

Bird Conservation in the 21st Century

Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

A report from the Fifth International **Partners in Flight** Conference and Conservation Workshop, August 25–28, 2013



As I sat in one of the breakout sessions at the Fifth International Partners in Flight Conference and Conservation Workshop held this past August in Snowbird, Utah, I wondered about something: What is it about birds that connects us to nature, to the earth and the sky, and to each other? Birds seem to be a conduit to something pure, to simple pleasure. We enjoy birds, knowing they are there, hearing them and seeing all those brilliant colors flash in the sky, or even finding the browns among the browns. Birds are one of our keenest connections to nature. But their populations are threatened everywhere.

Migratory birds in particular face an ever-expanding web of hazards to navigate through. Looking at the data from the Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan, we learn that well over 100 North American land bird species are severely threatened by habitat loss, have declining populations, or have small populations with limited distributions. Species as diverse as the Loggerhead Shrike, Evening Grosbeak, and Eastern Meadowlark have all declined by at least 70% in the past 40 years.

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The Great Salt Lake is a globally critical stopover site for **Eared Grebes**, which stage here in staggering numbers in late summer. Nearby, in Park City, delegates to the fifth international Partners in Flight Conference and Conservation Workshop convened in late August 2013 to devise conservation strategies for Eared Grebes and hundreds of other at-risk bird species in the Americas. *Photo by © Mia McPherson.*





Thanks to the dedicated work of students, scientists, organizations, and birders, we now know more about migratory birds than ever before—where they go, when they go, when they come back, what they need to do to migrate, and more. There is still a lot we don't know, and tomorrow we will likely know more than today. However, with the knowledge at hand, we certainly know enough to act on it. Action is happening. It's just that there isn't enough. There's not enough people, power, and money being invested in migratory bird conservation at the moment to sufficiently slow, stop, and reverse the decline of migratory birds. We must not only turn the dial for bird conservation; we need to *CRANK* the dial for bird conservation.

This need for immediate migratory bird conservation action was the impetus for this fifth Partners in Flight international symposium. Partners in Flight was formed in 1990, and partners with more than 400 organizations concerned with bird conservation. Regional meetings are held frequently, but major international conventions occur only every three to five years. More than 240 conservation professionals representing 16 countries and 120 organizations convened for the 2013 event, based out of the upper reaches of Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon. Participants brought diverse skill sets and perspectives: Some are developing new technologies to track bird migration; others are communications experts, trying to hone bird-conservation messaging; and yet others deal in easements, management plans, and timber sales. All were united in the goal to formulate regional plans that address the full-life-cycle conservation needs of our declining migratory birds.



A key focus of this workshop and conference was the human dimension of bird conservation. How do we engage the public as broadly as possible? How do we strengthen existing partnerships? How do we forge new alliances? Such questions are central to the ABA's mission and very identity. "The gathering at Snowbird reaffirmed the ABA's commitments to outreach, connections, and community building," said conference participant and ABA Director of Part-

nerships and Marketing Bill Stewart. Another conference participant, ABA President Jeffrey A. Gordon, reflected on the role of the ABA's flagship conservation program, Birders' Exchange, in the human dimension of bird conservation. "It was gratifying to connect at Snowbird with so many Latin American scientists and conservationists whose careers have been directly affected by Birders' Exchange," he said. "Even more gratifying was a shared sense that we're moving forward—toward new and even more effective paradigms for engaging the next generation of bird conservationists."



This conference and workshop was participatory and goal oriented. Participants were divided into regional groups based on the wintering grounds of birds of particular conservation focus. These wintering ground geographies were closely tied to breeding ground geographies in order to create focal geographic regions for which full-life-cycle conservation "business plans" would be developed. The geographic regions and their focal species are identified in the online companion to this article <aba.org/birding>.



Terry Rich, Partners in Flight National Coordinator, and Peter Marra, Research Scientist with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, set the stage for the gathering by giving a history of and update on Partners in

Location, location, location. That seems to be the key for **Burrowing Owl** conservation. In western North America, most populations nest semi-colonially in prairie dog "towns" on undisturbed, arid, short-grass prairie. Populations have declined in many areas, and reversing population declines will require habitat management, legal protection, and money.

