

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT
PROACTIVE CONSERVATION FOR NEOTROPICAL
MIGRATORY BIRDS AND THEIR HABITATS

by Peter W. Stangel

Let's say you had the option to buy stock in one of two groups of companies. Group A companies have been hit hard by the recession, and have so declined in value that they may disappear from the Dow Jones. Some were blue chips, but through mismanagement now verge on bankruptcy. To recover, these companies would require a massive injection of capital and intensive new management. Even then, most will likely never reach their former stature.

Group B companies have also been hit hard by the sagging economy, but alert managers recognized the warning signs and took quick action to adapt. New management strategies focused on infrastructure investment, consolidation, and partnerships to improve competitiveness. Although some companies declined, most avoided a crash and were able to stabilize and eventually start to grow again.

Unless Evel Knievel is your investment advisor, group B companies are the obvious choice. They may be a little shaky, but managers anticipated the changing economic environment, acted quickly, and avoided catastrophic losses.

But do we make this obvious choice when investing in wildlife resources? Or is our "portfolio" dominated by high-risk endangered species, at the expense of better values in the not-so-threatened? Is too much spent bailing out bankruptcies, rather than investing in the habitat infrastructure that simultaneously benefits hundreds of more common species?

The comparison between stocks and species is not completely valid, because investment in wildlife entails unique social and moral considerations. We cannot abandon endangered species, but their swelling ranks make it increasingly difficult to direct limited resources into better investments, such as common species and ecosystem conservation. More endangered species mean less money for common species and habitats. Less investment in common species and habitats means more endangered species. It is a vicious cycle that threatens our ability to do conservation when it should be done—when species and ecosystems are still common.

Breaking the cycle challenges the conservation establishment. Charismatic endangered species justifiably elicit great emotion and are profitable causes for fund-raising campaigns. Endangered species have also become convenient legal tools to force conservation actions. Conversely, common species and their habitats are less likely to send one running for the checkbook. Check your mail—when was the last time you received an appeal for Red-eyed Vireos and their deciduous forest habitat? It was the Red-eyed Vireo and other neotropical

migratory birds, however, that provided the key to breaking the endangered species cycle and opened a new way of thinking about conservation of birds and their habitats.

Neotropical migrants are those species that nest in the United States and Canada and whose populations winter wholly or partially in the neotropical faunal zone, which includes the tropical regions of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Neotropical migrants span the taxonomic scale and include many waterfowl, waders, raptors, and nonpasserine and passerine land birds (Rappole et al. 1983). Just over fifty percent of the species nesting in the United States are considered neotropical migrants, and in many northern forests they represent up to ninety percent of the breeding bird species.

Birders have long lamented the loss of neotropical migrants from traditional nesting areas. It was not until just recently, however, that the spate of evidence forced reassessment of conservation programs for neotropical migrants and their habitats. In 1989 an international symposium at the Manomet Bird Observatory (now Manomet Observatory for Conservation Sciences) (Hagan and Johnston 1992), the book *Where Have All the Birds Gone?* (Terborgh 1989), and a scientific paper reporting twenty years of bird population trends (Robbins et al. 1989) all focused on the same fact—populations of many neotropical migrants were declining.

The extent, duration, and severity of the decline startled even pessimists. Population trends calculated from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) (Robbins et al. 1989) indicated that in the eastern United States, where the most extensive data were available, over seventy percent of neotropical migratory bird species monitored had declined over the last decade. Some, like the Cerulean Warbler, had been declining an average of about three percent per year for two and a half decades. More recent declines in other species, including Wood Thrush (four percent per year) and Olive-sided Flycatcher (5.7 percent per year), were equally sobering.

Although additional data revealed that some declines were reversing, and the BBS trends presented a confusing challenge of declining, stable, and increasing population trends, considerable evidence pointed to long-term declines in many species, particularly forest-dependent neotropical migrants.

Declines in neotropical migratory birds focused attention not just on the birds and their habitats, but also on the effectiveness of our conservation programs. In North America, with our rich ornithological history and legions of birdwatchers, it seemed implausible that declines in some of our favorite birds could occur "right under our noses."

An assessment by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in 1990 revealed some gaping holes in our bird conservation efforts. Although many private organizations and state and federal agencies had impressive and effective bird conservation programs, little communication and coordination occurred

among these groups. Conservation projects were often focused on single species, rather than habitats, and discrete geographic areas, rather than entire ranges. There was a dearth of information on neotropical migrants during migration and on the nonbreeding grounds. No strategic plans for migratory birds existed, and no long-term funding sources had been identified.

