



ASSOCIATION *of*
FISH & WILDLIFE
AGENCIES

WILDLIFE VIEWING AND NATURE TOURISM WORKING GROUP NOTES

Chair: Shelly Plante (TX)

Co-Chair: Deniz Aygen (ID)

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

1:15pm – 3:15pm

Attendees: 30

Agenda

- Call to order, introductions, and review of agenda (5 minutes)
 - ANNOUNCEMENT: New Vice-Chair- Deniz Aygen (ID)

- 6th Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Academy: Seattle, Washington (15 minutes)
 - www.wvntacademy.com
 - Occurs every other year
 - Why should you attend in 2028?
 - Welcoming
 - Professional (and personal) development needs
 - High take-away value
 - Archives of slide decks from past academies are available on the website
 - 2028 will be at National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia
 - Dates Feb 2028
 - RFP goes out by the 2027 North American Conference

- Beyond the Binoculars: What eBird Data Tells Us About Wildlife Viewing on WMAs – Deniz Aygen, Idaho Department of Fish and Game (30 minutes)
 - Wildlife recreation is changing
 - Wildlife related recreation has nearly doubled in the last 20 years
 - More people watch wildlife than hunt of fish
 - Supporting viewers also benefits hunters and anglers
 - Understanding viewing patterns helps us manage wildlife management areas for everyone
 - The Challenge- the data gap
 - WMAs are managed for wildlife habitat and public access, but we lack visitor tracking infrastructure.
 - The eBird opportunity
 - Birdwatchers submit thousands of observations every year
 - eBird is a public platform where birders record what they see; each observation is tied to a location and dates
 - useful as an index of visitor activity, not a census

- A manager-friendly Shiny App deployed
 - Interactive online tool; automatically pulls eBird observations from WMA; shows where and when people visit; no technical skills required for staff.
 - Who uses it?
 - Infrastructure planning
 - Habitat planning
 - Visitor activity
 - Managers, planners, etc can use data
 - Case Study: Targeted closure at Market Lake WMA
 - Focal Species: long-eared and short-eared owl, and western screech-owl
 - The challenge: sensitive owl nesting areas were experiencing increased pressure from photographers and birders during critical later winter nesting
 - Allowed for real time management value
 - Limitations
 - The eBird numbers are modest estimates of 'bird users'
 - Key Takeaways
 - Community science (eBird) fills gaps we couldn't close on our own; supports infrastructure, closures, and restoration decisions; your state's birders are already collecting this data

- The "Public -> Data -> Public" Loop: Facilitating Engaging Projects – Scott Anderson, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (30 minutes)
 - Interconnectedness
 - North Carolina Bird Atlas
 - People count, birds count → Bird Count
 - Original Goals
 - Provide data-driven, statewide distribution and abundance data for most species
 - Engage CN including landowners, citizen scientists, and the general public in large- scaled conservation efforts
 - Attract and strengthen the diversity of partnerships required to accomplish its goals.
 - Use of eBird- contributes to science and conservation
 - Shows where the birders go, not where all the birds are
 - eBird breeding behavior [confirmed, probably, possible, observed]; already embedded in the eBird app
 - the North Carolina Bird Atlas → data shows the NC Bird Atlas did significantly increase the number of contributions to eBird data collection (81% increase)

- WVNT Updates from States/Organizations – Roundtable Discussion (30 minutes)
 - Come prepared to share any milestones, successes, innovative projects, or questions your organization wants to share or discuss with colleagues from other states/provinces

- Ongoing communication tools (10 minutes)
 - Webinars, Facebook Group, Monthly Calls

Adjourn