CHAPTER V

EVALUATION OF THE GREAT TEXAS COASTAL
BIRDING TRAIL WEB SITE

This chapter evaluates the Web pages hosted by Texas Parks and Wildlife

Department (TPWD) for the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail (hereafter Birding Trail

site). The guidelines used for this evaluation were derived from the literature on

interpretation and Web site development as discussed previously in the literature review.

Evaluation criteria are specified in the methods section of this dissertation. Table 5.1

displays the results of the evaluation.

Based on this evaluation, the TPWD Birding Trail site can be used for testing the

flow model with the structural equation modeling method described in the previous

chapter. It provides a relatively rich multimedia environment (e.g. text, pictures, sound)

to create a Web browsing experience that should engage people. More importantly, the

intent of the Birding Trail site is to stimulate people's interest in knowing about the

"place" and hopefully visiting it.

In summary, the Birding Trail Web site provides a useful context for this

research, because 1) the Web site provides interpretative information about a specific

geographical place, 2) it contains enough content, structure and design characteristics that

are needed to test the flow model and examine factors of the Web site that affect flow

experience, and 3) the intent of the Birding Trail Web site developers was to inform

TABLE 5.1

Evaluation of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail Web site

Criteria	Characteristics	Evaluation
1. Short and simple index page	There are 3 elements and 18 links on the index page (Figure 5.1). It has one major visual element that sets the overall theme for the site. It has one large welcome and orientation block that provides instructions for navigating the site. The map loops (links) are all listed in one element at the top of the page. Access to the maps, trail information, and multimedia links are arranged in another element at the bottom of the page. Visually, the page is well balanced. It is simple, with user choices arranged only at the top and bottom of the screen. The main body of the index page is the image of the trail map. The original map image had the roadways and they have been removed. This leaves a large blank space on the page that does not provide any content or particular visual interest. The advertisement for the 3rd edition maps is a distraction that draws attention from the elements that the users' need to navigate the site. All of the information is viewable on the computer screen without having to scroll down in the browser window. By comparison, the main home page for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has seven main visual elements, with poor visual balance (Figure 5.2). Navigation of the site if difficult to determine because topic areas are distributed around the page seemingly at random. The structure of the site and its subsequent presentation of information are not clear. Because of the amount of information provided on this page it is necessary to scroll down in the browser window to see all of the information. There are 90 hyperlinks from the main page. Deciphering the information provided within each of the hyperlinks is difficult because the titles of the links are not intuitively clear for the site visitor.	The Great Coastal Birding Trail site is relatively simple compared to the home page for TPWD.

Table 5.1-- *continued*

Criteria	Characteristics	Evaluation
2. Use theme titles for all pages.	The site expresses two themes: (1) the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail provides significant opportunities for birding; (2) the trail is easily accessible by private auto. These themes are expressed in the site by how the information about the birding trail is provided, such as the driving maps and links to a variety of information about birds and birding resources along the Texas coast.	Although the site has a thematic presentation, themes are not stated clearly. Also, the visitor is not reminded of the themes in effective ways. An HTML "title" tag is used for each page, but it appears only on the top of the browser's window, not on the main page.
3. Use pictures to tell stories and provoke feelings and thoughts with text to support.	From the trail map, the various "loops" of the Birding Trail are the primary presentation. In the "loops" section there is very little use of a combination of images and text. A visitor can either view an image of the driving map of the loops or, alternatively, the text describing the birding sites within that loop. The Web site has the same functional problems as the printed map—you can either look at the map or at the text. Neither page provides detailed enough information to direct you to the birding trail sites. It is apparent that the Birding Trail "map" pages are simply a Web version of the printed map.	Although there are images throughout the site, it is apparent that there was not significant thought put into how they might be combined with text to provide a more engaging experience for visitors. More effective use of text and images can be found deeper in the Web site. For example in the "Birds of Texas" pages there is a better use of graphics, images and descriptive text. However, these "better" examples of "interpretive" presentation pages are not readily accessible.
4. Keep images small in memory storage size to reduce download time	The size of the major images used in the site ranges from 9KB – 156 KB. Images with larger memory size are those uncompressed .bmp format files. The Birding Trail download times averaged 18.18 seconds compared to a range of other sites of 16.87 to 26.37 (see Table 5.2).	The images used in the Birding Trial site ranges from small to medium in memory size. The downloading speed is moderate as compared to five other similar Web sites.

