

# People, Wings, and Forests: An International Program for Conservation of Migratory Birds and their Habitats to Benefit People<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

One in eight bird species in the world have a real risk of becoming extinct in the next 100 years (Birdlife International 2000). About three-fourths of these species occur in forests and over half of these species suffer from severe fragmentation of their habitats. Tropical deforestation is the major reason for bird decline in the world (Youth 2003). Almost half the forests that once covered the Earth are gone, and deforestation is expanding and accelerating (Abramovitz 1998).

*More than one-third of the bird species in the United States migrate to Latin America and the Caribbean each year* (North American Bird Conservation Initiative 2003). For many, they spend more time south of the US than inside U.S. boundaries. Therefore, what happens outside the US will often determine if these species will survive. Yet, for most species, little information is available on what that species needs and the availability plus security of these needs in other nations. By providing the requirements of these birds outside the US we not only help save the species, we also help prevent triggered restrictions on land use in the US, as well as protect the conservation investments we have made at home.

*Americans highly value their wild birds.* Over 65 million Americans feed, study, watch, or hunt birds. These Americans spend over \$25 billion a year in these activities (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2002). Bird watching is the fastest growing activity (Cordell et al. 1999, American Birding Association 2003).

## Discussion

### Reasons for Concern

Most migratory birds that spend part of the year outside the US are declining. Many of these species, including the Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), are declining due to disappearing and degraded habitats. Why?

Because some of these habitats are in countries that lack the resources or information to adequately protect and sustain the forests, wetlands, coastlines, grasslands and other much-needed habitats. Other factors in these countries include pesticide use, invasive species, and over harvest of timber. The human population in Latin America and the Caribbean is expected to increase between 50 percent and 100 percent in the next 50 years. Worldwide, habitat loss and degradation are the major causes of endangerment of birds. Most important is the loss and fragmentation of forests, especially tropical forests. Over 75 percent of threatened bird species worldwide occur in forests (Birdlife International 2000).

### Our Starting Point

In the Forest Service, we began by defining the problems and establishing conservation partnerships with organizations and agencies already committed to international conservation on the ground. First, we established criteria for targeting our work. These include:

- Habitats degraded or at high risk
- Imperiled and declining bird species
- Opportunities and needs for conservation partnerships
- Importance of Forest Service expertise
- Need for conservation of biodiversity
- Importance of birds to humans

*We identified the species most declining or most at risk.* We used species listed in the United States Endangered Species List, the Canadian List of Species of Conservation Concern, the Partners at Flight Strategic Plan, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, and the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan. These lists represented the expert analyses and conclusions of conservation priorities from experts in North America's bird conservation community.

*We identified biodiversity and habitat hotspots.* We analyzed results of biodiversity conservation planning

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and other work that identified habitats of greatest conservation concern and of highest bird species use. We utilized work done by The Nature Conservancy (Brooks et al. 1999). We then compared migration distribution of migratory bird species of highest concern with areas of highest biodiversity conservation concern. The combination of bird species of greatest concern occupancy of areas of highest biodiversity concern indicated where we should be working. Where conservation partners were available to collaborate on the ground we began conservation projects. Forest Service direct involvement in all projects is done to strengthen the partnership and expand Forest Service international experiences. Bird conservation work is direct or indirect. Direct is where we target funding and personnel on the ground in work to directly benefit migratory bird species, for example identifying distribution and specific habitat use of a species in another country. Indirect is where we work with another nation to, for example, establish ecological fire management to protect the forest and benefit birds, other species, and provide forest harvest or other utilization of the forest. Multi-year action plans are completed for each project with co-project managers representing the Forest Service and the coordinating partner.

### **Protecting U.S. Interests and Investments at Home**

*This program benefits the United States in several ways.* First, Americans want the birds sustained that visit the US each year. Birds provide many economical, recreational, cultural, and environmental benefits. Many businesses involved with birding, bird hunting, and other enterprises depend on birds. Millions are spent each year inside the US on conservation of migratory birds. Second, if species are lost, or populations are too low due to events outside the United States, we lose our investments made at home. With diminished bird populations, especially when these species are listed or petitioned for listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, we lose land use opportunities here at home. Third, events and situations outside the US can trigger land use restrictions here in the US. It is in the best interests of the US to work wherever needed to prevent the need to list species under the Endangered Species list and thus prevent need to restrict natural resources management options in the US. Fourth, other nations that protect their natural resources and use them sustainably over time help; sustain their democracies and stable governments. Stable and democratic governments abroad help prevent need for U.S. economic assistance or humanitarian relief and provide economic opportunities for the US in the form of trade and sales by U.S. companies. Lessons learned by other countries can be helpful to the US in addressing our conservation and business concerns and opportunities.