Despite the popularity of birding and the obvious success of many conservation organizations and agencies, comprehensive programs for conservation of neotropical migratory birds and their habitats were lacking. That such an effort did not exist is not surprising—conservation of neotropical migrants is a daunting challenge. Over 350 species, each with its own conservation priorities, politics, and problems, breed in, migrate through, or spend the nonbreeding season in many states and countries.

Although the reported declines in neotropical migrants were threatening, most species were still common. The early warning provided by the BBS and other survey programs offered an excellent opportunity to invest in conservation when birds needed it most, when populations were beginning to decline, but while species and their habitats were still common.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation made the investment in 1990 by launching the Partners in Flight-Aves de las Americas Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Program. Developed by representatives from federal and state agencies, private conservation groups, the research community, and the forest products industry, Partners in Flight promotes better understanding of bird and habitat population trends, a halt to declines, and maintenance of stable populations of neotropical migratory birds.

Best viewed as a framework within which an international bird conservation program can be coordinated, Partners in Flight builds on the strengths of existing conservation efforts and fills the gaps where new projects are required.

In addition to promoting conservation while species are still common, Partners in Flight also focuses on the following:

- habitat, rather than single species, conservation
- simultaneous conservation on the breeding, nonbreeding, and migration areas
- cooperation among federal, state, corporate, and private sectors.

Partners in Flight is centered on habitat conservation. By focusing on habitats, entire suites of species and the ecosystems in which they function benefit. Acquisition to preserve natural habitats is one strategy, but Partners in Flight also highlights improving habitat quality on managed lands—those used for timber production, grazing, military maneuvers, even urban landscapes. These areas offer nesting, migration, and nonbreeding habitat to many species of neotropical migrants and are an important complement to costly acquisition programs.



Such an approach is particularly important in areas such as New England, where the vast majority of land is in private hands. Land and wildlife managers are adept at their jobs—witness the tremendous productivity of our industrial forests and the resurgence of white-tailed deer and Wild Turkey. Once managers are provided the necessary information on habitat requirements of neotropical migrants, we should anticipate similar successes.

Although much remains to be learned about neotropical migrants and their management on the North American breeding grounds, the extent of our breeding range knowledge dwarfs what we know about these species during migration and on the nonbreeding grounds. In some cases, even basic distributional data are lacking for many migrants (resident species as well) in the neotropics.

A primary goal of Partners in Flight, therefore, is to accelerate conservation efforts on the migration routes and nonbreeding areas. A key to this focus has been increasing the awareness of conservation groups and birdwatchers of the importance of nonbreeding areas to neotropical migrants.

The primary limiting factors in making conservation more comprehensive have been recognition of need and, of course, funding. Neotropical migrants are a superb vehicle for helping North American conservationists identify with and feel ownership for neotropical conservation issues. Once New Englanders realize that Black-throated Blue Warblers nesting in Vermont's Green Mountains depend on the Caribbean for wintering habitat, it becomes much easier to take a hemispheric view of conservation. Likewise, once legislators recognize that conservation efforts in the United States will be unsuccessful without parallel efforts in the tropics, prospects for funding increase.

This realization made possible recent funding opportunities for neotropical migrant conservation through the Agency for International Development, the U.S. Forest Service's International Forestry program, and the Western Hemisphere program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The sheer enormity of the challenge posed by neotropical migrants dictated that a successful conservation program would have to be highly cooperative. There is simply no conservation organization, or country, with enough resources to do it all alone. Cooperation, especially from the start of new programs, can also help overcome the political polarization that characterizes conservation for species such as the Spotted Owl and Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Bringing

together potential players early in the planning process increases each individual group's stake in the program and reduces misunderstandings that often lead to political stalemates.

In order to facilitate communication and cooperation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation organized technical and regional working groups. Working groups comprise experts who gather in open meetings to identify priority conservation actions for neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. Recently, regional working groups have formed for boreal regions of Alaska and Canada, and for the Caribbean. Many states also established working groups to encourage cooperation and focus on local issues. Recommendations from working groups provided the vision for preliminary but comprehensive conservation programs for neotropical migrants. Although the working group system is still crystallizing, there have been many accomplishments already.

For example, the Monitoring Working Group Needs Assessment established guidelines for new programs to track bird and habitat population trends (Butcher 1992). Their recommendations can be customized by individual agencies or organizations, but encourage standardized techniques that permit data to be pooled and analyzed across broad geographic regions.

