Understanding Outdoor Recreationists Using the Recreational Specialization Framework

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Explain the utility of recreation specialization as a tool for understanding diversity among outdoor recreation participants.
Diversity among activity participants
Changes in number of Americans (16 years +) participating in outdoor recreation: 1980-2011

Millions of Participants

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Wildlife watching

Year
- 1980
- 1985
- 1990
- 1995
- 2001
- 2006
- 2011

Hunting
- 17.4
- 16.7
- 14.0
- 14.0
- 13.0
- 12.5
- 13.7

Fishing
- 83.2
- 109.6
- 76.1
- 62.9
- 66.1
- 71.1
- 71.8

Wildlife watching
- 42.0
- 46.4
- 35.6
- 35.2
- 34.1
- 30.0
- 33.1
Freezing rain. Gale-force winds. Rodents in the sleeping quarters. Lousy food. Rampant flu. Just another day in the Big Year

By Mark Obmascik

Sport Illustrated, January 19, 2004
Birdwatchers are a diverse group of recreation participants.
In a nation-wide study, Stephen Kellert (1985) reported that only 30% of American birdwatchers (18 years of age or older) used binoculars and only 4% said they used a field guide.
Only a small fraction of people who observe birds are skilled and serious about birdwatching.
What does specialization mean?

- **Specialist** describes an individual who devotes him or herself to a specific occupation, area of expertise, and so on.
- **Specialize** means to “train in or devote oneself to a particular area of study.”
- **Specialization** connotes a specific occupation, a branch of study, or a field of research to which people dedicate themselves.
“In the research reported here the idea is explored that fishermen can be arranged along a continuum of experience and commitment to the sport from the beginning recreationist to the specialist, that distinctive preferences and behavior attend sportsmen at each level.” (1979, p. 30)
Bryan’s ideas about specialization

- Goal was to facilitate understanding of “within-sport” variability
- “A continuum of behavior from the general to the particular, reflected by equipment and skills used in the sport, and activity setting preferences.”
Theoretical range of specialization/seriousness within activities

Level of seriousness or specialization

High

Low
Bryan’s ideas about specialization (Continued)

- Along the continuum there are characteristic *styles of participation* that can be represented in the form of a *typology* (system of classification)

- Participants along the continuum differ in terms of behavior, skill, commitments, motivations, setting preferences, place attachment, and other facets of involvement
Bryan’s ideas about specialization (Continued)

- Typology represented typical *stages of involvement* through which individuals *progress*

  - Specialization is a *developmental process*
  
  - Underlying assumption that end product of progression is an elite or privileged status
Three key dimensions of specialization

- A focusing of behavior
- Acquiring of skills and knowledge
- Tendency to become so committed to the activity that it becomes a central life interest
Application of specialization to birdwatching:
What experiences and amenities are attractive to different kinds of birdwatchers?
## Characteristics of Birders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Averages</th>
<th>Casual birders (35%)</th>
<th>Interested birders (41%)</th>
<th>Active birders (14%)</th>
<th>Skilled birders (10%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Days spent birding last year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>Birding trips taken last year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birds identified by sight</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
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<td>Birds identified by sound</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of importance/involvement #</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality to lifestyle #</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Scale ranged from 1 to 7

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Casual birders (35%)
  - Relatively unskilled and uncommitted to birding
  - May lack basic birding equipment
  - Combine birdwatching with other outdoor recreation activities, shopping, visiting small towns, and visiting historic sites

