

# Ten Years of International Migratory Bird Day<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer Wheeler<sup>2</sup> and Susan Bonfield<sup>3</sup>

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## Introduction

Public awareness and concern are crucial components of migratory bird conservation. Citizens who are enthusiastic about birds, informed about threats, and empowered to become involved in addressing those threats can make a tremendous contribution to maintaining healthy bird populations. One of the most successful vehicles for public education on migratory birds is International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD).

IMBD, held annually on the second Saturday in May, is an invitation to celebrate and support migratory bird conservation. Like any day of recognition, IMBD exists to focus attention on a valuable resource — the nearly 350 species of migratory birds that travel between nesting habitats in North America and wintering grounds in South and Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and the southern U.S. IMBD was created in response to disturbing findings in the late 1980s that many of these bird species were in decline, facing a growing number of threats on their migration routes and in both their summer and winter habitats. Thus, IMBD, in addition to being a day to foster appreciation, was created as a call to action.

This article describes how IMBD has grown from a good idea to a significant, annual occurrence. It provides a brief history of IMBD, the partnerships that sustain it, and a discussion of future directions for the event.

## A Retrospective

The history of IMBD is one of growth — the event was launched with a tremendous amount of energy and has continued to gather momentum over time. Below are some of the highlights in the IMBD story:

### 1993

- Saturday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1993 marked the first annual IMBD. It was conceived to “provide a

platform for the numerous conservation efforts already underway through the Partners in Flight — Aves de las Americas Program, as well as to inspire others into action.”

- Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center compiled The Migratory Bird Handbook, providing activists and educators with strategies, ideas, and resources.
- Partners in Flight poster with art by Kendahl Jan Jubb created for distribution.
- Considered a glowing success with 130 events in 39 states, two Canadian provinces, and several locations in Guatemala and Mexico.

### 1994

- An Organizer’s Information and Media Packet was coordinated by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, National Audubon Society, with a Latin American version produced by Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center.
- 2,300 packets were mailed by the IMBD date.
- IMBD 1994 poster art depicting a wide variety of birds created by Kendahl Jan Jubb.
- Events tallied at about 100, in at least 30 states and 3 provinces. Drop since 1993 was likely due to reporting, as those reports received indicated increases (e.g., events doubled in Alaska).

### 1995

- Coordination moved to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), with major sponsorship by Phillips Petroleum Company and others. First contractor hired as a coordinator.
- New annual Organizer’s Packet and IMBD-specific t-shirt developed for distribution on an order basis, and over 30,000 free IMBD 1995 posters distributed, again featuring art by Kendahl Jan Jubb.
- Promotional material touted “more than 400 events.”

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<sup>2</sup>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 634, Arlington, VA 22203. E-mail: jennifer\_a\_wheeler@fws.gov.

<sup>3</sup>National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, P.O. Box 934, 998 Blue River Parkway, Silverthorne, CO 80498.

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- Focus put on the economic values of nongame birds and non-consumptive bird-related recreation.

### 1996

- Two separate and expanded packets produced: Organizer's Packet and Educator's Packet.
- Sales of IMBD products were initiated, including banners, t-shirts, tote-bags, pins, and stickers, on top of distribution purely by sponsorship. Over 40,000 Partners in Flight posters distributed, featuring art by Margo McNight.
- Estimates of 250 to 500 local events and "tens of thousands" of people reached by IMBD activities.
- Focus on the production of the PIF Flight Plan.

### 1997

- First formal products catalog produced, including promotional banners, t-shirts, pins, patches and stickers. Products distributed by USFWS.
- IMBD 1997 poster features montage of bird profiles created by Keith Hanson.
- Theme switches from "Sharing A Passion for Birds" to "Join the Flock" – encouraging measurable steps towards conservation. Concerted effort is made to offer the media "solutions."
- Substantial supplements were created for the nearly 1,500 Organizer's and Educator's Packets distributed.

### 1998

- Catalog published in full-color; theme was "Catch the Migration Sensation," and highlights the importance of coastal beaches to neotropical migrants.
- Artist John Sill depicts migrants on a Gulf Shore beach for IMBD 1998 poster.
- IMBD went on-line via an American Birding Association website, which included data entry.
- Approximately 24,000 posters distributed; about 500 contacts compiled on the sales list.

### 1999

- IMBD highlighted the critical importance of wetlands to migratory birds.

- IMBD 1999 poster illustrates wetland diversity through art by Carol Decker.
- Product sales were handled out of American Birding Association Sales Office.
- Events continued to number in the hundreds.

### 2000

- Art by Roger Tory Peterson featured on products. Theme was the recovery of an Endangered Species, the Peregrine Falcon.
- USFWS website, including access to Events Registry, went online.
- First IMBD Distance Learning Program by the National Conservation Training Center.
- Focused effort to tally IMBD activities supported estimate of hundreds of thousands of people reached via at least 500 public events, countless private events, distance learning and media coverage.

### 2001

- Theme was the benefits of shade-grown coffee, resulting in many new connections and partnerships. Artist Terry Isaac is flown to Guatemala to produce original art for IMBD 2001 poster.
- Product distribution moved to NFWF contractor in Colorado Springs; on-line ordering via NFWF website established.
- 25,000 catalogs distributed.
- Poster and education piece translated into Spanish for the first time

### 2002

- IMBD turned 10 years old! Theme was "Celebrating Special Places for Birds," highlighting habitat conservation especially via the Important Bird Areas programs.
- IMBD 2002 poster features a popular print "Mystery of the Missing Migrants" by artist Charley Harper.
- Approximately 40,000 catalogs and 75,000 posters distributed; about 1,500+ contacts on the sales list.
- Data from Events Registry indicates that IMBD is reaching a growing audience.

