



From Migration Corridor to Conservation Destination: Integrating Birdwatching into Biodiversity Protection in Artvin, Türkiye.

De corredor migratorio a destino de conservación: Integración de la observación de aves en la protección de la biodiversidad en Artvin, Turquía.

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Abstract

Bird watching; It is a type of alternative tourism that supports economic growth and environmental sustainability, as well as contributing to physical and mental health. For Artvin, which ranks 49th among the provinces in Türkiye in terms of its level of development, such alternative tourism activities are a priority potential for regional development. This study asks "Is Artvin a potential destination for bird watching?" It seeks an answer to the question and aims to fill the gap in the literature due to the fact that the region has not been examined with qualitative methods in this respect. Within the scope of qualitative research approach and purposeful sampling, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 14 experts in this field and the data were analyzed with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings indicate that especially the Macahel region and Çoruh Valley have high potential for migratory bird observation; It reveals that observation towers and accommodation facilities to be established in these areas can support scientific research and bird watching tourism. The study also makes a unique contribution in terms of providing a concrete road map for adding Artvin to international bird watching routes; It also serves as an example for similar regions that are rich in biodiversity but relatively underdeveloped economically. As a result, considering Türkiye's geographical location on bird migration routes, the integration of areas such as Artvin into global routes; It will be able to provide alternative income and employment opportunities to the region by contributing to the protection of biological diversity.

Key words:

Birdwatching Tourism, Avifauna Tourism, Ornithological Tourism, Black Sea, Türkiye.

Resumen

La observación de aves es un tipo de turismo alternativo que apoya el crecimiento económico y la sostenibilidad Ambiental; además de contribuir a la salud física y mental. Para Artvin, que ocupa el puesto 49 entre las provincias de Turquía en términos de su nivel de desarrollo, dichas actividades de turismo alternativo constituyen un potencial prioritario para el desarrollo regional. Este estudio plantea como cuestionamiento "¿Es Artvin un destino potencial para la observación de aves?" Por lo que se busca una respuesta a la pregunta y se pretende llenar el vacío en la literatura debido al hecho de que la región no ha sido examinada con métodos cualitativos en este aspecto. En el marco del enfoque de investigación cualitativa y del muestreo intencional, se realizaron entrevistas telefónicas semiestructuradas con 14 expertos en este campo y los datos se analizaron mediante el Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo (AFI). Los hallazgos indican que especialmente la región de Macahel y el Valle del Çoruh tienen un alto potencial para la observación de aves migratorias; revela que las torres de observación y las instalaciones de alojamiento que se establezcan en estas áreas pueden apoyar la investigación científica y el turismo de observación de aves. El estudio también realiza una contribución única en cuanto a proporcionar una hoja de ruta concreta para añadir Artvin a las rutas internacionales de observación de aves; también sirve como ejemplo para regiones similares que son ricas en biodiversidad, pero relativamente subdesarrolladas económicamente. Como resultado, considerando la ubicación geográfica de Turquía en las rutas de migración de aves, la integración de áreas como Artvin en las rutas globales; podrá proporcionar oportunidades alternativas de ingresos y empleo a la región al contribuir a la protección de la diversidad biológica.

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Palabras clave:

Turismo de observación de aves, Turismo de avifauna, Turismo ornitológico, Mar Negro, Turquía.

Introduction

Birdwatching is one of the popular ecotourism activities that has the ability to transform the ecosystem that cities possess into a valuable resource. As a form of recreation, this type of tourism also enhances human well-being while conserving biodiversity related to bird species (Liu et al., 2021). Indeed, there are a number of variables that influence birdwatching. Among these, the pleasure people derive from observing birds, the diversity of bird species, and the subtle relationship between humans and nature are subjects that are interesting to examine (Cox & Gaston, 2015). Birdwatching is becoming a tourism category that attracts wealthy tourists, demonstrates significant economic potential, and is increasingly recognized (Flores-Ramírez et al., 2023). However, the birdwatching potential of destinations along Türkiye's major migration routes remains largely unexplored. Underdeveloped provinces such as Artvin are a clear example: their potential has not been examined through the eyes of the experts and residents who know these areas firsthand.

An increasing number of scientific studies are being conducted on how birdwatching supports economic growth and environmental conservation. Research carried out by Ocampo-Peñuela & Winton (2017) and Renjifo et al. (2020) revealed that birdwatching tourism is an effective way to raise funds for conservation areas, increase local people's awareness of ecosystems, and create alternative income sources after the end of the conflict in Colombia. According to research conducted by Ng et al. (2022) in the Ayer Hitam Utara Forest Reserve in Johor, Malaysia, birdwatching tourism generates income and sustains livelihoods. On the other hand birdwatching also stands out in terms of its educational and scientific contributions in places such as Deliblato Sands in Serbia (Krejić et al., 2019) and Curup Tenang in the South Sumatera region of Indonesia (Sitanggang et al., 2020). It has also been noted that birdwatching has developed tourism and encouraged the conservation of natural resources in places such as the Rajegwesi area of Meru Betiri National Park in Indonesia (Muttaqien et al., 2015) and the Pelawan Forest in Central Bangka (Henri et al., 2017). Birdwatching programs in Rajegwesi are helping to conserve biodiversity and expand ecotourism opportunities. It is stated that the presence of Caribbean flamingos in the Celestun Biosphere Reserve in Mexico has increased birdwatching tourism and provided economic benefits to the region and supported sustainable development (Galicia et al., 2018). These cases show how bird watching helps nature conservation efforts. In fact, bird watching also supports the long-term survival of destinations in terms of finance, meaning bird watching stands out as a form of tourism.

