

Birds in the Balance

Stan Senner, director of Audubon's Migratory Birds Conservation Program, talked to Victoria Irwin about Audubon's latest commitment to the birds of this hemisphere.

WHAT IS *BIRDS IN THE BALANCE*?

It's the National Audubon Society's international campaign to save migratory birds and their habitats in the Americas. The future of birds really is "in the balance." We can go either direction: Take steps now to maintain bird populations, or continue to witness their demise.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION THAT BIRDS FACE NOW?

Birders have been saying for several decades that things aren't like they used to be. Now we have ample data from Breeding Bird Surveys, Christmas Bird Counts, and other monitoring programs to indicate that there are a number of birds showing declining populations. Most of our migratory birds are still common, even abundant. Nonetheless, we see declines in birds from all different habitats, different parts of the country—short-distance migrants, long-distance migrants, wetlands birds, grass lands birds, neotropical migrants and others.

I'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY THAT THE BIRDS IN THEIR BACKYARD ARE DOING JUST FINE.

History has taught us a number of harsh lessons. One is that birds that have been incredibly abundant, like Passenger Pigeons or Carolina Parakeets, are now extinct. Abundance is no guarantee. The fact that most of our favorite songbirds are still common is great news, but we need to be exceptionally alert to early warnings. We have to take steps to ensure that these birds remain common. If we wait until the data indicate a crisis, then in most cases we are too late. The goal of *Birds in the Balance* is not to preserve remnant populations of endangered species, but to maintain the spectacular phenomenon of migration—hundreds of species and billions of individuals. It's that phenomenon that's important.

HOW WILL *BIRDS IN THE BALANCE* HELP?

Our campaign has a policy dimension and is field-based. Our goal is to strengthen and update the laws and international agreements that are designed to protect migratory birds and their habitat. And to make sure that those laws are implemented. On the field side, we encourage Audubon members, other birders, and ornithologists to participate in monitoring programs, to educate the public, and, most importantly, to do something that saves or restores habitat.

HOW DOES THIS FIT IN WITH AUDUBON'S HISTORICAL MISSION AND PRESENT PROGRAMS?

National Audubon was started in response to the shooting of plumed birds in Florida and the southeast. Our roots lie

in bird conservation. So many people who have made vital contributions to bird conservation have been a part of the Audubon program. Research on condors and scientific panels reviewing the fate of the Spotted Owl—all of these are part of the Audubon tradition. National Audubon has reaffirmed that commitment by launching *Birds in the Balance*. But we recognize that the problems effecting birds are bigger than the birds themselves: climate change, population, the health of ancient forests. It's important that Audubon has an agenda in which birds play a prominent part, but it's also appropriate that this agenda addresses fundamental problems that effect life on earth.

WHAT ARE AUDUBON'S PARTICULAR STRENGTHS?

Audubon is uniquely qualified to carry off a program like *Birds in the Balance*. We have significant scientific capability, a great network of sanctuaries, expertise in policy and advocacy, and we have a wonderful membership of 500,000+, many of whom are birders.

LET'S LOOK AT POLICY. WHAT LAWS ARE ON THE BOOKS, AND HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN THEM?

The basic law that protects migratory birds in the United States is the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, dating back to 1918. The effect of the act was to ban the taking of migratory birds and their eggs, unless allowed under a permit program, like a hunting license.

For most of this century, the management of migratory birds, excluding game birds or endangered species, has been one of benign neglect. We made the assumption that if we didn't allow these birds to be shot, they would take care of themselves. It's time to change that attitude. We've seen dramatic change in the extent and quality of bird habitat in this hemisphere. We need to update laws, to have a comprehensive plan for monitoring and studying birds—and for protecting them in their habitats. This must be preventative. It can't only be directed to birds after they are endangered.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE COMMON SENSE.

Things are very conservative in Congress now; chances for new initiatives are difficult. The so-called private property rights movement is latching onto anything remotely environmental, doing its best to hold up or kill such initiatives.

However, a lot of what *Birds in the Balance* is doing doesn't rest on legislation. It's a matter of getting federal agencies to carry out laws and authorities already on the books. For example, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980 requires that Fish and Wildlife Service have a comprehensive monitoring program covering all types of migratory birds. That law isn't fully implemented. The Service hasn't been given the resources to fulfill this mandate.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO IN THIS ARENA?

As with any issue, there are opportunities for citizens to take

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT

Partners in Flight was launched by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in 1990 as a cooperative and comprehensive program for conservation of neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. Partners in Flight promotes conservation of species *before* they become endangered by emphasizing protection of natural habitats and improved management of altered habitats on the North America breeding areas, neotropical non-breeding sites, and the migration routes connecting the two.

Partners in Flight is a framework within which the expertise and conservation programs of individuals organizations such as National Audubon Society can be effectively coordinated with those of other national, state, and private groups. Fifteen United States federal agencies, more than 60 state and provincial wildlife agencies, 29 private conservation organizations, and 14 companies within the forest products industry have joined together as partners in this international effort. Member organizations are represented on technical and regional working groups that identify priority conservation actions needed to ensure long-term survival of neotropical migrants and their habitats.

After just three years, Partners in Flight has succeeded in making conservation of these migrants a priority issue. Innovative partnerships between the public/private sector and between corporations and conservation groups have resulted in a flood of new information on habitat needs and conservation priorities. Funding commitments from both the public and private sector have increased dramatically, and the list of on-the-ground conservation successes is growing at a rapid rate.

