

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# 1991-2016 Trend in Participation Rates for Wildlife Watching, by Demographic Group



# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>All Wildlife Watching .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Around-the-Home Wildlife Watching.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Age .....	4
Metropolitan Statistical Area.....	5
Gender .....	5
Region.....	6
Income.....	6
Race.....	7
<b>Away-from-Home Wildlife Watching .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Age .....	8
Metropolitan Statistical Area.....	9
Gender .....	9
Region.....	10
Income.....	10
Race.....	11
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>12</b>



# 1991-2016 Trend in Participation Rates for Wildlife Watching, by Demographic Group



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*This report is intended to complement the National Report from the 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. The conclusions are the author's and do not represent official positions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*

*Included photos are courtesy of USFWS.*

# Introduction

Wildlife watching is closely observing wildlife with the intent to identify, photograph, or feed. Also included in wildlife-watching activities are maintaining plantings and natural areas for the benefit of wildlife and visiting local parks with the primary purpose of observing wildlife. These activities have always been popular with a wide spectrum of Americans. This report quantifies over time the proportion of Americans who were wildlife watchers, and then points out the specific demographic cohorts that were most responsible for the trends.

The primary measure of wildlife watching in this report is the participation rate. This is the percentage of a given group that participates. This measure lends

itself to easier comparison across cohorts, since a participation rate is calculated the same across categories, presenting the number of participants per hundred people in each demographic category.

This analysis is based on data from the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, done about every five years since 1955. Wildlife watching was introduced into the survey in 1980, and this analysis restricts the study period to 1991-2016 because the survey methodology was the same for those years. See the 2016 National Report for further details about that methodology, at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/fhw16-nat.pdf>.

The National Survey divides wildlife watching into “around the home” and “away from home.” Around the home is activity within one mile of home. Away from home is trips or outings at least one mile from home for the primary purpose of observing, photographing, or feeding wildlife. Wildlife watching around the home encompasses activities that are not possible for away-from-home participants—for example, maintaining a backyard birdfeeder and plantings such as shrubs and agricultural crops for the benefit of wildlife.



# All Wildlife Watching

The highpoint of wildlife watching participation rates was 1991, when 40 percent of Americans 16 years of age and older watched wildlife. The second highest participating year was 2016, with 34 percent participating. *See Table 1. Wildlife Watching Trends.*

Comparing the two peak years of participation shows which cohorts increased or decreased their participation. The demographic categories with the biggest percentage increases were Blacks, All Other races, 45- to 64-year-olds, 65 and older, and the West region. The cohorts with the smallest increases were 25- to 44-year-olds and the South region.

Overall there was a one-third increase in population from 1991 to 2016. All wildlife watching participation increased 13%. The categories with the biggest percentage increases were 45- to 64-year-olds, Blacks, and All Other races. The categories with the biggest percentage decreases were 25- to 34-year-olds, 16- to 24-year-olds, and the Midwest region.

The biggest percentage increase in participation rate for all wildlife watching was Blacks. (Participation rate is a percent, so all the changes are based on the same concept, unlike the percentage increases of totals, where a percent change in a big number is different in effect from a percent change in a small number.) The next biggest were All Other races and 45- to 64-year-olds. The biggest decrease was 25- to 44-year-olds. Others were 16- to 24-year-olds, the Midwest region, and females. *See Table 2. Total Population and Wildlife Watching Estimates, by Cohort.*

To help explain which demographic groups were responsible for the dynamics of wildlife watching trends from 1991 to 2016, the rest of this report is divided into around-the-home and away-from-home comparisons, using tables and graphs.

**Table 1. Wildlife Watching Trends**

(Population 16 years of age and older.)

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Total Number	76,111	62,868	66,105	71,132	71,776	86,042
Participation Rate	40%	31%	31%	31%	30%	34%
Around the home, participation total	73,904	60,751	62,928	67,756	68,598	81,128
Away from home, participation total	29,999	23,652	21,823	22,977	22,496	23,720

**Table 2. Total Population and Wildlife Watching Estimates, by Cohort**

(Population 16 years of age and older. Numbers in thousands.)