Burrowing Owl populations can be preserved. The question is: Do humans have the will to make the necessary investments? Conference and workshop participants took a good, hard look at the strengths and weaknesses of the bird conservation movement in the 21st century.

*Antelope Island State Park, Utah.
Photo by © Mia McPherson.*





One of the chief themes from the conference and workshop was the need to embrace full-life-cycle conservation strategies. The miraculous courtship dances of **Western Grebes** are but a small part of the whole annual cycle. What happens on migration? What happens on the wintering grounds? When and where do the birds molt? What are known and potential effects of mercury poisoning, invasive plants, and climate change? What about gene flow among populations and even across the species boundary? Avian conservation biology in the 21st century will require an interdisciplinary approach that challenges human creativity, ingenuity, and budgets. *Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah. Photo by © Mia McPherson.*

Flight. They reviewed where bird science and conservation has gotten us so far, and they proposed ways for saving bird populations in the future.

Rich said that Partners in Flight has been on the right track for a long time, and he emphasized threats away from the breeding grounds. He also noted that, with improved technologies—such as smaller satellite transmitters, geolocators, radar tracking, stable isotope analysis, and more sophisticated modeling—we are better equipped than ever to pinpoint where in the Americas on-the-ground conservation action is most needed.

Marra’s cutting-edge research has provided critical information about habitat quality on the wintering grounds and its carryover effects on migration timing, nest success, productivity, and mortality. His results make it clear that efforts in the U.S. and Canada to secure and improve breeding habitat for migratory birds are insufficient. Without plentiful, quality habitat on the wintering grounds, success of bird-conservation initiatives will be limited. Investment in a full-life-cycle conservation approach to migratory bird conservation is critical.

David Younkman of the American Bird Conservancy set us loose on a three-day assignment to develop the most creative, strategic, and effective projects for



migratory bird conservation by challenging us with a simple question: “Will the birds know?” As we design the next decade’s strategies for conservation, we must pursue actions that truly affect birds, not just human perceptions and “perceived needs” about avian welfare.

As a participant in the Partners in Flight symposium, I was a member of the Caribbean–West Indies Group. If you have ever taken part in a conservation workshop, you know that it can be difficult to get something tangible out of group work. It can be sausage-making messy. Our group on day one was like doing the Hokey Pokey—we threw lots of things in and lots of things out. We believed some birds should be added to our list of priority species: Northern Waterthrush and White-crowned Pigeon, for example. Other species, like the Black-throated Blue Warbler and Mangrove Cuckoo, had either lower immediate conservation needs or didn’t fully represent the effort we were to undertake.

We discussed threats, and why one or the other was having more of an impact. We used “magic stickers” to settle the score and select which urgent threats to focus on. This was our group’s way of identifying our region’s focal threats. Other groups did it differently, but the overall goal was the same: to identify and prioritize, by the end of day one, the key threats



to each region's birds of conservation concern.

We had gotten somewhere, but there was still some nervous energy in our group. People wondered if we really knew what we were doing, if we could get anything accomplished of real value for bird conservation.

Maybe because of the beers from the previous evening's Oktoberfest festivities (that's right, Oktoberfest in August at Snowbird), or maybe because time was short, the proceedings were decidedly less nervous on day two.

In a plenary presentation by Alvaro Umaña, a former Minister of the Environment for Costa Rica, we were reminded of the rampant deforestation and conversion of forests to cattle ranching and agriculture that occurred during the 1980s in Latin America. Emergency measures were put in place in Costa Rica, and incentives—including payments for ecosystem services—were instituted to protect water resources and wildlife habitat. Costa Rica has since become a leader in ecotourism in general and bird tourism in particular, with more than 600 private reserves outside of national protected areas. Umaña's message was that creative, responsive action can have an impact on conserving habitat for biodiversity.

Gary Machlis, Science Advisor to the Director of the U.S. National Park Service, expanded our consciousness by discussing the need to converge social and cultural sciences with bird science to meet the challenges we face. To do so, we must examine and understand what influences decision making, from political systems to economic and food distribution networks. It was a timely and im-



portant point as our breakout groups reassembled and began to look at the drivers of threats to migratory bird declines.