## Partnerships

From its beginnings, IMBD has drawn on the ideas, talents and energies of many individuals and organizations. The principal responsibility for coordination has been shouldered by a few parties, but IMBD is an event that belongs to all who celebrate it.

IMBD's first and lasting affiliation is with Partners in Flight (PIF), recognized by the PIF logo on IMBD products. When PIF formed in 1990, education was identified as a critical element of bird conservation. Members of the PIF Information and Education Working Group and associated Task Group on Education and Outreach produced the first IMBD materials. IMBD is now considered the hallmark outreach event for PIF, and continues to be supported by partners through sponsorship, creation and review of products, promotion, coordination, and celebration. It is particularly effective when a geographic working group or partnering agency takes on local coordination, as has occurred in Colorado, Georgia, Nebraska, Georgia, and Utah, among others.

IMBD also owes much of its success to individuals and organizations not directly affiliated with PIF. For example, sponsors over the years have included *Birder's World Magazine*, Birdlife International, Canon, Center for Conservation Research and Technology, Eagle Optics, Harcourt Brace, Mark Feldstein and Associates, Inc, Mill Pond Press, Phillips Corporation, Sanctuary Coffee, The Summit Foundation, Swift Optics, Thanksgiving Coffee, and the Wild Bird Feeding Institute/National Bird Feeding Society (apologies to any omitted).

The American Zoo and Aquarium Association and its members have promoted and celebrated IMBD; a formal campaign in 2000 resulted in 100 facilities hosting activities, most of which continue to do so. Via an arrangement with Eagle Optics, IMBD catalogs are sent out with every order and taken to trade shows and festivals. The non-profit Kids for Saving Earth mails out catalogs supplemented with their poster. Schools and school systems have embraced IMBD; in 2001, a consortium of 23 school districts highlighted IMBD as part of their county-wide internet-based project on migratory birds. IMBD has recently partnered with the Council for Environmental Education (Project WILD) to support a new middle-school based program, Flying WILD.

IMBD belongs to all who celebrate it, and IMBD coordinators are eager to develop new partnerships that advance its goals.

## Future Directions

By definition, IMBD is a single-day observance. In hindsight, perhaps it might have been easier to have International Migratory Bird Week or Month. Also, its annual date – the second Saturday in May – often conflicts with the timing of bird counts or surveys. However, these issues really aren't limiting. Event planners are encouraged to schedule activities on the date or dates best suited to the presence of migrants in their area and are certainly not discouraged from celebrating IMBD on an alternative date. The date of IMBD has intentionally been left off of IMBD products to avoid drawing attention to necessary or appropriate rescheduling. Moreover, for those skilled birders with commitments on the second Saturday in May, what better way to celebrate IMBD than to involve new enthusiasts in their activities?

More importantly, IMBD is a movement as well as a day of recognition. The materials and messages created for IMBD are useful year-round. And indeed, IMBD posters are distributed at bird walks and talks all summer long. As another example, IMBD-related educational materials, including the new Junior Birder packets have been embraced by the Girl Scouts. Wild Bird Centers and Wild Birds Unlimited shops stock IMBD items. Public festivals will always be a core element of IMBD, but providing year-round resources for migratory bird educators is also an important aspect of the program.

How secure is IMBD's future financially and organizationally? Sales of IMBD products provide income and prices are set to recover the costs of production and some development. However, an objective of IMBD coordinators is to provide celebrants, educators especially, with resources at the lowest price possible. Thus, it is likely that IMBD products development will always require sponsorship. "External" funding is also necessary to continue IMBD coordination, the bulk of which is performed under contract. However, IMBD itself has been embraced and institutionalized by many organizations. For example, the National Wildlife Refuge System holds IMBD as one of its primary observances. Many zoos and aquariums report IMBD as one of their most successful events. Festivals providing positive economic returns are unlikely to be cancelled. IMBD as an observance will persist as long as it is needed.

Has IMBD been effective? Those involved with IMBD at the time of its creation asked three questions of the program, the answers to which can help us decide if IMBD is achieving its goals.

- 1) Does IMBD educate the public about migratory birds: their habitats, the challenges they face, and status of their populations? Yes. The

materials and messages crafted for IMBD each year always include conservation issues (i.e., they are not limited to natural history or ornithology topics). Given the increasing size of the audience reached, IMBD has certainly been an effective vehicle for education.

- 2) Does it raise awareness of our biological and economic ties to Latin America? Needs Improvement. While IMBD materials and messages traditionally have focused on neotropical migrants, more could be done to directly connect northern audiences to individuals and organizations in Latin America. For example, some festivals highlight an adopted sister-city in the tropics. Or correspondence programs could be developed enabling students to communicate internationally (similar to the Shorebird Sister Schools Program). Also, it has been a challenge to provide affordable IMBD materials to Latin America to encourage them to celebrate IMBD. Additional sponsorship to support Latin American celebrants would be welcomed.
- 3) Does it prompt the initiation of conservation projects or supported existing ones? We don't know. A primary purpose of IMBD is to stimulate the audience to engage in activities that provide real benefits to populations of wild birds. To this end, IMBD coordinators have strived to integrate suggestions for how people can support bird conservation through

specific actions. Themes of recent years promote ongoing conservation projects (e.g., shade coffee campaigns, the IBA Programs). However, no evaluations have been conducted to determine if audiences have actually changed their behaviors as a result of exposure to IMBD activities. This question is at the heart of all environmental education programs, and researchers are invited to conduct studies as a means of answering it.

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