Gender-Based Differences in Birdwatchers’ Participation and Commitment

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This study explored possible gender-based differences in birdwatching participation and commitment using a sample of North Carolina birding organization members. Within the theoretical contexts of recreational specialization and symbolic interactionism we examined whether male and female birdwatchers differed in objective measures of participation such as frequency of participation, birding skills, monetary investment, and years of participation. We then examined differences between men and women in their psychological commitment to birding and why they first decided to get involved in the activity. Findings indicated that men were significantly more involved in birding in terms of their objective behavior and skill level. They were also slightly more committed to birding than were the women, although these differences were less pronounced than for behavior and skill. Numerous differences in why men and women initially decided to become involved in the activity were also found. Implications for both future research and management are discussed.

Keywords birding, birdwatching, gender, specialization, commitment, initial involvement

Introduction

Wildlife-related recreation is extremely popular and growing in importance. According to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, more than 87 million American adults (38% of the U.S. population) participated in recreation activities related to fish and wildlife in 2006 and spent over $120 billion (1% of U.S. GDP) in the process (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2007). Birdwatching, or “birding” as serious participants often refer to it, is an important part of this wildlife-related recreation. Approximately 47.7 million adults (21% of the population) participated in birdwatching in the United States in 2006, generating nearly $32 billion in retail sales and over $85 billion in overall economic output (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001). Moreover, people’s interest in birdwatching has increased over the last 20 years while participation in hunting and fishing has declined (Cordell & Overdevest, 2001). As the population ages, even larger numbers of people will likely gravitate to activities like birding, which can be pursued in less strenuous ways and are attractive to older participants as well as others. Given the popularity and economic contribution of birding and its rapid growth relative to
traditional consumptive wildlife activities, it is important for managers and planners to understand its participants and the nature of their involvement.

A growing number of studies have shown that birdwatchers comprise a diverse group of recreationists (Cole & Scott, 1999; Hvenegaard, 2002; McFarlane, 1994; Scott, Ditton, Stoll, & Eubanks, 2005). These studies show that participants vary in frequency of participation, level of skill, and commitment and suggest that only a small proportion of birdwatchers can be classified as serious or committed participants. Little research, however, has examined the extent to which male and female participants differ in terms of behavior, skill, commitment, and socialization into the activity. Unlike fishing and hunting, birding and other forms of wildlife watching tend to be fairly egalitarian in that there are nearly equal numbers of male and female participants (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2007). However, given that men and women are socialized differently (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1989) and face different constraints, it is reasonable to predict that they might approach birdwatching differently and become involved in the activity in different ways. Our purpose was to systematically examine the extent to which male and female birdwatchers differed in their level of specialization and the mechanisms by which they were socialized into the activity. We sought to accomplish this within the theoretical frameworks of recreational specialization and symbolic interactionism.

**Literature Review**

**Specialization and Commitment in Birding**

Recreation specialization, commitment, involvement, serious leisure, and other related concepts have had a prominent place in leisure research for decades. Beginning with Bryan (1977), specialization research has sought to differentiate among subgroups of recreationists to help researchers improve understanding of leisure behavior and assist planners and managers in their efforts to provide high-quality recreation opportunities. More recently, Scott and Shafer (2001) concluded that specialization is a developmental process that involves progression in terms of focusing of behavior, acquiring skills and knowledge, and increasing personal and behavioral commitment to the activity. A focusing of behavior among birdwatchers is reflected by such things as number of birding trips taken away from home, years of involvement, and monetary expenditures (Cole & Scott, 1999; Hvenegaard, 2002; McFarlane, 1994, 1996; Scott, Ditton et al., 2005). Skill among birdwatchers is typically measured by having respondents rate their ability at identifying birds and estimate how many birds they are able to identify by sight and/or sound (Kim, Scott, & Crompton, 1997; McFarlane, 1994, 1996; Scott & Thigpen, 2003; Scott, Cavin, & Lee, 2005). Commitment involves, first, a strong personal attachment to the activity and a "conviction that the activity is worth doing for its own sake" (Scott & Shafer, 2001, p. 329). Commitment also entails outside or behavioral investments that make stopping difficult because doing so would "lead to the loss of a strongly held identity, friends, and resources to pursue other activities" (Scott, Ditton et al., 2005, p. 63).