Bird watching is a type of tourism that is directly or indirectly effective in many areas such as economic development, recreation, education and environmental protection. Regional tourism development theory also suggests that a unique natural resource diversifies the local economy and increases the long-term competitiveness of the destination. Birdwatching tourism is one such nature-based specialization: it can yield economic returns while giving local communities a tangible incentive to conserve the biodiversity on which those returns ultimately depend. Likewise, birdwatching is in line with the regional tourism development theory, which encompasses a number of viewpoints and methods meant to encourage the expansion, advancement, and sustainability of tourism in certain geographic regions. In the development rating of provinces, Artvin is ranked 49th, according to reports that consider a wide range of factors, including employment, education, health,

the economy, and the quality of life in Türkiye. In this sense, it is evident that Artvin's development holds a top priority (Acar, et al. 2019). Yet the potential of Artvin itself remains unexamined. No study has assessed the province as a birdwatching destination through the eyes of the experts and residents who know its terrain, and none has set out how the region might be linked to international birdwatching networks. Artvin is located on major migration corridors and has significant untouched biological diversity. As a matter of fact, this study, which benefits from regional tourism development theory and sustainable ecotourism literature, aims for three purposes. The first is to determine whether Artvin is a suitable bird watching spot; Secondly, determining the ornithological and infrastructural assets on which this type of tourism will be based; The third is to propose practical steps to connect Artvin to international bird watching routes. While seeking answers to these questions, the study is expected to provide a model that will help fill a gap in bird watching research at the destination level in Türkiye and that other regions in similar situations can adapt.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section presents the conceptual framework that guides the study and is based on three interrelated ideas. First, bird watching is both a recreational pursuit and a scientific activity; second, that protecting biodiversity is an ecological necessity; and finally, it provides a broader policy context within which both operate for the sake of sustainable development. Indeed, these three ideas provide a basis for evaluating Artvin's potential as a birdwatching destination. Observing birds in their natural habitat or following them along a route is defined as bird watching; It is also a leisure activity that can benefit mental and physical health (Şekercioğlu, 2002; Xu et al., 2023). Bird watching is carried out in pre-determined bird observation areas and it is possible to find many bird species with unique ecological characteristics in these areas. The presence of rare or endemic bird species makes these areas more attractive and a center of attraction for nature lovers and bird watchers. Bird watching can also provide extra advantages for scientific and recreational purposes due to the unique views and biodiversity it offers (Dileep Kumar et al., 2020; Ocampo-Peñuela and Winton, 2017).

Bird watching is not just a hobby but also a vital tool in ecological research and environmental protection. According to Schuttler et al. (2018) bird watching provides important details for investigating the habitat preferences, migration routes and population dynamics of bird species. In addition to its recreational value, it makes significant contributions to global environmental policies and the protection of biological diversity and raises awareness of environmental problems. It is beneficial in promoting conservation initiatives by bringing together those who support biodiversity and environmental protection (Kronenberg, 2014; Ren et al., 2022).

In addition to strengthening individuals' sense of connection with nature, this form of tourism also increases awareness of environmental problems and contributes to the protection of biodiversity (Yerbury and Lukey, 2021). Bird watching activities are also important in terms of developing environmental awareness on a local and global scale. Studies conducted in China, where bird watching has been developing since the 2000s, have concluded that these activities increase participants' environmental awareness and support conservation efforts (Ma et al., 2013; Walther and White, 2018). Furthermore, festivals and initiatives related to birdwatching not only educate the public about biodiversity but also encourage the adoption of sustainable practices in nearby towns (Maia et al., 2024; Weston et al., 2015).

There are many connections between birdwatching and tourism. In this context, a type of ecotourism that is particularly worth mentioning is birdwatching, which enables people to be intertwined with nature, advances environmental conservation, and revitalizes local economies (Randler & Marx, 2022; Ren et al., 2022; Yong et al., 2021). The increasing share of ecotourism in the global market has increased the attractiveness of birdwatching tourism as a sustainable alternative. While ecotourism has grown by 10-30% annually in the last decade, the growth rate of total tourism has remained at approximately 4% (Sukereni, 2023). The demand for niche tourism industries such as birdwatching is also increasing and the biggest reason for this increase is that consumers increasingly prefer environmentally friendly and sustainable travel options (Tamimzadeh & Özel, 2024). In addition to being a recreational activity, birdwatching also makes significant contributions to environmental conservation and citizen science initiatives (Mansourian, 2021).

Birdwatching has an important function in the field of ecotourism with its low investment costs and minimal negative impacts on the environment. These characteristics have made it an important component of sustainable tourism practices (Liu et al., 2021). Environmental, economic, and sociocultural sustainability are the cornerstones of sustainable tourism, which aims to reduce negative impacts on the environment, preserve cultural values, and ensure fair financial contributions. Sustainable tourism places great importance on prudent resource management that seeks to reduce ecological degradation and support conservation initiatives (Alvarado, 2024; Kurniawan, 2024). Bird watching is a form of tourism that is compatible with the broader goals of sustainable tourism and the promotion of sustainable habits.

Birdwatching tourism is an economic reason for local people to value the natural environment and allows them to have awareness of what is at stake environmentally. This also supports conservation, as communities protect the habitats that visitors come to see. As a matter of fact, healthy ecosystems make destinations more attractive to bird watchers, which makes demand sustainable and supports the development of the region. Therefore, each part in this cycle depends on the survival of the others.

Birding not only supports local economies but also makes a significant contribution to conservation efforts, as income from this form of tourism is often used to protect habitat (Ocampo-Peñuela and Winton, 2017; Steven et al., 2013). Bird watching is more than just an environmentally friendly tourism option, it is also increasingly gaining financial acceptance. As a result of the unique experiences it offers, this activity attracts an audience that has significant spending power and is willing to pay high prices (Flores-Ramírez et al., 2023). Birdwatching tourism, along with the global spread of ecotourism, is a sustainable alternative that supports local economies and is compatible with international conservation goals. These tourism-related efforts are considered to be a useful tool for revitalizing the local economy and helping to conserve natural areas (Assa, 2019; Steven et al., 2017).

