

# Involving the Private Sector in Georgia's Conservation Initiatives for Neotropical Birds

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**Abstract** — Faced with major financial and manpower restrictions, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Nongame-Endangered Wildlife Program (NGEWP) is aggressively encouraging the private sector to participate in a broad spectrum of innovative neotropical bird-related research, survey, fund raising, management and educational activities. A key element in this initiative was the passage of landmark legislation that permits the purchase of low cost liability insurance for volunteers.

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The implementation of *Partners in Flight* in Georgia, the largest state east of the Mississippi River, is a monumental task. Success of this initiative is closely linked to the strength and diversity of partnerships forged between governmental agencies, businesses, private citizens, as well as civic and conservation groups. Realizing its manpower and financial limitations, NGEWP is actively encouraging involvement of the private sector in a broad spectrum of neotropical migratory bird initiatives including fund raising, research, survey, education, and management.

The problem of volunteer liability has long hampered state and federal volunteer efforts. During the 1992 legislative session the Georgia General Assembly passed a bill (SB 272) that provided for volunteers to be covered under a special liability insurance program. This cost of this insurance is less than four (4) dollars per volunteer.

In response to this landmark legislation, the Georgia DNR has moved swiftly to expand volunteer opportunities. Each division and program has been given the opportunity to administer its own volunteers in a manner that best serves its needs. The NGEWP, which will direct the DNR's neotropical migratory bird-related projects, has chosen to utilize volunteers through a formal volunteer network. The coordinator of this network will herself be a volunteer with many years of volunteer experience with a number of organizations.

Volunteers will be solicited by means of news releases and an attractive information brochure. Applicants will be sent a catalog of projects. Each project description will include the

following pertinent information: objectives of the project; geographic location of the study area; duration of the project; time commitment needed to participate in the project; and what special skills are necessary to satisfactorily perform the work.

All applicants will be carefully screened and required to successfully complete an orientation and training regime before being assigned to a project. This will help insure that volunteers will be fully trained when they enter the field as representatives of NGEWP. The training regime will be designed to reinforce the concept that each volunteer is making a significant contribution to the conservation of Georgia's wildlife resources.

Each year NGEWP will hold an annual volunteer appreciation banquet. At such time, awards will be given to those volunteers that have distinguished themselves in the volunteer program.

Like most states, the NGEWP budget is far from adequate to meet conservation needs of states nongame wildlife resources. Concomitantly, one of the most important ways that volunteers are currently aiding NGEWP's initiatives for neotropical birds is fund raising. Volunteers are actively promoting the tax checkoff through distribution of promotional material, appearing on television and radio programs, and making oral presentations to civic and conservation groups. All public appearances are coordinated through a speaker's bureau.

One of our most lucrative fund raising activities is the annual Weekend For Wildlife. This fund raiser, conceived by two volunteers--- Emmy and Al Minor, has raised approximately \$225,000 for NGEWP in just three years.

Weekend For Wildlife is held each February at the Cloister, a five-star hotel situated on the Georgia coast. Guests are offered a cornucopia of nongame wildlife-related talks, field trips, a banquet, and auction. The event is staged through combined

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efforts of volunteers and staff members representing all four Georgia DNR divisions. Volunteers serve in practically every aspect of preparation and staging of the event. For example, volunteers help decorate the banquet halls and meeting rooms, serve as statewide auction chairmen, solicit auction items, guides for field trips, and lecturers. This involvement greatly reduces the number of DNR staff members needed to stage the event.

Another volunteer, Eva Persons, has recently organized a NGEWP friend's organization called TERN, INC. One of the primary objectives of this organization is to provide a dependable supplemental funding source for NGEWP.

NGEWP is also developing a plan to provide Georgia's business community with the opportunity to financially support its neotropical migratory bird and other wildlife projects. Corporations will be given the opportunity to provide long-term funding for nongame-related projects. Each corporation will be provided with a list of projects and their costs. For example, one project will be development of a breeding bird atlas for Georgia. If one or more corporations are willing to fund this project for the anticipated five years needed to complete the effort, they will be able to use their sponsorship in corporate advertising campaigns. In addition, NGEWP will acknowledge each corporation's generous support.

Education is the cornerstone of Georgia's NGEWP. Currently volunteers are supporting the program's educational efforts by assisting with the presentation of workshops and field days for property owners, conducting field trips, visiting classrooms, development of demonstration areas and writing brochures.

The extremely small NGEWP staff, three biologists (including the program director), severely limits the type, scope, and number of survey and research projects initiated. However, volunteers have proven to be invaluable to several nongame survey and research endeavors. For example, volunteers routinely assist in shorebird and cavity nesting bird surveys. Others are helping develop bird lists for Georgia's parks and wildlife management areas. It is hoped that, in the future, volunteers will play key roles in carrying out breeding bird surveys and preparation of a breeding bird atlas.

Since 1989, NGEWP has been conducting annual hummingbird surveys. These surveys have proven to be extremely popular. Well over 2000 participants, named Hummingbird Helpers, have taken part in the survey during the past three (3) years. The survey is designed to monitor hummingbird populations and evaluate management techniques. For example, already over 120 plants have been identified by landowners as being used by hummingbirds in their yards. In addition, during the past three years, heightened public

awareness has played a key role in two new species of hummingbirds, the black chinned (*Archilochus alexandri*) and magnificent (*Eugenes fulgens*) being discovered and identified in Georgia.

It is obvious that Georgia must successfully address problems associated with managing private lands for neotropical migrants, if its Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Program is going to enjoy any degree of success. Currently, management of privately-owned woodlands and other habitats for neotropical migrants is being promoted through the Georgia Acres For Wildlife and Forest Stewardship Programs.

One of the fastest growing habitats in Georgia is urban/suburban habitat. In response to the realization that a wide variety of wild plants and animals occupy this habitat type, the NGEWP will shortly launch a new program called *The Community Wildlife Project*. This initiative is designed to heighten awareness of private citizens, as well as civic and governmental leaders, to values of managing public and private property within urban/suburban settings for wild plants and animals. Communities desiring official certification as a Certified Wildlife Community must meet stringent guidelines established by NGEWP. Included in these guidelines will be parameters designed to enhance habitats for neotropical migrants.

This project is being cosponsored by the Garden Club of Georgia, Inc. NGEWP will establish certification guidelines and provide communities with technical assistance. Members of the Garden Club of Georgia, Inc. will serve as advocates of the project within their respective communities.

Finally, Georgia's new land acquisition program entitled, *Preservation 2000*, is providing the private sector with a unique opportunity to nominate tracts of land that represent the best of Georgia's remaining wildlife and plant habitats. Birding groups throughout the state have been encouraged to nominate sites important to breeding birds and neotropical migrants.

The problems facing our neotropical migratory birds are not insurmountable. They should simply be viewed as exciting new challenges. The solutions to this conservation crisis lay in our ability to balance our economic and human growth with the needs of our wildlife resources. This will require the aggregate skills of a veritable army of professional biologists and technicians, private citizens, legislators, educators, planners, economists, and others. It will necessitate forging new alliances between the private sector, federal, state, and local governments. We must develop new ideas, and be willing to discard time worn concepts that have guided our resource management efforts in the past. The neotropical migratory bird conservation initiatives involving the private sector presented in this paper represent Georgia's first steps toward solving these complex problems.