

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Testimony

TESTIMONY OF PETER STANGEL, DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION'S NEOTROPICAL MIGRATORY BIRD CONSERVATION INITIATIVE BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS, CONCERNING H.R.4517.

SEPTEMBER 17, 1998

Mr. Chairman, my name is Peter Stangel, Ph.D., and I am Director of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Initiative. I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee and provide testimony on H.R. 4517, a bill introduced by Chairman Young to assist in conservation of Neotropical migratory birds.

I consider the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act to be one of the most exciting opportunities for bird conservation in recent history. For the past several years, the conservation community has been developing cooperative management plans for Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. The critical element missing in these plans has been a sustainable source of funding to implement on-the-ground conservation. This proposed bill addresses that need. Furthermore, this bill will send a strong message to the bird conservation community that proactive, cooperative approaches to conservation will be the model for the future. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation fully supports this bill, and we look forward to future opportunities to work cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and other partners on conservation of Neotropical migratory birds. We commend Chairman Young and other members of the Subcommittee for their leadership in sponsoring the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act.

As you know, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was established by an Act of Congress in 1984 as a private, 501(c)(3) organization created primarily to assist the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in undertaking activities and programs that further the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plant resources. The Foundation creates public/private partnerships using federal funds that are matched with non-Federal funds for on-the-ground conservation. Chairman Young's bill provides an excellent opportunity for the Foundation to continue its long history of effective partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by working cooperatively with it to conserve Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats.

The Foundation plays a leadership role on behalf of the FWS and other federal agencies with regard to conservation of Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, when evidence for long-term declines in Neotropical migrants was reported, the Foundation launched a major new initiative called Partners in Flight to address the conservation needs of these species. The Foundation's goal in creating Partners in Flight was not simply to award grants to benefit Neotropical migratory birds, but to create an entirely new approach for bird conservation in the Western Hemisphere.

In assessing the causes for declines of Neotropical migratory birds, the Foundation recognized that the problem went well beyond habitat loss, pesticide poisoning, fatal collisions with man-made structures, and other sources of bird mortality. The problem, in a very broad sense, was that the conservation community

was ill-prepared to address a challenge as complex as that of declines of Neotropical migrants. Conserving Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats is an enormous challenge. There are more than 350 species of Neotropical migratory birds, and they occupy virtually every habitat in the Hemisphere at some point during their life-cycle. During migration, an individual bird may cross the boundaries of a dozen or more countries, each with its own conservation priorities and challenges. The habitat in each of these countries is critical for the bird's survival-- the loss of suitable areas in even one country or region can result in mortality. And, to top it all off, we know very little about the ecology and management needs of most Neotropical migrants.

When the Foundation assessed the conservation community's preparedness to successfully address a challenge of this magnitude, we found many gaps in the safety net for Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. For example, we found there was no strategic plan for conservation of Neotropical migratory birds. We found relatively little cooperation on conservation programs among or between federal and state agencies, nongovernmental conservation organizations, and corporations. This included limited involvement of one of the largest private landowners in the United States--the Forest Products Industry. Communication about conservation priorities and ongoing programs among these groups was lacking. Very little funding was available for Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. Virtually no one was devoting attention to conservation in the tropics, where these birds spend the majority of their lives. The birding public was largely unaware of the problems facing Neotropical migrants. Given these findings, we considered it miraculous that Neotropical migratory birds were doing as well as they were.

Partners in Flight was created by the Foundation, federal and state natural resource agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and the forest products industry to address the problems I have just described. We recognized that there were many very effective agencies and organizations doing very good work, but that these efforts were uncoordinated and underfunded. Our goal with Partners in Flight was to develop a planning framework to improve communication, enhance cooperation, bolster funding resources, and to create a long-term strategy that would conserve Neotropical migratory birds as important parts of our culture, economy, and environment. Partners in Flight created a framework within which any organization--federal or state, corporate or nonprofit-- could work cooperatively on strategic programs to benefit Neotropical migrants.

We also felt that Neotropical migratory birds offered an excellent opportunity to literally change the basic approach to conservation. Through Partners in Flight, we sought to show that the most effective time to do conservation was when problems and declines were first detected, not when species were in a crisis situation and being considered listed as threatened or endangered. Although many Neotropical migrants were declining, most were still relatively common. If we acted quickly, we could do conservation when it should be done--when species were still common, but showing signs of concern.