Several generalizations can be made from studies of specialization among birdwatchers and other wildlife watchers. Specialized birdwatchers are far more likely than casual ones to use a variety of information sources when planning birding/wildlife watching trips (Cole & Scott, 1999). Specialized birdwatchers are also much more focused with regard to desirable destination attributes than are casual birdwatchers (Cole & Scott, 1999; Scott & Thigpen, 2003). The former primarily make trip decisions based on the birds likely to be seen, whereas casual participants are likely to make trip decisions based on a broader
range of destination attributes. Similarly, specialized birdwatchers are more likely than casual ones to be motivated to see new or rare birds (Hvenegaard, 2002; McFarlane, 1994; Scott et al., 2005), whereas casual birdwatchers are more likely to ascribe importance to appreciative motives (McFarlane, 1994) and family bonding (Scott, Cavin, & Lee, 2005). Studies also show that specialized birdwatchers are far more likely to engage in leadership and conservation activities (Lee & Scott, 2006; McFarlane & Boxall, 1996). Finally, specialized birdwatchers are more likely than casual ones to have been initiated into the activity during childhood (McFarlane, 1996).

**Gender, Wildlife-Related Recreation and Birding**

Early attempts to classify recreation activity participants into meaningful homogeneous subgroups often focused on individual characteristics of participants including variables such as age, income, education, and gender. In general these variables turned out not to be powerful predictors of preferences or behavior, but some differences did emerge. One such variable that was sometimes useful was gender, which has long been considered a factor that might affect which activities a person chooses. One theorist speculated, for example, that “gender acts as a sort of sieve, filtering out males and females from activities culturally defined as appropriate for one sex only” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 73). Unlike hunting where the majority of participants are men, wildlife watching appears to be culturally “appropriate” for both genders. Females make up 54% of all residential wildlife watchers and 48% of nonresidential wildlife watchers in the United States (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006) and more than half (54%) of all birdwatchers in the United States are women (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001). A handful of studies indicate that gender may be related to recreationists’ motivations, although no consistent patterns are readily apparent. For example, Ryan (1995) found that female’s motivations for traveling were more likely than males to involve mental and physical relaxation, and a desire to develop close personal relationships. Pearce and Catabiano (1983), however, found that males expressed greater needs for positive experiences of love and belongingness than did females.

More important than differences in stated motives, however, could be differences between men and women in terms of the meanings their experiences have for them. From a theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, experiences have meaning because they are interpreted by individuals who ascribe particular meanings to their actions as well as to the actions of others. In this regard, men and women are thought to view reality, including leisure experiences, differently. Symbolic interactionism, based on work by Mead (1972) and adapted to leisure concepts by Kelly (1983), is the foundation for much of feminism research in the leisure field (Wearing, 1998). These authors view leisure experiences as filtered through one’s sense of self and one’s life roles. Leisure is, therefore, seen as a dynamic process that differs for men and women. Henderson et al. (1989), for example, suggest that men’s leisure experiences tend to “focus on quantity, activity, achievement and competition” (p. 53) whereas leisure for women tends to focus on the quality, sociability, relationships, and cooperative interactions inherent in the experience.

There is evidence that women hold stronger humanistic (i.e., emotional attachment) and moralistic (i.e., reverence and ethical concern) sentiments toward the natural world than do men (Kellert, 1996). However, only a few studies exist that have focused specifically on the relationship between gender and involvement in outdoor and wildlife-related recreation. These studies show that males tend to be more specialized than females (Lee, Graefe & Li, 2007; Wilde, Reichers & Ditton, 1998). Schroeder, Fulton, Currie, and Goeman (2006) examined men and women anglers and found that men were more
specialized than women, with men fishing more days per year, owning more fishing equipment, and generally rating fishing as more important to them than did women. In terms of motivations, they found that men were motivated more by developing skill and knowledge and catching trophy fish, whereas women were more motivated by catching fish for food. There were no differences between the two in terms of appreciation, affiliation, or catching fish in general. The authors speculated that some of the women may have been more utilitarian in their angling because providing fish for their families was an expression of an “ethic of care” (Shaw, 1994) or, that as women, they felt less entitled to leisure and by catching fish for food they saw their fishing as a productive pursuit rather than leisure. Miller and McGee (2000) found differences between men’s and women’s values toward and knowledge of wildlife. Men were more likely than women to support consumptive, dominating, practical, and habitat values whereas women were more supportive of aesthetic values and were more likely to express love for animals and to express fear of certain species.

