

## ***Birders Discover They're the Ones Being Watched***

By Cynthia H. Cho Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — When Ned Brinkley was renovating his bed-and-breakfast in Cape Charles, Va., four years ago, he racked up nearly \$9,000 in toll fees for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel — the quickest way to get to the nearest Home Depot.

But there was a benefit to crossing that 17.6-mile stretch so many times: He was able to stop along the way to look at birds, a favorite pastime for 34 years.

Over the last four decades, bird-watchers have flocked to the four manufactured islands of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, where at least 350 different species have been spotted. "It's probably the single most popular birding site in the mid-Atlantic," said Brinkley, who edits the journal *North American Birds*.

But nowadays it isn't as easy or simple for birders like Brinkley to do what they love. At popular birding sites across the country, they are facing stricter regulations — in some cases being required to hire a police escort — as authorities beef up national security.

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Americans have been subject to increased government restrictions and scrutiny at airports and elsewhere. That bird-watchers have become a target is somewhat surprising, since all they do is "walk quietly through the woods," as Brinkley put it.

But those woods are often around military bases, wastewater management plants and dams — places where government authorities fear that terrorists, disguised as birders, could lurk or strike.

And the equipment they carry — binoculars, telescopes and cameras — can make birders look suspicious at first glance. That has been the case at Wisconsin's Jones Island, a peninsula in Milwaukee Harbor about 100 yards from a Coast Guard station and a Navy Reserve station.

Since they have "sophisticated gear and [are] looking at things not normally photographed by the common citizen in this area, they may be stopped and asked a few questions," said Lt. Jamie Rickerson, chief of port operations at the Coast Guard station's Marine Safety office.

Birding at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel used to just require an annual permit that was easily available via mail, telephone or fax; about 800 were distributed annually. To enter any of the three northern islands, which are not open to the public, a birder would only have to show the permit, a photo ID and vehicle registration. The southernmost island, which has a restaurant and a fishing pier, is open to the public.

"Anyone could stop [on the islands]. We had no idea who was on the islands and who was not," said Clement Pruitt, director of operations and chief of police for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel.

But this year, after Virginia's Department of Transportation determined that the ventilation buildings on each of the four islands were poorly secured, fences were erected around the buildings and the three northern islands were closed to nonemployees.

"We discovered that we had areas of concerns; we didn't have enough safeguards around our ventilation buildings," Pruitt said. "If you can get into the ventilation buildings, you have direct access to the tunnel and can inflict serious damage to the tunnel" — which is also a link to Hampton Roads, site of the Navy's largest base.

Bird-watchers reacted angrily to the closure of the islands, and a committee — consisting of members of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel Commission, bridge-tunnel staff members and local birders, including Brinkley — was formed to come up with a new access policy.

Its decision, made June 14, allows bird-watchers back on the islands, but with many more restrictions. The spontaneous stops that Brinkley would make on his trips to Home Depot, for instance, are prohibited.

Under the new rules, which took effect Friday, individuals or groups of no more than 15 people have to arrange their visits in advance and pay \$50 an hour to be escorted by an off-duty police officer.

Upon arrival, birders must provide photo identification and vehicle registration. Their belongings and vehicles may be examined at check-in and at any time during the visit. Scientists and researchers can apply for a \$50 annual pass and may be subjected to background checks.

"These sorts of national security issues seem to be intruding in ways one would never have expected. You expect airline security. You don't expect it when you go birding. Who knew you'd have a police escort?" said Perry Plumart, director of conservation advocacy for the American Bird Conservancy.

The Calumet Water Reclamation Plant in the southeast part of Chicago is one of the best places for observing migrating shorebirds.

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, more than 300 tour groups visited the facility, said Peggy Bradley, public information coordinator for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, an independent agency overseen by nine elected commissioners.

But in 2002, the commissioners adopted a policy prohibiting members of the public from entering its facilities. "There are no exceptions," Bradley said. "If you let [bird-watchers] in, what about the environmentalists, high school students, professionals?"

"We all understand any restrictions around the filtration plants, as it doesn't take much imagination to envision a scenario involving drinking water," said Joe Lill, president of the Chicago Audubon Society. "But the sludge ponds?"

Bradley sees the situation differently. "If our plant became the target of a terrorist attack, public health would suffer," she said. "People take wastewater treatment for granted — but if you have 5 million people living in close proximity, [an attack] would be a public health crisis."

Donald R. Dann, president of the Bird Conservation Network, a coalition of about 20 Chicago-area organizations, remains skeptical. "Someone can lodge a grenade from the street if they wanted to. I'm not sure they're achieving any great national security objective," he said.

Lill said his organization had written letters to the water reclamation district's commissioners. The last time the topic came up at a meeting, in mid-June, the board did not change its mind.

Denial of access to the plant means more than just being prohibited from enjoying a hobby — it's about science and conservation, Lill contended. "The real downside is that the data with regards to migration has not been comprehensively gathered since 2001," he said.

One of the country's top birding sites, according to *Birding* magazine, is an area in Sierra Vista, Ariz., at the base of the Huachuca Mountains, that includes Ft. Huachuca, an Army military intelligence center. Birders used to be able to enter the base freely.

But under regulations imposed in March, birders who are not U.S. citizens can enter only if sponsored by someone who is in the U.S. military or is affiliated with the base. U.S. citizens must show identification, vehicle registration and proof of insurance to obtain a visitor's pass.

"The issue is that we need to know who is coming onto the military installation, especially given the sheer number of visitors," said Tanja Linton, a Ft. Huachuca spokeswoman.

Noting that some foreign nationals may not know anyone who can sponsor a visit to the base, Linton said, "we are looking into working with the convention and visitors bureau in Sierra Vista to train docents so that foreign visitors have an option if they don't have a sponsor."