It is important to note that our goal with Partners in Flight was not to create yet another conservation organization, or to increase bureaucracy, but instead to streamline opportunities for partnership and cooperation.

The forest products industry provides a good example of our success. Many conservationists view the timber industry as a villain. We took a different approach. We recognized that in the eastern United States, and parts of the west, industrial and nonindustrial forest lands dominate the landscape. We also recognized that many aspects of bird conservation were compatible with responsible forest management.

Partners in Flight was designed in part to draw the forest products industry in as a proactive partner. Industry representatives were at the table when we created Partners in Flight, and they continue to be key

players. The Foundation recently signed a Memorandum of Agreement with 17 of the largest forest products companies to work cooperatively on forest management issues as they relate to birds. The Foundation has invested more than \$1 million in research, management, monitoring, and education projects on industrial forest lands. It is our firm belief that private timber lands are a critically important component of bird conservation at the landscape level. Prior to Partners in Flight, this sort of cooperation was unheard of.

Other industries have also become involved. Exxon, for example, was an early supporter of the program, and featured a full-length story on Partners in Flight in its shareholder's magazine.

We also used Neotropical migrants to refocus conservation efforts on habitats, rather than single species. Although the single species approach can be very effective and appealing, it is completely impractical for the hundreds of species of Neotropical migrants that needed attention. Instead, we needed to conserve habitats, which would benefit dozens of species simultaneously. And, we wanted to highlight the value of managed lands, not just pristine habitats. Natural habitats do need to be conserved. But, the reality is that our landscape is dominated by highly managed lands, such as industrial forests. It was our opinion that commercial timber lands, grazing lands, agricultural areas, and other managed lands could play a complementary and critical role in conserving Neotropical migrants. The fact that the timber industry has been a key player in Partners in Flight is testimony to our efforts in this regard.

Neotropical migrants also demanded simultaneous conservation on the North American nesting sites, the Latin American wintering areas, and the migratory routes that connect the two. Quite bluntly, even the most effective U.S. based conservation programs would be for naught if we did not simultaneously conserve these birds throughout their ranges. Developing a conservation program for the neotropics is a proactive way to protect and complement the increasingly large investments we make on behalf of these birds here in the United States. The rate of habitat loss in Latin America is critical and its impact on species is tremendous.

We also believed that concern for Neotropical migrants would energize the enormous, growing constituency of birders in North America into an effective force for conservation. Sportsmen have a long and rich tradition of on-the-ground conservation for the species they seek. This tradition is less well-developed among birders. Our goal was to capitalize on the dynamic appeal of Neotropical migrants to stimulate America's estimated 60 million birders to become more active conservationists.

Most importantly, however, Partners in Flight was designed to build strong, effective partnerships for conservation among federal and state agencies, nongovernmental conservation organizations, corporations, and the public. We remain convinced that no single agency, organization, or even country can save Neotropical migrants. The problem is simply too large and complex. The traditional approach--many groups working independently--is doomed to fail. The traditional approach also seems to be based on creating and perpetuating a crisis--like the decline of migratory birds. We took a different, proactive approach. We firmly believed, and continue to believe, that conservation of Neotropical migratory birds is an objective that can be achieved. It will take cooperation at an unprecedented level, but it is possible through Partners in Flight.

Implementing the Partners in Flight strategy described above has not been easy, but progress has been steady, and each year more and more partners see the value of this approach. The face of bird conservation now is very, very different than it was eight years ago when we launched Partners in Flight. Although much important work remains to be done, our results speak to the effectiveness of a cooperative approach.

Today, there are more than 150 agencies and organizations that have signed on to the Partners in Flight

program. This includes 17 federal agencies, 60 state and provincial agencies, 17 of the largest forest products companies in North America, and more than 60 nongovernmental conservation organizations. A new campaign is beginning this month to enroll the support of nearly 2,000 additional bird clubs, Audubon chapters, garden clubs, and others in Partners in Flight.

