

## 2016 Adopt-A-Trail Survey Results

Of the 12 VMN Chapters that participated in AAT in 2016, 10 responded to the year-end survey. This report is a summary of the results.

- **12 Chapters participated in AAT in 2016**
- **16 VBWT Loops were adopted & visited.**
- **Over 126 VMN members participated in this project. (The actual total # of participants is likely closer to around 175 as 2 chapters did not provide participation numbers).**
- **All 10 chapters reported that they generally enjoyed working on this project.**
- **Things that Chapter AAT coordinators and members *like* about participating in this project included the following:**
  - Getting outdoors/ Being Outside – *reported by 5 chapters*
  - Hiking/ Hiking Trails – *reported by 3 chapters*
    - "What's not to like?! I love these trails."
  - Birding – *reported by 3 chapters*
    - "It is so nice to have an excuse to go birding and get volunteer hours for it!! It is the perfect project – to be outside enjoying and observing nature."
  - Learn something new at every visit
  - Feeling useful
  - Independence
  - Flexibility
  - Enjoy getting out to parks that we normally do not go to.
  - viewing wildlife
  - getting to know some chapter members
  - seeing improvements after reporting problems
  - Wildlife Mapping
  - kayaking
  - Helping DGIF
  - seeing the same area over the four seasons
    - "It's a great way to be outdoors, seeing the same area over the four seasons."
- **Things chapter members find *challenging* about participating in this project**

**NOTE:** Thanks for letting us know of these challenges! Responses below offer advice on remedying the challenges as well as some explanations/ more information. Hopefully they help!

  - iNaturalist/ Wildlife Mapping – *reported by 2 chapters*

- “Pictures of a 5 second sighting is impossible. I understand the need for a picture of proof”

Response: You are not required to get a photo of every animal that you see. We are most interested in documenting herpetofauna (frogs, lizards, snakes, salamanders, turtles, etc). If you are able to capture a photo of any of these critters, we appreciate you posting them. You are welcome to add photos of other wildlife that you are able to capture a photo of, but again it is not required. We understand birds are particularly difficult to capture photos of; by entering bird observations in eBird, this data has been captured.

- “iNaturalist to identify things before we enter. We can take lots of pictures but we have to learn the names of things.”

Response: One of the great aspects of iNaturalist is the learning opportunity it offers. You are not required to identify the animal when you upload the photo. If you don’t know what species it is, you can leave the species identification field blank. iNaturalist will label it as “Unknown” and “Needs ID”, so that others who use iNaturalist can identify it for you.

- Driving distance to sites; some are particularly far away – *reported by 3 chapters*

- “It’s rather disappointing to drive for miles to find a very small area with nowhere to park.”

Response: For sites that don’t have any member living near them within a reasonable driving distance, you don’t have to visit those sites 4 times per year; once a year is sufficient, but perhaps overtime, try visiting it in different seasons, so we get as much information as possible on it. It is true that not all VBWT sites are “destination” sites. Some are more suitable to visit, if it’s close to where you live while others are very much worth a long drive. Eventually, we will work towards indicating the top/ “best bet” sites to separate the destination sites out for people using the VBWT. We do appreciate very much your effort to make the drive out to monitor these sites!

- Finding/contacting the site owner/manager – *reported by 4 chapters*

- “Emailing the listed contact worked for 3 contacts and leaving a phone message resulted in being able to contact one site contact”
- “People left and no one knew who took over the responsibility.”

Response: This is very likely *THE* most challenging aspect of this project. From what I’ve seen in the returned checklists, it appears that email is the most productive way to successfully get in touch with the site contacts. However, in many cases you may have to make phone calls in order to know who the right person to email is. This part of the project is challenging, but it is also one of the most important. If all of your detective work to find the right contact doesn’t get you anywhere or repeated attempts to reach someone continues to fail, please let me know; this is good information. All we ask is for your best effort. Some seasons, such as spring/ summer, can be very busy times of year for the staffs who manage parks and public lands. Going forward, I recommend reaching

out to the site contacts in the fall or winter seasons when these folks are generally less busy.

