

Virtual Birding Festivals

By Celeste Silling

This year, birding festivals all over the world have been canceled, but many of them are choosing to go virtual instead. At Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we are taking our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza (XHX) online on September 19 and 26. For those who have never been to a birding festival, these events are chances to get outside, see new birds and habitats, make friends, and celebrate nature! For many, these festivals are family traditions and the highlight of their year.

Birding festivals benefit the birds too! Attendees learn about birds and how to help save their habitat, food sources, and lives. They can buy bird houses, feeders, native plants and more to help the birds in their backyards. These festivals also help raise money for conservation agencies by drumming up donations and selling merchandise. That money can then go towards research, habitat conservation, education and other helpful endeavors.

Some birding festivals bring in huge crowds from all across the world. This boosts local economies and shows governments, businesspeople, and the public that preserving habitat has a positive economic impact! These festivals are beneficial to everyone involved, which is why some of them have been happening for decades.

So how can these outdoor festivals be translated into online at-home events? First comes the problem of making people feel like they are at a live event. We do this by making live videos, which means that viewers are watching things live as they are happening. During XHX, we will be filming live as we catch and band hummingbirds for our research, hold them in our hands, and interview experts.

During live videos, you can ask experts questions in the comments and get your answers within moments. This real-time conversation makes people feel like festival attendees rather than just video viewers. You can also talk to your friends in the comments like you would at a normal event. A bonus is that you can share the videos on social media, bringing all of your friends and family to the festival with you!

Another hurdle is the donations and sales that conservation organizations rely on from their festivals. We lose out on much of this during virtual events, but many festivals are getting creative with their fundraising. Selling merchandise on online stores, creating virtual raffles and online auctions are some of the more popular solutions. At GCBO, we will also be symbolically “adopting” out the hummingbirds that we catch during our festival.

The third and most difficult problem is making a lasting positive impact on attendees. We want folks to walk away loving birds and knowing how to help conserve them, but it’s difficult to make a lasting impression when you aren’t there in person. How can watching a hummingbird video compare to holding a hummingbird in your hand?

We’re overcoming this by making our content so compelling that you can’t look away! You will be able to look at the hummers more closely than ever before and see how we catch and band them. You’ll learn about our other research, hear amazing bird facts, and come away with a new appreciation for these creatures. We will teach you how to help these birds and why you should care, changing the world as we do so.

So, with a little pizzazz and a lot of creativity, birding festivals persist. To watch our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza, tune into Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's Facebook page on September 19 and 26 from 8 to noon and click on the live video. See how a nature festival can go virtual!