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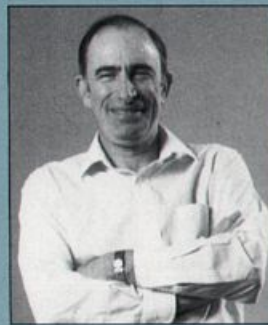
IF YOUR HOME WERE ablaze, would you rush in and out and try to rescue a few precious items, or would you try to put out the fire and save what you could of the remaining property? This is the type of dilemma that wildlife conservationists face routinely. The Earth is plagued with natural disturbances and human-induced disasters. Those choosing to rush in to try to rescue a few precious items must decide how to save the most vulnerable organisms. But preventing widespread disaster requires saving the "remaining property." Critical ecosystems must be protected and restored. This demands massive cooperation among land managers, owners, and policy-makers.

Neotropical migrants are birds that breed primarily north of the Tropic of Cancer and for the most part winter south of the same line. "Neo" refers to new and thus connotes the New World tropics; the tropics of the Western Hemisphere. Neotropical migrants are ambassadors that can promote the sorts of massive cooperation needed to save our life support systems. And since most species of neotropical migrants are not yet endangered, we have the opportunity to preserve them before they reach the ecologically, politically, and economically demanding status of endangerment.

Conservatively defined, there are about 200 species of neotropical migrants. Although the majority are song-

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BIRDING FOR FUN



Neotropical Migrants and the Art of Turning Birders into International Conservationists

*Illustration
by Darryl Wheye*

birds, many species of shorebirds, raptors, and even a few waterfowl qualify. They play vital roles in the ecosystems of our hemisphere, dispersing seeds that help to regenerate forests and grasslands, controlling insect and rodent populations, and pollinating flowers. For centuries their beauty and song have captivated and inspired humankind. Birders in North America spend billions of dollars annually on their hobby. Many enthusiasts pursue migrants to tropical wintering grounds, adding eco-tourism dollars to local economies.

Destruction and degradation of habitats throughout the Americas threatens migrant species and their vital roles within ecosystems. In recent years, populations of many neotropical migrants have declined dramatically. Some migrant songbird populations

in eastern North America have declined as much as three percent a year since 1978. The drop in numbers of some shorebird populations has been extreme: dowitcher by 40 percent, Whimbrel by 60 percent, and Sanderling by a staggering 80 percent. Although some raptor species have recovered in response to stronger United States controls on organochlorine pesticides, some soon face endangerment if their numbers continue to fall. Sharp-shinned Hawks, American Kestrels, and Broad-winged Hawks are examples. The number of breeding ducks on the North American prairies, already at

record lows, fell an additional 11 percent in 1993. The most dramatic decline was in the Blue-winged Teal, a neotropical migrant whose population fell 26 percent in that year alone.

The decline of the migrants has come to symbolize the extent and severity of human-caused extinctions. Like the miner's canary whose distress indicated lethal gases seeping into the mine, the decline of neotropical migrants warns that something is amiss in the global environment. Habitat destruction and degradation in the United States and Canada undoubtedly imperil migrants to varying degrees. Since many year-round resident species that share the same breeding grounds as migrants are not declining, however, the greatest threats for at least some migrants are almost certainly tropical. Thus, fewer Red Knots returning to breed in the Arctic might indicate a loss and degradation of wetland habitat in Chile. Fewer Prairie Warblers returning to breed at the margins of eastern woodlands might signify habitat loss throughout the Caribbean.

Increasingly, neotropical migrants are the inspiration that turns bird enthusiasts (and yes, even "twitchers") into international conservationists. Because of their semiannual movements between breeding grounds in North America and wintering grounds in the neotropics, migratory birds constitute an international resource that demands hemisphere-wide approaches to conservation.

For most people, getting involved in international conservation means annually sending a check to one of the many conservation organizations based in the United States. There is nothing wrong with this approach. We must encourage financial support of organizations that work to preserve intact forest ecosystems, manage forest remnants, protect critical wetlands, reduce dependence on pesticides, promote sustainable use of unprotected lands, and conduct research



In recent years, populations of such neotropical migrants as (clockwise from the top left) Prairie Warbler, Whimbrel, Blue-winged Teal, American Kestrel, and Scarlet Tanager have declined dramatically and, in the process, have become ambassadors for cooperative international conservation efforts.

on habitat requirements of migrants. Neotropical migrants, however, open the door for concerned citizens to become directly involved in locally based conservation efforts in both North and Latin America—efforts which are critical to the long-term survival of biological diversity throughout the Americas. Both the essence and the structure of these efforts is that of partnership.

Several Audubon Society chapters have led the way in organization-to-organization partnerships. In 1989 the Seattle Audubon Society began working with Pronatura-Chiapas, a private conservation organization in

southern Mexico. Seattle Audubon (SAS) has assisted Pronatura by sending field and computer equipment, as well as funds, to support a neotropical migrant study. The two organizations have assisted each other in letter-writing campaigns; SAS wrote to Mexican officials when a proposed road threatened critical habitat in Chiapas and Pronatura wrote letters to United States officials regarding their concern that the destruction of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest threatens neotropical migrants.