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Interested birders (41%)
  - Not very skilled but highly interested in birding
  - Not particularly focused on listing
  - Will probably require guides or leaders to help identify birds
  - Interested in combining birdwatching with other activities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
Exploring battlefields and birding opportunities along
Robert E. Lee’s final route of retreat

by Jerry Uhlman

Birders who are also Civil War enthusiasts will now have ample opportunities to enjoy both pastimes along the highways and byways of central Virginia. A newly designated automobile trail called the Virginia Civil War Trail closely follows Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s route of retreat in the final months of the Civil War. And, fortunately for birders, this 180-mile self-guided trail system threads its way through a wide variety of excellent bird habitats, crisscrossing through forests, farmland, and river systems from the foothills of the Shenandoah Mountains in the north to the Piedmont of central and southern Virginia. Shaped like a huge backward L, the trail is divided into two distinct sections: “Lee versus Grant: The 1864 Campaign,” which starts in northern Virginia at Germanna Ford and runs southward, ending at the Petersburg National Battlefield, and “Lee’s Retreat,” which extends from Petersburg to Appomattox.

Lee versus Grant: The 1864 Campaign
In March of 1864, Ulysses S. Grant takes charge as general-in-chief of the Army of the Potomac. He decides that instead of focusing all of his energies on capturing the rebel capital at Richmond, his major aim will be to defeat Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, the pride of the South. His army outnumbers Lee’s by two to one, but the Southerners have proven repeatedly to be fierce, resourceful fighters. Victory will not come easily. Grant has his first major confrontation with Lee during the Battle of the Wilderness, a fierce clash lasting from May 5-6. Only resting his men for one day, Grant marches his army to Spotsylvania, where they meet Lee’s troops in another horrendous battle, lasting from May 8-20.

The casualties are staggering: some 18,000 Union troops and perhaps 10,000 Confederates fall there. But the Confederates can ill afford to lose any men. General Grant’s troops push the Confederates all the way to Petersburg, south of Richmond, fighting constant grueling skirmishes and battles the entire way. All told, these warring armies suffer a combined total of some 70,000 casualties in Lee’s crushing 42-day retreat from Germanna Ford to Petersburg. There, Lee’s army digs in, fighting off every Union attack. Hope-
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Hummers at Feeders
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Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Active birders (14%)
  - Relatively skilled and participate far more frequently than other birdwatchers
  - Committed to birdwatching
  - Not particularly interested in shopping, visiting small towns, and comfort amenities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
Birds You Can View

When the holidays approach, nature lovers prepare for a century-old tradition, the Christmas Bird Count. From December 14 through January 5, birders around the country take inventory of the avian population to determine, among other things, any change in the distribution or habits of species. The Texas Gulf Coast, the Lower Rio Grande region, and parts of New Mexico are many birds’ favored winter homes. The four sites below are easily accessible and usually have a variety of birds in winter. Contact the National Audubon Society (212-979-3000; audubon.org) for other recommendations. —JERRY G. WALLS

**Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge**

**HARLINGEN, TEXAS**

A wonderful mix of subtropical forest, desert, and coastal lagoons. Expect insects and chiggers much of the year, along with a chance of encountering coyotes, rattlesnakes, and alligators. Tote your own water on longer birding loops.

**Aptomado falcon** (best spot in the U.S.), **green jay**, **plain chachalaca**, kingfishers, waterfowl, and waders.

**WHAT TO EXPECT**

**COOL BIRDS**

- Fee: $3/car
- Visitors’ center open year-round except Thanksgiving and Christmas
- Restrooms
- Guided birding tours during winter
- Several loops with observation towers and photo blinds

**CALLING GUESTS**

From Harlingen, head east on FM 106 for 14 miles, past Rio Hondo. At the T-shaped intersection, turn left and go 3 miles to the visitors’ center. Information: Call (956) 748-3607 or visit fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/laguna.html.

**Aransas National Wildlife Refuge**

**TIVOLI, TEXAS**

A vast area of brackish and freshwater marshes, as well as coastline. Alligators and cottonmouth are common, as are mosquitoes.

**Many winter waders** (including reddish egret) and waterfowl. Major attraction is the **whoooping crane**, present from mid-October to mid-April.