Demographic Cohorts	Total Population			Total Participation		
	1991	2016	Percent Change	1991	2016	Percent Change
<b>Age</b>						
16+	189,964	254,686	34%	76,111	86,042	13%
16-24	29,553	36,892	25%	8,551	7,092	-17%
25-44	81,272	84,432	4%	35,383	22,769	-36%
45-64	48,106	84,991	77%	20,358	38,025	87%
65+	21,032	48,372	56%	11,819	18,155	54%
<b>Race</b>						
White	162,367	199,086	23%	71,065	74,710	5%
Black	18,395	33,358	81%	3,111	7,384	137%
All Others	9,202	22,242	142%	1,934	3,948	104%
<b>Region</b>						
Northwest	39,396	45,386	15%	15,154	16,600	10%
South	65,275	65,579	-0-	24,946	31,067	25%
Midwest	45,692	53,395	17%	21,435	18,670	-13%
West	39,600	60,233	52%	14,576	19,705	35%
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	90,369	121,775	35%	37,188	51,125	37%
Female	99,595	132,911	33%	38,924	34,917	-10%

# Around-the-Home Wildlife Watching

While overall wildlife watching increased from 2011 to 2016, this was due almost entirely to participation around the home. Away-from-home participation went down overall, and for most demographic groups.

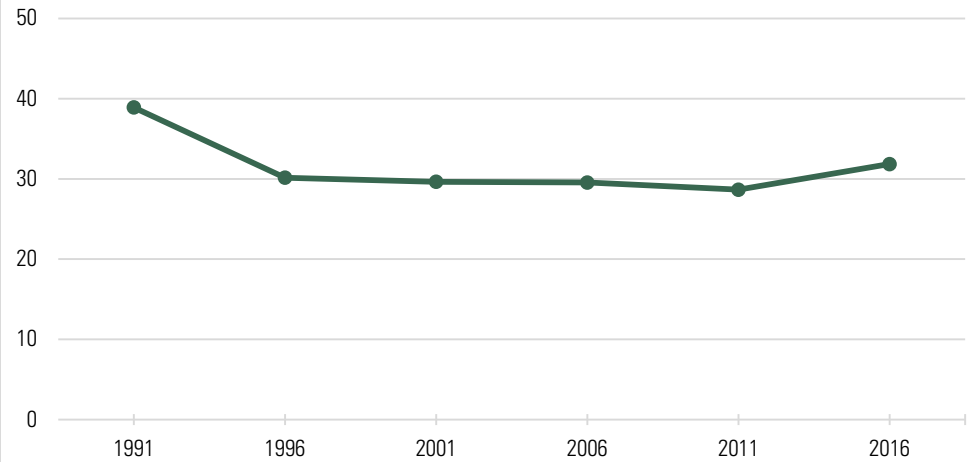
Comparing 1991 and 2016 participation, the increase was 10%. The categories with the biggest percentage increases were 45- to 64-year-olds, 65 years old and older, Blacks, and All Other races. The categories with the biggest percentage decreases were 25- to 44-year-olds, 16- to 24-year-olds, and the Midwest region. See *Chart 1. Around-the-Home Participation Rates*.

The biggest percentage increase in participation rate for around-the-home wildlife watching was Blacks. The next were All Other races and 45- to 64-year-olds. The biggest decreases were for 25- to 44-year-olds, 16- to 24-year-olds, the Midwest region, and females.

## Age

Three age cohorts had similar decreases in participation rates from 1991 to 2011: 16- to 24-year-olds, 25- to 34-year-olds, and 35- to 44-year-olds. They then had similar increases from 2011 to 2016. The 45- to 54-year-old, 55- to 64-year-old, and 65 and older cohort rates decreased from 1991 to 1996, then increased until 2006, whereupon they diverged markedly. The 55- to 64-year-old cohort steadily increased, the 45- to 54-year-olds decreased then increased, and the 65 and older cohort increased then decreased. See *Chart 2. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Age*.

