

Partners in Flight – Working for Bird Conservation Implementation and Integration in the Western Hemisphere¹

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In 1990, a group of far-sighted individuals from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the U.S. Forest Service launched the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Initiative. At the time, few people noticed. New programs are launched all the time. In government, at least, it is easy to become cynical about the initiative *du jour*, the latest vision statement, the fresh reorganization, and the coolest new fad in management. Initiatives come and go. Most seem to be missing something essential, some internal spark that strikes a chord with people. If we're lucky, they just fade away. Very few new ideas can say that they have grown steadily for 11 years and fewer yet can claim to having been instrumental in spawning yet further initiatives. Partners in Flight can say both.

In 2002, we have wall-to-wall Bird Conservation Plans in the United States.

We have Partners in Flight in Canada and Central America, and our partners in Mexico and the Caribbean are selecting from PIF those ideas and processes that work best with their own resources, issues, cultures and objectives.

Partners in Flight has expanded from a focus on long-distance migrants that inhabit eastern deciduous forests to essentially all birds in all habitats.

We have a Species Assessment Database for all birds that forms the cornerstone of a very wide variety of actions by partners in the U.S. And we're working with Canada and Mexico to continually refine the database, to include ever more species, to make it work better for everybody.

Few people realize that this decade-plus of progress has been made by people who do not work for Partners in Flight. Indeed, Partners in Flight secured its first full-time, securely funded position only at the beginning of 2001 – fully 11 years after the idea was crafted. All of the progress to date, all of the advances in bird conservation thinking that have formed the backbone

of PIF, were made by people and organizations using their own capacities. Thus, while more paid staff and more operational money are always welcome, a good idea will move forward on its own internal, self-evident rightness. People find ways to make it happen – with, without and, sometimes, despite, organizational support. Bird conservation strikes a chord.

Here are a few of the things we need to do now.

1) We need to secure permanent, long-term funding for Partners in Flight Regional Coordinators in the U.S. We are working with the North American Bird Conservation Initiative on a number of fronts to secure these and a few other permanent positions.

2) We need to put conservation action on the ground. As John Fitzpatrick pointed out in his closing remarks at the Cape May Partners in Flight conference in 1995, all of this activity is great. But if we don't have more birds at some point down the line, then we will have failed. Our specific challenge is to create more habitat, to improve habitat quality, and to take other actions that lead directly to more birds. PIF must accept the challenge of our colleagues in the Joint Ventures to bring new partners to the table and to make improvements in the real world.

3) We need to motivate the tens of millions of people who feed birds and watch birds to become active in conservation. We should make people who are comfortable only enjoying birds, slightly uncomfortable. Since you began reading this, the population of the planet has increased by about 1000 people. We now have less habitat, fewer natural resources and more problems for birds. We need more people doing more, and doing it sooner.

4) We need to secure long-term funding for landbird projects. This will be through expanding the scope of North American Wetlands Conservation Act, expanding the funding of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, succeeding in getting a Conservation and Reinvestment Act, taking advantage of opportunities in the Farm Bills, and a host of other actions.

5) We need to be very generous in our thinking about geographic priorities. Look for the opportunities and the priorities at the largest scale. Maybe your greatest opportunity to make a difference tomorrow is not in Idaho or Georgia, not on your forest or in your park,

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not on your block – maybe it's in Chiapas or Costa Rica or the Atlantic rainforest of Brasil. Think big and expand the partnership. Globalization is more than a term for Wall Street. It's a fundamental understanding that we really are all connected and that the loss of a species is tragic, no matter where it occurs. And it's doubly tragic if we had capacity but did nothing.

I look forward to a terrific conference. All of you have been active in various bird conservation arenas up to this point. But I don't think we've ever had such a productive mix of people from conservation and academia, from water birds to and desert birds, and from north to south. Let's take advantage of this week to meet new people, exchange ideas and create bold strategies for the future of bird conservation.