Spring arrives in Michigan, and so do the many birds — from warblers to waterfowl — migrating from their southerly wintering grounds. Great Lakes coastlines provide important migratory corridors where birds utilize the winds of the offshore highway for flight, and cover of shoreline and coastal wetland habitats for shelter and refueling on food. They also offer an opportunity for nature enthusiasts and wildlife watchers to get outside to experience and enjoy these amazing wildlife migrations.

Each spring, in northeast Michigan's Iosco County, the annual Tawas Point Birding Festival is hosted by the Michigan Audubon in cooperation with AuSable Valley Audubon, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, along with other community and conservation collaborators. This event attracts visitors from across the state, country and even internationally — all with a shared interest in birds and birding.

Tawas Point State Park — recently designated an Important Bird Area — offers an ideal setting where birdwatchers meet up with the birds during their migration. Such geographic points, or places where land extends out into the lake, offer important resting and refueling points during these migrations. In the case of Tawas Point, it is the first or last stopping point for birds looking to cross Saginaw Bay. The diverse coastal habitats of this Lake Huron shoreline translate to richness in biodiversity, illustrated by endangered Great Lakes piping plovers nesting along the Tawas Point coastline and 187 species including the more than 25 warbler species spotted by birders during the 2014 event.

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How many birds can you discover and add to your life list? A visit to the Lake Huron coastline offers abundant opportunities for birding and wildlife watching. Aside from the Tawas Point Birding Festival, additional opportunities you may wish to explore include:

- Known for its extensive network of coastal wetlands, Saginaw Bay is a mecca for waterfowl and wetland species. Each August, the DNR Saginaw Bay Visitor Center hosts the Saginaw Bay Waterfowl Festival at the Bay City State Recreation Area; and you will want to check out the Saginaw Bay Birding Trail, led in development by the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy.

- Vast stretches of undistributed Lake Huron coastline at Negwegon State Park and Thompson’s Harbor State Park are known for their diverse habitats and coastal wetlands communities that support a wide variety of plants and animals. Waterfowl and loons, eagles and ospreys, terns and shore birds are among those inhabiting these secluded sandy beaches, dune and swale, cobble shores, and coastal marsh habitats.

- Tuttle marsh in Iosco County offers an easily accessible example of wetland marshes common across Michigan. This large wetland area is home to nesting osprey. Birders witnessed Bald Eagles, Northern Harrier ‘Marsh Hawks’, Red-tailed hawks, merlin, and kestrels — all birds of prey — in just one evening at Tuttle Marsh. Visitors will also see many other wetland species you can expect to see here, such as various ducks, herons, egrets, rails and the American and Least Bittern.

- Rare, threatened and endangered species inhabit northeast Michigan, given the diversity and large areas of protected habitats in this region. Among several, three stand out for both their rarity and their popularity among birders. Along the coastline, shore habitats of Tawas Point are critical and protected for the endangered Great Lakes Piping Plover. Up river, the famous AuSable River provides home to breeding pairs of Trumpeter Swans. Inland, the U.S. Forest Service protects and manages jack pine forests all across northeast Michigan, as this habitat serves as critical habitat for the endangered and world-renowned Kirtland’s Warbler.

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*The Sustainable Coastal Tourism Guide* — produced by Michigan Sea Grant and Michigan State University Extension — provides best practices and examples of how northeast Michigan communities are promoting coastal tourism in ways that are friendly to the environment.

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