**Chart 1. Around-the-Home Participation Rates: 1991-2016**

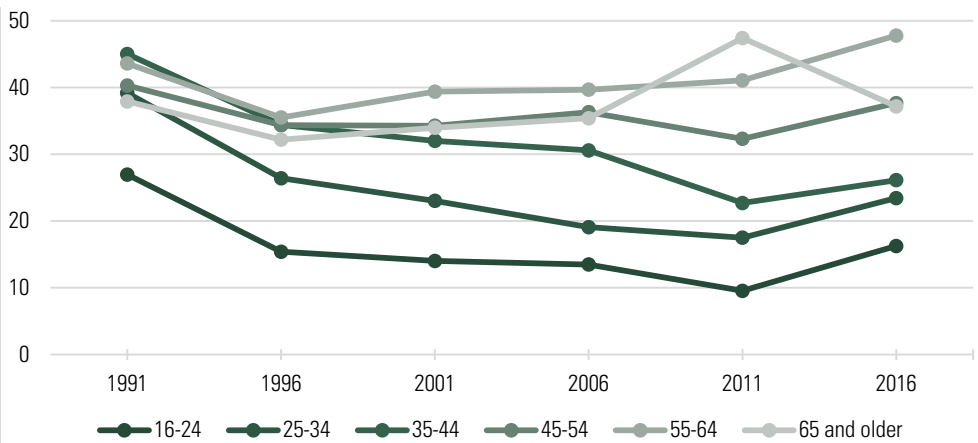


**Table 3. Around-the-Home Participation Rates: 1991-2016**

(Population 16 years of age and older.)

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Participation Rate	39%	30%	30%	30%	29%	32%

**Chart 2. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Age**



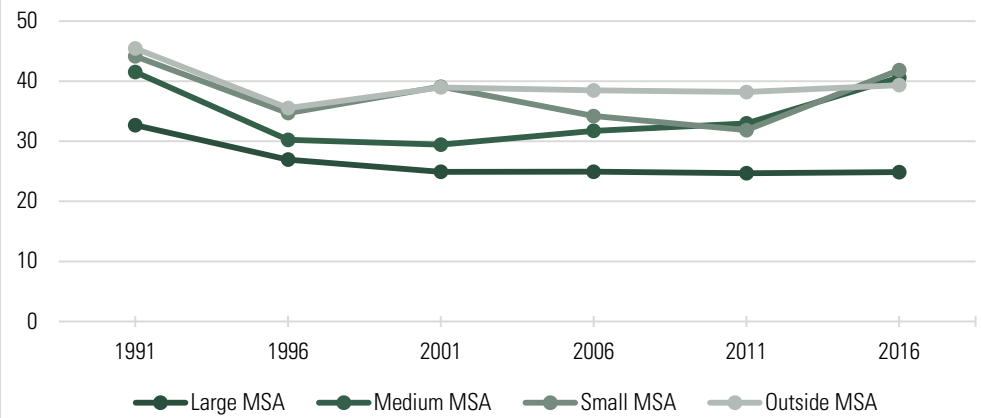
**Table 4. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Age**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
16-24	27%	15%	14%	13%	10%	16%
25-34	39%	26%	23%	19%	17%	23%
35-44	45%	34%	32%	31%	23%	26%
45-54	40%	34%	34%	36%	32%	38%
55-64	44%	36%	39%	40%	41%	48%
65 and older	38%	32%	34%	35%	47%	37%

## Metropolitan Statistical Area

A Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is a grouping of one or more counties or equivalent entities that contain at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants. A large MSA is a million residents or more. A medium MSA is 250,000 to 999,999 residents. A small MSA is 50,000 to 249,999 residents. (See [www.census.gov/population/metro/about/](http://www.census.gov/population/metro/about/) for more information.) The participation rate trends were more or less level for all MSAs. The Outside MSA category had the highest participation rate for most of the study period. See Chart 3. *Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area.*

**Chart 3. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area**



## Gender

The participation rates for women and men were similar from 1991 to 2011, with the rate for females staying higher than the rate for males. From 2011 to 2016, the male rate was higher than the female rate. See Chart 4. *Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Gender.*

**Table 5. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Large MSA	33%	27%	25%	25%	25%	25%
Medium MSA	42%	30%	29%	32%	33%	41%
Small MSA	44%	35%	39%	34%	32%	42%
Outside MSA	45%	36%	39%	38%	38%	39%

**Chart 4. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Gender**



**Table 6. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Gender**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Male	40%	29%	28%	29%	27%	39%
Female	38%	31%	31%	31%	30%	26%