A few studies also show that males participate more intensely in wildlife watching activities than do females. McFarlane and Boxall (1996) segmented birdwatchers in Alberta using specialization indicators and found that females made up 60% of casual birdwatchers but only 37% of specialized birdwatchers. Scott et al. (1999) reported that the vast majority of participants (85%) in Great Texas Birding Classic, an annual event attracting highly skilled competitive birdwatchers, were male. Finally, Scott, Cavin, and Lee (2005) examined gender differences among members of the American Birding Association (ABA), which tends to attract specialized birdwatchers that are highly skilled at identifying birds by sight and sound and includes people devoted to listing and chasing birds. Females comprise only about one-third of all ABA members and male members were more focused on skill development, owned more birding guides, and reported longer “life lists” than female members. In contrast, females were more focused on and committed to conservation efforts affecting birds and their habitats. Scott, Cavin, and Lee concluded that males and females were both highly committed to birding, but their styles of participation took different forms.

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

This study was undertaken to further explore and expand on possible gender-based differences using a sample of birdwatchers from a North Carolina organization called the Carolina Bird Club (CBC). The CBC provides an opportunity to examine specialization and socialization processes among a more general cross sample of birdwatchers than those examined by previous studies (Scott et al., 1999). Our study objectives were to compare men and women birdwatchers in terms of their (a) behavior and skill, (b) commitment to birdwatching, and (c) reasons for getting involved in the activity. This study attempts to make two contributions to the literature. First, it provides insight into how gender is related to level of specialization. Few studies have examined the extent to which males and females differ in behavior, skill, and commitment, particularly in terms of wildlife-related recreation activities. Second, the findings extend our understanding of sources of differences among birdwatchers and possible career paths that attend people’s involvement in the activity over time.

**Methods**

**Sample and Data Collection**

The data for this study came from a 1998 study (see Newberry, 1998 for details) of birdwatchers conducted in North Carolina for the Carolina Bird Club. The CBC was founded...
in 1937 to promote avian and other wildlife conservation in North and South Carolina, with membership “open to all persons interested in the conservation, natural history, and study of wildlife with particular emphasis on birds” (Carolina Bird Club, 2007). The CBC publishes a quarterly newsletter, The Chat, sponsors regular meetings and birding outings, and maintains an extensive website that includes bird checklists, lists of birding locations, and other information of interest to birdwatchers in the Carolinas. At the time of the original study CBC had approximately 1,100 members. Data were gathered from a random sample of 800 members selected from the full CBC mailing list who were mailed a written questionnaire. Two survey mailings yielded 570 useable responses for a response rate of 71%. Twenty-four respondents did not provide their gender and were dropped from subsequent analyses for this research. Of the remaining 546 respondents, 324 (59%) were male and 222 (41%) female. Because gender was determined through a question on the survey itself and the gender breakdown for CBC membership was not available, we were not able to compare response rates for men and women or weight the data to match the actual gender proportions of the sample frame.

**Instrumentation and Analyses**

Six different behavioral measures of birdwatching participation were assessed for men and women then compared using *t*-tests. Respondents rated their skill level in identifying birds on a 7-point scale (1 “Novice” to 7 “Expert”), and estimated the number of bird species they could identify without using a field guide, and the replacement value of their birding equipment. They also reported the age at which they first decided to get involved in birding, which was used with their self-reported current age to calculate the years each respondent had been involved in the activity. Finally, an estimate of frequency of birding participation was obtained by asking how many trips (one mile or more from home) they had taken in the previous 12 months where birding was their primary activity.