Implementing sustainable tourism practices in conservation areas such as birdwatching can help protect birds and promote long-term tourism solidarity for the conservation of biodiversity (Silva et al., 2022). These areas should be carefully selected environments that allow visitors to move around safely, enjoy a certain level of comfort, and provide opportunities for birdwatching. For example, bird observation areas that can direct wind currents and provide shade can be mentioned

(Huang et al., 2020). Walking paths, information boards and bird watching platforms are examples of infrastructure that reduce environmental impacts while increasing visitor satisfaction. These structures provide hidden observation areas that do not disturb wildlife and offer guests a more interesting and satisfying experience (Leksono et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2024). Carefully planned walking trails and observation points can direct traffic and prevent habitat degradation; both contribute to the conservation of natural ecosystems (Rega-Brodsky et al., 2018; Wakass et al., 2023). When skillfully integrated into the landscape, they can raise tourists' awareness of environmental issues and provide safe havens for bird species (Larasati et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2024). Educational boards can inform tourists about local bird species and conservation initiatives while encouraging more conscious actions that reduce people's impact on ecosystems (Aas et al., 2023; Leksono et al., 2023). Such infrastructure can also strengthen the ecological integrity of these areas by ensuring the conservation of important habitats and ecosystem balance (Rega-Brodsky et al., 2018; Sander & Tietze, 2022). These approaches also contribute to the conservation of bird biodiversity by enriching the tourist experience. Additionally, to further enhance the quality of the experience, amenities such as green areas, gathering points, shops and other adjacent places, rest and seating areas, viewing platforms, and information platforms should be provided and tourists should be given access to information resources (Beames et al., 2018; Hora et al., 2018).

The conservation of bird habitats is also a priority when developing birdwatching facilities. To ensure the survival of birds, challenges such as conservation plans, protecting urban nests, and raising local awareness must be overcome (Adi Nugroho et al., 2023). It is important to protect the nesting areas of birds, conserve the environment by providing feeding opportunities, and support the reproduction and survival of the population (Acharja, 2020). According to Leimena et al. (2023), one of the most important components of bird conservation initiatives is the identification and conservation of natural habitats surrounding the places where birds live and breed. International conservation initiatives like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in the United States and the European Union's Natura 2000 program have been extremely effective in preserving bird populations in this regard. The Natura 2000 network, for example, has profoundly influenced the stabilization and growth of populations of vulnerable bird species and established a vast network of protected areas throughout Europe (Butchart et al., 2004; Gray et al., 2022). Such regulations demonstrate the value of legal measures in supporting biodiversity and the effectiveness of coordinated habitat protection approaches. In addition, these approaches set an example for other countries and contribute to global bird protection efforts.

Türkiye, located at the intersection of Asia, Europe, and Africa, holds an important place on bird migration routes and possesses a great diversity in terms of bird species (Karataş & Üçeş, 2021). According to scientific research, birds use two main routes to migrate through Türkiye (Kolecek et al., 2016). The first of these is the migration route between Africa and Western and Central Europe. It has been observed that birds use Türkiye as a bridge on the migration route from Europe to Africa. The second is the migration route connecting Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Birds coming from Eastern Europe and Russia reach the Middle East and Africa through Türkiye. Türkiye's strategic position on migration routes, its rich natural vegetation, and the presence of wetlands are in fact related to this situation and these factors also contribute to

the diversity of bird populations (Karataş & Üçeş, 2021). Türkiye is therefore one of the major nations in the world, home to around 450 different species of birds (Çakıcı & Harman, 2006). Birds that begin their migration in February take the first route, which involves crossing the Mediterranean from the south to the Göksu Delta. They then go west, making another significant halt at the Salt Lake, and finally make their way to Europe across the Çanakkale and İstanbul Straits. The second path takes migratory birds to Sultan Marshes in Central Anatolia when they enter Türkiye in February from Hatay's Amik Plain. They travel north through Artvin to Russia and Eastern Europe. As a result, the straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles in the west and Artvin in the east occupy an essential geographic position in bird migration routes (see Figure 1).

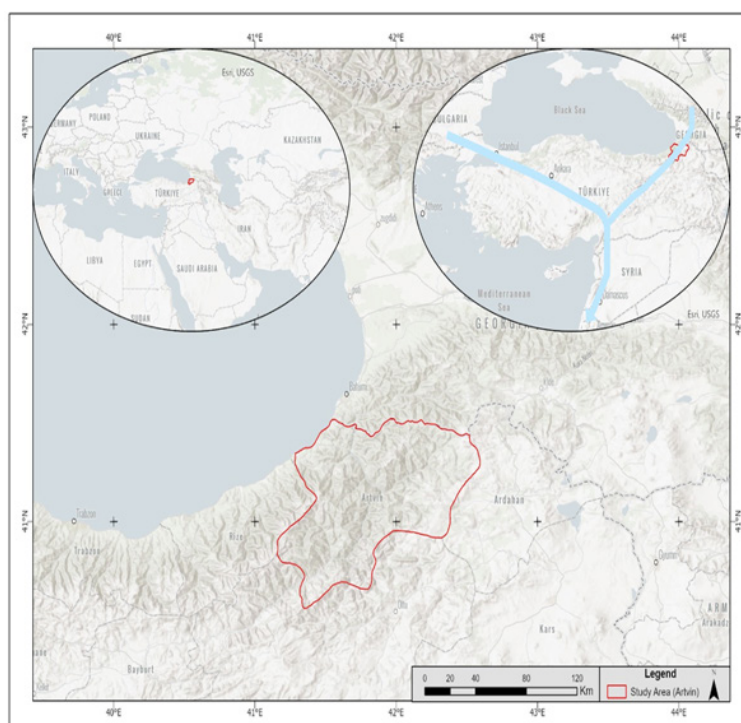


Figure 1. The route of migratory birds in Türkiye and the location of Artvin

With its rugged landscape and diverse ecosystems, the province of Artvin, which is part of Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region, also draws notice. In this context, in accordance with both Türkiye's national legislation and international agreements, there are significant protected areas declared as Hatila Valley National Park, Karagöl-Sahara National Park, Borçka Karagöl Nature Park, Arsiyan Yaylası Nature Park, Camili Görgit Nature Reserve, Camili Efeler Nature Reserve, Otingo Nature Reserve, Yalnızçam Wildlife Development Area, and Büyük Çoruh Wildlife Development Area in Artvin. Given that Artvin has a total surface area of 7,436 km² and that there are roughly 2,398 km² of protected areas, about 32% of Artvin remains protected. This rate is well above the Türkiye average and reveals the tremendous diversity of Artvin's flora and fauna. The research results, in which more than 216 bird species were detected, show that Artvin has a unique biological diversity (Göktürk, 2018). Artvin is a special place for bird watching due to its unique nature and advantageous location on international migration routes.