**WHAT TO EXPECT**

**COOL BIRDS**

- Fee: $3/person or $5/car
- Visitors’ center open year-round except Thanksgiving and Christmas
- Restrooms and nature store
- Trails and driving loops with observation towers and photo blinds

**CALLING GUESTS**

From Tivoli, head south on SR 35 one mile to SR 239 (to Austwell). SR 239 becomes FM 774. Go right at the stop sign on FM 774, and right at the street’s end. Turn left onto FM 2040. Go 6 miles to the refuge. Information: Call (361) 286-3559 or visit fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas.html.

**Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park**

**MISSION, TEXAS**

Subtropical forest and Rio Grande oxbows. Possibly the best birding spot in South Texas. Can be crowded on weekends and holidays. Mosquito and chigger populations can be abundant.

**Kingfishers, least grebe, plain chachalaca, raptors, red-billed pigeon, white-tipped dove, and green jay.**

**WHAT TO EXPECT**

**COOL BIRDS**

- Fee: $5/day
- Visitors’ center open year-round
- Restrooms
- Gift shop
- Tram tours and guided birding walks
- Feeders, photo blinds, and observation towers

**CALLING GUESTS**

From Mission, take US 83 west. Take the Inspiration/US 83 exit and go left. Go left onto FM 2062 (S. Bentsen Palm Drive). The visitors’ center and headquarters are on the right; look for brick buildings with metal roofs. Information: Call (956) 585-1107 or visit worldbirdingcenter.org.

**Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge**

**SOCORRO, NEW MEXICO**

A large grouping of ponds near the Rio Grande in an otherwise dry region. Watch out for coyotes.

**Famous for thousands of sandhill cranes**, snow geese, and Ross’s geese. Bald eagles also common. The annual Festival of the Cranes draws thousands of visitors.

**WHAT TO EXPECT**

**COOL BIRDS**

- Fee: $3/car
- Visitors’ center open year-round
- Restrooms
- Guided birding tours during annual Festival of the Cranes (Nov. 14–19, 2006)
- Birding trails and loops

**CALLING GUESTS**

From Socorro, take I-25 south to exit 139. Go east on US 380 one-quarter mile to the flashing signal at the Village of San Antonio. Turn right onto SR 1. Continue 9 miles to the visitors’ center. Information: Call (505) 835-1828 or visit fws.gov/southwest/refuges/newmex/bosque.
Diversity among birders (cont.)

- Skilled birders (10%)
  - More narrowly focused than the other birders: are highly selective and specialized in terms of their interests
  - Interested in observing target birds
  - Need little help in identifying birds
  - Not overly concerned about opportunities for shopping, comfort amenities, and other outdoor recreation opportunities

Source: Scott & Thigpen, 2003
How is specialization related to participants' involvement in conservation and organizing activity?
Hours spent volunteering for wildlife/conservation organizations

Type of Birder

Casual: 18% 41 or more, 11% 21 to 40, 17% 1 to 20, 54% Zero
Interested: 37% 41 or more, 13% 21 to 40, 16% 1 to 20, 35% Zero
Active: 33% 41 or more, 8% 21 to 40, 28% 1 to 20, 33% Zero
Listers: 25% 41 or more, 14% 21 to 40, 29% 1 to 20, 32% Zero

Chi-Square = 38.57, p < .001

Scott, Lee, and Lee (2009)
Percent of birders who led or organized bird walks or field trips

Scott, Lee, and Lee (2009)

Chi-Square = 54.08, p < .001
Percent of birders who served as a birding guide

Casual birders: 11%
Interested birders: 29%
Active birders: 46%
Listers: 53%

Chi-Square = 53.18, p < .001

Scott, Lee, and Lee (2009)
Importance of studying specialization?

- Sensitizes us to range of career trajectories that attend people’s involvement in outdoor recreation activities
- Provides a tool for understanding differences among outdoor recreation participants
- Helps resource managers understand why groups make demands for resources
- Explains potential sources of conflict among outdoor recreation participants