Partners in Flight is a model for the kind of proactive and highly cooperative conservation programs required to address international conservation issues. By working together, federal and state agencies, private conservation organizations, and the corporate sector can ensure bird migrations for generations to come.

For more information on Partners in Flight, contact the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, 1120 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 900, Washington, D.C. 20034

up pen, telephone, or computer e-mail and have an impact on public officials. Locally, there are opportunities to participate in zoning and land-use decisions: Help shape a management plan for a National Forest near your home, for example. These are things that make a difference. It's up to our readers, and others, to represent the viewpoint of birds.

WHAT ARE WE DOING INTERNATIONALLY?

Through *Birds in the Balance*, we want to establish relationships with birders and non-governmental organizations in other countries, both to provide assistance and to establish a two-way flow of information and perspectives. One of our dreams is to invite Latin Americans to come and testify at public hearings here in the United States on how our decisions effect birds in their countries.

Our No. 1 priority in international policy is to revitalize the Western Hemisphere Convention, which dates back to the 1940s. There are 22 nations that are signatories to the Convention, which recognizes the importance of migratory birds as a shared international resource. The Convention calls on nations to set aside protected areas of special scenic or natural value, but also habitat for birds and other wildlife. Most programs to implement this Convention are unilateral. Still, we lack a secretariat or permanent organization to develop a multilateral agenda for conservation under this treaty. We're working on that.

CAN WE CAN EXPECT ANYTHING IN THE INTERNATIONAL AREA SOON?

President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore have announced a Summit of the Americas in December 1994 in Miami, involving all the democratically elected leaders of Western Hemisphere countries. National Audubon and other organizations have called on Clinton to add conservation and biodiversity, including migratory birds, to the agenda. We've had a favorable response, and we are working with administration officials to see what kind of a discussion can take place. That's a very exciting opportunity!

WHAT IS *BIRDS IN THE BALANCE* DOING IN THE FIELD?

If the only thing we do is monitor bird populations, we will simply document the demise of more species. We need to encourage birding for a purpose. It's not that one can't have fun, but that fun should bring about conservation of birds.

We encourage birders who know something about bird habitat to be involved in protection and restoration. Our tall grass prairies are down to one percent of their pre-European extent. Nationally less than half of our wetlands are left. There have presumably been corresponding declines in the birds dependent on these habitats.

In Sacramento, Audubon's Bob Barnes devotes full time to matching members with projects, on both public and private lands. Chapters are restoring vegetation and putting up fences to help keep cattle off stream banks. Cattle were fenced out of the San Pedro National Riparian Conservation Area in Arizona received fencing a few years ago, and they've seen a large increase in nesting Yellow Warblers. One of the best aspects about restoration projects is that it doesn't take long for results.

I'VE HEARD ABOUT THE IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS CONCEPT. HOW DOES THAT FIGURE IN?

BirdLife International, formerly the International Council for Bird Preservation, has pioneered a program called Important Bird Areas. They have a series of criteria to objectively assess the importance of any given area for birds, be they migrant, wintering, or breeding populations.

We hope to have a state or two on a pilot basis to test this IBA concept here. For states that have done breeding bird atlases, this is a real opportunity. They've laid the groundwork to identify what is especially important.

Once IBAs are identified, we will have an agenda for conservation. We can decide which areas face the greatest threats. We can look at opportunities for education, or for cooperative conservation efforts with private landowners or government agencies. It's a starting point for habitat-based bird conservation.

WHAT ABOUT PARTNERS IN FLIGHT? IS AUDUBON TAKING PART IN THAT EFFORT?

Partners in Flight is an umbrella program, with more than 100 state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic and professional organizations, and industry groups. The strength of Partners in Flight is that it involves many partners, who are sometimes otherwise adversaries. It is a way of assessing problems, setting priorities, identifying projects that we can agree on, and trying to carry them out on a cooperative basis. National Audubon is active at every level. *Birds in the Balance* is Audubon's piece of this broad program. But we also believe that it's important to have a policy and advocacy dimension. That's one of the areas in which *Birds in the Balance* can go beyond what can be done in Partners in Flight.

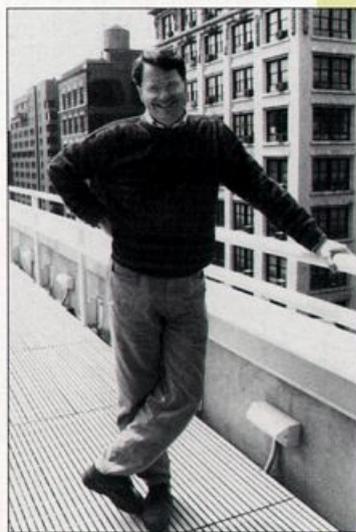
WHAT HAS BIRDS IN THE BALANCE ACCOMPLISHED IN TWO YEARS, AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Many Audubon chapters are tackling new projects for bird conservation. We held the first-ever meeting of Audubon chapters and affiliated organizations in Latin America.

We also have succeeded in restoring and increasing federal appropriations for migratory bird programs in the United States. And we've elevated attention to the Western Hemisphere Convention to the presidential level in this country.

Looking to the future, we want to establish a permanent organization for the Convention. We want to help Audubon's Latin American chapters and affiliates secure the resources they need.

And in five years we want to see major progress in the identification of Important Bird Areas. This is a job that Audubon can't do alone. It will require cooperation with many state organizations and birding groups. The possibilities are unlimited when people join hands to protect birds and their habitat.



Stan Senner

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