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WINGING IT

Birders answer call of plumage on Seaway Trail

518-mile route is hot spot for hundreds of migrating species

By Mary Esch The Associated Press

HILTON, N.Y. — Greg Lawrence crashed through the underbrush, eyes wide, binoculars swinging from his neck.

“Worm-eating warbler! Worm-eating warbler! That’s a lifer for me,” he called to the group of birders he was leading on a woodland trek near Lake Ontario. “Wow. Whew. That made my day. I just got my bins on it before it flew away.”

Lawrence, something of a birding prodigy at age 15 with 305 species already on his life list, explained that the worm-eating warbler is a rare sight so far north. The drab, greenish bird, hard to spot as it forages for caterpillars in dense underbrush, nests in the Appalachians and points south.

“It occasionally overshoots its breeding grounds and rests here,” he said.

The wayward warbler is just one of myriad species of songbirds, shorebirds, raptors and waterfowl found along the shores of Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River and Lake Erie, a region known as the Seaway Trail.

While avid birders have long flocked to the region, particularly during spring and fall migrations when incredible numbers of birds can be spotted, many people are unaware of the avian bounty here.

Local birding groups and Seaway Trail Inc., a not-for-profit tourism organization, are working to change that through a yearlong series of events promoting the region as a prime birding destination.

“We’re trying to make people aware of the world-class birding opportunities along the Seaway Trail, particularly along the southern shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario,” said ornithologist Gerry Smith, president of the Onondaga Audubon Society in Syracuse. “We’re working on a birding guidebook and accompanying CD and holding special events throughout the year to promote the exceptional ornithological resources within a few hours of the major cities of the Northeast.”

The Seaway Trail has the potential to rival renowned birding destinations such as Cape May, N.J., Chesapeake Bay’s Delmarva Peninsula, and the World Birding Center in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, said Kara Lynn Dunn, publicist for the Seaway Trail.

“A lot of tourist locations are chasing this fast-growing market,” said Pete Dunne, author of seven bird books and director of New Jersey Audubon’s Cape May Observatory.

One reason birding is growing in popularity is the aging of backpacking baby boomers, who are looking for a less strenuous way to engage in the natural world, Dunne said.

For tourism marketers, this is a valuable demographic.

An estimated 47.7 million birders in the United States spent about \$45.7 billion on wildlife-watching in 2006, said Richard Aiken, a natural resources economist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who studies the economic value of wildlife-related recreation.

The 518-mile Seaway Trail, a national scenic byway, features a wide variety of bird habitats, many of which are highlighted with 17 new educational kiosks being erected this summer.

An exhibit at the Seaway Trail's headquarters in Sackets Harbor provides an introduction to birding in the region, as well as maps and brochures detailing birding hot spots.

Birds are especially abundant during migration, when the region's forests, grasslands and shrubby habitat provide a rest-and-refueling stopover for colorful neotropical birds, including warblers, orioles, thrushes, flycatchers, tanagers, sparrows and cuckoos. Experienced birders have seen more than 40 migrant species in a single shoreline woodlot in one morning.

Some of the birding hot spots along the Seaway Trail include:

Braddock Bay, on Lake Ontario a few miles northwest of Rochester, where hawk watchers recorded nearly 63,000 migrating raptors this spring and volunteers band nearly 10,000 birds a year.

Derby Hill, 30 miles north of Syracuse, where tens of thousands of migrating hawks pass overhead as they follow the edge of Lake Ontario.

Little Galloo Island,

60 miles north of Syracuse, home to the world's largest ring-billed gull colony.

The Niagara Gorge,

winter home to at least 18 species of gulls as well as terns, ducks, hawks and falcons.

Bill Purcell has been a volunteer hawk-counter for 25 years at Derby Hill. He has seen days when the sky was filled with as many as 20,000 raptors a day. Daily numbers and season totals are recorded on a bulletin board in a small pavilion that includes photos and information about each of the 15 species seen there.

"This is the premier spot to see the vast spectacle of the spring hawk migration," Purcell said. "A south wind brings them up against the lake. They don't want to fly across 40 miles of open water, so they're concentrated as they're funneled through here."

Spring is the best time to see birds in their bright breeding plumage, Smith said. In summer, there's a great diversity of breeding birds. Whippoorwills, which have been declining elsewhere, flourish in the Indian River Lakes region a few miles inland from the St. Lawrence River, he said.

But you don't have to be an avid birder toting a \$3,000 spotting scope to enjoy the avian riches of vacation spots such as Cape May and the Seaway Trail.

"One of the things that makes our bird riches so important is the added element of enjoyment that it gives all visitors," Dunne said. "Most shore communities don't have a world-class birding location in their backyard. Even casual birdwatchers can go to the hawk watch platform for a few hours or join a morning bird walk before they head out to the boardwalk or the beach." **If you go**

SEAWAY TRAIL:

seawaytrail.com or (800) 732-9298. A 454-mile scenic route paralleling Lake Erie, the Niagara River, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River in New York, connects with 54 miles of Seaway Trail Pennsylvania.

EVENTS AT DISCOVERY CENTER:

“Handling Birds of Prey” on Aug. 21 at 6 p.m., “Journaling with Roger Tory Peterson Institute” on Sept. 18 at 6 p.m., “1,000 Islands Bald Eagle: On the Brink of Recovery?” on Oct. 9 at 6 p.m., and Audubon Christmas Bird Count director Geoff Learnon, Nov. 6 at 6 p.m. (\$5 fee)

BIRDING TRIPS:

Aug. 25, from 5 to 8 p.m., in the Sackets Harbor area. Starts at the Sackets Harbor Battlefield State Historic Site, West Main Street, sacketsharborbattlefield.org. All birders welcome, beginner to advanced. Fee: \$10.

BRADDOCK BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY: bbbo.org or (585) 234-3525. On the south shore of Lake Ontario northwest of Rochester. Open only during spring and fall migrations, mid-April to early June, and late August to mid-October. Closed on rainy days.

DERBY HILL BIRD OBSERVATORY: Mexico, N.Y., derbyhill.org. On private road Grand View Avenue at end of Sage Creek Road off Route 104B (Seaway Trail) in Oswego County, about an hour north of Syracuse.



KEVIN RIVOLI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS A Tennessee warbler is viewed under a magnifying glass at the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory near Rochester, N.Y.



KEVIN RIVOLI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Volunteer bander Karen Vilas, left, leads a family to the banding station after collecting birds at the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory in New York.