Partners in Flight participants are organized into regional and state level working groups. Working groups provide a neutral atmosphere in which federal and state biologists, Audubon chapter members, timber company representatives, and potential donors can work cooperatively to develop bird conservation strategies. Over the past several years, Partners in Flight working groups have been developing conservation plans for all birds and their habitats across North America. These plans are being developed cooperatively with the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, and other conservation programs. These plans set specific habitat and population targets for birds that will provide land managers with specific goals for future action. This is an unprecedented undertaking that sets the stage for a new Century of bird conservation.

The Foundation has used its challenge grant program with great effectiveness to "prime the pump" for this new approach to bird conservation. To date, we have awarded 448 grants specifically to benefit Neotropical migratory birds, committing \$13,483,886 of Federal funds, matched by \$23,699,355 from the private sector, for a total of \$37,111,993 in just eight years. Our grants include everything from research to education to economic development projects. A good example of the latter has been our support for birding festivals such as the Shorebird Festival in Cordova, Alaska. In many rural communities, these festivals are a major source of income for local business-people. They also foster greater appreciation for natural resources, and help stimulate conservation programs.

In 1991 we helped secure the first ever federal funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) specifically for Neotropical migratory bird conservation projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. This small grant program, funded by USAID and managed by the Foundation, sends up to \$500,000 to Latin America and the Caribbean annually. To date, we have committed \$2,691,711 of USAID funds to this program, matched by \$4,052,967 from the private sector-a total of 67 projects in Latin America and the Caribbean committing \$6,744,678 for Neotropical migratory bird conservation in the tropics.

Two important components of this partnership with USAID are of interest to this Subcommittee. First, these USAID funds are awarded as challenge grants. All grantees are required to match the federal funds on at least a 1:1 basis. In fact, we are able to achieve nearly a 2:1 match, and this ratio is improving all the time. Challenge grants are effective for several reasons. First, they leverage federal dollars, providing greater value to the taxpayers who support this program. Even more importantly, challenge grants require that local conservation groups make an investment of their own in their conservation projects. In our experience, when all the funding for a project is provided from an outside source, there is reduced ownership on the part of the grantee. By requiring grantees to put some of their own funds into the project, there is a better chance that the project will be completed satisfactorily.

Raising matching challenge funds can be difficult for grantees, particularly small conservation groups in Latin America. Our experience suggests, however, that most groups can successfully raise matching funds. Furthermore, raising matching funds helps many groups develop stronger fundraising skills, which will only benefit them in the long run.

Second, the Foundation has created an advisory committee that helps guide our USAID grant program. This

advisory committee includes representatives from USAID, FWS, Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, American Bird Conservancy, and other conservation organizations. This committee provides background and guidance that dramatically increases the effectiveness of our grant program. Perhaps even more importantly, by involving others in the project review process, we enhance opportunities for cooperation and partnership. Our advisory committee is a volunteer group that works efficiently and effectively to improve our grants program in Latin America.

To summarize, the success of the Partners in Flight program over the past eight years has created a foundation of communication, cooperation, and partnerships of unprecedented scale in the history of bird conservation.

In fact, in my opinion, there has never been a more opportune or exciting time in which to launch a major conservation program such as that proposed by Chairman Young. Three key factors create this opportunity.

First, most of our Neotropical migrants and their habitats are still common. Only a handful of the 350 species of birds in this category are Threatened or Endangered. Many are declining, but most are still common. If we act now, we can prevent the political, financial, and biological complications that invariably accompany Endangered species controversies.

Second, never before has there been such a groundswell of interest in birds and birding. A recent survey revealed that birding is the fastest growing outdoor recreation, with an increase in participation of 155% over the past decade. While the numbers of hunters and fishers holds steady or decreases, the number of birders is increasing dramatically, even outstripping growth in golfing, biking, and other popular sports. These new activists will demand conservation of birds and their habitats, and will also become the core of new fundraising and awareness efforts.

Finally, and critically, as a result of Partners in Flight there is now a framework within which all interested agencies and organizations can participate in strategic conservation programs for Neotropical migratory birds both here and in Latin America. Through development of the conservation plans discussed above, there is now a strategy toward which all groups can contribute.

The one ingredient lacking in this otherwise successful formula is funding. Although the Foundation, USAID, FWS and many other partners have increased funding for Neotropical migratory birds, the needs far outstrip what is available.