The commitment measures were those used in a number of previous studies of birdwatchers (Kim et al., 1997; Scott et al., 1999). These asked participants to rate their agreement with nine statements such as, “I find that a lot of my life is organized around birding,” “I consider myself to be somewhat expert at birding,” and “most of my friends are in some way connected with birding.” Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was employed to explore dimensions of commitment to birding. Respondents also rated the importance of 10 possible influences that might have affected their decision to initially take up birding from 1 (“Not at all Important”) to 7 (“Very Important”). *T*-tests were used to assess differences between men and women in terms of their levels of commitment to birding and the importance of the various initial involvement influences.

**Results**

**Characteristics of Respondents and Behavioral/Skill Measures of Birding Participation**

The men in the sample were significantly younger than the women, with men averaging 54 years and women 59 (*p* < .001). Education levels and household incomes were fairly high, with men’s household income levels significantly higher than women’s. In terms of participation and skill in birding the men were significantly more active than the women on 5 of the 6 measures examined (Table 1). Although there was no significant difference between the two groups in the number of birding trips they had taken
during the past year, the men reported they were more skilled than the women, could identify more than twice as many birds without a field guide, and owned birding equipment valued at more than twice that of their female counterparts. The men had gotten involved in birding at a significantly younger age (9 years younger on average) and had been involved in birding for over 5 years longer on average, at 31 and 26 years, respectively.

**Commitment to Birding**

Factor analysis of the nine commitment items revealed two distinct dimensions of commitment as in previous studies using these statements (Table 2). The “personal commitment” factor was comprised of the expected five items and explained 52% of the variance. The “behavioral commitment factor” explained far less variance (10%) and although it was comprised of the expected 4 items, it had an eigenvalue of only .93. Despite the low eigenvalue, the items comprising the factor are similar to those seen elsewhere (Scott et al., 1999) and provide a basis for comparing our results to those of others. Indices developed for the two commitment factors had acceptable Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .79 and .83 indicating each had high internal consistency. Personal commitment was much stronger than behavioral commitment with overall means of 4.00 and 2.55, respectively, on the 7-point scales. Men were significantly more committed to birding on average than were women, both in terms of their personal commitment and behavioral commitment (Table 3).

**Initial Involvement in Birding**

The respondents in this study initially became involved in birding due to a large variety of influences. The majority of both men and women reported that they could identify a particular key event that led them to get involved in birdwatching, with 55% of men and 60% of women able to do so ($p < .23$). However, there were a number of differences between

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men (n)</th>
<th>Women (n)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Reported Skill Rating$^1$</td>
<td>5.20 (323)</td>
<td>4.37 (222)</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Birds Able to Identify Without a Field Guide</td>
<td>399 (314)</td>
<td>186 (191)</td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Replacement Value For Birdwatching Equipment</td>
<td>$3,920 (322)$</td>
<td>$1,449 (214)$</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trips in Past Year Where Birding Was the Primary Activity$^2$</td>
<td>33.8 (315)</td>
<td>23.5 (211)</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age First Decided to Get Involved in Birdwatching</td>
<td>23.3 (316)</td>
<td>32.1 (212)</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Involved in Birding$^3$</td>
<td>31.0 (314)</td>
<td>25.8 (209)</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$Means based on 7-point response categories with 1 being “Novice” and 7 “Expert.”

$^2$Trips 1 mile or more from home.

$^3$Computed by subtracting age at first involvement from present age.
men and women in terms of the factors that led to their initial decision to become involved (Table 4). On average, the women rated every factor except one as being more important than did the men and in 6 of these 9 instances the difference was significant. Only in the case of “teacher or course I took” did the men rate the influence as significantly more important than did the women.
Discussion

Our results show clearly that CBC men were significantly more active in their birding participation than were women. Men reported being more skilled, had invested far more in equipment, got started at a younger age, and had watched birds longer. Men also reported slightly higher personal and behavioral commitment than did women. This is consistent with earlier research suggesting men are more specialized in their birding than women (McFarlane & Boxall, 1996; Scott, Cavin, & Lee, 2005). These results should not be interpreted as suggesting that CBC women are inactive birdwatchers. There was no significant difference between men and women in terms of the number of birding trips taken in the past year and over 40% of the club members who responded to the survey were female. Still, males reported higher levels of involvement on most of the specialization indicators used in the study.