- Some members are not good birders & feel inadequate at this part of the task.  
Response: It's ok; all we ask is for your best effort. Some chapters have addressed this challenge by pairing less experienced birders with those who are more experienced. Some chapters have had one person visit the site and complete the admin type tasks on one visit and had a birder visit the site to do the birding task on a separate visit. Birding skills take time and practice to build; your members will get better the more they do it! There are great birding tips at <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/browse/topic/bird-id-skills/>. Also I recommend they try Cornell Lab's Merlin Bird ID app, which is very helpful, particularly for new birders.
- Access to some sites is not easy, but we are pretending to be tourists and taking our time.  
Response: Access to a site, in most cases, should not be difficult. We want all VBWT sites to be publicly accessible. If it is proving to be challenging to access a site, please report this with an explanation, so that DGIF may assess and deal with the situation. This information can go in the "red flag" section of the Phase I checklist or in an email to Jessica at DGIF if you are in Phase II.
- It took a while to get used to the survey forms.  
Response: Please contact Jessica at DGIF if you are unsure of how to complete the forms or need anything clarified. Phase I checklist forms will be improved in the future.
- Some members find four visits too many per year. However, I like to see that. Some of the areas are much larger than mine, so I understand the additional time it takes.  
Response: Participants may spend as much or as little time as they would like to at a site. We prefer they spend the amount of time an ordinary visitor to the site would spend at it. For some sites this is 15 minutes; for others this may be more like 1-2 hours. However, if the volunteer is short on time, we just ask that they spend at least 15-20 min birding/ viewing wildlife; if that is all the time they have, that is fine.
- Several areas show no changes after reporting problems; it will be reported to VMNs per your email that help is on the way.  
Response: We appreciate you sharing this information with the members in your chapter! With this being the first year of the project; there are a massive number of updates to be made to the website and signs to be replaced. We appreciate all the great work the VMNs have done to report these needs! And we appreciate your patience as I work towards resolving them. Please know that all information from all checklists has already been documented and will eventually be addressed. Website updates will be corrected first. Signage replacement will be next. Signage replacement may take quite a while, but again please be assured the needs have been documented and they will be addressed eventually.
- Some sites did not have groomed walking paths. (Tall grass, overgrown ...)  
Response: Not all VBWT sites have trails or are intended to be hiked; some are just lookouts/ overlooks/ viewing points and this may be why participants may be observing tall grass/ overgrown conditions. In a few cases, participants have worked harder than needed,

seeking out a trail to hike when there is not supposed to be one or the site is not intended to be hiked. However, if it is a site that is supposed to have a hikable/walkable trail, as indicated in its site description on the VBWT website, and the trail is repeatedly very overgrown from season to season, please report this on your Phase I checklist in the “redflag” section or if you are in Phase II it can go in an email, reported as an access issue. If it’s a DGIF-owned WMA, this is something we can and would like to remedy. If it is a site owned by someone else, there may not be anything we can do about it, except investigate the situation and determine whether this site should remain on the VBWT or be removed.

- **5 Chapters reported that the project was *easier/ less time consuming* than their chapter *originally anticipated prior to committing to this project*.**

**4 Chapters found the project *more difficult/ more time consuming*.**

- Most explanations of difficulties from the VMNs had to do with getting their chapter started on the project and getting everyone organized and use to the checklist, but said that once things got going and folks knew what to do, it was not difficult and work level was about what was anticipated. Other explanations had to do with doing a lot of follow ups and reminders with chapter members, more than they anticipated, and/or finding a lack of follow-through/ commitment to the project by chapter members; ie folks not doing what they said they would do.

**1 chapter said it was *both* easier and more difficult.**

- Some aspects of project were easier (site visits), while others were more challenging than they anticipated (getting ahold of site contacts).

- **9 out of 10 chapters reported that they would recommend the Adopt-A-Trail project to other Chapters.**

- **Items coordinators listed they’d like DGIF to do to make the project easier for them *to coordinate for their chapter*:**

- Nothing – *response from 4 chapters* (some cited chapter size as what would make it easier)
- Provide checklists or short response forms for quarterly coordinator reports
- Explain the checklist form in more detail, and provide a couple of sample completed forms. However, now that I’ve done this for 3 rounds of surveys, it’s easy.
- More explanation of what chapter coordinator responsibilities are and tips for getting chapter organized
- Reduce the number of visits from one per quarter to one or two per year.
- I can't scan multiple pages here at home, but this was easily solved with help from someone with an office
- Positive notes:
  - “you have been very accessible Jessica – Thanks”