While tens of thousands of migratory bird species try to reach Africa by crossing the strait between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, they also use the Çoruh Valley within the borders of Artvin province as a route. Artvin can be turned into a destination center for special interest tourism, as it is located on the route followed by endemic species of wild migratory birds. Thanks to the research conducted in the Eastern Black Sea region, especially in the valleys on bird migration routes, it has been possible to observe many bird species that are specific to the Middle East and the Caucasus and not found in Europe, and this paves the way for tourists living abroad and interested in bird watching to visit the region (Bekir et al., 2008).

A small number of scientific studies has been conducted on birdwatching in Türkiye (Bekir et al., 2008; Göktürk et al., 2011; Özkazanç & Özay, 2019; Gümüş et al., 2024; Kızıroğlu, 2023; Düzgün & Kurt, 2021). The basic purpose of these investigations was to identify endangered birds that were traveling along the Eastern Black Sea's migration routes and undertake the necessary research to protect their natural habitats. The purpose of these investigations was to determine both the shortcomings of local services and the minimal gear required by photographers for bird photography. Except for these, an evaluation relating to a touristic facility and birdwatching in general was not included in the studies. In this case, showcasing Artvin as a destination hub for the observation and photography of birds that frequently cross the same route demonstrates the relevance of this study. This study emphasizes Artvin province's potential for ecotourism as for documenting, photographing, and passing on rare bird species to future generations. It is hypothesized that the preservation and monitoring of the area's bird species may benefit the local population by creating a useful resource for scientific study and by generating jobs and income through the growth of ecotourism. Birds of several endangered species can be encountered in Artvin. In order to safeguard these species, it is crucial to increase awareness both domestically and internationally. Bird watchers and professional ornithologists who could be drawn to the area can help the region build its ecotourism brand value and promote Artvin's natural assets globally. Several features set Artvin apart from Türkiye's better-known migration sites, such as the Bosphorus and the Göksu Delta. The province lies on the only eastern land corridor between the Black Sea and the Caspian, which funnels tens of thousands of raptors, passerines, and waterbirds through a narrow bottleneck each season – a geographic situation the western passage points cannot reproduce. Artvin, which is extremely rich and has more than 216 recorded bird species, well above the country average, with an average of 32% of its territory under official protection, has the highest density of ornithological and ecological assets in the Eastern Black Sea region (Göktürk, 2018). Some of the Caucasian and Middle Eastern endemics that are not found anywhere else in Europe can also be reliably observed in Artvin. On the other hand, it is suggested that the presence of rare and regionally restricted species is considered an important attraction for international visitors with high spending capacity in the birdwatching market (Flores-Ramírez et al., 2023). Unlike the centers of Batumi on the Georgian border, Artvin remains undeveloped, leaving significant room for early investment that will shape how the destination will grow. These features not only add Artvin to the list of corridor sites; It also makes replacement difficult. Developing the province would serve biodiversity conservation and the regional economy at once, while also raising Türkiye's standing in international ecotourism.

3. Materials and Methods

By evaluating the experiences of individuals who have previously engaged in birdwatching in the province of Artvin, this study aims to reveal the potential of birdwatching in Artvin. In this case, a qualitative research approach was chosen to comprehensively understand the views and experiences of birdwatching experts in the province of Artvin. Qualitative research methodologies offer a suitable way to understand the experiences and views of participants (Cadena, 2019; Denny & Weckesser, 2022; Fossey et al., 2002).

Considering the aim of the study, a qualitative research approach was preferred as it required comprehensive and exploratory information. Purposeful sampling method was used to obtain the necessary information (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Interviews were conducted with individuals who are experts on birdwatching in the province of Artvin using maximum variation sampling, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods. Telephone interview technique, which is one of the qualitative data collection techniques, was preferred. Telephone interviews facilitate access to hard-to-reach participants and provide high response rates (Burnard, 1994; Cachia & Millward, 2011; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). A semi-structured interview form designed by the researchers was used during the interviews. The form consists of questions aimed at revealing the demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, age, marital status, monthly income, education level, frequency of birdwatching, and their experiences in the province of Artvin) and their experiences related to birdwatching. Furthermore, a voice recorder was used to capture the interviews with the participants' consent, protecting against any potential mistakes (Table 1). To guarantee that all procedures used in the execution of this research adhere to ethical guidelines, ethics committee approval was acquired. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University Ethics Committee (Approval No: 2023/168; date: 27/04/2023). All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and gave verbal consent prior to the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Table 1. Participant groups and profiles

Group of Stakeholders	Representation Code	Age	Sex	Educational Status	Date of Interview	Residence/ Interview Type
Manager / Officer	A1	40-50	M	Undergraduate	11/01/2024	Samsun/ Telephone
NGO Representative	A2	30-40	M	High school	15/01/2024	Erzurum/ Telephone
NGO Representative	A3	65-over	M	High school	15/01/2024	Artvin/ Telephone
Manager- Engineer	A4	30-40	M	Undergraduate	21/01/2024	Trabzon/ Telephone
NGO Representative	A5	30-40	M	Undergraduate	15/01/2024	Rize/ Telephone
Academician	A6	65-over	M	Ph.D	16/02/2024	Trabzon/ Telephone
Tradesman / Engineer	A7	30-40	M	Undergraduate	11/01/2024	Artvin/ Telephone
NGO Representative	A8	65-over	M	Undergraduate	15/01/2024	Rize/ Telephone

Group of Stakeholders	Representation Code	Age	Sex	Educational Status	Date of Interview	Residence/ Interview Type
Tradesman/National Mountaineer	A9	30-40	M	Undergraduate	11/01/2024	İzmir/ Telephone
NGO Representative	A10	65-over	M	Master's Degree	16/02/2024	Artvin/ Telephone
Tradesman	A11	40-50	M	High school	11/01/2024	Hatay/ Telephone
Local Manager	A12	40-50	M	Undergraduate	08/12/2023	Artvin/ Telephone
Tradesman / Veterinarian	A13	65-over	M	High school	20/03/2024	Rize/ Telephone
Tradesman	A14	65-over	M	High school	21/01/2024	Batumi-Georgia / Telephone