Table 5.1 -- *continued*

Criteria	Characteristics	Evaluation
5. Compatibility across different sized monitors and with different browsers.	The Web site has a combination of text, images, rollover buttons, multimedia audio and video components. All elements of the Web site were equally viewable on the 15 and 19 inch screen. Functionally the Web site worked exactly the same on both Web browsers.	The Web site is compatible across different monitors and with different browsers.
6. Present the information in multimedia formats of text, images, pictures and sound.	The Birding Trail site primarily uses a combination of images and text on all the pages except the multimedia area. The multimedia area contains over 100 audio files and one video clip. The interpretive information about the Birding Trail sites is provided in the map text section. These text descriptions are an interpretation of the character of the places (communities, parks, etc.) that are located along the birding trail.	The Birding Trail site uses text, images, audio and video files to present information. However, these elements do not compliment each other. It would be much more effective as an interpretive presentation if the pages included the map image, some photographs of the area, and the text describing the sites. In addition, rather than having all of the multimedia files located in one area, it would be more interesting to distribute links to the audio files throughout the site when appropriate.

Table 5.1 -- *continued*

Criteria	Characteristics	Evaluation
7. Follow a consistent presentation style	The Birding Trail follows a consistent presentation style for each area of the site. The links to the trail loops are alike with a "look and feel" similar to the index page (see criteria 1). The individual site's descriptive text pages are also consistent throughout. This presentation style is effective and provides an overall "feel" to the site that is not distracting when moving from one area to another. On the main TPWD site, in comparison, the only consistent elements are the top and bottom TPWD banners. As one proceeds into the subsequent pages, the navigation structure and the content presentation varies significantly from one topical area to the next.	The Birding Trail site follows a consistent presentation style. This consistency provides more ease of use than what is provided from the main TPWD site.

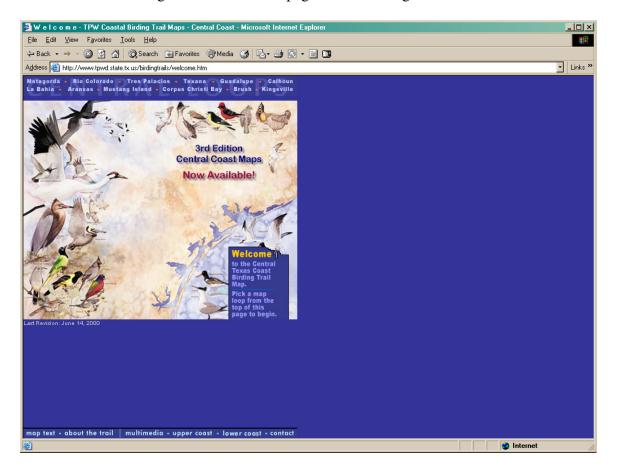Figure 5.1. The index page of the Birding Trail site

Figure 5.2. The main page of the TPWD's Web site

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TABLE 5.2

Comparison of the downloading time for five Web sites

Web sites	Range of download times (seconds)	Average
Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, TPWD	5.45 – 29.14	18.18
Idaho Parks	4.85 – 38.1	26.37
Massachusetts Division of Forests and Parks	7.03 – 32.82	16.87
Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept., Main page	4.4 – 22.03	14.02
Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation	5.33 – 49.83	22.62

people about the area, and hopefully stimulate their interest in investigating more about the natural resources in the place, and, potentially, to take some positive actions.