### **Partnerships are Critical**

*Where organizations and governments share the same goals we have a foundation for partnerships.* Working in other countries normally means we need to approach conservation in new ways from those at home. Governments, social systems, and ways of doing things are all different in different countries. Partners within other countries normally provide the best leadership and practicable knowledge for conducting conservation there. By combining United States expertise and commitment with the same in other countries conservation is more effective, efficient and sustained. Community-basing conservation in the other country is very important. We target partners that can help design, apply and sustain conservation long term on the ground based-locally. Partnerships also mean leveraging of the federal tax dollar. We always seek this leveraging.

*Partnership initiatives are important.* We established the Copper River Migratory Bird Initiative with Ducks Unlimited Inc, Ducks Unlimited Mexico, Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station, and the Alaska, Pacific Northwest, and Pacific Southwest Regions of the Forest Service. The Initiative is linking critical migratory bird stopover sites along the Pacific Coast for birds from Alaska's Copper River Delta. We have expanded the Forest Service Taking Wing Program to expand to all birds and all Forest Service program areas: National Forest System, Research and Development, State and Private Forestry, and International Programs. We have strengthened Forest Service participation and leadership in bird conservation Joint Ventures. Joint Ventures, born under the North American Waterfowl Management plan, are great working models for bird conservation at home and abroad.

### **Putting Resources on the Ground**

*It is essential that tangible work be done on the ground.* Birds most threatened and habitats most threatened or diminished need help as soon as possible. Often, funding targeted for conservation is never placed in the hands of those that can make a direct difference. We emphasize that our funding be directed to projects that are locally based and spent on the ground targeted at highest field needs. Our partnership projects in year 2003 directly addressing bird conservation needs on the ground are located in over 14 countries with over 20 partners leveraging over \$1.3 million of Federal dollars into over \$4.0 million of leveraged funding. These countries include Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Mexico, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, and the Bahamas. Indirect projects, using funding from the United States Agency for International Development and other funding are conducted in many other nations.

*Our work centers on priority aspects of bird needs.* Field projects in 2003 include:

- Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and landscape habitat partnership data bases,
- Wetland restoration,
- Bird habitat use research,
- Training of Latin American and Caribbean land managers,
- Encouraging shade-grown coffee,
- Teaching fire ecology and establishing fire ecology-based land management plans,
- Change detection in coastal wetlands and estuaries,
- Impact analysis of energy development and forest harvest on wetlands,
- Grassland conservation strategies and management plans,
- Writing shorebird conservation plan for Mexico,
- Bird population monitoring and teaching monitoring.

### ***The Forest Service Can Help***

*The Forest Service is a conservation leader.* The over 30,000 employees of the Forest Service have expertise and comprehensive skills in natural resource management and research. The agency's State and Private Forestry, Research and Development, National Forest System, and International Programs staff areas provide a vast array of skills and experience. The multiple use management experience of the agency in managing the over 190 million acres of national forests and national grasslands is in demand by nations that must use their lands for development while sustaining those lands and resources. The agency multiple-use mandate spans the spectrum from wilderness and protected area management to mining and research. Skills of the Forest Service include social, cultural, ecological, and economic studies. Programs to assist private land owners in natural resource management position the agency to help other nations dealing with private land issues.

### ***The Future Outlook***

Bird conservation is changing. Lacking, and needed, is more commitment to targeting conservation work by assessing the entire geographic range of the species. United States conservation efforts have been too

focused on the United States. Recent developments like the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), the new MOU soon to be signed among Canada, Mexico, and the United States strengthening NABCI, recent developments of the Waterbird Conservation Plan for the Americas, and the Mexico shorebird plan, all point that the needed international and landscape perspectives are gaining ground. Joint Ventures, initiated under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan are strengthening and adopting integrated, all-bird approaches. This leads them to think bigger and broader. The Sonoran Joint Venture now includes partnership collaboration with Mexico. The Atlantic Coast Joint Venture now includes Puerto Rico. Soon, other Joint Ventures will follow these leads and deliver bird conservation based on priorities throughout the ranges of the birds, and not just within the United States. Mexico is considering regionally based, landscape-oriented, biologically-driven partnership approaches, similar to the vision of NABCI and United States Joint Ventures. Our program, which we call "People, Wings, and Forests," will continue to intensively target our work and base our success on changes on the ground in the highest priority areas on the highest priority migratory bird species with action-oriented partners.

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