Seattle Audubon formed a second partnership in 1993. While still main-

LISTEN FRIEND

**Listen friend,
I don't want you killing birds.
Birds don't harm you,
they are good and bring happiness.
Just like you they have a right to live,
that is why I don't want you harming
them.**

**On the contrary,
you must love them.
Many of them come from far away,
they are tired, hungry and thirsty.
If you are good to them,
next year they will be back.
Love them,
don't harm them.**

*—Abaigail Yam Coh
11-years-old
Quintana Roo, Mexico*

THE DOVE

**Beautiful dove,
I have followed your course.
I have dreamed your flight.
The seeds move.**

**Your wings are to my eyes
like moonlight flags.**

**You, morning bird
dream, sing,
sunlight in the friendly look.**

**This afternoon you are flying down
on the almonds and hazelnuts.
We are meeting this afternoon.**

**It is raining now,
raindrops shot by strings,
ropes, and arrows.
You don't see the distance.**

**I see in your eyes
the crops,
the water,
the wind.**

**You are like noon,
dawn,
afternoon and night.**

*—Freddy Alberto Xool
11-years-old
Quintana Roo, Mexico*

*Courtesy of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird
Center and Econciencia*

taining their ties to Pronatura, SAS is assisting Econciencia, a grass roots conservation education organization that reaches out to the children (mainly of Mayan descent) of Quintana Roo, Mexico. Through SAS, Econciencia receives wildlife posters, pictures, and subscriptions to magazines. While such items may seem of little value to those of us in North America, they are precious educational tools for Econciencia—where the children are captivated and inspired by the wondrous diversity of migrants portrayed in full color.

Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) is a partner organization with the Programme for Belize (Pfb), a private, non-profit Belizean organization that serves to bridge private and public sectors in conservation issues. For example, the enthusiastic support of MAS members and associates has helped the Pfb to protect more than 200,000 acres of land in northwestern Belize, undertake research projects, and conduct education programs.

Perhaps the most important partnerships are those between children, for children are our future stewards of the land. On the occasion of the first International Migratory Bird Day (May 8, 1993), the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and BirdLife International joined forces to initiate "Migrant Exchange," a pen-pal program that links students in the Washington, D.C. area with their peers throughout the neotropics. The linkage is based on nothing more than a love and concern for migrants—it crosses political, cultural, and economic lines. On Migratory Bird Day, children at the National Zoological Park wrote letters and made drawings for their unknown peers with whom they share Scarlet Tanagers, Broad-winged Hawks, Red Knots, and Blue-winged Teal. In return, the children at the zoo received letters, poems, and art from concerned students of Econciencia in Quintana Roo, Mexico. These exchanges not only illustrated

that children can come to recognize the value of local wildlife, but they expand their vision to include an appreciation for internationally shared resources as well. The accompanying letters—"Listen Friend" and "The Dove"—make the point better than we can. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and BirdLife International have now successfully created dozens of formal partnerships—all based on neotropical migrants—between schools throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Successful partnerships between neotropical groups generally require that the United States or Canadian partner has the ability to amass resources and that both parties can guarantee a long-term commitment to the venture. For these reasons, partnerships are often best approached by clubs, organizations, or businesses. By no means, however, should this discourage you from establishing partnerships as an individual citizen if you have the means to do so effectively.

Finding a partner group in another part of the world may seem like a daunting task. However, there are organizations whose primary purpose is to establish international partnerships. Both Partners of the Americas (1424 K St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005) and Sister Cities International (The Town Affiliation Association of the United States, 120 South Payne St., Alexandria, VA 22314) link states, cities, or towns with like interests and goals throughout the world. The South-West Regional Office of the National Audubon Society (Regional Representative, 2525 Wallingwood Rd., Suite 1505, Austin, TX 78746) establishes partnerships between United States or Canadian groups and Audubon chapters in the neotropics. If you are interested in establishing pen-pal programs for children, you can contact the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (National Zoological Park, Washington, DC 20008) or BirdLife International (C/O WWF, 1250 24th St., NW,


Washington, DC 20037) for advice and assistance. World Wise Schools (Peace Corps of the United States, 1990 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20526) offers a linkage program with internationally based Peace Corps volunteers that many schools have found especially rewarding.

As a member of a group or as an individual, you can help to conserve neotropical migrants by participating in an existing partnership. Manomet Bird Observatory's Birder's Exchange (PO Box 1770, Manomet, MA 02345) sends donated birding equipment to conservation groups throughout the neotropics. At the request of Latin American conservation biologists and managers, Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO, Latin American Program, Barnes 3B, Escondido Village, Stanford, CA 94305) provides in-country technical ornithological training and support. Because few of the groups in Latin America can afford field supplies, let alone the cost of long-term profes-

sional training, PRBO encourages U.S.-based groups to provide financial assistance. Through its "adopt an acre" initiative, Massachusetts Audubon Society (Programme for Belize, South Great Road, Lincoln, MA, 01773) continues to expand the protection of critical habitat in Belize.

United States or Canadian organizations often find that the greatest needs of their tropical partner organization are funds and field equipment. We offer two suggestions for incorporating "birding for fun" into the donation process: Whether it is the World Series of Birding or a local effort instituted on your own behalf, as the National Audubon Society has shown, birdathons can raise considerable funds for conservation. The sporting spirit of birdathons is notorious for drawing enthusiastic birders from far and abroad to a good natured game of competitive bird counting. If you are one of those people whose birding fun is enhanced by the new models of optical equipment

or the latest edition of your favorite field guide, here is a guilt-free way to up-grade. Go shopping...and donate your used binoculars, scopes, and field guides to organizations in the neotropics.

Next time you hear the watery melody of a thrush or watch a flock of peeps waltzing beyond the waves, think about their wintering grounds, so far away. Think about foreign birdwatchers, young and old, working hard to save them. Make the resolution to participate in an international partnership to the benefit of neotropical migrants. Then, on May 14, the 2nd International Migratory Bird Day, get started—for, if nothing else, the fun of it. 

—Paul R. Ehrlich is Bing Professor of Population Studies at Stanford University, and co-author of *The Birder's Handbook*, *Birds in Jeopardy*, and *Healing the Planet*. Jamie K. Reaser is a doctoral candidate in Biology at Stanford University, and co-author of the soon to be released *Bring Back the Birds: The Natural History and Conservation of Neotropical Migratory Birds*.


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