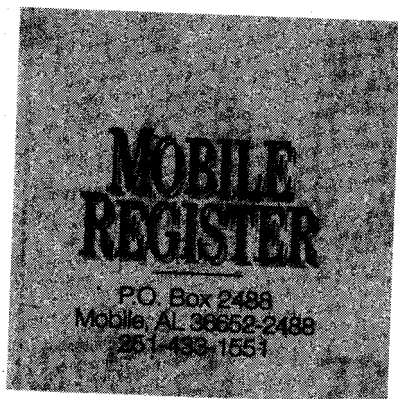


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Editorials

There's beauty in island's new 'birdiest' designation

DAUPHIN ISLAND has taken flight among bird watchers, which bodes well for south Alabama.

The visionaries who have worked to establish birding trails, set up birding events and generally raise Dauphin Island's visibility as a coastal bird-watching haven have contributed significantly to environmental protection and commercial activity in south Alabama, particularly in Mobile County.

An informal bird count on Dauphin Island in April recorded an astounding 185 species, earning the city title as the "birdiest coastal city." The number was 60 birds higher than a recent count in Brownsville, Texas, which allowed Dauphin Island to seize the "birdiest" title from that Texas city.

The prominence of Dauphin Island among bird-watching enthusiasts draws tourists to the town each year in the spring and fall, when they come to catch sight of numerous species that migrate across the Gulf of Mexico.

Local officials estimate a \$2-million-a-year economic impact from bird watchers who flock to the island in search of the 384 spe-

cies thought to inhabit or visit it.

Bird watching has become big business nationwide, accounting for a multibillion-dollar outdoor activity, and Alabama is wise to go after those dollars.

The 164-acre Audubon Bird Sanctuary on Dauphin Island provides birding trails and swamp walkways, and there are plans to expand the sanctuary.

Dauphin Island's nearest competitor for birding enthusiasts is Fort Morgan in Baldwin County. Gulf State Park, Weeks Bay National Estuarine Reserve, Meaher State Park, Mobile Tensaw Delta Wildlife Management Area, USS Alabama Memorial Park and Bellingrath Gardens fill out the bird-watching paradise of south Alabama.

Bird-watching rivals hunting as an outdoor activity and deserves the attention of local and state officials. Dauphin Island, the birdiest coastal municipality in America this year, proves its importance.

Protecting south Alabama's viability as a birding capital safeguards the environment and capitalizes on the economic, social and cultural value of south Alabama's natural resources.