

Birding retreat gives attendees good ideas

By Frank Scott

James and Linda Johnson, both retired teachers, derive some income from their 330-acre farm near Quitman by running a pumpkin patch for schoolchildren during each October. They wanted to figure out ways to get more income from their property, but they didn't know where to start.

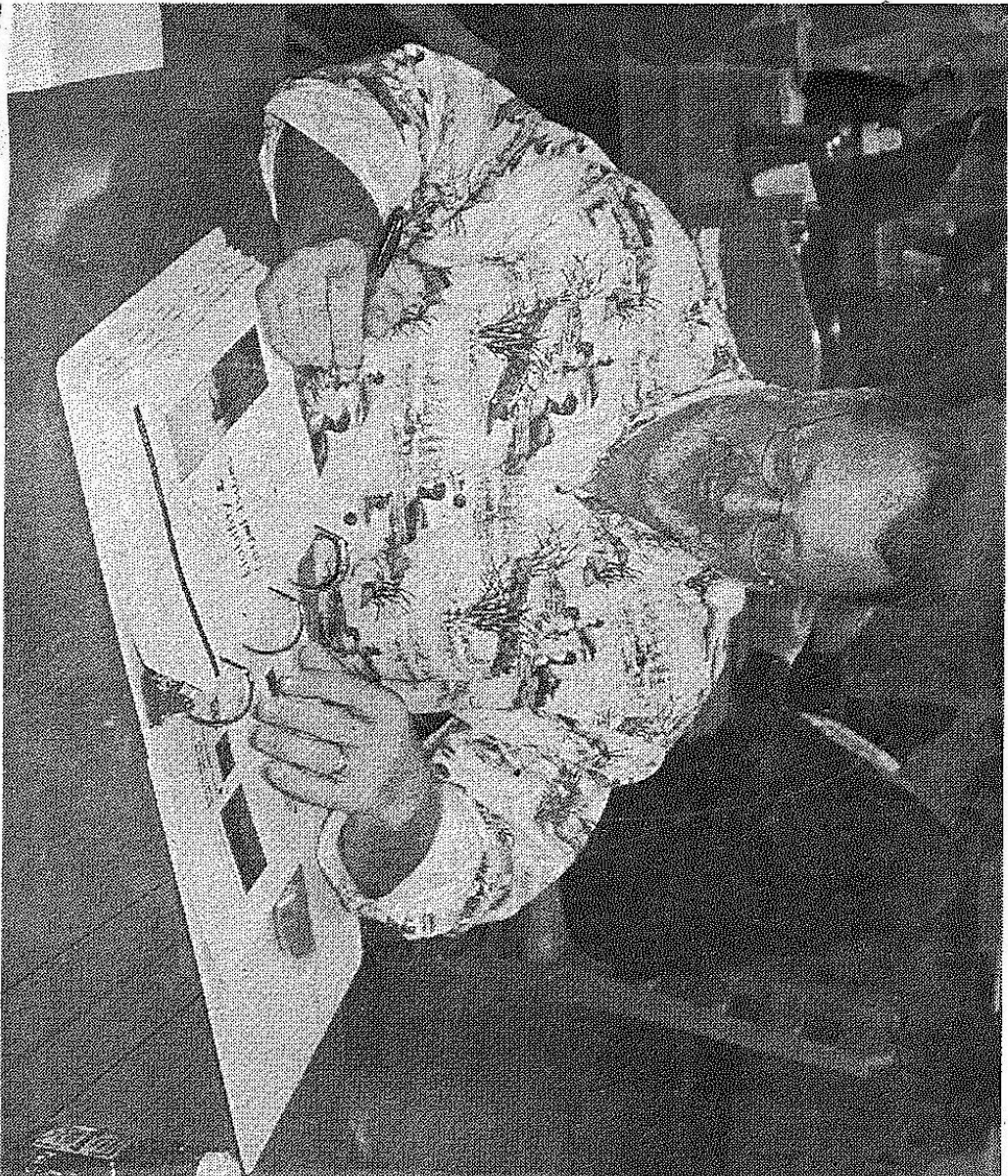
Enter the Business of Birding Institute, a four-day retreat sponsored by Phillips Community College.

The institute, an outgrowth of the Business of Birding classes PCC has offered the last two years, brought together 20 people with a wide variety of backgrounds from all across Arkansas for an immersion into all facets of agritourism. The curriculum was as diverse as the attendees. Topics included enhancing wildlife habitat; creating an agritourism

plan; financial and legal considerations; interpretative programs; nature tourism; identifying birds; resources for development; and hospitality, marketing and public relations.

"We've gotten so many ideas, we're going to have to plan which ones to do first," Linda Johnson said. "We've got a lot of assets we didn't realize we had until we took this course. Our hills and trees provide habitat for a lot of wildlife that people will maybe pay to see."

