

Testimony of Mike Daulton
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Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
In Support of H.R. 518, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act of 2005
June 23, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Mike Daulton, Director of Conservation Policy for the National Audubon Society. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 518, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act of 2005, and for the opportunity to discuss the many benefits of this program for the conservation of America's native migratory birds.

H.R. 518 would improve the conservation and management of neotropical migratory birds by supporting an effective conservation program and providing financial resources. We applaud this important and timely legislation.

National Audubon Society's 27 state offices and more than 500 local chapters throughout the United States serve more than one million members and supporters. Audubon's mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. Our national network of community-based nature centers and chapters, scientific and educational programs, and advocacy on behalf of areas sustaining important bird populations, engage millions of people of all ages and backgrounds in positive conservation experiences.

Audubon is the North American partner of Birdlife International, a global alliance of conservation organizations working together for the world's birds and people. Together with Birdlife International, Audubon is working to identify and protect the world's most important habitat areas for birds, collectively known as Important Bird Areas, or IBAs. To date, Audubon has identified more than 1,800 IBAs in 40 states and continues to identify new IBAs throughout the country. These sites serve as a powerful tool for prioritizing and targeting conservation effort, as well as an opportunity for international cooperation for the benefit of the shared migratory bird resource.

The National Audubon Society is pleased to commend Congressman Ron Kind and Chairman Wayne Gilchrest for important bipartisan work in the 108 th Congress on H.R. 4114, a bill that proposed to both make important clarifications to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and also reauthorize the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act. We are gratified that after that bill received bipartisan support in this committee and in the Senate, the Congress enacted the important changes to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. We commend Congressman Kind and Chairman Gilchrest for addressing the unfinished business of H.R. 4114 by turning now to the critical need to reauthorize the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) has done a great service for the conservation of neotropical migratory birds since it was enacted in 2000, awarding more than 140 grants for pro-active, on-the-ground conservation projects benefiting America's native migratory birds. These grants have been distributed across more than 30 countries in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, and include efforts to protect and manage bird populations and habitats, to increase research and monitoring, to improve law enforcement, and to promote community outreach and education programs.

Unfortunately, despite these numerous conservation efforts, many neotropical migratory bird species are experiencing population declines. For example, the rufa subspecies of the Red Knot, a small neotropical migratory shorebird that visits Delaware Bay during its migration, is believed by some experts to be on a path toward extinction as soon as 2010.

More than 70 species of neotropical migratory birds are listed on the national list of Birds of Conservation Concern of the United States, including the majestic Peregrine Falcon, which breeds immediately adjacent to the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge in Wisconsin, and the elusive Black Rail, which can be found in the marshes of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland. H.R. 518 is necessary not only to support and build upon the great success to date of the NMBCA, but also to improve the conservation of declining neotropical migratory birds.

The Importance of Neotropical Migratory Birds to People and Our Economy

Neotropical migratory birds are bird species that breed in North America and spend their winters in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. These are among the most attractive and interesting birds to America's 46 million bird watchers, and drive many of the economic benefits that bird watchers provide to local communities.

Each year, thousands of birders flock to see neotropical migratory bird species all across the United States during their migration seasons. During the Spring migration in April and May, bird watchers visit the Gulf Coast, including the coast of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, to try to catch a glimpse of the migratory songbirds that stop by there, like the Scarlet Tanager and the Baltimore Oriole.

During the Fall migration in September, birders visit the Atlantic and Pacific coasts to try to spot neotropical migratory songbirds and shorebirds. Away from the coasts, bird watchers visit sites like Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania, Hawk Ridge in Minnesota, and Corpus Christi in Texas to see migrating raptors like the Swainson's Hawk.

