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## *From* HERDS *to* BIRDS

CHRISTOPHER JOE HAS HELPED TRANSFORM HIS FAMILY'S HALE COUNTY CATTLE AND CROPS FARM INTO A MECCA FOR BIRD-WATCHERS.

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# From HERDS to BIRDS

A FAMILY CATTLE FARM  
IN THE BLACK BELT IS  
EMBRACING ECOTOURISM.

By CARY ESTES — Photos by ART MERIPOL

**T**he Joe family has been working a 200-acre plot of land in Alabama's Black Belt for three generations, first as a vegetable farm before transitioning into raising Black Angus cattle. The family has deep roots in this rich soil near the town of Newbern, and 37-year-old Christopher Joe doesn't want that to change.

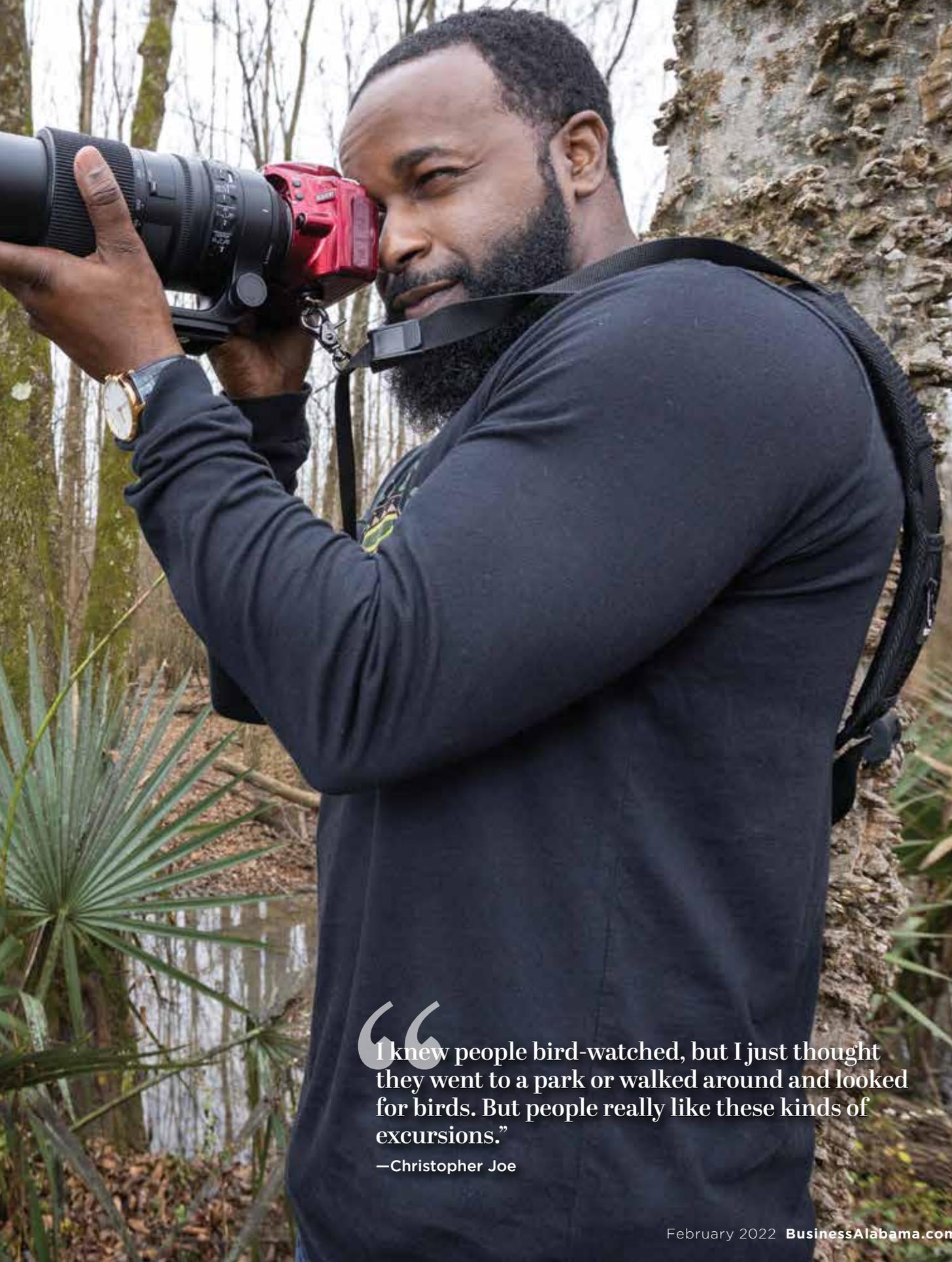
But Joe also acknowledges that farm living is not the life for everyone, and some sort of change might be on the horizon since the current cattle operation is run primarily by his father, Cornelius Joe, a retired agri-business teacher. So, a few years ago Chris Joe began looking for ways to diversify the family farm.