The central question that arises from these results is why are men more active and committed to birding than are women? Differences in participation and commitment between the sexes suggest that women prefer to participate in different ways and possibly for different reasons than men. Consistent with the symbolic interactionism framework, women apparently value different aspects of birding and place different meanings on their birdwatching experiences than do men. Women seem less compelled to focus on skill development and achievement than their male counterparts, and considerably less than those in competitive and male-dominated events such as the Great Texas Birding Classic, where 72% reported that they kept life lists (Scott, Ditton, et al., 1999). Such differences are also consistent with feminist writers who contend that men’s leisure experiences focus on competition and achievement whereas women are more oriented toward sociability and relationships (Henderson et al., 1989). Interestingly, 14% of the women in our sample chose not to answer the questionnaire item that asked them to rate their ability to identify birds. They might have felt such a metric of skill and accomplishment was not particularly relevant to what their birdwatching meant to them. In contrast, all but one of the 324 men provided this skill information.

### Table 4
Importance of various influences in decision to get involved in birdwatching for men and women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Men (n)</th>
<th>Women (n)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a particular bird for the first time</td>
<td>4.94 (316)</td>
<td>5.39 (216)</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining a birdbfeeder or nestbox</td>
<td>4.04 (321)</td>
<td>5.33 (217)</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking organized bird walk or hike</td>
<td>3.83 (312)</td>
<td>4.59 (212)</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining a birding club or organization</td>
<td>3.60 (316)</td>
<td>4.57 (215)</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend who was a birder</td>
<td>3.88 (320)</td>
<td>4.07 (212)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>.378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going on family nature outing as a child</td>
<td>3.20 (316)</td>
<td>3.21 (211)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life changes that allowed time to participate</td>
<td>2.72 (312)</td>
<td>3.89 (213)</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member who was a birder</td>
<td>2.61 (317)</td>
<td>3.29 (210)</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher or course that I took</td>
<td>2.95 (317)</td>
<td>2.53 (202)</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV shows or movies</td>
<td>1.95 (315)</td>
<td>2.19 (210)</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means based on 7-point response categories with 1 being “Not at all important” and 7 “Very Important.”
Related socialization pressures might also help explain why women tended to be more causal in their birding. Competitive birding is a highly masculine endeavor, and involves generating long life lists and buying expensive gear. Many women may conclude, consciously or unconsciously, that serious birding is a “man’s activity,” essentially a form of hunting where the game is “bagged” in non-lethal ways. In the extreme, some women could be intimidated enough by intense and competitive male birdwatchers that they might be discouraged from pursuing the activity within organized outings.

Our data also suggest that women birdwatchers might face constraints that keep them from participating at the same level of intensity as men. For example, the women here became involved in birding significantly later in life than did the men, almost 9 years on average, with the women waiting until their early 30s to get involved. A disproportionate share of child-rearing and household responsibilities fall to women, which likely inhibits their ability to pursue outdoor recreation activities like birdwatching. McFarlane (1996) found that specialized birdwatchers are more likely than casual ones to have been initiated into the activity during childhood. The men in this study were socialized earlier and reported higher levels of specialization than the women. Women’s birding commitment may lag behind that of men’s due to the fact that they take up the activity so much later in life.

Consistent with previous research, personal commitment was far stronger than behavioral commitment for men and women (Scott et al., 1999). It is possible that commitment to leisure pursuits such as birding is generally a personal process and that the “side bets” associated with behavioral commitment as conceptualized and measured in the survey items used here are less important aspects of commitment for most birders, hence the finding that the behavioral commitment factor explained only 10% of the variance in our factor analysis. Perhaps the behavioral aspects of commitment tend to strengthen after many years of involvement, but are rarely at the core of the commitment process for most birders, especially women.

