



Shaping the future for birds

U.S. House of Representatives

Natural Resources Committee – Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans

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American Bird Conservancy

Chairwoman Bordallo, members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you on behalf of my organization, American Bird Conservancy, for holding this hearing today on three important bills: the first, bipartisan legislation (H.R. 2213) seeking the reauthorization of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Grants Act; second, a bill (H.R. 3433) to amend the North American Wetlands Conservation Act; and third, legislation (H.R. 3537) to reauthorize the Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program Act.

I am here today as Vice President for Conservation Advocacy for American Bird Conservancy, a national, not-for profit organization whose mission is to conserve our native wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas.

To begin, I would simply say that American Bird Conservancy supports all three bills that are before the Subcommittee for consideration today and urges their expedited markup and passage by Congress.

The Federal Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program has successfully provided students in kindergarten through high school with an important opportunity to learn about migratory birds, their migration patterns, and their habitat requirements by focusing on birds often found in the students' own backyards. Since the Junior Duck Stamp legislation was enacted in 1994, there have been hundreds of thousands of students who have been educated on the importance of bird conservation, and permitted students to demonstrate what they have learned through their creation of truly stunning works of art. This program successfully serves to inspire the next generation of bird conservation leaders and merits Congress' continued support.

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act has helped to conserve wetlands in North America for more than twenty years by providing grant money for projects that would provide habitat conservation for wetlands-dependant species. The law requires each federal dollar put into this grant program to be matched by at least \$1 in non-federal funds, and projects may be completed in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico. As currently written, Canadian projects must be matched solely by American match money, and any funds raised by Canadian organizations and local governments are not counted towards the required match. H.R. 3433 would allow Canadian organizations and local governments to contribute up to 50% of the required matching funds. And because these organizations are already raising non-matching funds, these monies could be counted towards the match if H.R.3433 is passed.

As an organization that works with migratory birds, which by definition cross international borders during their migration patterns, we know that protection and restoration of wetland and upland habitat must occur across the continent if the goal is to protect the species. By previous amendment, Mexican projects are able to raise their matching funds from Mexican sources. But because Canadian projects are required by law to raise matching funds solely from the United States, these projects are suffering from a lack of funding. H.R.3433 would rectify this discrepancy, and allow Canadian sources to contribute monies to projects in their own communities. This amendment can only serve to raise more money for this important program, and enable these partnerships to conserve the habitat that is so important to migratory bird species.

With our unqualified support of the first two bills I would like to spend just a bit more time on the third, Congressmen Kind and Gerlach's reauthorization of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act. For those on the subcommittee who aren't familiar with my organization, American Bird Conservancy acts to address the full spectrum of threats to birds, safeguarding the rarest bird species, restoring habitats, and finding policy solutions that reduce threats to America's native birds. In so doing, American Bird Conservancy has a great deal of experience working with our partners in accomplishing the goal of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act - the long-term conservation of these birds and their habitats for future generations.

In last year's prescient Subcommittee hearing entitled, "Going, Going, Gone? An Assessment of the Global Decline in Bird Populations," my colleague, Dr. George Wallace, testified that of the 341 neotropical migratory species found in the U.S., 127 are known to be in decline – 60 severely, suffering a population loss of more than 45% in just the past 40 years. This analysis was confirmed earlier this year in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *U.S. State of the Birds* report, the most comprehensive assessment to date on the status of bird populations.

The reasons for this startling decline of migratory bird species in the U.S. are many and varied. Threats such as inappropriately lit communications towers, poorly placed wind turbines, unnecessary night lighting of tall buildings, or even glass windows in our homes that reflect the surrounding environment and consequently cause the sickening 'thump' we have all heard from a bird strike – all play a contributing role to the decline of many bird population levels.

While science continues to document the growing impact on bird species from these threats, it is also advancing practical solutions to them. Yet scientists and conservationists agree that the major source of mortality comes from habitat loss through conversion for human uses, and habitat degradation from ecologically unsustainable land uses. Resource extraction and a growing human population have resulted in more development and land conversion for suburban sprawl. There are simply fewer and fewer places for our native birds to breed and live, especially large blocks of unbroken natural habitat. Meanwhile deforestation, especially in Latin America, is accelerating at an alarming rate, driven by the needs of a rapidly expanding human population that has tripled in the last fifty years. Estimates of the percentage of remaining forests that are lost each year in the Neotropics are between 1-2%.

While the situation is clearly dire for many species of our native, migratory species, such as Golden-winged and Cerulean warblers, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Reddish Egret, and Wood and Bicknell's Thrushes, there is a federal program in place that has an established and proven track-record of helping to reverse this trend: the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Grants Act (NMBCA).

