

STRATEGIES FOR THE CONSERVATION MONITORING OF RESIDENT LANDBIRDS AND WINTERING NEOTROPICAL MIGRANTS IN THE AMERICAS

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Resumen. – **Estrategias para el monitoreo y conservación de aves terrestres residentes y migratorias neotropicales en las Américas.** – Muchas organizaciones a nivel internacional, regional y local, han concordado con la necesidad de establecer programas de monitoreo de aves a largo plazo en las Américas. Sin embargo, el reto de desarrollar programas de monitoreo nacional e internacional es difícil, debido a la falta de biólogos capacitados u otros recursos en las regiones claves. Más aún, aquellas organizaciones locales que cuentan con personal y recursos para desarrollar un programa de monitoreo, usualmente tienen sus propias metas y objetivos de monitoreo definidos a nivel local. Estos objetivos pueden variar entre regiones y países, pero deben apoyarse durante el diseño y financiamiento de programas de monitoreo a gran escala. Presentamos una estrategia de monitoreo que permite a las organizaciones locales generar resultados de importancia para sus esfuerzos de gestión local, y que al mismo tiempo les permite participar en esfuerzos de monitoreo más amplios, a nivel regional e internacional. Bajo esta estrategia, los resultados de esfuerzos conjuntos sirven a su vez para determinar las tendencias poblacionales y las relaciones de hábitat de las aves migratorias y residentes, a una escala mucho mayor que la que puede ser alcanzada por un esfuerzo de monitoreo aislado. Igualmente, esta estrategia nos permite enfocarnos en resolver preguntas básicas sobre la ecología y la historia natural de las especies de aves migratorias y residentes. A través de un esfuerzo cooperativo como el presentado aquí, y mediante el uso de protocolos que incorporan métodos de monitoreo estandarizados, podemos evaluar la eficacia de las acciones de conservación y manejo a lo largo de las Américas, y al mismo tiempo cumplir con los objetivos de conservación y monitoreo definidos a nivel local.

Abstract. – Many international, regional, and local partner organizations have agreed in the need to establish long-term bird monitoring and research programs in the Americas. However, the challenge of developing national or international monitoring programs is difficult often because of the lack of qualified biologists or other resources in key regions. More fundamentally, locally-based organizations that may have personnel and resources that could be involved in monitoring programs often have their own goals and locally defined monitoring objectives. These objectives may vary among regions and countries, but must be supported when designing and funding monitoring programs. Here we present a monitoring strategy that allows locally-based organizations to generate results that will have relevance to their local management efforts, while enabling them to participate in wider, regional and international monitoring efforts that will

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help to determine population trends and habitat relationships of both migratory and permanent resident birds, at a scale far greater than any single monitoring effort. It also allows to address basic research questions of the ecology and natural history of migratory and resident bird species. Through a cooperative effort such as outlined here, and with the use of protocols that incorporate standardized monitoring methods, we can evaluate the efficacy of conservation and management actions throughout the Americas, while also fulfilling locally-defined conservation and monitoring objectives. *Accepted 3 March 2005.*

Key words: Monitoring, Latin America, Neotropical migratory birds, avian ecology, avian conservation.

INTRODUCTION

The conservation and management of terrestrial landbirds requires the collection of habitat-specific data on population parameters because a vast majority of conservation and management activities are related to the population size of a species (Faaborg 2000). For example, population dynamics of game species must be understood well enough to allow continued harvest activities without negative impacts on future reproduction and population levels. With threatened and endangered species, we must know the distribution of species, the population size, population trend, and primary population parameters in order to develop and evaluate effective conservation plans. For species that are neither harvested, threatened, or endangered, monitoring activities must be adequate to detect population trends so that declining species can be recognized while they are still relatively abundant. Linking bird population data to specific habitat types, land-use practices, or landscapes is perhaps the most effective way to allow managers to use the information effectively in setting conservation priorities and assessing the effect of management actions (Martín 1995, Hutto & Young 2002).