The Johnsons have already thought about turning one or more of the unused buildings on their farm into visitors' quarters. "There aren't a lot of lodges or bed-and-breakfast [inns] in our area," Linda Johnson said. "Seeing lodges like this [Thayn and Sally Morton's Fowl Play Lodge] See **BIRDING**, page 10A



Richard Drewery studies the Business of Birding Institute course manual.

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southeast of DeWitt makes me think we can do something like this with our buildings."

One of the sessions that was of most interest to the Johnsons was the one that covered legal issues.

"We had been a little afraid to open up to the public all the way because of the liability issue," James Johnson said. "We were afraid somebody might get hurt and sue us."

"But here, we learned how to set things up so that isn't a problem."

Different parts of the four-day institute appealed to different attendees. Richard Drewery of Harrison, an official with the National Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), got several ideas that he can use to help clients in his nine-county service area in northwest Arkansas.

"Agriculture is going through a hard time in our area," Drewery said. "And an extra \$200 or \$2,000 a year would make a great difference in the quality of life for people in our area. It would let their kids

have a good Christmas."

Attending the institute, "I've gotten several ideas for things people (in his area) could add in the off-season," Drewery said.

One specific idea Drewery developed while attending the institute would be perfect for one of his clients who has property on the Buffalo National Scenic River.

"There are only three horse camps along the river," Drewery said. "Sometimes people come from 200 miles away and don't have a place to stay. A place with boarding for horses and a campground or a bed-and-breakfast would be a perfect opportunity for someone who has land near the river."

Drewery even learned some things that will help him introduce new ideas to a clientele that have followed the same patterns of farm life for generations.

"We'll always have some detractors who are reluctant to do something different," he said in answer to a question. "But now I have something to balance that with."

The institute even proved benefi-

cial for attendees with no seeming agritourism opportunities, like Travis Collins, the grant writer for the City of Eudora in the extreme southeast corner of Arkansas.

Eudora has only one motel and no obvious tourism attractions. However, it is between two large lakes and the Mississippi River and near Greenville, MS, a restored cotton plantation in Lake Providence, LA, and the Parola sauce factory, also in Louisiana.

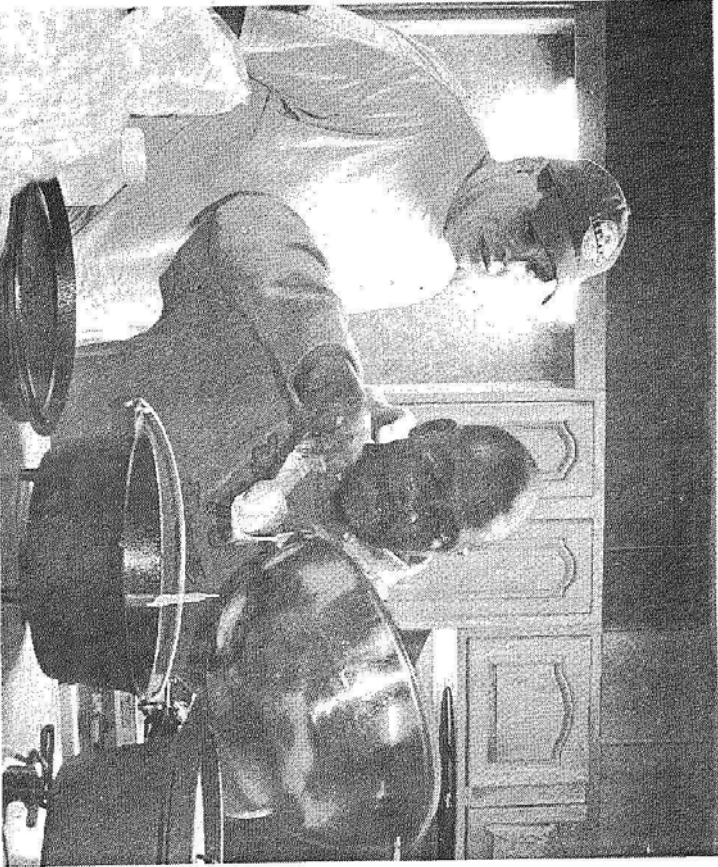
Eudora "could be the gateway to a large area of agritourism," Collins said after the first three days of the institute. "I got some ideas of how we can put together a package that would help us draw tourists to our area."

The institute was "money well spent," Collins said. "I've enjoyed it."

The institute was good for PCC as well. It "exceeded expectations," organizer Kathy Radomski said. "The quality of the speakers and the information available was outstanding. I'm sure we will do more of this type of workshop in the future."



Dan Scheinman (left) of Audubon Arkansas instructs participants on birding techniques at Five Oaks Farm. Photos by Tami Horrbek, Phillips Community College.



Business of Birding Institute participant Travis Collins tries his hand at Dutch oven cooking under the watchful eye of White River National Wildlife Refuge ranger Matt Conner.



James and Linda Johnson talk about agritourism prospects for their farm near Oultman.