

Have Binoculars, Will Travel: In Pursuit Of Rarities, Bird-Watchers Boost Tourism

BY LISA MILLER

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Mio, Mich., doesn't have much to offer in the way of tourist attractions. It's not even a real town, just a ZIP Code in the middle of a thick pine forest, about 100 miles north of Flint.

But Mio does have one priceless natural resource, which draws thousands of tourists every year: a very rare yellow-bellied warbler. Every spring, 1,200 Kirtland's Warblers—the world's entire population—fly up from the Bahamas to breed in the pine trees near Mio. And every spring, pilgrims follow, with binoculars around their necks and cash in their pockets.

"Birders have great disposable income," says Virgie Purchase, who owns the Songbird Motel in Mio. "They're great people to have around. They're very quiet, very neat and very clean."

Mio knows what other small towns and cities across the country are discovering: Bird-watchers are big business. Birders want to see birds they have never seen before and will travel long distances and spend enormous sums to do so. They travel south in the winter and north in the summer, filling small-town hotels and restaurants to capacity, renting cars, purchasing guided tours and gobbling up all sorts of gear, from binoculars to apparel. ("Nobody does it without Gore-Tex," says Jane Murphy, a birder and historian from Ithaca, N.Y.) And their numbers are growing—if not exploding.

In just the past five years, membership in the American Birding Association soared to 16,000 from 6,000. Subscriptions to WildBird magazine have risen to 180,000 from 62,000 in 1990. And the pool of potential birders seems almost limitless, particularly as baby boomers get older and less active. Most estimates put the total number of American bird-watchers, from the casual to the expert, at 65 million.

What's the thrill? For Vicki Lang, who works at a rehabilitation center in Carbondale, Ill., it's the idea of pursuing some-

thing as ephemeral as a bird. "You see it, you own it," the 36-year-old says simply.

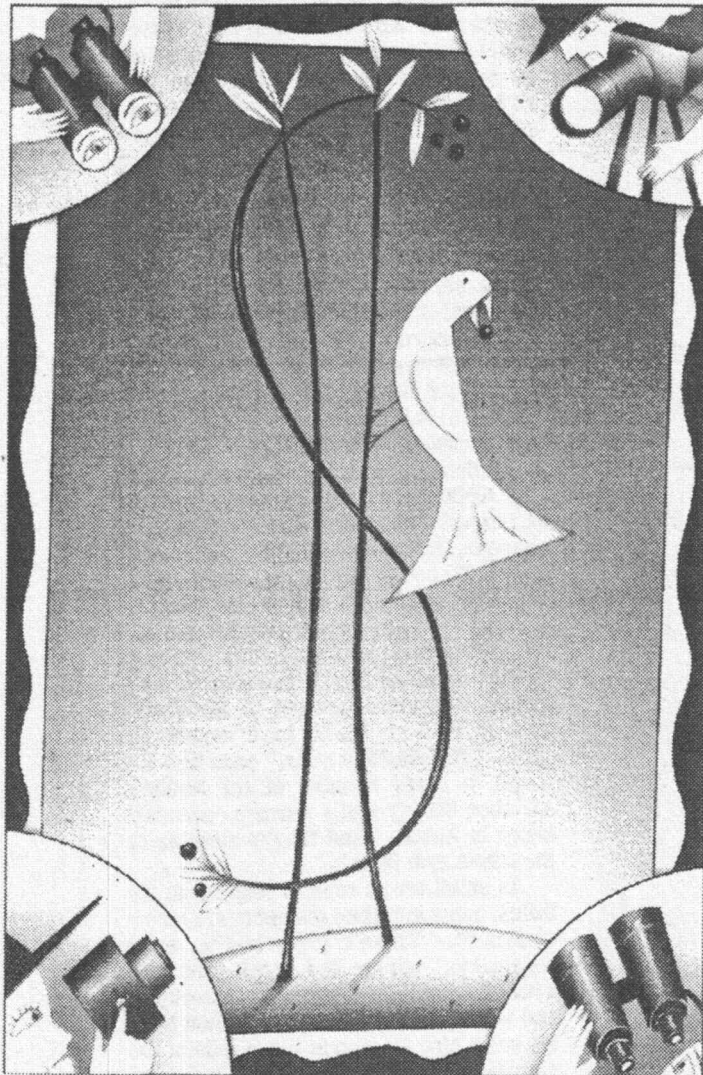
"There's a build-up of anticipation," explains Sandy Komito, 64, of Fair Lawn, N.J. "You never know: Will you find them? Won't you find them? I think I can use the word ecstatic when you do find it."

In a year, Mr. Komito takes 12 to 20 birding trips. He regularly phones birders' hotlines for tips on new or unusual sightings in North America. And whenever he hears about a bird he's never seen, he hops on a plane, "usually within an hour." Last spring, for example, a number of European birds—including more than a dozen Greater Golden-Plovers and two Pink-footed Geese—got caught in a storm on their way north and were blown off course to Newfoundland. Mr. Komito followed them there. The retired contractor estimates that he spends more than \$10,000 a year on his hobby.

Most birders seem willing to go anywhere. For example, Wings Inc., a bird-touring company based in Tucson, Ariz., added 10 foreign countries to its destination list last year.

Even birders with limited budgets take trips when they can. Andy Aldrich, a 44-year-old machinist for Pratt & Whitney, recently traveled from his home in North Burwick, Maine, to East Texas for the fall migration. He did it on the cheap, taking a bus to a train to a low-fare Southwest flight from Baltimore. Once in Texas, he hitched rides and camped in parking lots.

Traveling birders find an increasing number of destinations as more small towns have started marketing their birds as a tourist attraction. Two years ago, Mio launched the first-ever Kirtland's Warbler festival. Seven thousand people came, and each one spent an estimated \$50 a day—in a town where the per capita income is \$8,000. In Socorro, N.M., 14,000 sandhill cranes draw 12,000 people every November. The town of Harlingen, Texas, a pit stop for hundreds of species on their way to South America, just had its second annual birding festival, attracting



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Please Turn to Page B4, Column 4