Experts with a keen interest in birdwatching who have previously engaged in birdwatching events in Artvin province using their own funds make up the study's target group. Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) had personally conducted birdwatching activities in Artvin province on at least one occasion; (2) possessed direct field knowledge of the region's avifauna or birdwatching infrastructure; and (3) represented a stakeholder group with a substantive connection to birdwatching tourism, nature conservation, or local development (e.g., NGO representatives, academicians, local managers, or tradespeople). Individuals who had not visited Artvin for birdwatching purposes were excluded. Within these criteria, maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity across stakeholder types, geographic backgrounds, and levels of expertise, so that the sample would reflect a wide range of experiences bearing on the research question. Because participants meeting these criteria were difficult to identify and reach, recruitment also relied on snowball sampling, with initial interviewees referring others who qualified. Snowball sampling is a technique that relies on current participants suggesting more possible participants in the event that the target population is difficult to contact (Heckathorn, 2011; Naderifar et al., 2017; TenHouten, 2017; Gazeloğlu & Erkilic, 2020). In this study, new participants were reached with the suggestions of the participants in the target group. The procedure was finished after data was gathered from a total of 14 participants because of the repetition of responses to the questions posed within the parameters of the study and the tiny focus group. Six people who were contacted about the study said they did not want to take part.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was adopted to look into the gathered qualitative data. A qualitative method that offers in-depth accounts free of theoretical preconceptions and explores individual lived experiences is interpretive phenomenological analysis (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2015). The frequency with which participants engaged in birdwatching in Artvin, the amount of material and spiritual resources they used for this pastime, etc., were highlighted in this study, and these data were analyzed to produce unique conclusions. The results were analyzed and the opinions and experiences of the participants were backed up by direct quotes. The IPA procedure was adapted from Smith et al. (2021), it includes four successive stages. First, each transcript was read several times until the researcher became thoroughly familiar with it, and exploratory notes were created in the margins recording observations, reflections, and initial comments. Second, these notes were retrieved as emergent codes that captured what participants said and the experiential meaning behind them. Third, the codes that emerged from each transcript were examined within the context of connections and patterns and grouped into subthemes. And finally, subthemes across all transcripts were reviewed and integrated into superordinate themes that reflected participants'

most commonly shared experiences related to the research question. Several procedures were used to strengthen analytic rigor: (1) member checking, in which summary findings were shared with two participants who confirmed the accuracy of the interpretations; (2) an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions; (3) negative case analysis to identify and explain different perspectives in the data; and (4) reflexive journaling, in which researchers record and examine their assumptions and potential biases throughout the analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2015; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018).

4. Results

To convey participants' responses, this section draws on direct quotations from those who had previously taken part in birdwatching or bird photography in Artvin and had field experience there. Although the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, the findings are organized below under four superordinate themes that emerged from the IPA process: (1) Artvin's ornithological and geographical potential; (2) infrastructure, facilities, and destination development; (3) human resources, local expertise, and stakeholder roles; and (4) scientific and sustainable development dimensions. Presenting the findings thematically, rather than question by question, makes the connections across participants' accounts easier to follow.

All 14 participants in the study were male and most (n=8) were between 30 and 50 years old. During the research period (December 8, 2023 – March 21, 2024), income levels were generally high, with nine participants earning more than 22,104 TL per month. The sample had good education and 12 of the participants had higher education degrees. Participation in bird watching varied, and most participated in this activity at least once a year. Monthly or quarterly attendance was most common (8), while weekly attendance was rare (1). Participants resided in various provinces such as Samsun, Erzurum, Artvin, Trabzon, Rize, Izmir, and Hatay, and the sample also included one person from Batumi, Georgia. This geographical and professional diversity allowed the study to draw on perspectives from different regions and areas of expertise in the tourism sector.

Theme 1. Artvin's Ornithological and Geographical Potential: The strongest theme in the interviews was that Artvin is a strategically important point on important bird migration corridors, and yet its potential remains largely untapped. Three related sub-themes recurred: Artvin's role as the main entry point for migratory birds into Türkiye, the ecological richness of the Çoruh Valley, and the region's suitability as a center for birdwatching. Participants connected these points to the area's climate and physical geography. Most observed that its varied topography, range of altitudes, and forested valleys support migratory bird populations and make the birds easier to observe. Representative responses are given below.

"The entry point of migratory birds into the country is the Camili (Macahel) region of Borcka district, Artvin. Birds use the rich biodiversity of the Çoruh Valley in particular and meet their nutritional needs. The most suitable place to observe these species, which spend time in the region for hunting and resting purposes, is again the province of Artvin."

"It has the potential to be a destination center. Moreover, even if the effects of the dams built in the region have not yet been scientifically proven, I think it will indicate that the intensity of migration will increase."

Secondly, "Do you believe that the climate and geographical characteristics of Artvin province are conducive to housing migratory birds on their migration routes?" was directed to the bird observer about their experiences. 15.38% of participants replied "no," compared to 84.59% who thought "yes." It was found that the great majority of participants gave it a favorable evaluation.

Theme 2. Infrastructure, Facilities, and Destination Development: A second major theme concerned what it would take to turn Artvin into a working birdwatching destination. Most participants pointed to Batumi in neighboring Georgia — now among the best-known sites in the world for watching raptor migration — as a model that Artvin could adapt fairly directly. They did not see it as something simply to copy, however. More specific needs were also expressed: organized promotional campaigns, ready-made tour packages combining bird watching with other nature activities, regular guided events and the involvement of local guides and non-governmental organisations. Where the facilities would be located was another important issue that participants repeatedly mentioned. It was suggested that the high altitude plateaus of Arhavi district of Artvine (especially the Dikme and Ridge plateaus overlooking Yusufeli), the Damar region of Murgul district and the Macahel region would be the most suitable places. Access difficulties and risks posed by steep terrain were also brought up, but participants considered these not as reasons for not moving forward, but as design challenges that needed to be worked on.