Many international, regional, and local conservation organizations have agreed to the need to establish long-term avian monitoring and research programs in the Americas. Much discussion over the past decade about the establishment of bird monitoring programs

throughout the Americas has established the need for the use of standardized methods in monitoring bird populations (e.g., Ralph & Milá 1994, Geupel & Warkentin 1995, Latta *et al.* 2003). Data on population parameters must be quantifiable and collected in a similar manner on a regular basis so that comparisons can be made across space and time (e.g., Koskimies & Vaisanen 1991). Standardized monitoring methods for landbirds have been presented in Ralph *et al.* (1993, 1996) and are in general use, but challenges remain in developing national or international monitoring programs. These challenges include the potential lack of qualified biologists, methods of integrated data management and dissemination, and (perhaps more often) the lack of key resources such as funding. More fundamentally, locally-based organizations that may have personnel and resources for monitoring programs often have their own goals and locally-defined monitoring objectives. These objectives may vary among regions and countries, but must be supported when designing and funding monitoring programs.

Here we present a monitoring strategy that allows locally-based organizations to generate objectives and results that will have relevance to their locally-defined management efforts, while enabling their participation in wider regional and international monitoring efforts that will help determine population trends and habitat relationships of migratory and permanent residents birds at a scale far greater than any single monitoring effort. It also allows us to address important (and often

TABLE 1. A strategy for the conservation monitoring of landbirds in the Americas based on six levels of monitoring. Increasing the level of monitoring (from level A through level F) increases complexity and cost, but builds the level of knowledge needed for effective conservation. The key questions and techniques from lower levels of monitoring which may still be addressed are included in higher levels also.

Basic questions	Monitoring objectives	Basic technique(s)
CENSUS METHODS		
	Level A: Species presence/absence	
What species are present?		Observations
	Level B: Population size	
How large is the population?		Single set of counts
Where are the birds (and why)?		Habitat measurements
What species are present?		Observations
	Level C: Population trends	
What is the population trend?		Repeated sets of counts
How large is the population?		Habitat measurements
Where are the birds (and why)?		Observations
What species are present?		
	Level D: Ecology/natural history	
What are birds doing (and when)?		Constant-effort mistnetting
What is the population trend?		Repeated sets of counts
Where are the birds (and why)?		Habitat measurements
What species are present?		Observations
DEMOGRAPHIC METHODS		
	Level E: Reproductive success	
What are the causes of population change?		Monitoring of nests Habitat measurements
What is the reproductive rate?		Observations
What is the population trend?		
What are the birds doing (and when)?		
Where are the birds (and why)?		
What species are present?		
	Level F: Survival and productivity	
What are the causes of population change?		Constant-effort mistnetting
What are the rates of productivity and survival?		Color-band resighting
What is the population trend?		Repeated sets of counts
What are the birds doing (and when)?		Habitat measurements
Where are the birds (and why)?		Observations
What species are present?		

novel) basic research questions of the ecology and natural history of migratory and resident bird species. Through a cooperative effort such as outlined here, and with the use of protocols that incorporate standardized monitoring methods, we can evaluate the efficacy of conservation and management actions throughout the Americas, while also fulfilling locally-defined conservation and monitoring objectives.

In building a candidate monitoring scheme, we suggest six conditions to strive for achieving. First, the proposed monitoring strategy should focus on methods that are intended to apply over a relatively small spatial scale, such as a refuge, national park, or forest preserve of perhaps 10,000 km² or less, where management actions need to be based on information from the local area. Within each area, one or more monitoring sites could be established incorporating the methods described here. Second, we propose that all methods should be, to the greatest extent possible, mutually compatible, so that existing programs at a station can, with minimal perturbation, be integrated with other existing or proposed programs at other stations. Third, monitoring efforts should seek to understand factors that involve both Neotropical migratory birds and permanent resident species. To implement this condition, one would conduct surveys both during the northern winter when Neotropical migrants are present, and during the season when most permanent resident species are breeding. Fourth, we emphasize the need for basic research into the ecology and natural history of both resident and migratory birds. As the Partners in Flight Research Working Group (2002) has pointed out, monitoring, research, and management are closely interrelated, and much research depends on well-coordinated monitoring efforts; clearly the mechanisms of population change can best be understood through continued and expanded population monitoring.

