
HUMAN DIMENSIONS

ENHANCING CONSERVATION BENEFITS FROM WILDLIFE FESTIVALS AND ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Wildlife festivals, i.e., short-term celebrations of local natural wildlife features, are growing in number across North America. To be considered ecotourism activities, wildlife festivals should focus on natural areas, deliver environmental education, and promote sustainability. The goal of this article is to identify the potential conservation impacts of wildlife festivals and promote ways to improve the conservation benefits. The potential conservation benefits are not well documented and include political incentives to protect habitat, revenues for

management, local economic incentives to conserve habitat, alternatives to wildlife-unfriendly land uses, and environmental education that generates conservation action. Recommendations to enhance these conservation impacts include: documenting and publicizing local economic impacts, using financial mechanisms for local sustainability projects, using local services and sponsors, addressing relevant legislation and policies and interests, using effective interpretation, involving and empowering the local community, and developing a comprehensive environmental ethic of



Figure 1. Wildlife festivals can demonstrate techniques for wildlife conservation. Here local purple martin experts, Dan Olofson and Bob Buskas, discuss nest box issues at the Camrose Purple Martin Festival in Alberta.
Glen Hvenegaard

operation. We conclude with an overview of wildlife festivals in the prairie provinces of Canada.

Introduction

Wildlife festivals typically involve host communities that facilitate short-term celebrations of local natural wildlife features. The names of wildlife festivals vary greatly (e.g., festival, fest, celebration, jamboree, chase), and can focus on individual species (e.g., purple martins, Fig. 1), groups of species (e.g., dragonflies, shorebirds, waterfowl), or birds or wildlife in general. The focus of most festivals is on birds (specific or general) or wildlife in general. Common festival activities include presentations, guided walks, birding competitions, wildlife carving competitions, children's crafts, and trade shows.¹

The number of festivals in North America has grown from 10 in 1992 to over 240 in 2002.²⁻⁵ Wildlife festivals are less common in other regions of the world. In 2010, Canada hosted 90 wildlife festivals, of which 22 were in the prairie provinces (14 in Alberta, 8 in Saskatchewan, and 3 in Manitoba).⁶ Festivals are typically offered in rural areas near habitats that support the target wildlife species, particularly in protected areas.⁷ Wildlife festivals are open to the public, typically last only 1 to 4 days, and involve many volunteers from community groups, conservation organizations, and tourism agencies.⁸ Attendance can range from a few dozen to several thousand. Attendees are relatively educated, affluent, and older than the general population.⁹ Local economic impacts can be significant, especially if the festival attractions and length encourage participants to stay overnight, resulting in higher expenditures for food and accommodation.⁹

Festivals can help enhance a community's image, generate local economic impacts,

provide recreational opportunities, and develop a local sense of community. However, any wildlife festival should also help protect the natural environment, particularly the local wildlife species and habitats that are being celebrated by the festival.¹⁰⁻¹³

A focus on this last goal would be more in line with the objectives for ecotourism in general.^{14,15} The core criteria of ecotourism focus on nature-based activities, environmental education, and sustainability.^{14,16-18} Thus, true ecotourism activities are characterized by nature appreciation and learning in natural settings, with management following sustainability practices for economic and socio-cultural systems.^{19,20} Many wildlife festivals promote the general principles of ecotourism, but often do so in a diffuse and superficial manner.^{4,11,21} The purpose of this paper is to highlight the recent surge in wildlife festivals, identify potential conservation impacts, and promote ways to improve the environmental benefits. We conclude with an overview of wildlife festivals in the prairie provinces of Canada.

Identifying the Potential Conservation Impacts

Ecotourism activities, such as wildlife festivals, have the potential to both harm and help the target species and their habitats.²² On the negative side, research has demonstrated many ways that recreational activities (such as those promoted by wildlife festivals) can harm wildlife. Knight and Cole (1991) provided a useful overview of the mechanisms involved.²³ First, festival activities can modify habitats that are critical for key stages in a species' life cycle (e.g., through development and trampling). Second, activities can also contribute to environmental pollution, through emissions to the air, water, and soil. Last, activities can disturb individuals and

populations, both over the short and long term.

