

Discovering Alabama

Teacher's Guide

Alabama Birds

Suggested Curriculum Areas

Environmental Studies
Geography
Art

Suggested Grade Levels

4 – 12

Key Concepts

Natural Diversity
Stewardship
Conservation

Key Skills

Observation
Reading
Research

Synopsis

The video “Alabama Birds” is about more than birds. As impressive as Alabama’s great bird diversity is, so too the natural habitats of Alabama are exceptionally diverse. This special combination has inspired a legacy of Alabamians advocating for bird and habitat conservation. It has also contributed to growing public enthusiasm for recreational birdwatching in the state, fostering the establishment of the Alabama Birding Trail system and a host of annual “birdfest” events enjoyed by many. Alabama Birds covers all of these aspects and includes guest commentary from a number of experts who discuss the wonder of birds.



Discovering Alabama is a production of the **Alabama Museum of Natural History** in cooperation with **Alabama Public Television** and **The University of Alabama College of Continuing Studies**. For a complete list of titles in the *Discovering Alabama* series, as well as information about ordering videos and accompanying Teacher's Guides, contact us at either: *Discovering Alabama*, Box 870340, Tuscaloosa AL 35487-0340; phone: 205-348-2039; fax: 205-348-4219; or email: orders@discoveringalabama.org. Also visit our website: www.discoveringalabama.org.

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Before Viewing

1 Take the class outside for a quiet, simple “birdwatching” walk around the school area (or perhaps a nearby park or wooded area) and have students look, and listen, and make mental note (maybe also make a written list) of as many kinds of birds as they can find (different in color, size, sound, or behavior). No need for binoculars or bird identification guides for this – and certainly, no need for cell phones. The purpose is just to provide students with a bit of dedicated time noticing and thinking about birds, uninterrupted by “gadget” distractions, an experience few youngsters have these days.

2 Return to the classroom and invite students to discuss their observations, the birds they liked best, and any other birds they have seen or enjoy around their homes or other places. Don’t be shocked if most of your students have no previous bird observations (thanks to today’s societal preoccupation with screen devices). And don’t be surprised if a few students are quite familiar with birds (thanks to friends or family who are nature enthusiasts). Introduce the video by explaining that Alabama has an especially great variety of birds.

Video Mystery Question:

The video mentions that Alabama has helped with the recovery of several bird species whose populations were once in serious decline (threatened or endangered). One of these species is a woodpecker that makes its den in a living tree and maintains family groups. What is the name of this bird? (Answer: Red-cockaded woodpecker.)

After Viewing

1 Discuss what students feel they learned from the video. Record on the blackboard or flip easel a list of noted items. Be sure to include discussion of factors contributing to Alabama’s exceptional bird diversity.

2 Challenge the class to help you compile a list of the names (or descriptions) of as many different kinds of birds they can recall from the video.

Extensions

1 View other *Discovering Alabama* episodes featuring birds (examples include “Red-Cockaded Woodpecker,” “Whooping Cranes,” and “Wildlife History”) or that highlight Alabama’s natural diversity (examples include “Alabama’s Natural Diversity,” “Alabama Forests,” and “Alabama Wetlands”).

2 Invite representatives of birding organizations to visit the class and discuss Alabama’s bird diversity (groups such as the Alabama Audubon and the Alabama Ornithological Society have impressive photographic presentations of Alabama birds).

Philosophical Reflections

The video mentions that paleontologists trace the evolutionary development of birds to the age of dinosaurs, a contention of science that has surely met with the reaction, “Wait, what?” The transition from reptilian to avian probably seems a fantastic claim for some laypeople to accept. Imagine, for example, the sweet beautiful little blue bird having lineage traceable to the brute, ugly, T. Rex. However, the science of paleontology does prompt us to wonder about conditions that influence evolutionary change over time, and to muse about the possibilities of dramatic evolutionary changes in the future. Indeed, imagine the human species evolving to become a grammar-deficit creature with a digital texting appendage, an inherited short attention span, and perhaps a permanently downward drooping neck. Wait, what?

