



ENSURING PROTECTION OF AMERICA'S IMPERILED BIRDS AND HABITATS



American Bird Conservancy/National Audubon Society
Presidential Transition White Paper





AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY AND NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION WHITE PAPER

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CHALLENGE

In recent years, many of America's most familiar birds have disappeared from their traditional homes on the landscape. In 2007, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and National Audubon Society (Audubon) teamed up to produce a comprehensive analysis of population size and trends, distribution, and threats for 700 bird species in the United States. The U.S. WatchList identified 178 species in the continental United States and 39 in Hawaii that are in immediate need of conservation due to declining or very low population numbers. For example, the Red-headed Woodpecker, which has been historically common, especially in open woodlands of the east, has dropped 65% over the past 40 years. The Wood Thrush has similarly lost over 50% of its population in just 40 years. The Rusty Blackbird has declined a staggering 99%.

The main reasons for these precipitous bird declines are well established. The primary source of bird population declines is habitat loss through conversion for human uses. Resource extraction and a growing human population have resulted in more development and land conversion for suburban sprawl, leaving fewer and fewer large blocks of unbroken habitat for our native birds. The second major impact is from habitat degradation from ecologically unsustainable land uses, such as farming on land created by destroying forest or grasslands. Deforestation, especially in Latin America, is accelerating at an alarming rate, driven by the needs of the rapidly expanding human population, which tripled from 1950-2000. Estimates of the percentage of remaining forests that are lost each year in the Neotropics are between 1-2%.

Global warming threatens many bird species with extinction due to climatic changes and the loss of the habitats they depend on for survival. Like many plants and animals, birds have life cycles and behavior closely linked with the changing seasons. For some species, including many warblers, vireos, and other songbirds, changes in temperature, day length, and the winds signal when they should begin their long flights southward in the fall and back again in the spring. Studies in the United States and Europe have found that some songbirds are migrating earlier in spring, corresponding with warmer temperatures. A study of 20 species of migratory birds in North America shows that spring arrival dates were up to 21 days earlier in 1994 than in 1965, while just a few species were later. Many species, including the Tree Swallow, are now nesting up to nine days earlier than 30 years ago. In addition, studies indicate that the ranges of a number of bird species have been changing, consistent with the trend of rising average temperatures.

Bird populations are also expected to shift poleward, or to higher elevations, to stay within their ideal temperature and habitats as the climate changes. At least seven North American warbler



species (Prothonotary, Blue-winged, Golden-winged, Black-throated Gray, Pine, Hooded, and Cape May) are documented to have shifted their range north in the past 24 years, by an average of more than 65 miles.

ACTION

First 100 days:

Promote economic recovery and create jobs by investing in habitat restoration on National Parks, Forests, Wildlife Refuges, and National Conservation Areas.

Wildlife conservation in the United States is heavily dependent on national protected areas such as National Parks, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, and National Conservation Areas. Each of these systems is understaffed and has a large backlog of maintenance and habitat restoration needs. Filling open positions and immediately beginning work on the maintenance backlog would put people to work immediately while fulfilling high priority conservation needs. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has identified more than \$440 million in shovel-ready restoration projects on America's National Wildlife Refuges.

Significant portions of land and water under federal jurisdiction, especially National Wildlife Refuges, are thoroughly infested with harmful non-native species, which are subsequently able to spread unchecked to adjacent private and public lands and waters. Investing \$140 million in controlling invasive species on National Wildlife Refuges, many of which are listed as Important Bird Areas (IBAs), would create 2,940 jobs and work could begin within three months of allocation.

Reverse Bush Administration rules harmful to endangered birds and wildlife.

A series of Bush Administration initiatives to dismantle the Northwest Forest Plan and increase logging of old-growth forests need to be reversed to ensure the survival of the threatened Northern Spotted Owl. Specifically, the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan and a related proposal to reduce Critical Habitat for the owl are not supported by the best available science. Peer reviews of the final owl plan concluded that it provided little hope of recovering the species and should be redone. The Recovery Plan should be withdrawn and a team of independent scientists with backgrounds in owl conservation should be convened to develop a new plan. Similarly, proposals to delist the threatened Marbled Murrelet and reduce Critical Habitat for the species are not supported by the best available science. These proposals also should be withdrawn or revoked. The Western Oregon Plan Revision, a management plan revision affecting 2.2 million acres of federal forests managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Oregon, is not supported by the best available science and proposes to triple logging of old-growth forests in the plan area and harm the Northern Spotted Owl. The plan should be revoked or withdrawn, and a new plan should be completed using the best available science.