Negative short-term impacts on individual animals can include changes to behaviours (e.g., birds are flushed by bird watchers coming too close) or death (e.g., birds colliding with a vehicle traveling to a festival location). Long-term impacts on individuals include altered behaviour (e.g., animals avoiding areas visited by wildlife viewers), altered vigour (e.g., poor nutrition among subadults who cannot access the best feeding sites), altered productivity (e.g., smaller clutch size of nesting species), or delayed death (e.g., insufficient food due to lack of access to resources). Long-term impacts on populations are reflected in changes to abundance (e.g., declining populations of targeted species), distribution (e.g., species changing common feeding areas), or demographics (e.g., skewed gender or age ratios). Long-term impacts on communities include changes to species composition (e.g., local extirpations, increase in non-native species) and subsequent interactions (e.g., competition, predation).

The positive conservation impacts of wildlife festivals are not well documented and have fairly weak causal links.²⁴ Moreover, it is difficult to measure the influence of festival factors on wildlife conservation because the causes and effects are embedded in larger scales over space and time. Nevertheless, there are at least five ways in which wildlife species and their habitats can benefit from wildlife festivals in particular and ecotourism in general:⁹ (1) The economic activity and public profile generated by wildlife festivals can provide incentives to establish protected areas around critical wildlife habitat.²⁵ (2) Revenues from festivals can be used for enhanced management of wildlife and habitat.²⁶ (3) The economic impacts of festivals

in nearby communities can encourage residents to conserve wildlife.^{27,28} (4) The use of wildlife in related festivals can provide alternatives to other uses that cause more environmental damage.^{29,30} (5) festivals can generate support for conservation by educating local and non-local participants.¹³

Enhancing Positive Conservation Impacts

Considerable research is available on the negative conservation impacts of wildlife-viewing activities.²³ Thus, wildlife festival organizers can address the impacts of these activities in many ways. Potential strategies include selecting appropriate activities, adhering to sound wildlife-watching guidelines, limiting group size, and avoiding sensitive habitats and species.

Limited research has been done on the positive conservation impacts of wildlife festivals and the key influencing factors.⁹ Nevertheless, the ecotourism and conservation literature provides valuable and concrete recommendations that can enhance these potential conservation benefits. These suggestions revolve around economic incentives, legislation and policy, education, community support, and ethics of use.

First, to identify and promote incentives, organizers should document the local economic, social, and environmental impacts of a wildlife festival.³¹ In particular, the economic information can convince decision makers and local residents that financial efforts to protect wildlife and habitat have economic benefits.^{13,15,25} Many mechanisms can be used to generate and increase local economic impacts (e.g., fees, donations, local spending, and longer events).²⁸ Moreover, it is imperative to use revenues generated from wildlife festivals to fund local conservation and community

development projects that can stimulate sustainable economic activity in these largely rural areas.

Festival organizers and participants should tell tourism service providers (e.g., owners of restaurants and hotels) that money is being spent in local businesses because of local support of, or interest in, the local wildlife and wildlife festival. For example, the Great Florida Birding Trail provides calling cards for birders to give to gas stations, hotels, and restaurants that read: "I'm spending money in your community because I'm here to see your wonderful birds. Keep up the good work conserving your wildlife and wildlands, and I'll keep coming back."³² This will encourage people to make a strong connection between the festival and economic benefits.

This logical connection is needed for both public (e.g., provincial or national park) and private (e.g., local landowners) interests so that there are market incentives to conserve wildlife.³³ Festival organizers might also seek out sponsors and partners to contribute financially, raise interest in the festival, and increase the profile of the target species and habitats. Economic incentives can also be used to maintain and increase use by visitors (e.g., loyalty benefits, identification with a festival).

Second, festival organizers should pay attention to legislation and policy frameworks. Festival activities must adhere to existing political and legal frameworks for wildlife protection in Canada.³⁴ This can help decrease resistance and increase support from relevant wildlife protection agencies and government departments. The involvement of political leaders is also critical: involve them in decisions, provide them with economic impact data, and invite them to present at the festival. The leaders might use the opportunity to

announce an environmental protection initiative. At the very least, they will see first-hand the level of public support for wildlife protection.