"It is definitely applicable, after this application, there is a need for real advertisements, information, predetermined tours and activities. In addition to birdwatching, there are also rare species in Artvin. Nature lovers will also have the opportunity to watch them. In addition, nature lovers can find the opportunity to explore the Camili region, the first biosphere reserve area in Türkiye, which is protected by UNESCO. We should also add another region, the Hatilla Valley."

"Of course, it is very important to implement it for the same purpose, at this point, it is necessary to organize periodic events with predetermined activities together with experienced local guides and bird watchers. Only in this way, you will be advertising at an international level. Georgia is 2 steps ahead of us at this point."

Participants were also asked whether Artvin could become a tourist destination once the necessary facilities and services were in place. All agreed that it could. In explaining why, they returned to several points raised earlier: how well such facilities would need to be managed, how tour packages might be designed, and why local guides would be central to the effort. Their observations and recommendations are given below.

"It is very important that the facilities are run by the right people. Because it will not be enough to advertise only as birdwatchin or bird photography. In order to reach nature lovers, hundreds, thousands of tourists, it should be sold as a package including daily trail tours. Maybe this will help us to develop our instinct to protect nature and embrace nature."

"It is necessary to emphasize that local guides are definitely needed along with the facilities to be built in the right spot. If you do not go to the right spot at the right time without the guidance of local guides, the weather conditions of this geography can be brutal. It is especially important to remember that the weather conditions are very variable. There were times when we could not do birdwatching when the weather was cloudy and rainy for days."

"Do you believe that Artvin province can establish birdwatching facilities? What part of the province of Artvin can be deemed suitable for this, if any?" was prepared for comparison purpose. 16.66% of participants responded "no," compared to 83.34% who said "yes." According to the majority of participants, Artvin's Arhavi district needs to be equipped with facilities for birdwatching. On the other hand, they stated that birdwatching could be carried out more easily in the Valleys of the Arhavi district overlooking the Yusufeli district, and that the Arhavi district was in a position where birds needed to rise in order to go on their routes. In this context, some participant comments are as follows:

"One of the main routes coming from Georgia passes through the Arhavi district, so it is apt to do it in the high parts of the Arhavi district. But the point to be careful about is the presence of very steep cliffs in a short distance and the elevation exceeds 2500 meters. That is, it can cause various difficulties."

"Based on my previous experiences, I had the opportunity to observe the birds of prey very closely soaring in the Sirt Plateau, high above the Arhavi district, and in the valleys of this plateau overlooking the Yusufeli district. When the weather conditions are convenient in this region, they are golden opportunities for observers and photographers."

"I have a lot of experience in the Damar area of Murgul district, where we regularly go. In this area, I had the opportunity to see species of hawks, harriers, eagles and falcons with larger wingspans, and the mountain rooster, an endemic species. The Dikme plateau of the Arhavi district, located on the other side of the valley close to the Damar location, is also very important. Another advantage of these regions is that migratory birds feeding in the wetland on the Çoruh must rise in order to continue their route, and this region is one of the valleys needed for their rise."

On the sub-theme of transportation and access, most participants did not see Artvin's difficult terrain as an obstacle that would rule out development, though they recognized that seasonal conditions – landslides, fog, and snowfall at high altitudes – would need to be taken into account when planning facilities. The responses below come from participants who did not regard the terrain as a barrier.

"It is possible to go to many points in Artvin by car. Sometimes, landslides due to excessive rainfall in the region prevent transportation for a short time. However, it does not pose an obstacle for bird watchers."

"Migratory birds migrating from north to south enter our country in the autumn months and continue via Artvin-Erzurum. If we talk about this route, due to the rugged terrain and high altitudes, sudden snowfall is seen even in the summer months. Moreover, it should be said that reasons such as the high number of foggy days have a small negative effect on transportation."

Theme 3: Human Resources, Local Expertise, and Stakeholder Roles: A third superordinate theme was related to the human and institutional aspects of developing birdwatching tourism. Participants specifically mentioned that the roles of local guides, non-governmental organizations and educated community members are very important. On civil society organizations in particular, most participants saw them as important, pointing especially to their part in environmental education and in fostering cooperation among institutions. Some of their responses are given below.

"In the past, the local people would catch hawks because of their old traditions and feed them for use in hunting. Nowadays, in order to keep birds of prey such as hawks, some documents and certificates are needed. It is forbidden to catch them without these. In order to get the certificates, it is necessary to receive some training. Information about birds is given by experts on this subject."

"Associations that provide services for the protection of natural life, wildlife protection and nature sports established in the region have to raise awareness about this issue. We should guide these people with correct information who have come together for the same purpose. The most beneficial thing that can be done for future generations to be conscious hunters and protective nature lovers is education."

On the sub-theme of the need for local guides, there was near-unanimous agreement. Participants pointed to guides' knowledge of the terrain, routes, weather, and local languages as something that would be hard to replace, and as important both for visitors' safety and for the quality of the birdwatching experience. Their responses are given below.

"It is definitely needed. I can give a couple of examples from my previous experiences. For example, thanks to the local guide, we were able to reach the valley in a shorter time by using different routes that technological navigation tools do not know. Again, thanks to the local guide, sometimes the roads in the region can be closed due to landslides and you may lose your direction for birdwatching."

"The terrain conditions in the Eastern Black Sea region are more complicated than in our other regions. The people of the region have been living here for centuries and it is necessary to take advantage of this. In particular, the local guides knowing the language will be of great benefit to tourists coming from abroad."

Participants also considered whether Artvin could draw adventure tourists, and most saw birdwatching facilities as a way to open the door to broader nature-based tourism. A related point came up repeatedly: that such facilities would only fulfil their potential if combined with other nature sports and organized events. Their recommendations are given below.

"It attracts the attention of adventure tourists, but this is only possible if the nature sports that the region has are also carried out as activities in these facilities. It is possible to do almost all nature sports in Artvin."