Mr. Chairman, the bill proposed by Chairman Young will go a long way toward meeting the need for critical funding of Neotropical migratory bird conservation needs. I would like to extend a word of appreciation to Chairman Young for his leadership in development of H.R. 4517, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act. This Act provides a framework for the Secretary of the Interior to provide funds for projects that assist in the conservation of Neotropical migrants and their habitats. Activities that support implementation of conservation programs, the development of sound scientific information on populations, habitats and threats, and partnerships with foreign governments and local communities are all envisioned in the bill.

I believe it is important to note that if implemented, funding for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act will have immediate application in the field. As a result of Partners in Flight activities over the past several years, there are already strategic plans for bird conservation being developed. In many cases, all these plans lack is start-up funding. In Latin America alone, there have been recent meetings in

Mexico and Central America to develop conservation programs modeled after Partners in Flight. By making funds available for implementation of projects identified as priorities in these areas, you will be sending a strong signal of support to our partners in Latin America.

As I have stated above, the Foundation has considerable experience implementing a program such as that described in Chairman Young's bill. Although we are fully supportive of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act, we would like to make some suggestions, based on our experiences, that may make the bill more effective.

In particular, we would like to stress two points: the value of matching funds to leverage federal funds, and the critical importance of partnerships and cooperation in implementing conservation programs.

The Foundation has been very successful leveraging federal funds; we believe that the FWS can be equally effective doing so through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act. In our grant program at the Foundation, we have a Congressional mandate to match each \$1 in federal funds with \$1 from the private sector. In reality, each \$1 in federal funds is leveraged with at least \$2.5 from our partners. It has taken us several years for us to reach this match level. Our much newer partnership with USAID for Neotropical migratory birds requires a 1:1 match from partners, but is currently returning better than 1.5:1 ratio of nonfederal to federal funds. We anticipate that this ratio will continue to increase.

We believe that a match ratio of 1:1 would be very practical for funds disbursed through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act. We also suggest that FWS encourage its grantees to continually strive to improve this ratio. Cash matching funds should be required of U.S. and Canadian groups requesting funds, and either cash or in-kind services and products can be required of grantees in Latin America. This formula has worked quite well for the Foundation.

Second, we strongly urge that the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act be used to further strengthen the partnerships and cooperation that has developed through the Partners in Flight program over the past eight years. We believe that it is impossible to effectively conserve Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats without proactive partnerships. We also believe that it is critical for the FWS to reinforce cooperative behavior among its federal, state, and nongovernmental partners through this proposed Act.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act builds upon the conservation model that Congress created to assist African and Asian elephants, rhinoceroses, and tigers. We suggest that the current Act be broadened to encompass the collaboration of the many other federal and state agencies, nongovernmental conservation groups, and even industries whose activities have a bearing on Neotropical migratory birds. I note that the bill requires that the Secretary provide a copy of all grants received to the Migratory Bird Commission. This has great value, and will help stimulate cooperation between the Commission and the many other groups that are active partners in conservation of Neotropical migratory birds. We believe it is very important, however, for the FWS to actively seek the input of key groups that are involved with conservation of Neotropical migratory birds and their habitats.

At the Foundation, we solicit this cooperation through our advisory committee described above. This advisory committee works very efficiently and effectively, and greatly assists our program. I believe that a similar arrangement could be used by FWS. Drawing in key partners will assist FWS in project review, reducing program overlap and redundancy, stimulating partnerships, increasing matching funds, and improving the effectiveness of on-the-ground conservation programs. Committees such as the one we formed can be established with minimal effort, and can serve to build a strong coalition among key partners

in conservation of Neotropical migratory birds.

In fact, I suggest that FWS could use such an advisory committee to further increase cooperation among the several large bird conservation programs that now exist-the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Western Shorebird Reserve Network, Partners in Flight, and several fledgling programs that are now developing. It is imperative that these programs be closely coordinated. The FWS could accomplish this through an advisory committee established as part of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Enhancement Act.

Mr. Chairman, I want to again congratulate Chairman Young and the other members of the Committee for their leadership on the Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act. Over the past several years, the conservation community has come together as never before to develop a coordinated and cooperative approach to conservation of Neotropical migratory birds. New funding through this bill would reward these partnerships, and launch a new era in nongame bird conservation. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation fully supports this bill, and we look forward to providing the Subcommittee and the FWS with any assistance that might be needed. Thank you very much for the invitation to testify on this important bill.

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