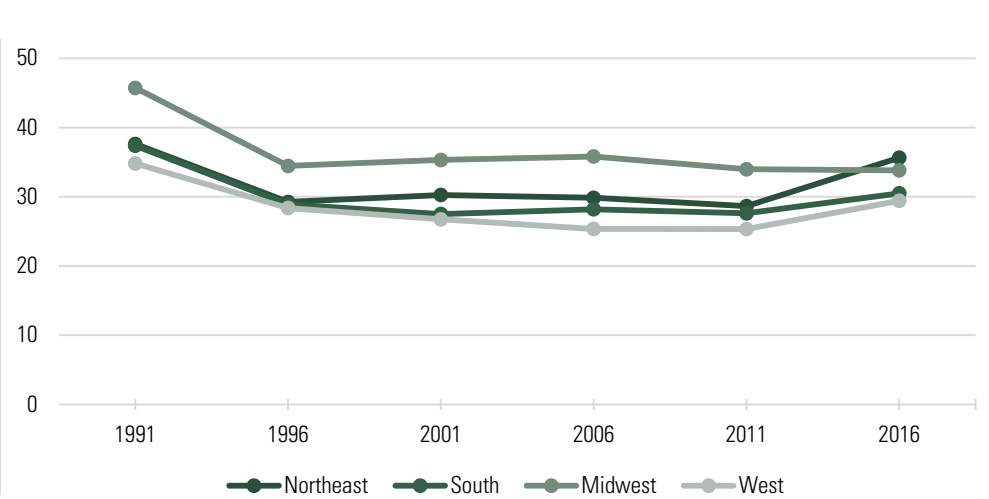
## Region

The participation rate trends for the four regions of the country were fairly level from 1996 to 2011. The Midwest rate was the highest from 1991 to 2011. The Northeast rate increased to the highest in 2016. *See Chart 5. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Region.*

## Income

The above median income cohort maintained a consistently higher participation rate throughout the study period. “Not reported” is the category of respondents who would not divulge their income during data collection. *See Chart 6. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Income.*

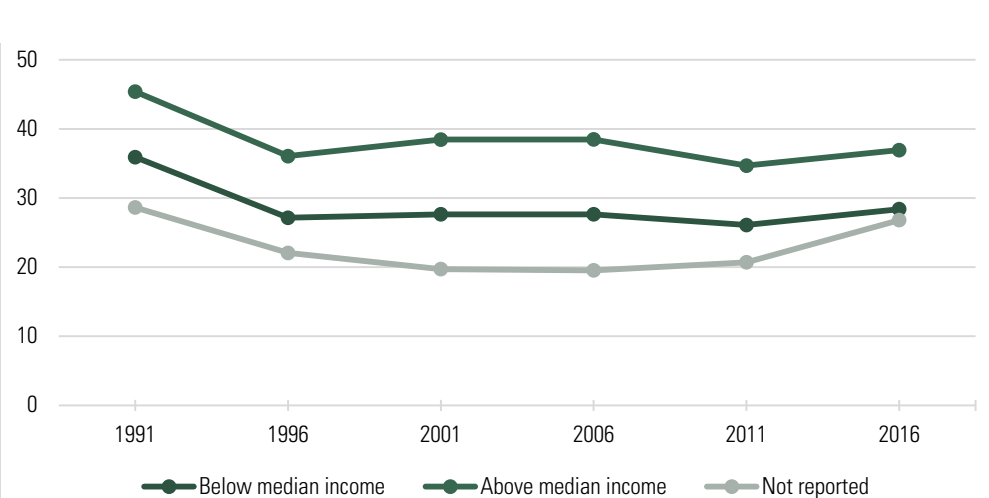
**Chart 5. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Region**



**Table 7. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Region**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Northeast	38%	29%	30%	30%	29%	36%
South	37%	29%	28%	28%	28%	30%
Midwest	46%	34%	35%	36%	34%	34%
West	35%	28%	27%	25%	25%	29%