Fifth, monitoring efforts should strive to seek to understand both primary and secondary population parameters whenever possible, as it is important that we identify not only negative population trends, but also the demographic factors that might be associated with population declines. And finally, the data at any monitoring station should be able to be upwardly integrated. No matter what the resources of the operator at a station, the data are much more valuable if they contribute to larger programs. Specifically, an operator can contribute to one or more monitoring objectives for a single site, and further, those data can also be aggregated to answer larger, regional questions.

A MONITORING STRATEGY IN SIX LEVELS

We suggest that the general goals of any bird monitoring program can usually be placed among six objectives and their concomitant methods, and these can be arranged semi-linearly in an interactive structure from Level A monitoring to Level F monitoring such that each can form the foundation for the next level (Table 1). As we envision this sequence of objectives, as one moves from level A through level F, one gains additional knowledge concerning avian populations and ecology, the complexity of monitoring methods increases, and costs and personnel needs for the monitoring program increase.

At its simplest, avian monitoring consists of an inventory, that is, the determination of presence or absence of various species (Level A). Building on this foundation, we can construct successively more complex objectives, including: defining population size, and determining habitat relationships based on a broad-scale set of point counts (Level B); estimation of long-term population trends with censuses based on repeated counts (Level C); determining the population ecology and life

history of species through constant mist-netting effort or observations (Level D); the determination of reproductive success and reproductive rate through nest monitoring (Level E); and, the estimation of population composition and limitations through demographic parameters, such as survivorship and site fidelity, with a comprehensive program of mist netting and/or color-band resighting (Level F). With each new level, methods are added, or their intensity is increased, and at the same time understanding and perspective are increased. Below we define more clearly these monitoring levels.

Level A monitoring: Species presence or absence through observation. This level of monitoring is an inventory, and is the basic level of monitoring. Techniques include various counting methods, area searches, targeted searching, and the compilation of data from historic records, birdwatchers, and others familiar with the area. This would result in a checklist of birds over time, such as many protected areas and parks have already accomplished. Checklists are usually augmented by subjective estimates of relative abundance of species, habitat associations, and seasonal changes in presence and abundance.

Level B monitoring: Estimating population size through a single set of counts. Monitoring at this level involves the possibility of evaluation of many habitats and many species. Estimations of population size with variable-distance counts, habitat relationships, and habitat requirements can be generated with this monitoring method (e.g., Hutto *et al.* 1986, Lynch 1989). Point counts are usually considered as the best option during the breeding season, when species are actively singing, but they have also been used at all times of the year. Area search counts (usually 20 min in duration) are also considered a good option during all times of the year, and are especially useful

for flocking species.

This monitoring method reflects guidelines presented in Ralph *et al.* (1993, 1995) and Faaborg (2000), in which a route of many point counts, or a series of area searches is recommended. For point counts, we suggest a minimum of 25 census stations/habitat. Routes are preferentially located on tertiary roads, then secondary roads, and then off-road trails. Primary roads should be avoided to reduce edge effects. Using either a 5-min or 10-min, unlimited-radius point count, we recommend that all birds seen and heard at a station be tallied, both inside and outside a given distance (for example 25 or 50 m). The distance to each individual bird can also be recorded so that detection probabilities and density of birds can be determined rather than relying on the index of number of birds per station (Ralph & Scott 1981, Burnham & Anderson 1984). For area searches, all birds seen within and outside the observer's walking circle are tallied. We suggest specific seasons for surveys; for example, wintering Neotropical migrants could be censused annually during January, or several times during the northern winter, while breeding birds could be censused at a locally-determined date.

The advantages of a census are its ability to detect many species simultaneously, as well as population-level responses to habitats, and the relatively easy logistics of implementation. Its main disadvantages are that roadside habitats will be different in some degree from a random sample of an area, and observer variability may be somewhat higher than in the demographic methods described below. This variability results from the difficulty of learning to identify a large number of species, especially in the diverse tropical forests, and the seasonality of detection rates. Some of these disadvantages can be ameliorated by recording the distance to each individual bird as noted above. Alternatively, it can be advanta-

geous to select a subset of focal species and/or easily recognized species to count (Geupel & Warkentin 1995, Chase & Geupel in press).