Nature in Art

Naturally, John James Audubon is the premiere name for any discussion of birds in the context of nature and art. And certainly, the topic of Alabama birds is prime for introducing to Alabama students the historically significant artistic work of Mr. Audubon. Likewise, an Alabama ornithologist shown in the video is also quite gifted at creating superb art involving birds. The impressive renderings of Dr. Bill Summerour, noted in the video as Past Editor of *Alabama Bird Life*, have been featured in a number of birding publications, including *A Birder's Guide to Alabama*, long considered a cherished reference by Alabama birders.

Community Connections

- 1 Have the class plan and install several bird feeders for easy daily observation (outside windows or in a suitable location on school grounds), obtain several copies of field guides for birds and have students identify the various birds that visit the feeders.
- 2 Determine which birds that visit your area are migratory species. Assign group projects to research the migratory routes and habits of each species.
- 3 Assign a class project to develop a birding guide for public distribution (to be printed/published, possibly with bird pictures) containing information about bird species that can be found in your local area.

Additional References & Resources

A Birder's Guide to Alabama, edited by John F. Porter, with a foreword by Thomas A. Imhof. The University of Alabama Press, 2001.

All about Alabama Birds, by Fred Alsop III. Sweetwater Press, 1997.

The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, by John Bull and John Farrand Jr. Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.

A World on the Wing, by Scott Weiden-saul. W.W. Norton & Co., 2021.

Birds, Their Life • Their Ways • Their World, by Christopher Perrins. Reader's Digest, 1985.

Websites:

- Alabama Birding Trails: <http://www.alabamabirdingtrails.com/>
- Alabama Department of Conservation: <http://www.outdooralabama.com>
- Alabama Tourism Department: <http://www.http://tourism.alabama.gov/>
- National Audubon Society: www.audubon.org/
- Alabama Audubon: <https://alaudubon.org>
- Alabama Ornithological Society: <https://www.aosbirds.org>
- South Alabama Land Trust: <https://southalabamalandtrust.org>
- Alabama Wildlife Federation: <https://www.alabamawildlife.org/>
- Coastal Land Trust Inc. in Fairhope, Alabama: <http://www.nonprofitfacts.com/AL/Coastal-Land-Trust-Inc.html>
- Five Rivers Delta Resource Center: <https://www.outdooralabama.com/activities/5-rivers-alabama-delta-resource-center>

Parting Thoughts

Occasionally, a particular Discovering Alabama program will include on-screen text to supplement the verbal narrative, depending upon program topic, pace, available time, and whether the screen text information aesthetically serves program aims. Discovering Alabama's video, "Whooping Cranes," for example, uses screen text identifying birds that are shown. However, the present episode, "Alabama Birds," does not include on-screen name identification of the many birds shown, and some viewers may wonder about this. The simple explanation, consistent with my comments above, is that the pace of the show is not conducive to such screen text. Many of the bird scenes are brief and many scenes feature activity for which screen text could possibly interfere with viewing enjoyment.

Moreover, there is another concern I have for Discovering Alabama in general. Perhaps this concern will seem a bit contrarian to some. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to at least offer the jist of my thoughts on the matter.

Discovering Alabama presents the natural wonder, intrigue, and beauty of Alabama. Our shows strive to convey a sense of allure, perhaps even a taste of artistic appeal, unfettered by recurring screen distractions. Personally, I shudder at the thought of our series becoming more like a PowerPoint "instructional" presentation, or like those videos with "pop-up" info about the taxonomy for every creature in the video, and giving GPS directions to every idyllic place shown in the video. In my personal opinion, a regular practice of spoon-feeding viewers this way is excessive, and further feeds the American drift toward short attention spans and a weakening of active intellectual curiosity.

