

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT CONSERVATION PLAN:

Building Consensus for Action at the 1995 International Workshop

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BY MIKE BRITTEN, KATY DUFFY, MARK SCHROEDER, AND GARY JOHNSTON

MORE THAN 550 PARTICIPANTS from state and federal agencies, conservation groups, private organizations, and Latin America attended the 1995 Partners in Flight International Workshop last October 1-5 in Cape May, New Jersey. The workshop goal was to begin developing an international migratory bird conservation plan.

A basic tenet of the Partners in Flight (PIF) conservation effort, begun in 1990 to conserve neotropical migratory birds, is that hundreds of migratory bird species are at risk. Neotropical migrants are those birds that winter in Central or South America and nest in North America, making coordination of both breeding and wintering habitat conservation especially important. The ecosystems on which these species depend extend across political and management boundaries throughout the western hemisphere. Impacts to breeding or wintering areas or to migratory stopover areas threaten the long-term survival of many of these species. Ecosystem management, on a grand scale, is necessary to conserve migratory species.

Our efforts are carried out by state and regional working groups and overarching monitoring, research, international, and information and education working groups. An international Partners in Flight conservation plan is necessary to coordinate and strengthen these efforts. The plan has a precedent in the North American Waterfowl Conservation Plan.

Dr. Michael Soule, science advisor to the Secretary of the Interior, gave an inspiring opening to the conference by reminding us that species protection, i.e., protection of biodiversity, is the basic need. Dr. Jack Ward Thomas, Director of the U.S. Forest Service, vowed his commitment to protecting natural systems on

public lands. Noting that public lands are essential to preserving biodiversity, he warned us to beware of congressional intent to "devolve" the Bureau of Land Management and other public lands by turning over management to the states whose, primary goals may not include species conservation. Dr. Thomas pointed out that Forest Service lands contain the most breeding bird habitat under one jurisdiction in the United States and that congress recently cut funding for his agency's migratory bird monitoring programs.

Mr. Steve Wendt of the Canadian Wildlife Service, recommended using birds as a link for conservation across international boundaries by designing bird monitoring programs (e.g., the joint America-Canadian bird banding effort) with a hemispheric approach. Dr. Roberto Roca, of the Nature Conservancy, outlined the challenges to the Partners in Flight initiative in Latin America. He noted that Latin America contains 50% of all avian species known on earth (3,000+ species) and 175 different ecosystems. While conservation of North American species that winter in Latin America is important, conservation of incredible biodiversity of the neotropics is critical. A major challenge, he explained, is international coordination and cooperation given that 40 countries and more than 200 indigenous languages exist in Latin America.

On Monday morning, a panel discussed "A Study in Bird Conservation Planning: the Mississippi Alluvial Valley." Only 4 million of the original 24 million acres (1.6 and 9.7 million hectares, respectively) in this area remain in their natural state. Habitat conservation needs in the area are integrated through cooperative planning

(among corporate landowners, government agencies, academic institutions, and conservation organizations) for all birds including waterfowl, shorebirds, and migratory land birds. This presentation made obvious the preference of protecting systems before they are drastically altered because recovering highly modified systems is very expensive. Regional conservation plans like the Mississippi Alluvial Valley plan are a model for the Partners in Flight International Conservation Plan.

Terry Rich of the Bureau of Land Management presented results from his nationwide survey of PIF activities by state. Thirty-seven states have formed state working groups to coordinate and implement PIF actions. Eight states have either full-time or part-time paid coordinators. The National Park Service was recognized as making significant contributions to 12 state working groups. The broad conclusion from the survey is that although every state program is different, states are accomplishing migratory bird conservation through Partners in Flight. The greatest advances occur where infrastructure (e.g., a state working group or steering committee or a dedicated PIF coordinator) exists to implement the goals and objectives of the organization. Partners in Flight is currently recruiting and hiring coordinators for four of the regional working groups (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West).

At the workshop, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (which includes all 50 state wildlife agencies) introduced us to "Teaming with



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Wildlife.” The funding initiative promotes an “outdoor enthusiasts” user fee on a range of outdoor equipment (such as backpacks, tents, mountain bikes, recreational vehicles, photographic equipment, bird seed, and field guides). It aims to raise \$350 million annually to fund “wildlife diversity programs.” The proposed fee is similar to the fees that hunters and anglers have been paying for more than 50 years to support game and sport fish conservation programs. The funds would be allocated to states using a formula similar to that used to distribute Dingell-Johnson, Pitman-Robertson, and Wallop-Breau funds for game and fish management programs. Under this proposal, states must provide 25% of project costs and federal agencies are not eligible for funds. However, projects funded under the program could be conducted on federal lands.

Teaming with Wildlife funds would be devoted entirely to nongame species management. The initiative is already endorsed by more than 300 different groups including several companies whose products would be assessed. Reportedly, Speaker of the House of Representatives Gingrich expressed support for a user fee (as opposed to a tax) to support nongame conservation. “Teaming with Wildlife” seems to have momentum and could soon provide funds for land bird conservation (and nongame conservation overall) at a time when funds are desperately needed.

To date, Partners in Flight has stimulated interest and action promoting conservation of migratory birds. The primary benefits have arisen through communication and increased awareness among diverse PIF partners. Concrete examples of conservation action already exist in areas like the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. If successful, the International Partners in Flight Conservation Plan will provide a tool to stimulate conservation on scales (ecosystem, regional, national, and international) that are ecologically meaningful for migratory birds.

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Mike Britten is a Wildlife Biologist with the NPS Colorado Plateau System Support Office in Denver, Colorado. His phone number is (303) 969-6705.