

Finding Our Wings: The Payoff of a Decade of Determination¹

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The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) was founded in 1902 as an association of state and provincial wildlife agencies. We had our 100-year anniversary in September 2002. Audubon also started almost 100 years ago. A lot has happened in those 100 years. I am pleased to say we are at another very critical and historic moment.

The Reno *Gazette*, in a recent editorial, wrote that preserving wildlife depends on three critical issues: 1) forming partnerships at all levels from the Federal to the personal; 2) involving local people in a meaningful fashion; and 3) providing sufficient money. That is exactly what has just happened in our Partners in Flight (PIF) world, so I want to start my presentation by saying *thank you* for all your hard work and persistence.

Think back to more than 10 years ago, to 1990. That was a big year. The States, through IAFWA, determined that nongame wildlife was their biggest challenge and, therefore, their biggest priority, as it has remained through the decade. This led to the initiation of a major congressional push to obtain substantial Federal money to States for nongame wildlife conservation. It also led to the active participation and leadership of the States in PIF, including the funding of the PIF Regional Coordinators.

Dan Beard, Chief Operating Officer of Audubon at the time said (after telling me that I had been harassing him for years), "That's the point: to get your agenda to become someone else's agenda." I think that is what we have done in PIF. We have done some remarkable work together, getting our agenda to be a state agenda, a Federal agenda, a non-governmental organization (NGO) agenda, and even a Congressional agenda.

We had over a decade of initiating, organizing, growing coalitions, gathering information, and putting it all into planning. The PIF plans are mostly done, including assessments and recommendations for hundreds of land bird species. Moreover, our efforts went way beyond land birds, stimulating many other groups of

often-neglected wildlife. The U.S. shorebird plan is done. The waterbird plan is done. There are herpetology plans being formulated, as well as a national bat plan. This is a tremendous leap for wildlife diversity efforts, and much of it to our credit.

As we worked on these plans, we also grew the leadership among the major players in each of these entities.

On the NGO front, we have had leadership from many of the smaller and local bird-related organizations, notably the bird observatories. Now Audubon is back in the bird business in a big way through their Important Bird Areas program (IBA), in part because of all of this bird conservation activity. I, along with many others here, just came from Audubon's 2nd Annual Important Bird Areas Conference, held in Big Sur, CA.

This is our activist constituency. This is one way we may finally get those many birders organized and focused on a campaign good for birds at every scale. That is the role of the NGOs for birds. The IBA program efforts to work with the PIF and other bird plans will pay great dividends for us all. I strongly encourage you to become familiar with the IBA representatives working for Audubon and others.

Under Federal leadership, we now have full-time national coordinators for PIF, shorebirds, and waterbirds. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a PIF coordinator in each of its regional offices. Overall budgets for such bird work have increased for some of these agencies too. Recently, new Memoranda of Understanding are being developed under the new Executive Order which mandates that each federal agency will cooperate to take care of migratory birds.

Under State leadership, as I already pointed out, we have had significant movement translating into new funding, which I will talk much more about, staff, projects, and overall genuine awareness for the significance and need. The table is set. However, what would be the point of planning if not for implementation? And you cannot do implementation without money.

While you in this room have been doing the planning, some of us who care very much about this work have been politicking to secure such funding. Now we have a convergence: a decade later all the roads have come back around to the same spot. Just as you have these

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PIF plans done, we have some real money to take action on them.

Due to the support of over 3000 wildlife-related groups under the Teaming with Wildlife coalition, for the first time ever, in the last 2 years, sizeable Federal money is flowing back to the states for essentially nongame wildlife conservation. It is under the same premise as PIF, to “keep common species common” or “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Let me show you the money. In fiscal year 2001, due to the efforts of this Teaming with Wildlife coalition, as part of a larger coalition working for passage of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA), we obtained \$50 million for state wildlife conservation. These funds were allocated to the fish and wildlife agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories. In fiscal year 2002, we secured \$80 million, and in fiscal year 2003, we are aiming for another increase of up to as much as \$150 million. This is now called the *State Wildlife Grants* program.

We have many examples of how the state wildlife agencies are using these funds for bird conservation and all wildlife on our web site at www.teaming.com. I think you will be very pleased with the number and quality of bird-related projects.

Our overall, and original, goal remains: to secure \$350 million a year for state wildlife efforts on a long-term basis. In the meantime, as we work to ensure passage of CARA or something similar, we also are working at increasing these shorter-term appropriations for State Wildlife Grants under the Department of Interior’s budget.

The planning is done, the money finally available, but the work is not really done. We need to close the deal. *You* need to make yourself heard. You’ve done something great with these plans; you now need to ensure that the implementation of the plans is a priority for spending this new money. In addition, that the money continues to continue—that it keeps on coming on.

You need to make yourself heard. There are two key ways to do that: 1) get (back) involved with your state wildlife agency; and 2) ask Congress for the money.

We have a simple message: urge members of Congress to support \$150 million in State Wildlife Grants in the Department of Interior appropriations.

If there is one thing we should have learned from our duck friends in all of these years: be part of the movement that gets the money, then you can be part of spending of the money.

This is a tremendous asset we have created, and one that cannot be squandered if you want these plans on the ground. After many, many years of making songbird or land bird or really nongame bird conservation a priority, we can now say our collective efforts are beginning to pay off, literally. This is the payoff after a decade of determination.

I thank the state fish and wildlife agencies for the work they do every day on the front lines of conservation on behalf of birds and all the other wildlife. I also thank C. J. Ralph for his continuous support of and involvement in PIF, and, in particular, of my efforts to do the same, including giving this presentation.