My lifetime of rambles in the Alabama backcountry have taught me that the greater learning and the greater appreciation for Alabama's natural heritage is best gained from personal exploration, from the adventures of finding one's own quiet wild places and consulting one's own field guides for the treasure of information about species identification, taxonomy, and life history. It is a wise old rule often applied for the schooling of children: "First spark curiosity and intrigue. The rest will follow, naturally." And, I might add, more meaningfully.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Get yourself a good field guide for birds – and go exploring!

Happy outings,

Dr. Doug





Discovering
Alabama

Activity/Information Sheet

Alabama Birds

Alabama Bird Species of Conservation Concern

Prepared with excerpts from Vols. 1 and 3 of *Alabama Wildlife*
*see below for complete citation

Introduction

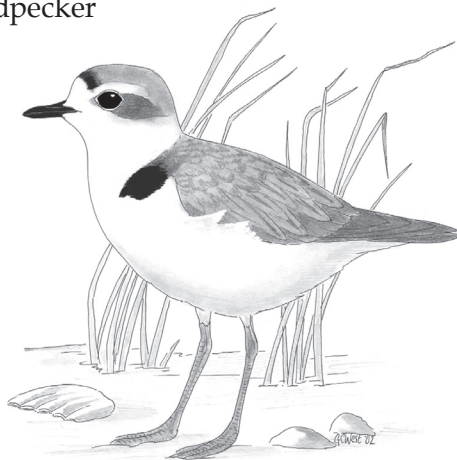
Not only do birds offer tremendous recreational, economic, and psychological benefits, they are often great indicators of environmental health. Decreasing populations and threats to certain species may indicate an ecosystem in peril. To ignore the warning signs may eventually be detrimental to our own species. To ensure that Alabama birdlife remains healthy and disparate, a diversity of healthy ecosystems in the state must be maintained and protected. It is hoped that an increasing awareness of Alabama's birdlife will stimulate a greater appreciation and protection of Alabama's natural resources so that future generations will have an opportunity to enjoy and benefit from them. In support of this aim, in 2004 a special committee of Alabama Wildlife professionals completed extensive information on species populations and habitats to designate those species of special conservation concern. Assessments

since 2004 confirm the continued general accuracy of these designations.

Conservation designations prioritize species as to their need of conservation attention. In most cases, data for four vulnerability parameters, i.e., relative abundance, distribution, threats to habitat, and population trend, were examined. If data for a species demonstrated vulnerability in all four parameters, a species was considered of Highest Conservation Concern (seven species). Species of High Conservation Concern were those that showed vulnerability in three parameters (19 species). Species of Moderate Conservation Concern (56 species) showed vulnerability in two parameters, or in one parameter and an uncertainty in another, e.g., population trend. Species of Low (115 species) and Lowest Conservation Concern (50) were those that had demonstrated vulnerability or uncertainty in one parameter, or in no parameters, respectively.

Common Names of Species of Highest Concern

Snowy Plover (illustrated)
Wilson's Plover
Piping Plover
Red-Cockaded Woodpecker
Bewick's Wren
Cerulean Warbler
Henslow's Sparrow



Common Names of Species of High Concern

Least Bittern	American Woodcock
Reddish Egret	Short-eared Owl
Wood Stork	Wood Thrush
American Black Duck	Worm-eating Warbler
Swallow-tailed Kite	Swainson's Warbler
Northern Harrier	Kentucky Warbler
American Kestrel	Bachman's Sparrow
Yellow Rail	Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
Black Rail	Seaside Sparrow
American Oystercatcher	

*Alabama Wildlife. *A Checklist of Vertebrates and Selected Invertebrates: Aquatic Mollusks, Fishes, Amphibians, Reptiles, Birds, and Mammals*. Vol. 1. Edited by Ralph E. Mirarchi.

*Alabama Wildlife. *Imperiled Amphibians, Reptiles, Birds, and Mammals*. Vol. 3. Edited by Ralph E. Mirarchi, Mark A. Bailey, Thomas M. Haggerty, and Troy L. Best.

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