Furthermore, the political leaders seek to satisfy the needs of their constituents, gain public approval, and establish their legacies.³⁵ Wildlife festivals can provide a venue to accomplish these goals. Birders have gone so far as to advocate for certain politicians they believe will promote the interests of birders.³⁶ Similarly, the Great Florida Birding Trail gives out stickers that read "Birding is big business: healthy wildlands make healthy economies" in order to promote their political cause.³² Integrating festival activities into larger tourism initiatives (e.g., birding trails), networking (e.g., Boreal Birding Network), and conservation programs (e.g., North American Shorebird Conservation Plan) can increase political and logistical support.

Third, awareness and education can achieve long-term conservation benefits. Effective interpretation leads to wildlife protection by addressing all scales of analysis (spatial, temporal, and ecological) and by focusing on all ages and interests of visitors.³⁷ Organizers should move from promoting awareness and understanding to promoting concern and action, in the form of pro-environment behaviour.³⁷ This type of behavior requires support (e.g., information, instructions, encouragement, social networking) and rewards (e.g., recognition, personal benefits). Educational efforts should focus on environmental themes that relate to the target species of the festival, and then move on to related ecological and community concerns. It is important to encourage participants to make social, economic, scientific, or spiritual connections and action-related commitments during their visit. Since participants learn in different ways, it is

helpful to offer a variety of educational opportunities (e.g., speakers, hikes, workshops, hands-on projects, and workshops that encourage self-directed work and enable participants to apply their creativity). High-profile guest speakers can draw many people to a festival, with its attendant educational benefits. Some festival visitors can be encouraged to participate as organizers in future years or in bird censuses, which are essential for determining bird conservation priorities.

Fourth, community involvement can enhance wildlife conservation by way of long-term funding, in-kind donations, and volunteer support.³⁸ Diverse funding sources can trigger or leverage additional funding sources to help achieve the festival's goals. Making the connection between economic development and conservation can promote funding efforts. Ecotourism should empower and develop local communities so that wildlife festivals can justify using funds from community and economic development sources.³⁹ For the process to begin, the community needs to understand and see evidence of the economic benefits. However, the economic benefits should strive for balance; inequitable economic benefits (e.g., to one hotel or one protected area) can lead to conflict and declining support. Local ownership of the festivals should be encouraged for similar political and economic reasons (i.e., to enhance local benefits).

Local conservation and tourism groups can provide important volunteer support (e.g., logistics managers) and credibility (e.g., birding experts) so that the festival can engage more people. Such skills are needed for any wildlife festival, and such volunteers should be supported and recognized.⁴⁰ Local involvement to engage the cultural and natural history can enlarge the overall tourism product and appeal to festival visitors with broader

interests, thus increasing local economic impacts.

Last, wildlife festival organizers should develop a project ethic to encourage efficiency and integrity. This begins with a public statement of purpose for the festival that can guide all decision making. Many festivals either do not have a statement of purpose or do not provide it to the public in their promotional information. Some purpose statements will incorporate the role of a sponsoring organization, but this must be balanced among environmental, economic, and social goals.

Festival activities should observe environmental etiquettes and minimum impact practices.⁴¹ Monitoring efforts are needed to ensure that wildlife and their habitats are maintained or enhanced, with transparent processes and standards. This should enhance fund raising and volunteer support. Festival organizers should adopt guidelines for ecotourism practices, wildlife observation, or travel to sensitive natural and cultural areas.^{5,42} These guidelines should be adapted to the local context as appropriate. Perceptive visitors, sponsors, and community members will understand and support these efforts with future visits, donations, and volunteer assistance. Overall, festival organizers should engage professional marketing expertise to successfully attract participants to the festival and to help ensure that a festival's objectives, marketing and conservation practices, and conservation outcomes are consistent.

Conclusion

Wildlife festivals are an example of an ecotourism activity with considerable potential to help conserve the wildlife species and habitats that are targeted by the festivals. Festival organizers need to be aware of festival impacts, document them, and use them for the betterment of the natural environment. This does not

require lengthy studies costing large sums of money. It simply requires a clear focus and a common-sense understanding of how local political, social, and economic systems work. Fortunately, experiences from other festival organizers can help ease the planning aspects so that festivals can achieve benefits for focal species.⁴⁰ This should be the most important goal of wildlife festivals, and of ecotourism in general.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding support and Jody Rintoul for past research assistance.

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Appendix 1. Current wildlife festivals in Saskatchewan. (If you have information to update the list, please contact the authors.)

- Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Bird Symposium
 - o Location: southeast Saskatchewan
 - o Timing: February to April
 - o Description: To promote awareness of prairie conservation issues, opportunities for habitat protection, and bird-watching potential
 - o Activities: presentations, hikes, children's and youth activities
 - o Phone: (306) 744-8140
 - o Contact: Rob Wilson, secretary
 - o E-mail: <rrwilson@sasktel.net>
- Wings over Wascana Nature Festival
 - o Location: Regina, SK
 - o Timing: early May
 - o Description: Aimed at acquainting participants with nature and promoting fun through different wetland and wildlife activities.
 - o Activities: animal presentations,

- guided nature hikes, presentations, face painting, bird house building, pond dipping, and more
 - o Website: <<http://www.wascanamarsh.ca/wow10.htm>>
 - o Contact: Friends of Wascana Marsh
 - o E-mail: <friendsofwascanamarsh@gmail.com>
 - o Phone: (306) 585-1852
- Nature Saskatchewan Spring Meet
 - o Location: variable in SK
 - o Timing: early June
 - o Description: Regular meeting of Nature Saskatchewan members with a goal of discovering and celebrating nature in the province.
 - o Activities: field trips, bird hikes, banquet, presentations, and more
 - o Website: <<http://www.naturesask.ca>>
 - o Contact: Nature Saskatchewan
 - o E-mail: <info@naturesask.ca>
 - o Phone: (306) 780-9273
- Leader Birding and Tourism Festival
 - o Location: Leader, SK
 - o Timing: early May, alternating years (2009, 2011, ...)
 - o Description: A celebration of birds offering unique opportunities for birdwatchers and nature lovers.
 - o Activities: guided or self-guided tours, guest speakers, presentations, and a banquet
 - o Website: <<http://www.sasktourism.com/whats-happening/sasksecrets-newsletter/april-2009-home/leader-birding-festival>>
 - o Contact: Leader Tourism Committee
 - o E-mail: <kerry.wrishko@gov.sk.ca>, <rwishko@sasktel.net>
 - o Phone: (306) 291-7781
- Bright Wings Bird Festival
 - o Location: Cherry Lake
 - o Timing: May
 - o Description: This festival shows adults and children how they can enjoy birds and help out with nature
- monitoring programs and to raise money for the Last Mountain Bird Observatory.
 - o Activities: Workshops, field trips, bird watching, trips by canoe and kayak
 - o Website: <<http://www.naturesask.ca/?s=news&p=events&id=470>>
 - o Contact: Trevor and Karen Herriot
 - o E-mail: <khherriot@sasktel.net>
 - o Phone: 306-585-1674
- Chaplin Shorebird Festival
 - o Location: Chaplin, SK
 - o Timing: early June
 - o Description: This annual event celebrates over 30 species of shorebirds which can number in the hundreds of thousands in the area.
 - o Activities: Tours
 - o Website: <<http://chapnc.sasktelwebhosting.com/events.htm>>
 - o Contact: Chaplin Tourism
 - o E-mail: <chaplintourism@sasktel.net>
 - o Phone: (306) 395-2223
- Native Prairie Appreciation Week
 - o Location: throughout SK, with workshops in rotating locations
 - o Timing: late June
 - o Description: This celebration raises awareness and develops appreciation of native prairie ecosystems and their importance to Saskatchewan's provincial, environmental, and agricultural sectors.
 - o Activities: workshops and field tours
 - o Website: <http://www.pcap-sk.org/?s=11.native_prairie_appreciat>
 - o Contact: Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan
 - o E-mail: <pcap@sasktel.net>
 - o Phone: (306) 352-0472
- Nature Saskatchewan Fall Meet

- o Location: variable in SK
- o Timing: late September or early October
- o Description: Regular meeting of Nature Saskatchewan members with a goal of discovering and celebrating nature in various parts of the province.
- o Activities: field trips, bird hikes, banquet, presentations, and more
- o Website: <<http://www.naturesask.ca>>
- o Contact: Nature Saskatchewan
- o E-mail: <info@naturesask.ca>
- o Phone: (306) 780-9273

Appendix 2. Current wildlife festivals in Alberta. (If you have information to update the list, please contact the authors.)