**Chart 6. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Income**



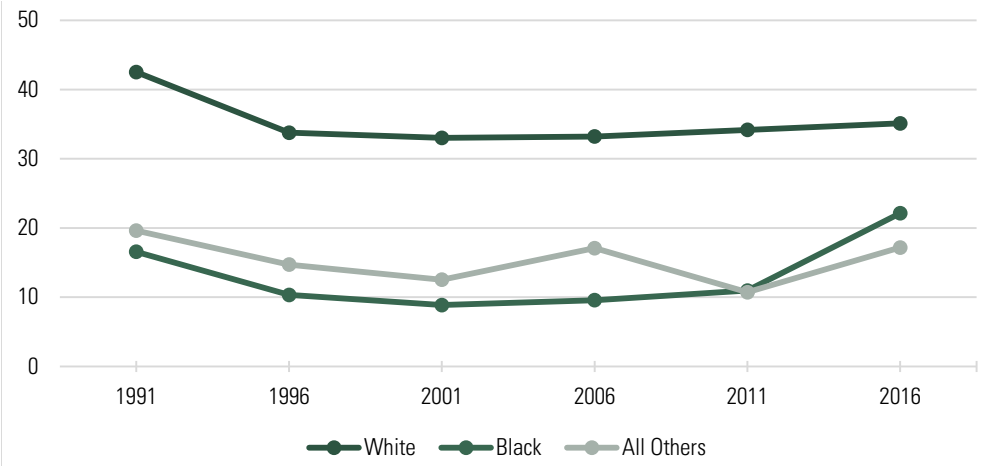
**Table 8. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Income**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Below median income	36%	27%	28%	28%	26%	28%
Above median income	45%	36%	38%	38%	35%	37%
Not reported	29%	22%	20%	20%	21%	27%

**Race**

The participation rate for the White cohort was consistently higher than those for the Black and All Others cohorts. The Black cohort rate reached its highest level in 2016, surpassing that of the All Others cohort. *See Chart 7. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Race.*

**Chart 7. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Race**



**Table 9. Around-the-Home Participation Rates, by Race**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
White	43%	34%	33%	33%	34%	35%
Black	17%	10%	9%	10%	11%	22%
All Others	20%	15%	13%	17%	11%	17%

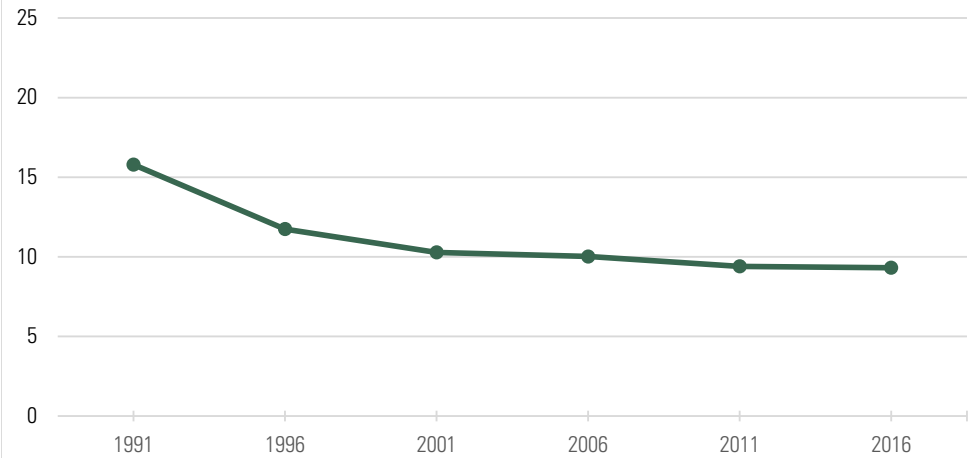
# Away-from-Home Wildlife Watching

Away-from-home participation decreased 21% over the study period. The only categories with percentage increases were 65 years old and older; 45- to 64-year-olds, and males. The categories with the biggest percentage decreases were 25- to 44-year-olds, the Midwest region, and females. *See Chart 8.*  
*Away-from-Home Participation Rates: 1991-2016.*

## Age

Each age cohort had a differing trend in participation rate. The 25- to 34-year-old cohort decreased throughout the 1991-2016 study period. The 16- to 24-year-old cohort rate decreased from 1991 to 2011, then increased dramatically in 2016. The 35- to 44-year-old cohort had an overall downward trend, as did the 44- to 54-year-old cohort, although they had inflection points at different intervals. The 55- to 64-year-old cohort rate increased, as did the 65 and older cohort, although again not at the same points in time. *See Chart 9. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Age.*