These birders, out to spot neotropical migrants, can provide a significant boost for local economies during the migration periods. In fact, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2001 46 million birders spent \$32 billion on pursuing their interest in bird and wildlife watching. Birders spend money on equipment, birding trips and vacations, bird food, park fees, hotels, food, and more. More than 18 million people take trips specifically for bird watching. These trips alone account for a staggering \$7.4 billion in spending by bird watchers each year. Overall, these purchases have a ripple effect in the economy that leads to a total of \$85 billion in economic benefit and generates more than 800,000 jobs, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Neotropical migratory birds also are an invaluable asset for farmers. These birds consume many detrimental insects; this prevents the loss of millions of dollars each year. Furthermore, maintaining healthy bird populations is essential to maintaining the healthy ecological infrastructure on which our society relies so heavily.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act: A Conservation Success Story

We strongly support H.R. 518 because it builds on the conservation success story of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act.

The grants provided by the NMBCA for international conservation work protect the investments made to conserve neotropical migratory birds here in the United States. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, restoring ecosystems like the Everglades, the Upper Mississippi River, and the Chesapeake Bay, and funding cooperative bird conservation efforts through initiatives like the North American Bird Conservation Initiative and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Joint Ventures. These investments are driven in part by the desire and need to conserve migratory birds, for the outdoor recreation and enjoyment they create, for the ecosystem services they provide, and for the economic benefits they generate.

However, once these birds leave the United States, either to go to Canada to breed or to Latin America or the Caribbean to spend their winters, they can be exposed to a range of other threats that hold the potential to significantly undermine conservation efforts in the United States. For example, bird surveys show that a variety of America's native migratory grassland-dependent birds, like the Dickcissel and Swainson's Hawk, are in decline. This information may lead fish and wildlife agencies and their conservation partners to make increased investments in protecting grassland birds in the United States. But these efforts would be undermined without additional investments in protecting the wintering range of these species, where they are exposed to harmful pesticides when they spend time in agricultural fields in South America.

Further, information gained from monitoring these birds throughout their entire range can be helpful in targeting and prioritizing conservation effort in the United States. For example, the rufa subspecies of the Red Knot has been studied using funds provided through the NMBCA throughout its range. When the population experienced a precipitous decline, these data were helpful in isolating the conservation effort needed to rebound the population. Studies have shown that no overwhelming threats to the Red Knot exist in its breeding and wintering ranges. The understanding of a more stable situation in the breeding and wintering ranges has helped scientists take out the guess work and more accurately isolate the primary conservation challenge: A lack of food for the Red Knots when they visit the Delaware Bay during their migration.

The NMBCA offers opportunities for coordinated effort among habitat sites in the United States and abroad. Many NMBCA grants have involved multinational partnerships that allow conservation work to be coordinated along the migratory route of particular species. The partnerships that have been forged through NMBCA-supported projects have brought an exchange of ideas, information, and "know how" to conservation efforts in Latin America. In the process, on-the-ground knowledge and know-how is funneled back from the south to the north, further enriching a hemispheric effort for the birds and biodiversity conservation.

The NMBCA is in itself recognition of the basic fact that many species depend on a chain of critically important habitats along their flyways, and the destruction or degradation of just one site can have a profound impact on an entire species population. The future survival of many of the 400 species of U.S. breeding neotropical migrants may ultimately depend on a range-wide, hemispheric approach to species conservation that falls outside the purview of the current major conservation initiatives in the United States.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act is pro-active, action-oriented, and built on a foundation of cooperation and partnership. The NMBCA allows species to be conserved before they are so critically imperiled that they are on life support. The funds go directly to on-the-ground projects to restore habitat, provide law enforcement protection, and monitor populations. Scientists, birdwatchers, sportsmen, farmers, and conservationists, from both the United States and abroad, are brought together in cooperative partnerships for the protection of a critically important shared natural resource, our migratory birds.

H.R. 518 Will Build Upon the Success of the NMBCA

Audubon is pleased to offer strong support for H.R. 518, which will build upon the success of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act and strengthen it in several ways. H.R. 518 would capture conservation opportunities missed under the current structure of the NMBCA while allowing for broader and more continuous participation in the program by community partners.