- “I appreciate your specific responses and flexibility”
- **Items coordinators listed they’d like DGIF to do to make this project easier to participate in for their chapter members.**
  - Create two separate forms/ checklists. One for the annual survey and one for the quarterly seasonal visits. – *indicated by 2 chapters*
  - Manage the contact part of the job since DGIF was the originator of the trails; also will know what to do to correct problems
  - Not sure.
  - Provide sample completed checklist forms.
  - Let new coordinators better know what they’re likely to experience as coordinator.
  - Reduce the number of required visits - it may help with volunteer follow through.
  - Positive notes:
    - “Nothing at this time. I agree with the four checks a year for consistency. There will be times in the winter where it will be too hard to get into some of the trails, so that would take it down to three if necessary. “
    - “It is pretty straight forward. As a leader I sent out initial forms as some members could not locate them.”
    - “Your slides and presentations have been very helpful, along with paperwork available so readily on the website.”
- **Improvements that could be made to local VBWT loops/ VBWT program on the statewide level.**
  - The best role is to take people to these sites.
  - None – *reported by 4 chapters*
  - Improve directions to sites. – *reported by 3 chapters; their specific suggestions are below*
    - Provide addresses for each site to help people get there by GPS, from any starting location
    - Driving directions should start from nearest major road , not just be from site to site – *suggested by 2 chapters*
  - More interpretive trails
  - Reevaluate sites to drop some and add others.
  - Ensure VBWT signage is placed at site entrances for all sites – *3 chapters suggested*
  - DGIF needs to do more coordination with site contacts/ managers – the main feedback I get is that they don’t understand what the VBWT program is or what it wants to accomplish or what their roles could be.
  - It’s not possible to visit the entire loop in 1 day, more realistically people can do 1-2 sites/ day.
  - Geocaching
  - Positive Notes:
    - “I'd say you are doing a great job! I've travelled Virginia quite a bit this past year camping. My husband and I have gone on many of the VBWT trails. Most were in very good condition.”

- “Looks great to us.”
- **Tips /advice for other VMN chapters that are just beginning the Adopt-A-Trail Project on how to get their chapter members started/ organized**
  - None, right now – *3 chapters reported*
  - Have an organizing meeting/ chapter education session on the project or have potential surveyors watch the online webinar – there will be a lot of questions and it’s a good way to get the ball rolling– *recommended by 3 chapters*
  - Have flexible coverage of sites even though a member/ members “own” a site
  - Stress the opportunity for volunteer hours for certification in VMN
  - Conduct a scouting trip
  - Mentor new people to their sites
  - As people get accustomed to their sites, they are better able to tune in to the species they see, and plan their trips for best times of day
  - Create a group email to be able to send out information to everyone and reminders of the quarterly surveys
  - Recommend it – no matter the difficulties, it’s basically a walk in the park with birding and wildlife watching!
  - Example Process Recommended by a Chapter:
    - Have a chapter committee organize how they’ll set up site visit scheduling, where to post documents related to surveying and the instructions for survey forms
    - Select a project coordinator and instruct them on scheduling, survey forms, communicating with site surveyors, follow up with surveyors and how to coach them to complete the forms and tips for contacting site contacts/managers, and how coordinators review forms.
    - Have the chapter committee and project coordinator walk through a first survey so committee/coordinator gets familiar with the forms, site visits, and the whole process.
    - When making revisit schedules, inform surveyors to only send in forms if there’s new findings for the site or a new site contact/manager. Instruct surveyors about revisits being primarily for ebird and the wildlife mapping program on iNaturalist.
    - Chapter coordinators/chapters need to store surveys, especially initial surveys, in order to be able to assist surveyors of subsequent visits to know what has changed since the original survey, and subsequent ones.
  - Example Process Recommended by a Chapter:
    - One Chapter person was assigned as the lead for each site. That person coordinated with the site manager and set up a time and date for the visit...and then invited chapter members to participate in the visit.
  - It’s a good idea to have an experienced birder and/or someone who knows about wildlife identification with those who don’t know much about bird and other animal identifications.

- It takes a while to get all participants coordinated and assigned to sites. I utilized the mass mailing to the chapter and at first I had people signing up every day. People want to be closest to home. However, not everyone could have their first choice.
  - Set a due date on the 20th of the month, to take into account the time it takes to collect and process the paperwork.
  - If members have not been submitting their checklists, contact them to follow up. Find out if they truly want to do the project, so that replacements can be made, if necessary.
  - Get a good feel for who wants to commit to this and if they understand what needs to be done.
  - You have to be dedicated and enthusiastic about it.
  - Figure out a way of organizing it that works best for you.
  - Be open to all questions from members– be responsive and supportive!
  - Try to be flexible.
- **All 10 of the responding Chapters indicated that they plan to continue participation in the Adopt-A-Trail project in 2017.**
  - **Other Comments:**
    - One chapter indicated that they liked the new website.
    - One chapter adopted an additional loop for 2017.
    - “Thanks for all your hard work. 75 volunteer hours”
    - 8/10 responders requested copies of guide books