"District and provincial organizations also need to take part in attracting tourists. Infrastructure is very important. The facilities in Batumi have solved many of their problems and invite tourists by organizing many nature sports events. It is also important to remember that well-known people advertise the region."

Accommodation was another sub-theme within infrastructure development. Participants were divided on whether overnight facilities were strictly necessary. Those who saw a need for them pointed to the physical demands of birdwatching at high altitude, the unpredictable weather, and the health risks that elevation can pose. Some of their responses are given below.

"Facilities should definitely be built in the Macahel region for migratory birds departing from the Batumi basin. This is because this route is among the rare areas where it is possible to observe migratory birds before they reach an altitude of 1000 meters."

"Birdwatching can be done without accommodation, but bird watchers who wait patiently for hours in the Artvin region get tired due to weather conditions and dense vegetation. Especially the effect of high altitude on the human body can cause health problems. It is necessary to rest to prevent such problems. If we consider all the factors, there will definitely be a need for accommodation."

Theme 4: Scientific and Sustainable Development Dimensions: The fourth superordinate theme concerned what birdwatching tourism could contribute scientifically and to the region's longer-term development. Most participants felt that good facilities in Artvin could give ornithologists a viable base for research, much as Batumi now serves researchers from neighboring countries. Some of their responses are given below.

"For the same purpose, ornithologists from neighboring countries such as Azerbaijan and Iran and our country go to Batumi. Their special tours and events are attractive to everyone who is interested in this activity."

"There is definitely a need for such facilities to assist scientific studies. With their help, an environment is created where graduate and doctoral students can conduct research as thesis and article topics."

Within this theme, participants also discussed the significance of the Camili (Macahel) region as the main gateway for migratory birds entering Türkiye – a point that carries clear implications for conservation policy. Most participants agreed that Macahel is an important migration corridor, but some also noted the regulatory challenges that come with UNESCO biosphere reserve status. The main reasons why they see Macahel as important are expressed as follows:

"It is known that the routes of birds migrating south from Georgia include primarily the Macahel region and the Sahara Pass. Two of the three main migration routes are on the Artvin lands. Migratory birds, especially those departing from the Batumi basin, prefer the Macahel valley."

Participants also weighed Macahel's ecological importance against the practical limits that its protected status places on building facilities there. A few recommended focusing instead on other locations – particularly the Çoruh Valley and the Arhavi highlands – where the rules are less restrictive. Some of their responses are given below.

"Batumi has established its facilities on one of the migration routes in this region, which is the second most intense migration point in the world, and regularly shares the number of tourists coming. In this way, it has done good marketing and the interest in the subject is increasing. For the same purpose, the Macahel region should not be the priority to monitor and observe the predatory migrations entering the country as another migration route, and other areas on the Coruh valley should also be looked into."

"It should be said that the Macahel region is the right spot for birdwatching. However, there are two nature parks protected by UNESCO. In these areas, there are processes such as establishing facilities for birdwatching and obtaining permission from authorized places. Therefore, it can be difficult."

The Çoruh Valley and the high-altitude plateaus at the intersection of Arhavi and Murgul districts stood out as the most operationally suitable primary facility locations, combining ecological suitability with manageable regulatory conditions. The majority of participants supported these areas as priority areas for development. The high-altitude plateaus where the districts of Arhavi and Murgul meet were deemed useful by most participants. Some of the answers given are as follows:

"To observe birds, virgin areas should be preferred like valleys where people are not visible and human factors are less. Because birdwatching is a nature sport where you watch birds without disturbing them or entering their habitat."

"Studies have already been done on the Çoruh valley before, especially if we have to mention one region, the high altitude Dikme plateau where Arhavi and Murgul districts intersect, the Cave plateau is a suitable place for watching birds."

According to the findings of the study, Artvin province—particularly the Macahel region and the Çoruh Valley—is ideally suited for witnessing migratory birds, and the facilities that will be built there offer enormous potential for uses in scientific research as well as birdwatching. According to the majority of participants, Artvin's climate and geography are perfect for supporting these migratory birds' migration patterns. Participants added that Artvin may offer amenities akin to those in Batumi, Georgia, and that the area might be a desirable destination for rare species and outdoor activities. The basic conclusions, however, state that greater awareness should be produced about the issue of poaching and that action should be taken in the area, that local guides must be present for the facilities to operate well, and that the protection mechanisms in place are insufficient. The four themes point in the same direction. Artvin's ornithological richness (Theme 1) forms the ecological basis for Artvin becoming a destination. Infrastructure (Theme 2) is what will transform this potential into something that tourists can actually use, and the people involved – local guides, non-governmental organizations and community members (Theme 3) – are what will make such a destination function well and take root locally. Linking the research to ecotourism (Theme 4) is what can bring lasting value to this effort in terms of conservation and also the regional economy. Participants disagreed on where development should be concentrated; most notably in the case of Macahel, whose ecological value as a major migration gateway runs counter to the restrictions of its UNESCO-protected status; some argued that this should be a priority, while others pointed to the Çoruh Valley and Arhavi-Murgul plateaus instead. Equally important, participants warned that the region's protection mechanisms are currently inadequate and poaching remains a real concern. These are not accidental warnings; These are practical problems that any serious development in Artvin must solve. Therefore, the findings show that Artvin is not a ready-made place, but a place worth developing carefully and consciously. When handled in this way, meaningful contributions can be made to Türkiye's ecotourism.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Discussion

This study set out to answer whether Artvin is a viable destination for birdwatching tourism. Drawing on an interpretative phenomenological analysis of 14 expert interviews, the findings give a clear affirmative answer, and they both support and build on existing work on birdwatching tourism, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable regional development.

That the Macahel region and the Çoruh Valley emerged as highly suitable for observing migratory birds fits earlier research identifying the Eastern Black Sea corridor as a major raptor migration route (Bekir et al., 2008; Göktürk et al., 2011). Earlier studies, however, were mostly concerned with documenting and identifying species. What this study adds is an assessment of the same region as a potential tourism destination – a question the Türkiye-specific birdwatching literature has not previously taken up. The situation parallels what Ocampo-Peñuela and Winton (2017) describe in Colombia, where a region's ornithological richness was recognized decades before anyone developed it for visitors.