In addition to counts, we recommend that vegetation measurements be made at each census station to provide on-the-ground information on habitat characteristics for developing land management guidelines and habitat requirements of the species. At a minimum, such data should allow comparison with remote sensing data or aerial photography. At the ultimate level, it can give fine-scale resolution of habitat preferences. There are many suggestions on how to complete vegetation measurements, but the most likely to prove useful is one that is rapidly taken and gives an overview of the vegetation, without great detail. Such a method, the relevé (Ralph *et al.* 1993), involves estimating the height of layers in the vegetation, identifying principal tree and shrub species or species groups, and determination of percent cover of each species in each vegetation layer. Most birds respond to habitat on this fairly large structural and spatial scale (Verner *et al.* 1986), rather than on the presence or absence of, for instance, the small plants in the herb layer.

Level C monitoring: Estimating population trends with repeated counts. This level of monitoring is an elaboration of level B monitoring, and consists of a system of counts repeated at least annually. While level B monitoring calls only for a single visit to each counting station, if such censuses are repeated annually, they can provide information on population trends (Nur *et al.* 1999). This monitoring protocol (when using 3-min point counts repeated annually) is similar to that of the North American Breeding Bird Survey (Robbins *et al.* 1986). The intent of the breeding bird survey is the detection of large-scale trends in population sizes, so that possible causes of population changes can be investigated with further monitoring, research, or management

actions. The breeding bird survey is thus designed to give us a first warning of population changes across a broad region. When counts are repeated at more frequent intervals, such as monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly, and of longer duration (5 or 10 min or greater), counts can also contribute to the knowledge of ecology and seasonal movements of birds. When vegetation and habitat measures are taken at regular intervals (approximately every 5 years) at each station, as in level B monitoring, it can also potentially provide on-the-ground information on habitat characteristics for developing land management guidelines and habitat requirements of the species.

Level D monitoring: Ecology and life history through constant-effort mist netting. This is a fundamental monitoring method used to determine the presence of rare and secretive species, breeding and migration phenology, age structure of the population, and ecology and life history of species. Constant-effort mist netting may be used to determine population trends if repeated annually (e.g., Faaborg *et al.* 1984, Dugger *et al.* 2001), and it can also provide the foundation for a much fuller understanding of the demographic changes within populations, as well as the potential causes of trends revealed by, for example, census-monitoring methods (e.g., Lynch & Whigam 1995). While constant-effort mist netting is sometimes undertaken once a year, monitoring can be more productive when nets are operated at more regular intervals, such as daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly, in order to give a fuller picture of bird activity around the year.

Constant-effort mist netting conducted throughout the year or in the season of interest can greatly enhance our knowledge of the population ecology and life history strategies of species. When coupled with behavioral observations, repeated counts, or nest monitoring, mist netting can be a valuable, proac-

tive tool in understanding changes in bird populations (Nur & Geupel 1993, Silkey *et al.* 1999), and detailing vital aspects of the ecology and life history of birds. This can include molt patterns, prevalence and diversity of parasites, food habits (through analysis of droppings), and temporal changes in body condition. In addition, level D monitoring can be used to determine migration movements and dispersal patterns of Neotropical migrants (e.g., Ralph & Hollinger 2003), as well as seasonal movements of tropical resident birds. Migration monitoring through constant-effort mist netting can assess migratory patterns, flock composition, and population trends of species during the annual spring and fall migrations. This might be particularly important in coastal areas and areas known as migration stopover sites where birds rest and refuel before continuing on migration.

Mist nets in level D monitoring are set in fixed locations that form a circle, a grid pattern, or a single long line. Depending on bird activity, one might use 10, 24, or even more nets (usually 12 m x 2.5 m, 30 or 36 mm mesh) per site. However, it is important that net numbers and locations at each site are fixed within a site so that timing and location are consistent among years and sites. A given monitoring station may set their own mist-netting schedule with the understanding that capture rates decline precipitously as nets are operated continuously over a few days, and most operations do not generally exceed three consecutive days in a single site except during migration when newly-arriving birds are still prone to net capture. Migration monitoring stations generally set mist nets in fixed positions that are opened every 1–3 days throughout the migratory period. While longer periods between net operations can result in missing major movements (Ralph *et al.*, 2004a), or obscuring trends (Thomas *et al.*, 2004), this might be ameliorated by combin-

ing data from a network of stations (Hussell & Ralph in press, Ralph *et al.* 2004b). All birds netted should be banded with a uniquely numbered aluminum band. In most countries, the capture and marking of migratory birds listed under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act requires a permit from the host country. As in other monitoring methods, vegetation and habitat measures should be taken at regular intervals (approximately every 5 years) at each station.