The NMBCA supports partnership programs to conserve birds in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean, where approximately five billion birds of more than 500 species, including some of the most endangered birds in North America, spend their winters. Highly leveraged projects include activities that benefit bird populations such as habitat restoration, research and monitoring, law enforcement, and outreach and education.

In a report produced last year by American Bird Conservancy entitled, *Saving Migratory Birds for Future Generations: The Success of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act*, we found the grant program has worked well in helping reverse habitat loss and advancing conservation strategies for the broad range of neotropical birds that populate America and the Western Hemisphere. These public-private partnerships along with the international collaboration they foster are integral to conserving vulnerable bird populations.

Here is just one example of the work accomplished through the NMBCA: Last year, ABC and its partners Fundacion ProAves (Columbia), Fundacion Jocotoco (Ecuador) and Asociacion Ecosistemas Andinos (Peru) received a \$204,500 NMBCA grant, and then matched it with \$613,500 in privately-donated funds to reduce habitat loss in the northern Andes, an important winter home for many migratory birds. This coalition worked together to acquire and preserve the few remaining obtainable patches of high elevation natural forest; we then partnered with local communities to reforest nearly 2,500 acres with 660,000 native tree species; and, finally, we persuaded local ranchers and coffee growers to use bird friendly cultivation practices such as the production of shade grown coffee which maintains a canopy of natural trees over coffee shrubs. This was a win-win solution for both birds and coffee farmers since coffee is the second most valuable exported legal commodity on earth (*after oil*) and their efforts to produce shade grown coffee adds value to their product, resulting in the farmers receiving higher prices than typically commanded on the world market.

Since 2002, there has been growing demand for grants to fund migratory bird conservation efforts. From 2002-2007, grant money has gone out to 44 U.S. states and 34 countries, funding 225 projects, impacting almost three million acres of critical bird habitat. On average, about 120 qualifying proposals are submitted every year, but grants are awarded to about 40 due to the program's current limited funding. In 2008, 37 grants totaling \$4,431,295 were awarded, but 63 projects, worth nearly \$10,000,000, were not funded. From these numbers, it is clear that there is a constant demand for funding that currently is not being met.

ABC strongly believes increasing the resources for this program is essential to achieving conservation goals critical to our environment and economy. Just as importantly, this federal program is a good value for taxpayers, leveraging over four dollars in partner contributions for each one that the government spends.

And, while it is not the explicit goal of the grant program, it is my strong belief that this grant is a good example of serving another important role – that of an effective tool of U.S. foreign policy. In a recent speech at the Council of Foreign Relations, U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton said:

“President Obama has led us to think outside the usual boundaries. He has launched a new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect. Going forward, capitalizing on America’s unique strengths, we must advance those interests through partnership, and promote universal values through the power of our example and the empowerment of people. In this way, we can forge the global consensus required to defeat the threats, manage the dangers, and seize the opportunities of the 21st century. America will always be a world leader as long as we remain true to our ideals and embrace strategies that match the times. So we will exercise American leadership to build partnerships and solve problems that no nation can solve on its own, and we will pursue policies to mobilize more partners and deliver results.”

Those words apply precisely to the NMBCA. It is, “engagement based on common interests, shared values, and common respect” and the grant program works because it builds “partnerships” and “promotes universal values”. Frankly, there is no surer way to win the ‘hearts and minds’ and build collaborative relationships among people than by assisting with the conservation of species that, literally, inhabit our respective backyards at different times of the year. Migratory birds are part of our shared history, culture, and legacy to our children – and conserving them for these future generations is a “problem no nation can solve on its own,” hence the need and effectiveness of this grant program.

Therefore, ABC fully supports Congressmen Kind and Gerlach’s bill, H.R. 2213, which will meet the growing conservation needs of America’s migratory birds by ensuring the authorization levels of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act meet the level of need.

In closing, Madame Chair, as you and the other members of this Subcommittee well know, birds are not only beautiful and interesting creatures eagerly welcomed by millions of Americans into their backyard every year; bird watching is also big business. According to a new report released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, birdwatchers contributed \$36 billion to the U.S. economy in 2006, the most recent year for which economic data are available. The report, “Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis,” shows that total participation in bird watching is strong at 48 million and has remained steady since 1996. Birds also naturally provide billions of dollars worth of pest control each year, benefitting farmers and consumers alike.

American Bird Conservancy believes that through the continued support and leadership by federal government in bird conservation through the NMBCA, combined with the active help of its citizens, we can restore America’s birds and the habitats on which they depend.