The final rule on consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act also should be reversed. This system of checks and balances helps ensure that the 90 birds and 1,263 other animals and plants that are on the Endangered Species List are adequately considered and



protected by federal government actions. If this new rule is implemented, it would reduce habitat protections for species on public lands and permit agencies to ignore global climate change when analyzing potential impacts of a project.

First year:

Significantly increase funding for neotropical migratory birds, endangered species programs, and wildlife refuges

Neotropical migratory birds. The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund supports partnership programs in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean, where approximately five billion birds representing more than 500 species spend their winters, including some of the most endangered birds in North America.

To support this critically important bird conservation program, Audubon and ABC recommend funding for FY 10 at the following level:

Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund -- \$6.5 million

Endangered Species. The Endangered Species Act is a critically important safety net for species on the brink of extinction that has helped save America's symbol the Bald Eagle, and has prevented the extinction of the California Condor. Endangered species programs are experiencing significant staffing shortages due to severe budget constraints. The Listing account, for example, faces a backlog of \$160 million with 280 species awaiting listing.

Particular attention is needed in regard to the endangered species of Hawaii. Hawaii leads the United States in the total number of endangered and threatened species with 394. Hawaii also leads in the total number of extinctions – with over 1,000 plants and animals having disappeared since humans colonized the islands. Before human settlement, Hawaii was home to 113 endemic bird species. Since then, 71 Hawaiian birds have gone extinct. Of the 42 endemic bird species that may remain, 31 are federally listed.

To adequately implement the Endangered Species Program, ABC and Audubon recommend funding for FY 10 at the following level:

Endangered Species program -- \$217 million
 \$15 million for Candidate Conservation
 \$32 million for Listing
 \$75 million for Consultation
 \$95 million for Recovery

National Wildlife Refuges. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a true national treasure and one of America's most powerful tools for bird conservation. There are 548 refuges on nearly 100 million acres across the country, protecting more than 2,000 bird and wildlife species, about one-tenth of which are federally listed as threatened or endangered. The Refuge System faces an



unacceptable \$3.5 billion backlog of operations and maintenance needs, leaving refuge visitor centers and critically important ecosystems in damaged condition.

To address the crisis facing the Refuge System and provide it with the resources it needs to fulfill its mission, Audubon and ABC recommend funding for FY 10 at the following level:

National Wildlife Refuge System -- \$514 million.

Help wildlife adapt to global warming that is already underway

The FY 08 Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill established the National Global Warming and Wildlife Science Center in the U.S. Geological Survey. Increased funding and other support will be needed to make it possible for the Center to provide leadership in establishing the most effective wildlife adaptation programs possible to help imperiled bird populations survive climate change.

A primary function of the Center will be to use the wide array of data collected and managed by U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to conduct climate change vulnerability assessments for fish and wildlife, habitats, and ecosystems at multiple scales. These assessments will involve simulations to evaluate which specific populations and habitats would be most likely to change, and what key components in the landscape need to be managed. The need for such information has been broadly identified by state fish and wildlife agencies and NGOs. It is a critical component needed for adaptation and adaptive management. Particular attention needs to be paid to the profound impacts of climate change on aquatic systems, where changes in snow and rain patterns, wetlands, baseflows in rivers, and temperature will accelerate the research challenge.

The Center also will play an important role in combining physical change, ecological and population modeling approaches with stronger standardized monitoring across biomes to forecast future conditions. This will include development of biological carbon sequestration alternatives depending on management of natural systems, fire regimes and risk potential for carbon sequestration.

Funding is also needed for the Center to support, based on a competitive review process, high priority global climate change research projects and the development of decision support tools in relation to: (1) identification of species and ecosystems at greatest risk; (2) identification and ranking, based on effectiveness, of the best responses to assist species and ecosystems at greatest risk; (3) research related to wildlife adaptation; (4) refinement of climate change models to regional and local scales relevant for fish, wildlife, and land management; and (5) development of robust monitoring programs to detect changes in wildlife abundance, abundance, distribution, and behavior related to global warming for use in federal and state programs, including land management.

