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Birding trail is taking wing

West Bank sites ripe for ecotourism

Wednesday October 29, 2003

By **Sandra Barbier**

West Bank bureau

The West Bank is vying to be part of Louisiana's plans to tap into the ecotourism market and the 70 million Americans who enjoy bird-watching.

Louisiana is "really a bird magnet," said Mary Jeanne Packer, a consultant working on the Louisiana Great Gulf Coast Birding Trail.

South Louisiana is a major stopover site for migrating birds, a place where many northern birds spend the winter, and a habitat rich in its own native species, Packer said. "They're everywhere."

In a project similar to those in Texas, Alabama and Florida, Louisiana tourism and parks officials hope to develop a detailed birding trail that highlights a variety of coastal bird habitats, including beaches, bottomland forests and riverbanks.

Fermata Inc., a nationally known nature tourism company in Austin, Texas, is heading the project, and consultants are wrapping up a survey of prime birding areas across south Louisiana.

The trail's foundation will be 11 of the state's scenic byways, said Sharon Calcote, director of heritage tourism for the state Office of Tourism. Its design is being financed with a \$168,000 National Scenic Byways grant.

Packer, who works for Fermata, recently updated local tourism officials in Gretna.

The trail will be a series of 10 loops extending south from Interstates 10, 12 and 49, Packer said. They will stretch from the Sabine River on the western border of the state to the Pearl River on the east.

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Last week naturalist Bill Fontenot, who was hired by Fermata, surveyed local places, including the Barataria Unit of Jean Lafitte National Park, the Lafitte Nature Trail, the Woodlands Trail in English Turn, and Fort Jackson in Plaquemines Parish.

Packer said interest in the project is high, with 177 sites nominated and 100 to 120 to be chosen for the trail and its guidebook.

The guidebook is loosely modeled after one developed for Virginia and will include maps, information on birds, guides to specific sites, and information about other attractions. A prototype is expected to be completed in March or April.

Consultants also hope to have a plan for developing road signs, parking areas, informational kiosks and other infrastructure along the route.

Those improvements, however, would be done in another phase of the project, which could be paid for with grants and state money, Calcote said.

Packer said the potential exists for a healthy market for nature tourists and especially for birders in Louisiana.

Seventy-six percent of nature travelers want to go somewhere they have never gone, 48 percent want to go somewhere remote and untouched, 57 percent are attracted by an area's culture and 44 percent want to learn something new.

Louisiana, with its unique history and culture and its wealth of wildlife, is perfect for such nature travelers, she said.

And besides tourism, there is the potential for economic development of locally made arts and crafts, guide services and other businesses, she said.

Lafitte Tourist Commission President Dale Ross said the areas on the trail will have multiple benefits, including aiding conservation of natural areas and increasing communities' appreciation of their own culture and environment.

"We're finally going to be showcasing our nature-based and outdoor recreation activities," Calcote said. "A lot of these birding locations are going to be located in the wetlands, and I think it will bring more attention to them."

For information, log on to www.fermatainc.com/la.

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