The plan that emerged — to offer bird-watching tours on the property — surprised Joe himself. He was skeptical whether it would generate any interest, but it turned out to be an idea that quickly took flight. Joe established Connecting with Birds and Nature Tours LLC and hosted his first tour in February 2019. Three months later, 130 people showed up for a single-day outing.

"I didn't think people would pay money to do that," Joe says. "I knew people bird-watched, but I just thought they went to a park or walked around and looked for birds. But people really like these kinds of excursions."

Indeed, according to a 2017 report by the Outdoor Industry Association, more than \$30 billion is spent each year on wildlife viewing





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—Christopher Joe

Cornelius Joe takes charge of the vegetables – mustard greens in this garden plot.



in the United States, with the majority of that figure coming from bird watching. That is why it was one of the ideas suggested by Brian Rushing with the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development when Joe called him to discuss possible ways of utilizing the land beyond farming.

“He mentioned birding along with horseback and ATV riding,” Joe says. “I knew we didn’t want to do horseback or ATV, but I thought bird watching sounded interesting. Then we got the folks from Alabama Audubon to visit us, and they were very excited about it.”

That’s because having coordinated birding tours on private property is a rarity in the state, even though Rushing says it is a relatively easy way for rural landowners to generate extra income.

“It’s very common for private lands in Alabama to be used for hunting, but birding is something that has been largely relegated to publicly accessible sites like national forests or state parks,” Rushing says. “It is an opportunity that most land-

**Joe purchased an 18-foot trailer to transport visitors along the six miles of maintained trails on the farm, set up a few portable restrooms and began offering Saturday tours by appointment. That was basically it. The birds did the rest.**

owners aren’t particularly aware of. Credit Chris Joe for recognizing the potential.”

Part of the appeal to Joe was that the time and cost needed to start such a venture were limited, which was important

since he has a full-time job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Joe purchased an 18-foot trailer to transport visitors along the six miles of maintained trails on the farm, set up a few portable restrooms and began offering Saturday tours by appointment. That was basically it. The birds did the rest.

“It’s just natural. It’s nothing that we’re trying to manufacture,” Joe says.

In fact, some of the regular operations that take place in raising the cattle contribute directly to the farm’s bird-watching allure. For example, when Cornelius Joe cuts the grass fields for hay to feed the cows, it unveils grasshoppers and dragonflies that provide a tasty meal for raptors such as the swallow-tailed kite.

“The birds will sit in the trees, and before I’m finishing cutting, they’ll swoop down and start grabbing the grasshoppers,” Cornelius Joe says. “It’s like ringing the dinner bell and saying, ‘All right boys, come on in.’ And then they’re just all over the place. People will be taking photos

of the birds while I'm still driving the tractor."

While that might be the most dramatic action that takes place on the property, the farm also is home to a wide variety of other birds that sit serenely in the trees and provide a whistling soundtrack over the land. Chris Joe says the most common varieties are the indigo bunting, summer tanager and prothonotary warbler, along with the occasional bald eagle.

"People will go to different areas of the country at different times of the year looking for certain birds. It's like treasure hunting with animals," Joe says. "We've had birders come here from New York and California. Once people found out what we were doing here, it just took off."

Rushing says dedicated bird watchers tend to be older with plenty of free time. As a result, they often are willing to spend money in order to pursue their hobby.

"Birders can have a really positive economic impact," Rushing says. "There are a number of species that birders want to see



Christopher Joe takes a visitor along a stretch of trail where birders catch glimpses of rare breeds.

that aren't in their part of the country, so they will travel to see them. They tend to spend quite a bit of money on accommodations and tour services.

"What's really special about the Joe Farm is that it's in the Black Belt, which is a traditionally underserved area of Alabama, but it's a region that is rich with natural resources. So, there are opportunities for nature-based tourism, and this is a great example of that."

Which is important to Chris Joe. After all, the Black Belt has been his family's home for nearly a century, and he wants to do what he can to help both the farm and the region. He hosted a Black Belt Birding Festival last May — so successful he plans to expand it into a two-day event this year.

"The main draw around here is the Civil Rights Trail, which brings in people from out of state," Joe says. "Now they can do that, then come birding with us, eat in Greensboro and maybe stay at a B&B. That's money that is going into the community and some of these high-poverty areas."

"Pretty much everybody who has lived right along this road was a family member. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins. I feel like I'm doing something that would have made them proud."

*Cary Estes and Art Meripol are Birmingham-based freelance contributors to Business Alabama.*

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