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My Turn

Economic resource slighted

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In the early 1800s, the only folks out watching birds were either ornithologists or other scientific geek types bent on establishing an avian classification system. By the early 1900s, bird watching was limited to a few clubs and the activity of Yankee gentlemen in large eastern cities.

With the publication of Roger Tory Peterson's "A field Guide to Birds," there was a burst of interest. This interest was further stimulated by the availability of binoculars after World War II. With improved equipment, specialized books and ease of travel, the last 50 years have seen explosive growth of birding watching enthusiast. Today 47 million Americans enjoy watching, photographing or feeding birds; 18 million serious "birders" take to the roads exclusively to watch birds. Each year over two hundred birding festivals take place in the U.S. and Canada.

So "why" you might ask am I writing about this in The Taos News. Well dear Taose-os, it's because, as many of you already know, the local Rio Grande Corridor, is a seasonal migration route for birds and a potential gold mine for attracting birders. Birders spend money on transportation, hotels, restaurants, local guides and souvenirs. They tend to be middle-aged or above and have better than average incomes. They spent about \$41 billion on birding trips and equipment in the U.S. per 2011 data.

They also happen to spend a lot of that money during slow tourist times, late spring and fall. I fear, we're not protecting this "gold mine", and we're not capitalizing on this incredible resource.

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive baseline survey of habitat critical to bird breeding, and survival. No shoreline areas, islands, trails or cliffs are yet identified that need protection from human activities during migration. At this time a plan is being developed for the Rio Grande Del Norte Monument.

Of the three partners involved in developing the plan, none is a voice for nongame wildlife. Additionally, BLM Taos says they don't have money for a summer breeding bird survey. Nonetheless, they are planning for bicycling races, replete with bands, vendors, toilet facilities, and expanded parking prior to the RGDN assessment and planning document completion.

Trails, climbing areas, camping sites and parking areas appear, but not crucial studies necessary to preserve an ideal "tourist" destination for birds.

There are no bird watching blinds or platforms to encourage bird watching. There are no designated birding trails. In the vast West Rim Trail area, all trails are open to hiking, biking and horseback riding. There are no trails limited to walking only and for the sanctuary of birds and their nests.

I have not seen promotional materials aimed at birding aficionados. In other good birding areas, nearby municipalities are exploring sophisticated ways to attract birders to their towns. For example one idea is to combine ecotourism with birding. One town held conferences to draw in local experts, state and federal agencies, resorts and parks to discuss how wetland conservation could be combined with birding opportunity. For assessment purposes, planning agencies have to address the effect human activities have on threatened or endangered species, but they are not required to consider impacts on bird variety and numbers. They do not have a mandate to monitor populations in decline like the pinyon jay.

Birders come when they hear that there are many marvelous birds to be seen. Birds of all sorts, come because the river corridor provides protection, forage, water and good nesting/roosting areas. The raptors, like peregrine falcons, golden and bald eagles seek fish, small game and high, quiet sanctuaries. Birds are ingenious in finding ways to protect and hide their young, and most will avoid human activity.

The following residents and visitors have expressed concern about increased activity on the mesas above Orilla Verde: loggerhead shrikes, horned larks, burrowing owls, grey vireos, black throated grey warblers, pinyon jays, black throated sparrows, Brewer's sparrows, juniper titmice, scaled quail, sagebrush and chipping sparrows, lark sparrows, sage thrashers, mountain and western bluebirds, western tanagers ... and other delightful neighbors. Raptors don't like bands at all.

I'm not against, biking, swimming, rafting, camping and other recreational activities, but if we don't care for special bird times and places, we'll lose our goldmine.

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