H.R. 518 Captures Conservation Opportunities Missed by the Current NMBCA

The National Audubon Society strongly supports language in H.R. 518 that would raise the authorized level of funding for conservation projects under the NMBCA from \$5 million annually to \$15 million by 2009. This increase in funds will allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to capture more conservation opportunities, leverage large amounts of private funding, and significantly expand the program's conservation impact.

Investments in the NMBCA have paid off by strongly leveraging private investment and thereby dramatically multiplying the program's conservation impact. Through FY 2005, \$13.5 million was available through Congressional appropriations for grants under the NMBCA. This modest investment resulted in more than \$64.8 million in matching funds and in-kind contributions. Overall, the program matched private funds to federal funds at a rate of nearly 5:1. For every \$1 invested, \$6 was spent on conservation, representing a tremendous leveraging of a modest federal investment.

Unfortunately, to date the program has not fully captured the opportunities to leverage such large amounts of private investment. Since the first NMBCA grants were awarded in 2002, the program has only been able to award 146 grants out of the 690 proposals received, meaning only 21% of the eligible projects proposed have been funded. Out of the \$53.6 million in grants requested since the program began, the NMBCA could only afford to award \$13.5 million of those requests, or 22% of the requested conservation funds. This represents an inadequate response to the overwhelming public demand for the program. The increased authorization levels in H.R. 518 would allow the government to more adequately satisfy the high public demand for project funding.

Since the NMBCA program began, more than \$150 million in matching funds and in-kind contributions have been left on the table because federal funds were not available to provide the federal match. This suggests an enormous opportunity for successful expansion of the program. The increased authorization level included in H.R. 518 recognizes this opportunity and takes an important step toward capturing the private investments and thereby significantly expanding the program's conservation impact.

H.R. 518 Improves Community Involvement

National Audubon Society supports language in H.R. 518 that would reduce the matching requirement from 3:1 to 1:1. The Fish and Wildlife Service has stated that the 3:1 match is difficult for many partners to meet, and successful partnerships may find it difficult to sustain their participation in the program at that level over time. The reduced matching requirement would allow some high-quality projects that do not meet the current 3:1 match to be funded, while expanding participation to a wider range of non-governmental organizations and partners.

Since 2002, federal investments in NMBCA projects have leveraged private funding at a rate of nearly 5:1, significantly exceeding the current 3:1 matching requirement. Audubon hopes and expects that the Fish and Wildlife Service would continue to favor funding for projects with a higher match when distributing grant monies, while also finding new opportunities to involve partners and fund high quality projects that cannot meet the current statutory requirement.

H.R. 518 Improves Conservation of Critical Breeding Habitat

National Audubon Society supports language in H.R. 518 that would allow projects in Canada to receive funds from the NMBCA. Canadian habitats such as the Boreal Forest host large numbers of breeding neotropical migratory birds. The Boreal Forest spans from Alaska to the Atlantic Ocean, covering 1.4 billion acres, and accounts for 25 percent of the world's remaining forest. A full 40 percent of North America's waterfowl and one-third of North America's land birds breed in the Boreal Forest. It is critical to ensure that these breeding grounds remain healthy. Under the current structure of the NMBCA, efforts to conserve these critically important habitats can receive no consideration for grant awards.

The language in H.R. 518 phases in Canada's participation at a funding level of \$10 million. This is a reasonable provision. The demand and need for the NMBCA program is extremely high in Latin America and the Caribbean and funding alternatives are limited in these regions. It is appropriate to phase in Canada only when funding reaches a higher level.

Conclusion

National Audubon Society is very pleased to offer our strong support for H.R. 518. Neotropical migratory birds are important to America's more than 40 million bird watchers, vital to the United States' economy, and critical links to the overall health of our shared environment. The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act has been an unqualified success, leveraging modest federal investments into a heavily multiplied and impressive conservation impact. We applaud the timely introduction of H.R. 518 to reauthorize and improve upon this impressive conservation success story. We are pleased to commend Congressman Ron Kind for his leadership in introducing this important legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.