**Chart 8. Away-from-Home Participation Rates: 1991-2016**

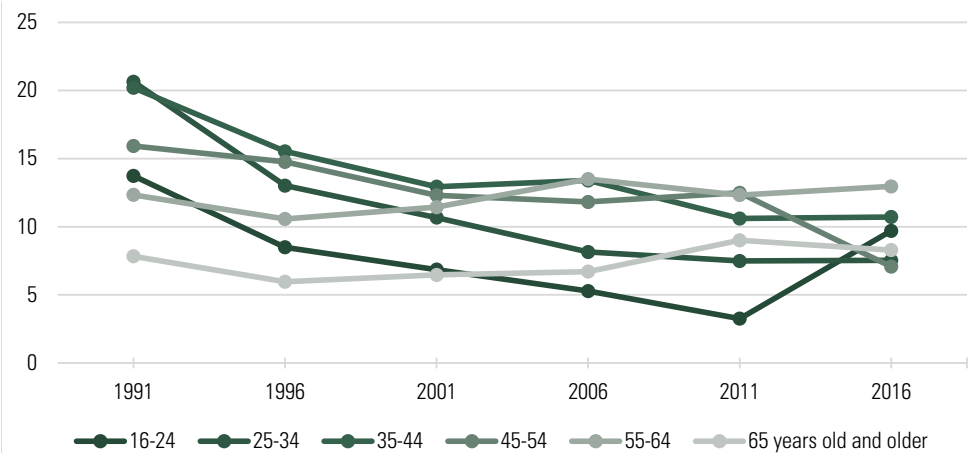


**Table 10. Away-from-Home Participation Rates: 1991-2016**

(Population 16 years of age and older.)

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Participation Rate	16%	12%	10%	10%	9%	9%

**Chart 9. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Age**



**Table 11. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Age**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
16-24	14%	8%	7%	5%	3%	10%
25-34	21%	13%	11%	8%	7%	8%
35-44	20%	16%	13%	13%	11%	11%
45-54	16%	15%	12%	12%	12%	7%
55-64	12%	11%	11%	13%	12%	13%
65 and older	8%	6%	6%	7%	9%	8%

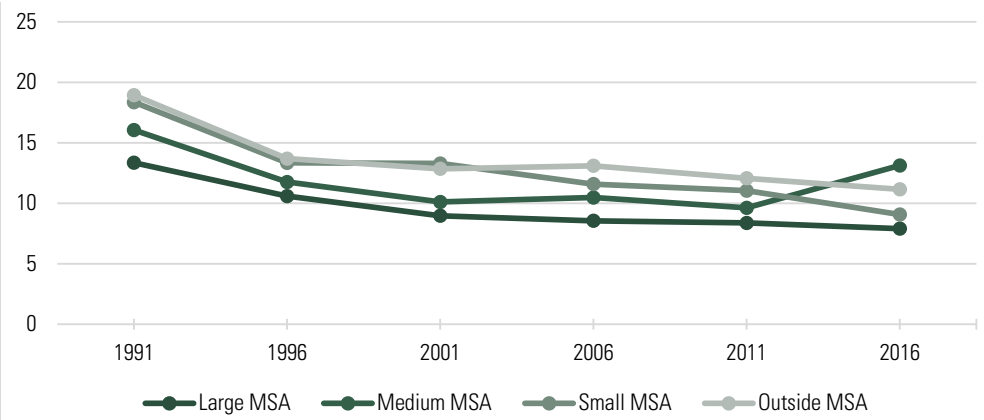
### Metropolitan Statistical Area

The Outside MSA category had the highest participation rate for most of the study period. The medium MSA cohort had the highest rate in 2016. The large MSA rate was the lowest throughout the study period. See Chart 10. *Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area.*

### Gender

Unlike around-the-home participation, the participation rate for men was higher than the rate for women throughout the study period except for 1996, when they were approximately the same. See Chart 11. *Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Gender.*