Level E monitoring: Reproductive success through nest monitoring. The monitoring of birds during the breeding season has as its goal the determination of local reproductive success and estimation of survival rates of resident species (Nur *et al.* 2000). A common and straight-forward method of monitoring reproductive success is through nest searching and nest monitoring. The nest-searching protocol is based on the Breeding Biology Research and Monitoring Database (BBIRD) program described in Martin & Geupel (1993), Ralph *et al.* (1993, 1996), and Martin *et al.* (1997). Plots for nest searching may be variable in size, and can be in any habitat of interest. The plots are systematically searched for nests, and each nest is checked every 3–4 days to determine if it is still active (with eggs or young) or if it has failed. Vegetation measurements are used to provide information on microhabitat choices made by nesting birds and for developing some aspects of land management guidelines, with vegetation assessed at the plant containing the nest, and in the area surrounding the nest site. By directly monitoring nest success on plots, we can also examine rates and consequences of nest parasitism (e.g., by cowbirds), provide badly needed data on life history traits, clutch size, and other demographic features of species, and provide direct information on nesting habitat conditions associated with high success (Martin & Geupel 1993).

Level F monitoring: Survival and productivity through mist netting. Level F monitoring is an elaboration of levels B and D monitoring and seeks to determine the demographic parameters of populations and habitat-specific measures of site fidelity and survival. This local, intensive monitoring complements broad-scale, rapid monitoring (levels B and C) by helping to explain population trends that the more rapid monitoring protocols find. In level F monitoring, constant-effort mist netting provides an index of annual productivity and information on annual survival. By addition of recapture of banded birds, or the resighting of color-marked birds, one can determine site fidelity and site persistence as an index of survival among or between seasons.

Level F monitoring is based on work on wintering migrant site fidelity by Holmes *et al.* (1989), Wunderle & Latta (2000), and Latta & Faaborg (2001, 2002), but can be applied to both resident species and wintering migratory birds. Since the documentation of continent-wide declines in some migratory species (Robbins *et al.* 1989), a growing number of studies focused on the need for habitat specific, demographic and site fidelity data in assessing habitat preferences of wintering migratory birds (e.g., Holmes *et al.* 1989). Because some species were shown to segregate by sex and age class, abundance data alone could be a misleading indicator of population size and habitat preference (Van Horne 1983). Furthermore, abundance cannot be equated with survival, so data on site fidelity, including overwintering site persistence and annual return rate, would be required to assess habitat quality. Thus, recent studies focused on habitat-specific demographics and site fidelity of wintering migrants (Holmes *et al.* 1989, Wunderle 1995, Wunderle & Latta 2000, Marra & Holmes 2001; Latta & Faaborg 2001, 2002), and these studies have set the standard for studies of

overwintering ecology of migrants.

In level F monitoring, constant-effort mist netting, color-banding, and resighting of color-banded birds through area searches is best repeated at intervals throughout the year or season of interest. Intervals between capture sessions are generally quarterly or bi-monthly, with the more frequent option chosen for seasonal studies. After each capture session, resighting of color-banded birds can be accomplished by systematically searching the study site and the immediate area for individual birds, mapping the location of birds on prepared site maps, and following birds to help determine their territories or home ranges. Resighting should continue until observers are confident that no more color-banded birds remain unidentified on the plot.

