

Important Bird Areas and International Migratory Bird Day – A Beneficial Convergence in 2002¹

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Coming Together

International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) was created in 1993 to increase public awareness, education, and concern for migratory birds and their habitats. As a day of recognition, it serves as both a celebration and a call to conservation action.⁴ Programmatically, IMBD offers resources to celebrants in the form of a suite of promotional and educational products as well as via communication networks such as listservs and web-pages. IMBD also can provide celebrants with a focus in the form of an annual, general theme. Themes have included the importance of wetlands, the recovery of the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) from an endangered status, and the role of shade-grown coffee in preserving migratory bird habitat (USFWS 2002a). In 2002, the theme for IMBD was “Celebrating Special Places for Birds,” with a particular focus on Important Bird Areas (IBAs).

The IBA program was first initiated by BirdLife International – a worldwide partnership of conservation organizations that work together to conserve all wild bird species and their habitats. Launched in Europe in 1985, the program has expanded to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. BirdLife International explains in its promotional material that the IBA Program helps to build capacity within participating organizations and involves them in specific, site-based conservation actions. Likewise, the National Audubon Society – a BirdLife International partner – includes in the U.S. IBA Program goals that it involve local communities, conservation groups, landowners and the general public (National Audubon Society 2002). Recognition of IMBD, in the form of gatherings or publicity, is an excellent means by which proponents for a particular site can engage and inform local individuals and entities in a very positive way.

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⁴Though technically a single-day observance on the second Saturday in May, IMBD should not be viewed as limiting for events; any successful IMBD events are held on alternative dates and over multiple days.

What IMBD Offers to IBA Programs

The IMBD program has progressed to a point where a catalog of products is offered each year (NFWF 2002). Promotional and educational products include posters and t-shirts (portraying artwork from a well-known wildlife artist), a press kit, conservation-related activity guides and booklets, music, banners, and more. These items can be of great assistance to site proponents in event planning and publicity.

In 2002, IMBD materials integrated specific information on IBAs with assistance from representatives from BirdLife International, National Audubon Society, and American Bird Conservancy. Specifically, IBAs were defined and described on the reverse of the poster, in the press kit, and in the colorful “Exploring Habitats” booklet. The IMBD products catalog also offered IBA directories for Mexico, the United States, and the states of New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania (Wells 1998 Crossley 1999, Arizmendi and Valdelamar 2000, Cullinan 2001, American Bird Conservancy in press).

In addition to material resources, IMBD provides IBA proponents with opportunities. IMBD is an ideal occasion to dedicate a new IBA or launch a State IBA program, because it puts these events into the context of an international celebration. IMBD is also an annual opportunity to attract birders and the public to IBAs, in order to strengthen and expand awareness and support. IMBD also has yielded a wealth of ideas for events and activities over its ten years. Coordinators can choose from any number of locally-focused activities to explain IBAs and their importance to birds, especially migrants, such as bird counts and walks, talks, open houses, classroom visits, written media and displays. Moreover, a variety of audiences can be reached, including local citizens (especially children), local advocates who can serve as citizen scientists, and local decision-makers who can be instrumental to site protection.

How IMBD Celebrants Can Draw on the IBA Theme

A primary goal of IMBD, and all conservation education endeavors, is to provide audiences with a means of acting on their newfound information and concern for the resource. The IBA theme is a powerful tool in that it allows educators to point to specific ways

in which inspired, concerned people can take direct action in support of migratory birds. IBAs are discrete sites with identifiable management, monitoring, and advocacy needs. By steering audiences to local IBAs, IMBD celebrants can make conservation messages tangible.

The theme of “special places” meshes well with the basic ecological concepts often forwarded by natural resource educators. A presentation on IBAs easily can segue into discussions on the definition and elements of habitat, wildlife habitat needs, and the importance of habitat protection to wildlife protection. For migratory birds specifically, the IBA Program can illustrate concepts of seasonal habitat needs, critical habitat – including stopover habitats along the migration routes, as well as geographic and demographic patterns of migration.

Finally, the IBA Program exemplifies the value of recognition programs, an approach that conservationists can apply in many situations. “Special places” may vary from those of global biological significance to a local woodlot. Regardless, the formula of site or cause designation, associated collaborations of concerned individuals and organizations, and the subsequent promotion and stewardship has universal effectiveness.

Mutual Benefits

In the wake of IMBD 2002 it is possible to make some measure of the success of “Celebrating Special Places for Birds” as a theme.

It is likely that the theme was helpful in raising awareness and adding to the momentum of IBA Programs. The logos and websites for theme sponsors – BirdLife International, National Audubon Society, and American Bird Conservancy – appeared on 75,000 posters and 40,000 catalogs distributed across the United States, Canada, and Latin America. IMBD also served as a forum for coordinators and supporters to promote IBAs, such as in radio interviews and articles in honor of the day, and several coordinators scheduled site dedication ceremonies to fall on IMBD. Via IMBD materials and hundreds of events, it is believed that IMBD activities involved two to three hundred thousand people in 2002.

Likewise, veteran IMBD celebrants drew upon the “special places” theme in their activities. A review of the IMBD Events Registry yielded a number of incidences where sites were identified as official IBAs or as “special places” – e.g., a presentation on “Bodega Bay, A Globally Important Bird Area” (Bird Rescue Center, Santa Rosa, California); a field trip to Mann Lake, an Idaho Important Bird Area (Lewiston Wildlife

Habitat Area, Lewiston, Idaho); nature tours of Forest Park’s “special places” (Forest Park Nature Center, Peoria Heights, Illinois); and a festival at Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge, an IBA (Eastern Neck NWR, Rock Hall, Maryland) (USFWS 2002b). The IBA theme provided educators with an example of an ongoing, successful movement to protect bird habitats and a means of putting into context the role of their specific site in bird conservation.

Also, the IMBD program benefited from promotional efforts by BirdLife International, National Audubon Society, and American Bird Conservancy, and through these organizations, established additional contacts with chapters and branch offices. Finally, representatives from these organizations acted as sources of ideas and expert reviewers for IMBD materials.

The Future

Work has already begun in crafting a theme for IMBD 2003; however, “A Celebration of Special Places” is not consigned to the past. The concepts of critical habitat and IBAs will continue to appear in IMBD materials (e.g., “Exploring Habitats” will be offered in future catalogs) and be advanced at IMBD events, and IBA managers will continue to have IMBD as a vehicle for rallying public support. The convergence of IBAs and IMBD will continue to be a boon to migratory bird conservation efforts.

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