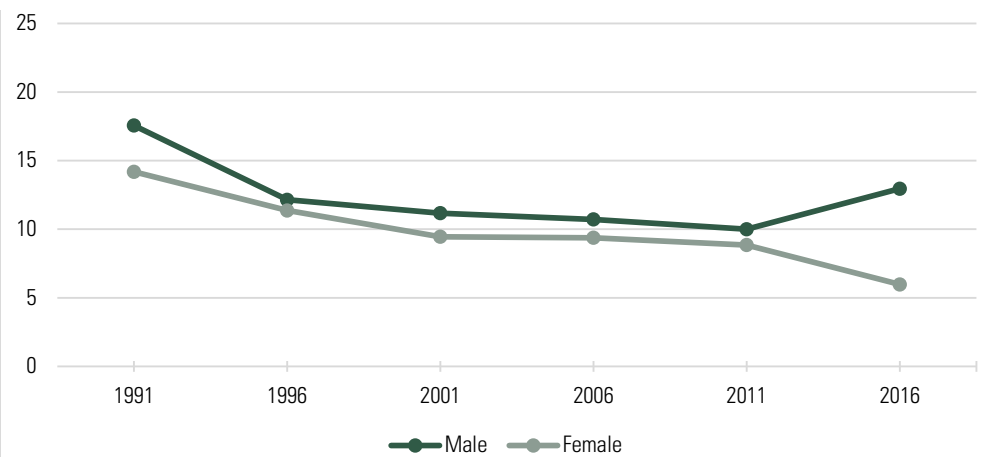
**Chart 10. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area**



**Table 12. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Large MSA	13%	11%	9%	9%	8%	8%
Medium MSA	16%	12%	10%	10%	10%	13%
Small MSA	18%	13%	13%	12%	11%	9%
Outside MSA	19%	14%	13%	13%	12%	11%

**Chart 11. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Gender**



**Table 13. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Gender**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Male	18%	12%	11%	11%	10%	13%
Female	14%	11%	9%	9%	9%	6%

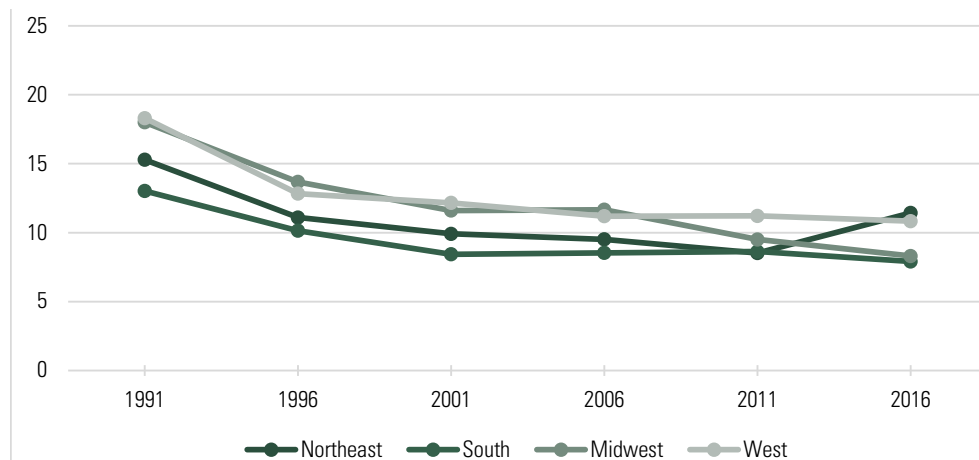
## Region

The participation rate trends for the four regions of the country paralleled each other from 1991 to 2011. The Northeast rate increased in 2016. *See Chart 12. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Region.*

## Income

Similar to around-the-home participation trends, the above median income cohort maintained a consistently higher participation rate throughout the study period. It declined throughout the study period, while the below median income cohort rate increased in 2016. *See Chart 13. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Income.*