To help wildlife adapt to global warming, ABC and Audubon recommend funding for FY 10 at the following level:

National Climate Change and Wildlife Science Center --\$10.0 million

**First term:*****Promote the use of birds as indicators of environmental health***

Birds have a long history as indicators of the health of the environment, beginning with the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Perhaps the most powerful indicator that something was amiss came when populations of bird-eating and fish-eating birds such as the Peregrine Falcon and the Bald Eagle declined precipitously because of exposure to DDT and related organochlorines.

A more recent trend in using birds as indicators involves state-of-the-birds reports. Almost ten years ago, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the British Trust for Ornithology began an annual series of state-of-the-birds reports for the United Kingdom. At the heart of the U.K. and subsequent European state-of-the-birds reports is a series of bird indicators: annual indices that reflect population trends of all birds, wetlands birds, forest birds, and agricultural birds. In both the U.K. and Europe, governments have adopted these indicators as official, and have adopted policies that promote stable or increasing bird populations.

With leadership from USGS and FWS, a number of federal, state, and nongovernmental organizations – including ABC and Audubon – have come together to work on a United States State-of-the-Birds Report, which is expected to be released in March of 2009 – within 100 days of the new Administration. The intention is to include habitat-specific indicators, similar to those developed for the U.K. and Europe, as the core of this report, and to report on conservation challenges such as climate change, energy development, contaminants, direct mortality, and invasive species as they affect birds, biodiversity, and human health. USGS and Audubon have already produced a grassland bird indicator using data from the Breeding Bird Survey (organized and analyzed by USGS) and the Christmas Bird Count.

The March 2009 State-of-the-Birds Report will give the new Administration a chance to make a positive statement about an important environmental issue. Following this report, the Administration should increase funding to USGS to increase the agency's research and monitoring capacity to better understand large-scale drivers of migratory bird populations and habitat change, such as those featured in the State-of-the-Birds Report and to prepare for future reports. Interior proposed a \$1 million initiative in FY 09 to support monitoring efforts in the Breeding Bird Survey (crucial to the state-of-the-birds and related reports), Strategic Habitat Conservation, and related activities critical to the conservation goals of USGS and its partners.

Promote the protection of Important Bird Areas

The Important Bird Areas Program (IBA) is a global effort to identify and conserve areas that are vital to birds and other biodiversity. Important Bird Areas are sites that provide essential habitat for one or more species of bird. IBAs include sites for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds. IBAs may be a few acres or thousands of acres, but usually they are discrete sites that stand out from the surrounding landscape.



To qualify as an IBA, sites must satisfy at least one of the following criteria. The site must support:

- Species of conservation concern (e.g. threatened and endangered species)
- Restricted-ranges species (species vulnerable because they are not widely distributed)
- Species that are vulnerable because their populations are concentrated in one general habitat type or biome
- Species, or groups of similar species (such as waterfowl or shorebirds), that are vulnerable because they occur at high densities due to their congregatory behavior

Identification of a site as an IBA indicates it is uniquely important for birds. Nonetheless, some IBAs are of greater significance than others. A site may be important at the global, continental, or state level. The IBA identification process provides a data-driven means for cataloging the most important sites for birds throughout the country and the world. The use of a hierarchical classification system further helps to establish priorities for conservation efforts.

IBAs have been proven worldwide as an outstanding strategic tool for bird conservation. IBA criteria should be added to strategic growth policies for national parks, wildlife refuges, and other public lands, and should be reflected in long range planning such as wildlife refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans. IBAs also should be prioritized for funding where appropriate in conservation grant programs, particularly those managed by FWS.

CONCLUSION

Birds are not only beautiful and interesting creatures eagerly welcomed by millions of Americans into their backyards every year; they are also an important natural resource shared among different countries and their people with great economic value. ABC and Audubon look forward to working with the new Administration to reverse some of these precipitous bird declines and restore America's birds and the habitats on which they depend.



COVER PHOTO: *Clockwise from top*: Hooded Warbler, Peter LaTourrette, www.birdphotography.com; Bald Eagle, FWS; Red-headed Woodpecker, Greg Lavaty; Red Knots, Ralph Wright.