Most participants regarded Batumi's facility model as one Artvin could adapt fairly directly, a view consistent with comparative work showing that geographic bottlenecks along migration routes draw the densest birdwatching traffic (Steven et al., 2013; Flores-Ramírez et al., 2023). Batumi sits on the same corridor, just across the Georgian border, and now attracts tens of thousands of birdwatchers a year. The lack of comparable infrastructure on the Turkish side is at once an economic opportunity left untaken and a missing link in the regional conservation network.

The importance participants placed on local guides, civil society engagement, and community education reflects findings from Indonesia (Muttapien et al., 2015; Leksono et al., 2023) and Malaysia (Ng et al., 2022), where good locally rooted expertise is the issue that most determines the quality and durability of birdwatching tourism. Likewise, their sense that Artvin's facilities could support graduate and doctoral research is in line with the citizen-science and ecological-monitoring roles of birdwatching documented by Schuttler et al. (2018) and Kronenberg (2014).

What these points share is a familiar pattern: ecotourism tends to emerge this way in regions that are rich in biodiversity but economically underdeveloped. To that extent, the framework set out in Section 2 – linking birdwatching, conservation, and sustainable development – finds support in what participants described from their own experience.

5.2. Conclusions

Respondents in this study who had previously traveled to Artvin, Türkiye for birdwatching were contacted, and the present state of birdwatching operations in the area as well as potential improvements were reviewed. From the viewpoint of a professional bird watcher, the potential of birdwatching in Artvin and the actions that should be taken to best maximize this potential have been investigated based on the perspectives and experiences of these participants.

The major conclusion is that the area needs amenities that permit birdwatching. Additionally, the results indicated just how crucial these facilities are to the long-term viability of birdwatching tourists. This circumstance also underscores how essential it is to provide infrastructure in popular tourist destinations. Therefore, one of the top priorities should be delivering the infrastructure and amenities needed to grow birdwatching tourism in Artvin. The Artvin region has been recognized as having the potential to evolve into a tourist destination in this regard, and it may fulfill the same function as the Batumi facilities, which were constructed specifically for the purpose of watching migratory birds. It has been assessed that the facilities that are to be built in the area could have an international component, impact the number of visitors to the nation and the area, as well as serving a resource for ecotourism for the residents of the area.

Based on the responses, it has been deemed that there is unlikely to be any noteworthy transportation issues for the facilities that might be built in the Artvin region, and that local guides can help with the challenges posed by the region's unique geography.

A scientific work environment can be established if first-rate facilities are constructed and the required conditions are established with the help of provincial and district organizations as well as civil society groups. Accordingly, it has been reported that they might all result in examinations that will help scientists.

The responses provided by the participants led to the conclusion that the Sahara passage was an alternative and that the Camili (Macahel) region may be selected as the birds' entry route into the country. From this point of view, it has been found that the facilities to be built could be located in the Camili (Macahel) region or in the Dikme and Cave Plateau in the Arhavi district because it has been confirmed that these locations have appropriate circumstances.

It came to light as a result of the final question directed to the attendees that the conditions needed to observe migratory birds were appropriate and that the facility that would be built in the high areas of the Arhavi district or in the Çoruh Valley could be designated as a point.

This study illustrates that because of its rich ecosystem and strategic placement along migration routes, Türkiye has a great deal of potential for birdwatching tourism. Türkiye's tourism supply and demand are still in their infancy, despite the fact that it is well recognized that the desire for birdwatching tourism has been increasing globally. The establishment of birdwatching locations and the provision of appropriate conditions may make a significant difference in the preservation of the environment and the advancement of rural communities, as demonstrated in the example of Artvin. On top of that, the growth of birdwatching tourism in Türkiye may introduce an enormous opportunity to strengthen the connection between tourism regulations and protected area management. With the aid of birdwatching and promotional efforts, areas like Artvin might be included in international birdwatching routes, which could promote the city's integration into the global system. The competitive development of Artvin may eventually be guaranteed by them.

Considering the facilities that could be built in the region, the study underlines how central birdwatching and bird photography are to Artvin's tourism potential. It also points to the need to raise awareness – among local residents in particular – so that endemic bird species are better protected.

The study makes three main contributions. The first is empirical: it offers the first destination-level qualitative assessment of Artvin's birdwatching potential, based on the field experience of 14 purposively selected experts. The second is conceptual: the three-part framework set out in Section 2, linking birdwatching, conservation, and sustainable development, finds support in what these experts described, in a context that has received little research attention. The third is methodological: by combining IPA with maximum variation sampling across stakeholder groups, the study offers an approach that others could adapt to assess ecotourism potential in regions that are biologically rich but economically left behind.

The findings provide a solid basis for policy makers, tourism planners and non-governmental organizations to develop Artvin as an international destination within the scope of the application. Concrete priorities include investing in facilities in the Arhavi plateaus and creating training programs for local guides, as well as connecting the region to existing international birdwatching routes.

This study has several limitations. The sample consists entirely of men, which likely reflects the gender makeup of Türkiye's birdwatching community, but it still means that the findings say little about the experiences of female birdwatchers and stakeholders. On the other hand, interviews were also conducted by phone to obtain data in the research. This was considered a practical choice given how geographically dispersed the participants were, but it hindered the reading of body language and may have made narratives less rich than face-to-face conversation would allow. The sample was small (14 participants), which complies with the IPA, but means that the findings should be read as a window into how these experts experience and interpret the region, rather than as statistically representative claims. Finally, ecotourism policy and infrastructure in the region is changing rapidly, and so some of the things participants observed may change as development progresses.

Future studies could uncover the perspectives of women and international birdwatchers, follow the region over time to see how its development is actually unfolding, and combine expert interviews with quantitative data on visitor demand. It would also be useful to compare Artvin with other newly emerging bird watching destinations in the Central Asia and Eastern Mediterranean corridors.

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Ethical Approval:

Ethical approval was obtained from the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2023/168). Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants before conducting the interviews.