The results regarding how important various influences were in men’s and women’s decisions to initially get involved in birding are interesting in at least two respects. First, the top five reasons were the same for men and women, led by “seeing a particular bird for the first time” and “maintaining a birdfeeder or nestbox.” If men and women get involved for similar reasons, it is all the more interesting that men’s participation becomes more intense than women’s. Such a difference in the progression of involvement suggests that men and women ascribe different meaning and focus to their leisure experiences. Second, it is striking that women rated 9 of the 10 initial influencing factors (i.e., socialization agents) as more important than did their male counterparts (6 of these statistically significantly). Women might simply feel more strongly that there were very specific influences that led them to get involved in birding. The majority of both men and women could identify a particular key event that led them to decide to get involved in birding (60% of women and 55% of men). With so many important initial influences, women’s involvement with birding might simply be more defused, which could help explain their lower levels of specialization.

The two biggest differences between men and women in terms of initial involvement had to do with maintaining a birdfeeder or nestbox and life changes that allowed more time to participate. Women were far more likely than men to state their involvement in birdwatching was a result of these factors. Each of these factors suggests women’s involvement may have been impacted by an “ethic of care” (Shaw, 1994). On the one hand, an ethic of care may have facilitated involvement (i.e., taking care of birds). On the other hand, it probably delayed their initial birding involvement by limiting their participation in leisure activities (e.g., caring for their own families).
It is important to note how CBC members differ from other birdwatching groups studied. Although there are very serious birdwatchers in the CBC, the organization attracts a broad range of birdwatchers with many different interests and orientations to birding. In contrast, members of the American Birding Association (ABA) are highly oriented to listing birds and members travel great distances for the express purpose of seeing new birds (Cole & Scott, 1999). The Great Texas Birding Classic, an event examined by Scott et al. (1999), is highly competitive and attracts expert birdwatchers from across North America. CBC members, as a whole, are more casual about their birding compared to those examined in studies of ABA and Birding Classic. CBC members reported lower levels of skill and personal and behavioral commitment than ABA members and Birding Classic participants. Similarly, although women make up more than half (54%) of birdwatchers in the United States (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001), the vast majority (85%) of Birding Classic participants were male and two-thirds of members of the ABA are men. Findings here indicate that the CBC membership is comprised of only 59% men. Given that there is evidence that females make up the majority of casual birdwatchers (McFarlane & Boxall, 1996) it is not surprising that, overall, CBC members appear to be less specialized and intense about their birding than ABA members or Birding Classic participants.

**Implications**

Care should be used when considering the broader implications of this study because the sample is not representative of birdwatchers in North America or the United States in a number of respects. CBC members are almost entirely from NC and SC and have all joined a formal organization to facilitate their birding. While approximately 54% of birdwatchers in the United States are female, the CBC contains only 41% women. CBC members are also far more avid than the national average in terms of their birding skills. About 8% of the U.S. population can identify more than 40 birds by sight or sound (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001) while nearly 95% of CBC men and 86% of the women reported that they could do so. The birdwatchers in this study were also older (men: $M = 54$ and women: $M = 59$) than the national birder average of 49 years (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001). While keeping these differences in mind, however, we do feel our results offer insights worth consideration by managers and researchers.

First, it is important to remember that more intense and committed birding, like that generally exhibited by the men in this sample, should not somehow be considered a more desirable form of the activity than less intense forms. Both are apparently meeting the needs of the participants enough that they are staying involved and actively engaged in birdwatching. However, understanding the differences between subgroups of birders does present opportunities. The most important implication for managers and planners in this regard has to do with recruiting for citizen science and avian conservation efforts. It is essential for wildlife and refuge managers and researchers to understand why participants and potential participants are involved in birding to most effectively engage them in volunteer efforts. Boxall and McFarlane (1993), for example, found that although data collection is the primary objective of the Christmas Bird Count, the personal satisfaction of the recreation experience involved was very important to the participants they examined in Alberta. If men and women are involved in recreational birdwatching for different reasons, as is suggested by our study, it is important that avian conservation efforts be designed to provide for the different benefits and meanings men and women seek. Marketing efforts for volunteer avian conservation efforts (as well as for birding areas and “birding trails”) should take these different desires into account and should not treat all
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birdwatchers as though they are alike. For example, some birdwatchers (often men) will be most interested in opportunities to compete and demonstrate their skills or in rare bird alerts and other opportunities that help them increase the size of their various species lists. Others (frequently women) will prefer opportunities to see a diversity of birds, learn about and participate in species and habitat conservation efforts, or simply socialize in a natural setting. Well targeted information facilitating the aspects of birdwatching experiences most meaningful to particular subgroups of birders can help better attract potential visitors to particular areas, maximize their satisfaction while there, and more effectively engage them in citizen science and other conservation activities.