- Beaverhill Lake Snow Goose Chase (Tofield)
 - o Timing: late April
 - o Contact: Edmonton Nature Club, <www.enc.fanweb.ca>
 - o Goal: nature immersion, including birds, snakes, insects, and more
- Swan Festival (Grande Prairie)
 - o Timing: late April
 - o Contact: Saskatoon Island Provincial Park, <www..swanfestival.fanweb.ca>
 - o Goal: Learn about trumpeter swans and conservation issues
- Red Deer River Naturalists May Species Count and Bird Festival (Red Deer)
 - o Timing: late May
 - o Contact: Red Deer River Naturalists, <www..rdrn.fanweb.ca/rdrn_home_page.htm>
 - o Goal: May species count and exploration of local nature hotspots
- Crowsnest Wing Fest (Blairmore, Crowsnest Pass)
 - o Timing: late May to early June
- o Contact: Crowsnest Conservation Society, <www.crowsnestconservation.ca>
- o Goal: Bird festival and the spring bird, mammal, and butterfly counts
- Songbird Festival (Lesser Slave Lake)
 - o Timing: early June
 - o Contact: Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory, <www.lslbo.org/songbirdfestival.asp>
 - o Goal: Birding festival, bird banding, and conservation of boreal birds
- Purple Martin Festival (Camrose)
 - o Timing: early June
 - o Contact: Tourism Camrose, <www.tourismcamrose.com>, City of Camrose, <www..camrose.ca>
 - o Goal: Birding festival with a focus on purple martins and other local wildlife
- International Migratory Bird Day Festival (Calgary)
 - o Timing: early June
 - o Contact: Inglewood Bird Sanctuary, <<http://www.birdday.org/birdday/explorers-map>>
 - o Goal: Celebrate the return of migratory birds, and promote awareness of conservation issues
- Waterton Wildflower Festival (Waterton)
 - o Timing: mid- to late June
 - o Contact: Trail of the Great Bear, <www.watertonwildflowers.com>
 - o Goal: Awareness of wildflowers and other local natural history
- Bluebird Festival (Lacombe)
 - o Timing: mid-July
 - o Contact: Ellis Bird Farm, <www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html>
 - o Goal: Awareness of bluebirds and other local wildlife
- Bug Jamboree (Lacombe)
 - o Timing: early August
 - o Contact: Ellis Bird Farm, <www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html>

- o Goal: Develop awareness of, and knowledge about, insects and spiders
- Jasper Annual Wildlife Festival (Jasper)
 - o Timing: late August
 - o Contact: Jasper National Park, <www.jaspercanadianrockies.com, www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/jasper/activ.aspx>
 - o Goal: Connect to the natural ecosystems and the wildlife that depend upon them
- Waterton Wildlife Weekend (Waterton)
 - o Timing: late September
 - o Contact: Trail of the Great Bear, <www.trailofthegreatbear.com >
 - o Goal: Experience the wonder of Waterton's native wildlife
- Crowsnest Pass Eagle Watch (Blairmore)
 - o Timing: early to mid-October
 - o Contact: Crowsnest Conservation Society, <www.crowsnestconservation.ca >
 - o Goal: Learn about raptor identification; help with annual eagle monitoring program.
- Festival of the Eagles (Canmore)
 - o Timing: mid-October
 - o Contact: Town of Canmore, <www.canmore.ca/About-Canmore/Community-Celebrations/October-Festival-of-Eagles.html>
- o Goal: Celebrate the Golden Eagle migration

Appendix 3. Current wildlife festivals in Manitoba. (If you have information to update the list, please contact the authors.)

- Delta Marsh Birding Festival (Portage la Prairie)
 - o Timing: May
 - o Contact: Delta Marsh Bird Observatory, <www.dmbo.org/festival/>
 - o Goal: Celebrate birds and promote their conservation; help local businesses through birding tourism
- Dragonfly Festival (Oak Hammock Marsh)
 - o Timing: Late July
 - o Contact: Oak Hammock Marsh, <www.oakhammockmarsh.ca>
 - o Goal: Celebrate the importance of dragonflies in the wetland food chain
- Migration Festival (Oak Hammock Marsh)
 - o Timing: Late September, early October
 - o Contact: Oak Hammock Marsh, <www.oakhammockmarsh.ca>
 - o Goal: Celebrate the amazing migrating birds as they head south



It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know of wonder and humility.

- Rachel Carson