



Louisiana's Coast Is Just Winging It *Visitors Can See and Learn About Hundreds of Bird Species*

The appeal of the coastal parishes of Louisiana isn't limited to human visitors; this region also welcomes an overwhelming number of feathered friends year round ... but especially in the spring. During spring migration, the coast of Louisiana is the first land mass that birds encounter as they arrive from Central America and other locales. After flying nearly 500 miles, exhausted birds literally fall out of the sky as they arrive at tree-studded land masses called *cheniers* (from the Louisiana French word for "oak"); as coastal erosion becomes more of an issue, the birds actually have to fly greater distances in order to reach land. This phenomenon, called a "fallout," is a fascinating process for visitors to watch. Just like human guests, the birds relax a bit and take advantage of Louisiana's abundant food supply ... and then continue their journey along the "Mississippi Flyway," which leads up through the United States and into Canada. Their presence is one more element that makes coastal Louisiana a special and spectacular place, any time of year.

The total number of bird species recorded in Louisiana is 479. Of that figure, more than 65 percent – 320 different species – live or migrate along the state's coast. Though many of these species can be found elsewhere in the state or throughout the country, the diversity of habitats along the Louisiana coast helps ensure that there are few other places where avid birders or even casual observers can spot so many birds in such a limited area.

Brightly colored songbirds, which are especially popular with human visitors, announce that spring has arrived and then return to Louisiana's coast on their trek back to warmer climates in the fall. But waterfowl and birds of prey are more at home here during the winter months than at other times of year. The American bald eagle is a winter nester, for example, making those months the best time to view the majestic birds. **St. Mary Parish** hosts an annual Eagle Expo each February, featuring seminars with wildlife experts, a live raptor presentation, and boat tours on which guests can view eagles.

Perhaps the best news for people hoping to catch a glimpse of these varied species is that coastal Louisiana makes the birds truly accessible. There are many National Wildlife Refuges, sanctuaries and wildlife management areas where visitors can spend time watching the skies, trees and waters. All an amateur birder needs is a good pair of binoculars and a field guide ... and a camera, of course! Several state and national parks

and refuges along the coast provide brochures and checklists, and there are even birding apps for smart phones. Birding trails throughout the region can be traveled by foot, bicycle, automobile or boat. But the best way for a visitor to have the most memorable experience is to work with someone who truly knows the birds of the area – via a guided ranger walk at a park, an eco-tour, or a field trip with an ornithological society.

Two areas that can offer particularly vivid glimpses of a variety of birds are Grand Isle in **Jefferson Parish**, which is a short drive from New Orleans, and **Calcasieu and Cameron parishes**, which are in the extreme southwestern portion of the state. Each April, the Grand Isle Migratory Bird Festival attracts birders from many states and several foreign countries, who gather to observe more than 100 species of birds that sometimes congregate here before continuing their migration. A great way to explore Southwest Louisiana is to follow the Creole Nature Trail, which offers visitors centers and its own app to help guests explore, experience and interpret the region – and features a downloadable birding guide on its website. The Lake Charles/Southwest Louisiana Convention & Visitors Bureau works in conjunction with the Cornell Ornithological Lab, giving visitors the opportunity to report sightings via the CVB’s website.

Residents of the Louisiana Coast take their role as partial guardians of so many bird species seriously, and they’ve taken great steps to help protect threatened and endangered birds. In the late 1800s, Edward “Monsieur Ned” McIlhenny, the son of the inventor of Tabasco sauce, helped rescue the snowy egret from extinction by building an aviary on his family’s island in **Iberia Parish**. From that effort developed Jungle Gardens, a 170-acre paradise on Avery Island that today is a fantastic spot for bird-watching. In neighboring **Vermilion Parish**, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries recently released young whooping cranes at White Lake Wetlands Conversation Area in the marshes near the town of Gueydan (which, by the way, is known as the “Duck Capital of America”). These magnificent birds are only found in North America, but it’s estimated that just 600 remain. Back in 1947, there was only one crane left in Louisiana ... so this is a success story, but one that wildlife authorities and residents are hoping to make even happier in this next chapter.

Another success story is that of the brown pelican, the official state bird of Louisiana. At one time it was a threatened species because of the use of pesticides; when that threat was reduced, the species rebounded in an impressive way ... and today can be seen soaring over waters and wetlands throughout the coastal region. Louisiana is nicknamed “the Pelican State,” and the brown pelican has a place of honor on both the state flag and state seal of Louisiana – and on the logo of the Louisiana Tourism Coastal Coalition. The species can be found in abundance at the Delta National Wildlife Refuge in the **Plaquemines Parish** town of Venice, which is located at the tip of the Mississippi River as it enters the Gulf of Mexico. The refuge is also a great place to spot songbirds on their spring and fall migrations.

Special thanks to Michael Musumeche of Iberia Parish for his expertise and assistance in assembling this information.