

Wildlife Viewing: OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAKE HURON



The southern Lake Huron coast is a fantastic setting for outdoor exploration. Promoting the region’s natural assets can help build vibrant communities and support local economies. This series of fact sheets profiles different outdoor activities that could appeal to residents and visitors of Michigan’s Thumb. We hope this information will help guide regional planning, business development and marketing throughout the region. **Here we focus on wildlife viewing — providing information about who participates in the activity, their economic impact and popular types of wildlife in Michigan.**

WHY VIEW WILDLIFE IN THE THUMB?

Humans have long been fascinated by wildlife — whether it is observing a herd of deer, catching a glimpse of a fox, or watching birds on their annual migrations. Today more than 70 million Americans seek out wildlife viewing opportunities for pleasure, and many travel away from home to do so. The Great Lakes region has a specific draw. For example, Magee Marsh along Lake Erie in northwest Ohio attracts a wide variety of birds during their spring migration, as well as 100,000 human visitors annually.

Michigan’s Thumb offers many opportunities to view nature, including observing bird-of-prey, songbird and waterfowl migrations, access to untouched dunes, swales and wetlands, chances to see spawning fish and rare coastal plants, and much more. Many communities have benefited by welcoming wildlife viewers; the Thumb area could also capitalize on wildlife viewing by inviting residents and visitors to share in its biodiversity.

How Popular is Wildlife Viewing?

In 2006, in the U.S.:

- 71 million Americans participated in wildlife viewing.
- Nearly one-third of the U.S. population aged 16 or older were involved.
- 10% of the U.S. population (23 million people) traveled away from home (one or more miles) to view wildlife.

In 2006, in Michigan:

- 3.2 million people observed wildlife in Michigan; most stayed close to home.
- 38% of the Michigan’s population aged 16 or older were involved.
- 753,000 residents traveled within Michigan to see wildlife.
- 281,000 non-residents spent an average of 5 days viewing wildlife in Michigan.
- The 2010 Tawas Point Birding festival attracted visitors from 17 U.S. states. Each visitor stayed in the area an average of 3-4 days.

Who Watches Wildlife?

A snapshot of people who observed birds along the Lake Erie shore in 2011:

- **Gender:** 51% are female.
- **Age:** 62% are over 55-years old.
- **Income:** 54% earn more than \$75,000 a year.
- **Education:** 80% have a college degree or higher.
- **Level of Experience:** 24% are casual birders, 51% are serious, 25% are advanced.
- **Geography:** Bird watchers on Lake Erie traveled 102 to 146 miles on average.

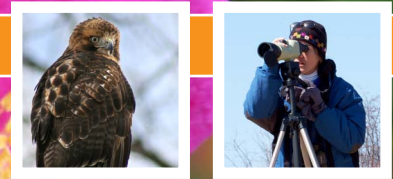
Economic Impact

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted a national survey in 2006. They found that Americans spent \$45.7 billion on wildlife watching, including trip and around-the-home expenses such as bird feeders and special plantings. In Michigan, the average wildlife viewer spent \$284 a year on trips.

SPENDING RELATED TO WILDLIFE VIEWING TRIPS IN MICHIGAN (2006)

	Per Participant	Total
Transportation	\$85	\$134 million
Lodging	\$36	\$37 million
Food	\$148	\$153 million
Miscellaneous trip expenses	\$15	\$16 million
Equipment (binoculars, cameras)	\$102	\$780 million
Other (magazines, membership dues)	\$99	\$503 million
Total	\$485	\$1.6 billion

Includes non-residents and residents who traveled at least one mile from their homes to view wildlife in Michigan. Source: USFWS, 2006.



Why do People View Wildlife?

People have various reasons to get out and view wildlife. Many participants enjoy wildlife viewing as a way of reducing stress and finding a sense of peace, belonging and familiarity through their involvement with nature. For example, many birders say they enjoy birding because:

- It fulfills curiosity about the natural world.
- It's challenging; there are many species, some are rare and difficult to find.
- It takes participants far and wide, providing a reason for travel.
- It is sociable; birders have extensive social networks.

Industry Outlook

- National wildlife watching participation rates have shown great stability over the last 10 years with participation around 31%.
- However, wildlife viewing was among the group of activities with low percentages of first-time participants in 2009 with only 5.3% new participants.
- Technology has made it easier to view wildlife. The Internet allows people to identify species and report and track migrations instantaneously; smart phones allow people easy access to field guides and socially reported information.

How Communities Can Support Wildlife Viewing

- Preserve natural areas and habitats.
- Create trails in natural areas.
- Add dedicated viewing areas and viewing platforms.
- Develop self-guided maps (hiking and driving).
- Organize guided tours by knowledgeable locals.
- Host events and festivals.
- Welcome wildlife viewers to communities through signage, special packages or discounts, hospitality training, etc.

