature Area provides one of the few opportunities on the Harrison County coast to view a variety of songbirds during spring and fall migration. Jones Park is a developed beach-front park at which coastal birds are easily viewable, and this spot regularly holds the greatest abundance and diversity of shorebirds on the mainland coast. The large nesting colonies of Least Terns in Biloxi and Gulfport are also easily viewable, with ample parking near most colonies, and a multi-use trail along the entire Harrison County coastline that allows visitors to walk along the north side of all colonies. On the other hand, one of the most popular areas among local birders for seeking migrant and winter birds is an abandoned property that used to be the Broadwater Sun Golf Course. This lot lacks any kind of infrastructure and has recently been purchased and slated for development as part of the proposed UMUSIC complex.

## 3. Access to birding areas

The Mississippi coast contains a wealth of natural resources and birding areas that are only accessible by boat, such as barrier islands and extensive salt

marsh and bayou systems. This presents a challenge for visitors, though several tour services are available to reach these places. For example, Shore Thing Charters provides bird-focused trips to Cat Island, and Ship Island Excursions provides transportation to Ship Island from Biloxi and Gulfport. Additional boat tours exist that could be used to provide birding-focused trips in the future, such as the Betsy Ann Riverboat tours around Deer Island, the Biloxi Shrimping Trip, and the new boat tours provided by the Mississippi Aquarium.



2. Cat Island.  
Photo: Melinda Averhart/Audubon Delta



#### 4. Birding-based festivals

There are currently three main birding-based festivals located on the Mississippi coast: the Diamondhead Hummingbird Festival in mid-September, the new Pascagoula River Audubon Center Hummingbird and Nature festival in mid-September, and Tern Fest in early May. The hummingbird festivals are located in Diamondhead and Moss Point, respectively, and Tern Fest is typically held at Jones Park in Harrison County to celebrate the arrival of the Least Terns.



3. Tern Fest mascot in Gulfport, MS.  
Photo: Jeremiah Stelljes

## Resource Gaps and Challenges

Relative to other Gulf Coast states, people wishing to visit coastal Mississippi for birding face a number of challenges, including outdated information and infrastructure that is poorly maintained or lacking. The varied challenges can be grouped into the following categories:

#### 1. Messaging about birding opportunities is lacking or poorly organized

- a. The Mississippi Coastal Birding Trail website is currently not maintained and information is out of date.

- b. There is a lack of awareness among residents and visitors alike of the significance of Mississippi's Least Tern population — the spectacle of Mississippi's large colonies could draw birders and photographers during the summer months, but this information is not readily available to visitors.
- c. Messaging about birding opportunities is hard to find, scant, or lacking from many websites or other information sources that visitors to Mississippi might search.

#### 2. Ongoing challenges related to accessibility after tropical storms and hurricanes.

- a. Repairs following hurricanes are slow-going and sometimes structures remain closed for years. For example, the Ship Island pier and dock is frequently damaged from storms and often remains closed for many months at a time, preventing the popular ferry tours to Ship Island from running. These ferries provide the only public access to Mississippi's barrier islands for those lacking their own boat transportation.

#### 3. Infrastructure is often lacking or poorly maintained at existing locations.

- a. Some public lands that might be desirable birding locations, such as Land Trust properties, do not have public parking or walking trails. Other infrastructure that caters to birders, such as boardwalks and viewing blinds, is also lacking.



4. Least Terns.  
Photo: Collin Stempien/Audubon Delta



6. Birders visiting a restricted-access area with special permission. Photo: Melinda Averhart/Audubon Delta

**4. There are few parks directly on the coast that have an emphasis on wildlife and birds.**

- a. There are many small green spaces along the Harrison County coast that have potential for holding migrant songbirds or rare strays, but many spots are either abandoned/unmaintained lots (such as the old Broadwater Sun Golf Course), or are organized solely for other types of recreation (e.g. Hiller Park).

**5. There is no general coastal birding festival that highlights all of coastal Mississippi's natural resources.**

- a. While there are several popular birding-based festivals, they are currently relatively narrowly-focused (i.e. two are focused on hummingbirds and one on Least Terns).

**Proposed Actions:**

In order to address these challenges and resource gaps, we propose the following actions:

**1. Improve the reach and consistency of messaging to increase awareness of birding opportunities**

- a. Increase communications with Coastal Mississippi
- b. Provide Audubon and birding materials to coastal Welcome Centers

- c. Build relationships with local hotels and supply informational materials for visitors
- d. Work with nature and visitor's centers including the Pascagoula River Audubon Center, Sandhill Crane NWR visitor's center, and Davis Bayou visitor center, in order to highlight birding activities as part of online and physical event programming
- e. Build out a bird-focused story trail along the coast, starting with our new GOMESA-funded Coastal Bird signs
- f. Add informational signs to park pavilions
- g. Host a tour for nature writers
- h. Include messaging at RV parks

**2. Highlight and promote existing locations as "birding spots"**

- a. Revitalize and update the Mississippi Coast Birding Trail
- b. Work with state and national agencies to improve website language and on-the-ground signage for public lands that are locally known as good birding areas

**3. Conduct a survey to assess needs and desires of birders**

- a. Send out a questionnaire to Mississippi Coast Audubon Society chapter members
- b. Make use of Every Action to tap additional networks as well



7. Boardwalk and wildlife viewing area at the Pascagoula River Audubon Center in Moss Point, MS. Photo: Audubon Delta

**4. Work with partners to plan and seek funding for improved accessibility and infrastructure of existing sites**

- a. Add photographer blinds at tern colonies, or other designated wildlife viewing spots
- b. Address issues with poorly-maintained areas
- c. Review parks in light of Birdability
- d. Promote the improvement and addition of new trails, wildlife drives, and other infrastructure for desirable birding areas

**5. Promote the development of new parks and green spaces in Harrison County**

- a. Engage with city planning commissions to highlight this issue
- b. Seek information on local comprehensive plans and identify any opportunities
- c. Promote the use of habitat restoration and native plantings as part of green space development

**6. Conduct a socioeconomic analysis to investigate feasibility of developing an annual Coastal Birding festival**



8. Least Tern with chick.  
Photo: Jim Verhagen/Audubon Photography Awards



## Literature Cited

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- <sup>3</sup> Longwoods International. 2017. Mississippi Gulf Coast 2017 Visitor Research.  
[https://res.cloudinary.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/gulfcoast/2017\\_Visitor\\_Study\\_7cac1066-16be-41cb-8420-cc720b47b06f.pdf](https://res.cloudinary.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/gulfcoast/2017_Visitor_Study_7cac1066-16be-41cb-8420-cc720b47b06f.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Issacs, J. C. and Y. N. Chi. 2005. A travel-cost analysis of a birdwatching festival: the Grand Isle Migratory Bird Celebration. Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.



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- Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
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- Office of the Mississippi Secretary of State
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Wildlife Mississippi

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<https://ms.audubon.org/conservation/coastal-bird-stewardship-program>