Recommendations for an intensive point-count program to monitor bird population responses to habitat management have already been adopted by several federal agencies. These intensive monitoring programs will allow land managers to track bird population changes on the local level and help identify factors contributing to population trends. Other recommendations include expanding the BBS, monitoring programs for roadless areas, migration monitoring, and programs for marsh birds and other species not adequately assessed by current programs. Clearly, the continued efforts of amateur birdwatchers will play an important role in Partners in Flight monitoring efforts.

The International Working Group has emphasized the need to strengthen the infrastructure of conservation organizations in the neotropics, along with training for protected area managers, and integrating programs for endemic species with those for neotropical migrants.

Enhancing the capabilities of neotropical conservation groups will empower local people to design and implement sustainable natural resource management programs. For example, a recent National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to the Pro Iguana Verde Foundation in Costa Rica will support workshops to train biologists in bird research and monitoring techniques. The first workshop, held in February 1994, brought together Latin American biologists to formulate coordinated bird monitoring needs and conservation strategies for the neotropics.

Similarly, advanced training for protected-area managers is a critical, but often neglected, need in the neotropics. Many protected areas are "paper parks," meaning boundaries appear on maps, but there is little on-the-ground protection

and management. To help meet this need, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ducks Unlimited/Mexico teamed up to provide advanced training through the RESERVA program. This intensive twelve-week course teaches skills including mapmaking, trail construction, wildlife and fisheries management, enhancing cultural values, managing ecotourists, and community outreach.

The U.S. Forest Service recently internationalized its bird conservation efforts with the "Sibling Forest Program," linking national forests with neotropical protected areas. Pairings are determined in part by the extent of bird migrations between sites. This program emphasizes technology transfer and training for managers at both ends of the spectrum. North Carolina's national forests and the Blue Mountain/John Crowe National Park in Jamaica is one such pairing.

Footing the Bill

Launching international conservation programs is an expensive undertaking, and declines in neotropical migrants were revealed at a time of both public and private belt-tightening. Although a federal pot-of-gold would certainly have been welcomed, its absence stimulated innovative funding strategies and an increased reliance on the private sector. Over time, this balanced strategy may provide more sustainable funding and also increase ownership of Partners in Flight and its goals.

Support from the corporate sector has energized the conservation programs of many organizations within Partners in Flight. For example, contributions from Exxon, Chevron, Weyerheuser, and other forest products companies to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation provided support needed to help organize and launch Partners in Flight. Similar support came as a grant to National Fish and Wildlife Foundation from the Pew Charitable Trust. A grant from the MacArthur Foundation helped launch Partners in Flight in the Caribbean, and Phillips Petroleum has underwritten public awareness events such as International Migratory Bird Day.

Despite federal cost-cutting, additional funding has been secured within key agencies. For example, in 1990 the U.S. Forest Service, which manages over 191 million acres of habitat, received its first-ever appropriation specifically for conservation of neotropical migratory birds. Funding for neotropical migratory bird conservation within the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continues to inch upward, helping balance the emphasis on nongame species such as neotropical migrants and better funded programs for game species.

Surging interest in neotropical migrants has brought some nontraditional federal agency partners into bird conservation efforts. The U.S. Department of Defense, which manages over twenty-five million acres, has actively promoted conservation efforts on many facilities. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has

provided funding to restore degraded riparian habitats heavily used by neotropical migrants in the western United States. The Agency for International Development, through a cooperative agreement with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, has provided the bulk of the funding for implementation of Partners in Flight in the neotropics.

State fish and wildlife agencies have used public concern for neotropical migrants to implement new conservation efforts and bolster traditionally small nongame initiatives (in comparison to game programs). For example, New Hampshire Game and Fish Department developed a touring art exhibit on neotropical migrants to raise public awareness and funding for conservation programs. Each of the northeastern states also has active Partners in Flight working groups, all of which are closely tied to state wildlife agencies.

It is too early to see positive changes in populations of neotropical migrants that are declining, except perhaps on a very local scale. Partners in Flight has, however, established the framework necessary for conservation of neotropical migrants. Awareness of neotropical migrants and their predicament is at an all-time high, and still increasing. Communication among federal, state, private, and corporate groups has dramatically increased, and many productive new partnerships have been formed. Scientists are racing to better understand the ecological needs of neotropical migrants, and land managers are implementing new recommendations as quickly as is feasible.

Partners in Flight has just introduced the North American Bird Conservation Program, a comprehensive habitat conservation effort that will benefit all birds. This program will be the first phase in a grander scheme that will eventually lead to coordinated bird conservation throughout the Americas.

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