Most groups broke into smaller subgroups as we identified priority threats and drivers—and these threats and drivers became rallying points for participants in discussing projects that might make a difference. An afternoon away from our breakout groups refreshed and energized us with diverse sessions: “Conservation Measures to Address Anthropogenic Causes of Bird Mortality,” “Understanding and Overcoming the Social Challenges of Bird Conservation,” “International Agreements and Bird Conservation in the 21st Century,” and “Bird Conservation on Private Lands and Community-based Conservation Initiatives.”

On that third morning, American Bird Conservancy President George Fenwick supercharged us with a bold new vision for bringing back migratory bird populations over the next 25 years. He asked us to look in the mirror and consider that we conservationists might be a bit less aggressive and less willing to fight for our interests than others. According to Fenwick, “We are people who prefer to walk in the woods.” If we were more forceful, Fenwick exhorted, we would achieve much. The number of people interested in birds is immense. Has there ever been a 10-million-signature petition for a cause? If any community could pull that off, Fenwick speculated, it is the community of bird lovers. Millions of people enjoy birds, birding, bird feeding, and connecting with nature; it is time to communicate that spirit to our leaders and decision makers.

It's all about priorities. Here are some: one year of an initiative championed by President Obama to study the brain, \$100 million; two days of the Iraq War, \$1 billion; a B-1 bomber,



We're all in this thing together. We're all Partners in Flight. Few species better exemplify that truth than the highly colonial and cooperative American White Pelican. These birds have packed together to create a feeding canopy that lures fish to the surface. When enough fish have been baited, the pelicans will quickly and effectively gulp down their prey. Like foraging pelicans, human conservation biologists are most effective when they work in partnerships toward clearly defined strategies. *Farmington Bay Waterfowl Management Area, Utah. Photo by © Mia McPherson.*

\$283 million; the Mars rover Curiosity mission, \$2.5 billion; insurance coverage for deer–car collisions, \$4 billion per year; a nuclear power plant, \$12–\$18 billion; the AIG bailout, \$163 billion; and restoring the world's fisheries, \$180 billion over the next 20 years. Compare those figures to funding for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act: a measly \$3.8 million per year, an amount eventually eliminated by the U.S. House of Representatives from the 2014 federal budget.

If birds are important to us—for cultural, spiritual, economic, or health reasons—and if we want to restore their populations, then we have to think big. And act big. As Fenwick put it, “We must either aim high or be in the business of accepting meager accomplishments.”

Next on the docket was Bruce Beehler, Director of Bird Conservation with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Beehler talked about the nuts and bolts of restoring bird populations. He promoted the importance of sound scientific foundations, rigorous evaluation, adaptive management, and good business planning to identify focused and measurable outcomes for species and habitats—outcomes that could be scaled up with additional investment. According to Beehler, transparent collaboration and creating common ground among diverse interest groups can result in funding that leads to tangible results for bird conservation.



Chants of “bring back the birds” echoed in the halls as conference participants returned to breakout sessions, ready to blaze the path for migratory bird conservation. A sampling of the many recommendations: full–life–cycle research projects; outreach campaigns involving sports, music, and entertainment celebrities to discover the “real Caribbean”; bird-friendly product development for landscape-level impact in Central and South America; engaging the shrimp farming industry and hotel and resort industry in Mexico and the Caribbean; improving forest management and land acquisition at key sites; and working with city planners to incorporate bird-friendly infrastructure and green spaces in North America and beyond.

This Partners in Flight meeting was more than just a conference and workshop. It was a call to arms, a summons to bird lovers everywhere to identify practical yet ambitious strategies for bird conservation in the 21st century.

Watching and counting birds isn't enough to protect our birds. We must campaign and act to save what we care about. I keep pondering David Younkman's charge that “actions are called for which will result in the birds knowing.” Think about it: The birds themselves neither know nor care that we gathered in Utah, but they will know if the patch of forest or mangrove where they wintered last year is there—or not—when they return. The Partners in Flight conference and workshop reminds us that we're all in this thing together. We're all partners in flight.