What Types of Wildlife do People Observe in Michigan?

Resident and out-of-state wildlife viewers made over 6 million trips to observe, photograph or feed wildlife in Michigan in 2006. What types of animals were most popular?

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS THAT OBSERVED DIFFERENT ANIMALS IN MICHIGAN	
Any Bird	87%
Songbirds (cardinals, robins, warblers, etc.)	57%
Birds of prey (hawks, owls, eagles, etc.)	50%
Waterfowl (ducks, geese, swan, etc.)	67%
Other water birds (shorebirds, herons, cranes, etc.)	42%
Other birds (pheasants, turkeys, etc.)	40%
Large land mammals (bears, deer, etc.)	60%
Small land mammals (otter, rabbits, squirrels, etc.)	61%
Fish (salmon, lake sturgeon, etc.)	30%
Other wildlife (butterflies, turtles, etc.)	42%

Includes non-residents and residents who traveled at least one mile from their homes. Source: USFWS, 2006.

Promotion of Wildlife Viewing

Wildlife viewers do a significant amount of background planning online, using the Internet, birding networks and blogs for information.

- They tend to research their travel in greater detail than other categories of tourists.
- Many return to an area where they had a positive experience.
- Birding clubs often influence where and how people travel.
- Wildlife viewers seek out and use interpretive materials and have high expectations for quality of both content and presentation.
- Dedicated stories and pictures in a local publication can strengthen a community's link to wildlife viewing.
- As many species of migratory birds follow coastline, the Thumb is well positioned for birding during migration. Special events could be planned for migration seasons.

WILDLIFE VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE THUMB

FISH POINT STATE WILDLIFE AREA

Fish Point, located near Unionville, Michigan, has been referred to as the 'Chesapeake of the Midwest' during spring migration (March-April). The more-than 3,000 acres of flat farm fields, diked flooding areas, and coastal wetlands and prairies attract thousands of ducks and other waterfowl each year. An observation tower and wildlife viewing trails provide ample opportunities for wildlife enthusiasts to view the habitat in and around the designated wildlife reserve.

PORT CRESCENT STATE PARK

Port Crescent State Park encompasses 3 miles of Lake Huron beachfront, sand dunes, dune forest, and backwaters and bayous of the Pinnebog River. During spring hawk migration (March – April), viewers can catch broad-winged hawks and other birds of prey that congregate to rest and feed before they move further north to their breeding grounds. Loons also migrate through the area in April, and large concentrations of bluebirds bring color and character to the fields near the park entrance. Wild turkeys, blue herons and whitetail deer are plentiful. The park is also a great place to see bald eagles.

HURON COUNTY NATURE CENTER

Located less than a mile from the shores of Saginaw Bay, this 280-acre nature center is a wonderful example of undisturbed dune and swale habitat. The dry, sandy ridges and the moist swales offer an outstanding array of plant life. There aren't many other places in nature where plants with totally different strategies for surviving can successfully coexist within a few feet of each other. Interesting plants found here include pink lady's slipper, trailing arbutus, Indian pipes, jack-in-the-pulpit and wintergreen. The paved trails provide great opportunity to view deer, squirrels and hognose snakes. Viewing of the spring warbler migration is also quite good.

RECREATION PROFILE: Wildlife Viewing



BAY CITY STATE RECREATION AREA

Tobico Marsh in the Bay City State Recreation Area is one of the largest open-water marshes remaining on the Saginaw Bay. On a short hike, visitors can traverse several different types of habitats; from cattail marsh, to brushy shrub areas, to upland hardwood forest. A boardwalk, two 40-foot observation towers, and a floating marsh dock with fixed spotting scopes offer excellent wildlife viewing along the Frank N. Andersen Trail. Waterfowl and shorebirds are seen year round, and Caspian terns and black-crowned night herons are very common. In May, visitors can see pike and carp spawning in the open water around the

bridges and boardwalk. The area is also an excellent funnel for migrating warblers in the spring. Bitterns, deer, otters, beavers, gray and red fox and turtles can all be spotted as well.

SHIAWASSEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Known locally as the “Shiawassee Flats,” the refuge lies in the Saginaw Bay watershed, historically one of the largest and most productive wetland ecosystems in Michigan. Four rivers converge on the refuge — the Tittabawassee, Flint, Cass and Shiawassee. More than 270 species of migratory birds including raptors, shore and wading birds, and more than 100 songbird species visit

the refuge annually. Shiawassee NWR is designated as a United States Important Bird Area for its global significance to migratory waterfowl. During peak populations — usually in late October — up to 20,000 Canada geese, 30,000 ducks and many shorebirds visit the refuge.

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Map of a few of the great wildlife viewing areas in the Thumb.

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