The protocol presented here is similar in some aspects to the MoSI Program (Monitoreo de Sobrevivencia Invernal) which seeks “to determine for each species the habitat characteristics that provide for adequate overwintering survival and good physical condition at the end of the winter season” (DeSante *et al.* 2003). But MoSI largely attempts to assess habitat-specific overwintering survival of migratory landbirds using mist netting and capture-recapture models alone. Color-banding and resighting individual birds is encouraged as “an excellent means for improving the precision of survival-rate estimates because, with sufficient effort, resighting probabilities can be substantially higher than recapture probabilities.” However, participants may be discouraged by the perception that resighting is more “labor intensive”, and by the lack of access to color bands. But recapture probabilities of wintering migrants are often very low, and if the number of mist netting sessions is several per season, then the labor can approach being as intensive as one requiring resighting of color-banded birds. In addition, a protocol involving resighting color-marked birds has the advantage that

both migrants and permanent residents can be simultaneously studied, data analyses are straightforward, and perhaps most importantly, data need not be pooled among many unrelated sites, but rather, data can be analyzed from a small number of sites (for example, a single reserve) because the inclusion of resighted color-banded birds allows investigators to increase greatly the ability to track more individuals birds in the population.

Constant-effort mist netting can also be used as an alternative method of monitoring reproductive success (DeSante *et al.* 2001), thus building on monitoring levels D and E. Constant-effort mist netting can provide data on reproductive success by determining the number of young birds relative to the number of adult birds that are captured. Promoted as the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program (<http://www.birdpop.org/>), the method depends on a network of banding stations collaborating across the breeding range of the same species, and has been used to explain very broad-scale patterns of bird productivity (Nott *et al.* 2002), but has not been used to determine trends at the level of a reserve, state, or similar-sized region.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior to initiating any of these monitoring programs, important decisions must be made concerning 1) the objective(s) of the monitoring program, 2) the scale of the monitoring that is possible given likely available resources, including funding and personnel, 3) the time of year that monitoring is of interest, and 4) the frequency of the monitoring. In the case of monitoring Neotropical migratory birds on their wintering grounds, the season is well-defined and reasonably consistent. Monitoring of permanent resident species is less circumscribed because breeding of any given species may occur at any time of the year

depending upon latitude, altitude, and climate, and in some species, may even occur more than once per year.

Once implemented, the methods outlined here will produce much-needed information on relative abundance, demographics, and bird-habitat interactions that can be compared among sites and years. Some of these monitoring methods (e.g., counts and mist netting) are much less time-consuming than biologists and managers sometimes think. A very worthwhile monitoring program could involve as few as 10 person-days per year by implementing road-based point counts, area searches, or a single mist netting session annually. A complete monitoring program for a reserve could involve as little as 30–40 person-days per year. The implementation of a long-term landbird monitoring station is therefore quite affordable. We particularly advocate the inclusion where possible of demographic methods (monitoring levels E and F) which seek to understand both primary and secondary population parameters so that we can identify not only negative population trends, but also the problems associated with population declines (Pienkowski 1991).

Finally, a long-term monitoring program can also serve as a basis for the development of a much larger and more comprehensive avian conservation program. We have seen many cases where the initiation of a monitoring program based on constant-effort mist netting, censusing, and/or nest searching, can serve as a facility to train new biologists and volunteers, develop a community-based environmental education program, serve as a basis for the development of research projects and theses for students and other investigators, and catalyze other local and regional conservation initiatives. Monitoring programs that incorporate mist netting can also be used as a public education tool, teaching schoolchildren and adults the beauty of birds and the importance of healthy ecosystems.

As is often the case, training is vital to any avian monitoring effort, and toward this end, joint efforts of various organizations and individuals are underway to offer training in monitoring methods. Such programs are offered by PRBO Conservation Science (formerly Point Reyes Bird Observatory; <http://www.prbo.org>), Klamath Bird Observatory (<http://www.klamathbird.org>), and the U.S. Forest Service's Redwood Science Laboratory (<http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/rsl/>), among others. Monitoring workshops enable individuals and local conservation organizations to provide biologists, land managers, and naturalists with the skills necessary to conduct standardized avian monitoring, as well as the analytical skills necessary to manage and interpret their data (e.g., Nur *et al.* 1999). Course participants are introduced to basic concepts in avian ecology and conservation biology, as well as bird identification, census methodologies, monitoring techniques, and environmental sampling, all adapted to their specific locales. These monitoring courses increase the exchange of information among biologists and monitoring stations throughout the Americas. The contacts and partnerships generated through the training courses, and the establishment of the additional monitoring programs, greatly enhances communication among biologists, fosters cooperation, and increases the effectiveness of larger-scale monitoring efforts advocated here.

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