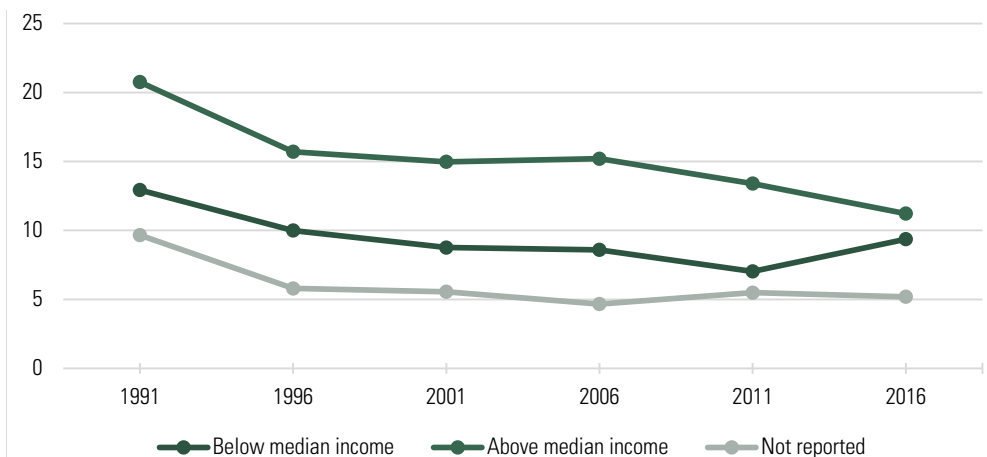
**Chart 12. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Region**



**Table 14. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Region**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Northeast	15%	11%	10%	10%	9%	11%
South	13%	10%	8%	9%	9%	8%
Midwest	18%	14%	12%	12%	10%	8%
West	18%	13%	12%	11%	11%	11%

**Chart 13. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Income**



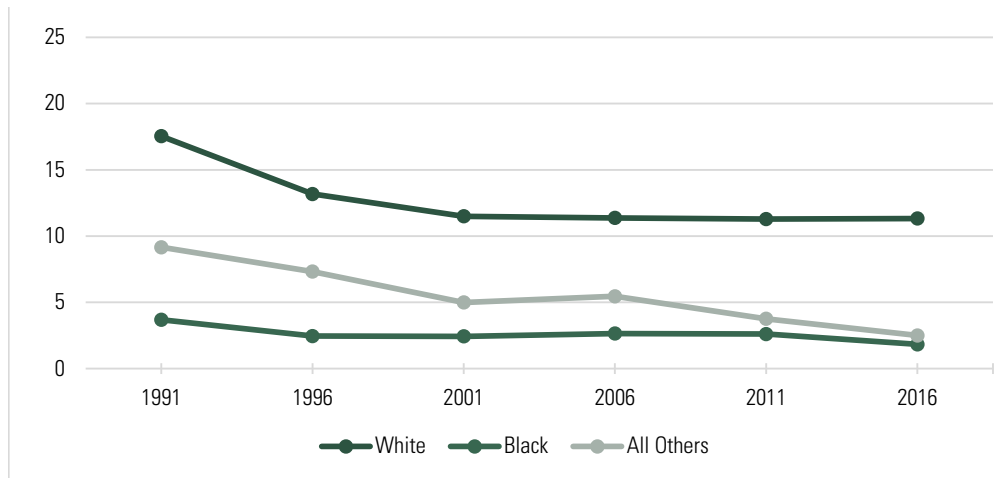
**Table 15. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Income**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Below median income	13%	10%	9%	9%	7%	9%
Above median income	21%	16%	15%	15%	13%	11%
Not reported	10%	6%	6%	5%	5%	5%

**Race**

Again similar to around-the-home participation trends, the participation rate for the White cohort was consistently higher than those for the Black and All Others cohorts. Dissimilar to around-the-home participation trends, the Black cohort rate was the lowest of the three categories throughout the study period. See Chart 14. *Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Race.*

**Chart 14. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Race**



**Table 16. Away-from-Home Participation Rates, by Race**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
White	18%	13%	11%	11%	11%	11%
Black	4%	2%	2%	3%	3%	2%
All Others	9%	7%	5%	5%	4%	3%

# Conclusions

Similar to findings of studies of other outdoor recreation activities, the baby boomers and middle-aged cohorts are maintaining or increasing their historical activity levels, while the participation of younger cohorts is falling off. Around-the-home activities such as photographing and feeding wildlife are the most popular. It is interesting that the most recent year of data, 2016, is the year of second-most activity in the study period. The next Survey in 2022 will help determine if this high level of activity is a new normal, or was an unusual year for wildlife watching.





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