Managers should also consider ways they can help mitigate constraints that might keep women from taking up birdwatching, particularly at earlier ages. Marketing a Christmas Bird Count event beyond traditional birding organizations, for example, was effective in attracting younger women than those who traditionally participate (Boxall & McFarlane, 1993). Family oriented birding events in convenient locations and events targeted at single-parent families headed by women could be effective means of increasing participation among young mothers and would have the additional benefits of introducing children to birdwatching and the outdoors as well as promoting physical activity for young people. Similarly, women-only events can be effective in providing an environment in which women are more comfortable developing leisure skills, particularly outdoor recreation skills (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1986) and should be considered by birding advocates and area managers. Efforts targeted at introducing women to birding could have broader recruiting implications for the activity as well. If women are more interested in social and relational benefits, avid women may be the most effective ambassadors in encouraging new recruits into birding.

This study also has a number of implications for researchers. More research should be conducted on women’s motivations for and the meanings they ascribe to participating in birdwatching and other forms of outdoor and wildlife-oriented recreation. Although men in this and previous studies tended to be more accomplished in their birding in terms of objective achievement oriented measures, this does not directly take into account the various meanings that women apparently ascribe to their birding experiences. Recognizing and better understanding these gender-based differences has important implications for how we examine leisure experiences in general and wildlife-oriented recreation in particular. For example, past research has found that some women are involved in hunting to facilitate the participation of their husbands or other cohabiting males, most conspicuously by entering lotteries for rationed licenses and thereby increasing the odds that someone in the household will be drawn (McFarlane, Watson, & Boxall, 2003). Are there cases where the men are the “true birders” and their female partners join them mainly as traveling companions? This would explain lower female commitment levels in some cases. Future research could examine the extent to which couples “negotiate” their different birdwatching priorities or styles and how they do (or do not) help facilitate involvement for one another.

The finding that men and women take up birding for quite similar reasons but men become more intense in their participation and commitment is a topic worthy of further study. Are men more intense at the onset or does their participation in birding progress differently than that of women? If so, what are the additional influences that cause men and women to progress differently in their birding “careers”? Are some initial motives more enduring than others or are differing constraints on participation or the age when someone first gets involved more important factors? Our finding that the men started birding at an earlier age than women on average is consistent with McFarlane (1996) who reported that
specialized birdwatchers are more likely to have been initiated into the activity during childhood. The question of how and why people initially chose to participate in particular leisure activities is not well understood and could be an important factor in whether and how they participate in the future. This should be further studied for birding and other wildlife and non-wildlife-related recreation activities.

This article addressed differences in birding based on gender. Although we found interesting differences that could have important implications, it is important that we remember that there is a great deal of recreation behavior that is not associated with gender. Future research needs to continue to investigate what demographic variables do not explain. Gender is only one factor that defines a person and all women birders are not the same of course. Variables such as level of commitment and why a person first takes up an activity vary greatly within gender groups as well as between them. It is also unlikely that all women share the same expectations or norms regarding gender roles. These and related questions should be the focus of future studies.

Women make up more than half of the 46 million birdwatchers in the United States and this number is very likely to rise as the population ages. It is incumbent of planners, wildlife and conservation program managers, and researchers to consider and engage this important segment of this popular and growing activity whenever possible. This will take effort because most planners and managers are themselves men, and inclined to approach their responsibilities from a male perspective. There are also indications that managers are not always accurate in their predictions of men’s and women’s values and knowledge related to wildlife (Miller & McGee, 2000). This suggests that we should be particularly diligent in gathering accurate information regarding gender-related differences among birdwatchers. Removing constraints and providing opportunities for the kinds of experiences sought by all major segments of the birding public will help maximize both participant satisfaction and open opportunities to better engage participants in important conservation efforts.

References


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