

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

STATEMENT OF THE AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

IN SUPPORT OF THE NEOTROPICAL MIGRATORY BIRD CONSERVATION ACT

(H.R. 39)

FEBRUARY 11, 1999

I am Gerald W. Winegrad, Vice President for Policy of the American Bird Conservancy. ABC is a national organization dedicated to the conservation of wild birds in the Americas. Our staff of ornithologists and other specialists work on programs critical to avian conservation including Partners in Flight, the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program, Pesticides and Birds Campaign, CATS INDOORS!, and our collaborative partnership through a 78 member organization Policy Council. The Policy Council includes conservation groups from across the U.S. such as National Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, Environmental Defense Fund, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, American Ornithologists Union, and the Peregrine Fund. ABC also administers a small grants program to foster bird conservation in Latin America and the Caribbean. We thank you for the opportunity to testify and submit these comments in support of H.R. 39, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act. This legislation authorizes \$8 million annually for matching grants (33% Federal share) to be made through the Secretary of the Interior for the conservation of neotropical migratory birds. At least 50% of the funds would be used for projects outside the U.S.

This legislation is important in its Congressional recognition of the serious decline in many populations of migratory birds and through its efforts to help finance conservation projects both in the U.S. and in Latin America and the Caribbean, where most U.S. birds spend their winters. American Bird Conservancy has been pleased to have worked with Senator Spencer Abraham's office on the original introduction of last session's S. 1970 and this session's Senate counterpart to H.R. 39, S. 148. We are hopeful that the introduction and passage of such legislation, with bi-partisan support, will begin an era of Congressional recognition of the need for a comprehensive approach to resolve the serious threats to migratory bird populations in this country and in nations to our South. These threats include: habitat loss; habitat fragmentation; pesticides and other contaminants; introduced exotic species; human constructed barriers to migration such as communication towers; free-roaming domestic cats; and insufficient funding and incentives to better manage existing habitat.

We support the passage of H.R. 39 and would ask that the full \$8 million funding be appropriated in the FY 2000 budget to implement the migratory bird grants program as soon as possible, as is envisioned in the

legislation. There are critical needs for this funding both in the U.S. and in Latin America and the Caribbean. We would request that the bill be amended to provide for an advisory panel to help guide the Secretary of Interior in decisions for funding under the act. Such a provision exists in S. 148. Further, the legislation should specify the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the administering agency under Interior as is done in the Senate bill. The Fish and Wildlife Service has significant experience in migratory bird conservation through its Office of International Affairs and its Migratory Bird Management Office. We also suggest that the match from the U.S. funds be increased to at least 50% of a project's cost for U.S. projects from the bill's 33%. We would suggest that the U.S. match be at least 50% for projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, with discretion in the Secretary to increase that to 75% dependent on the priority of a project. This would facilitate the involvement of NGO's and other agencies, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This legislation is before the Congress at an opportune time in bird conservation. Partners in Flight bird conservation plans are being completed this year for all areas of the U.S. These plans, developed by a unique partnership of Federal and State agencies, private corporations and landholders and conservationists, detail the needs for avian species in 52 distinct geophysical units. Priority species are described and the plans specify on-the-ground management measures necessary to enhance populations of migratory birds. In addition, the United States National Shorebird Conservation Plan and the North American Colonial Waterbird Conservation Plan are under development. Most importantly, this large scale planning process is being combined into a North American Bird Conservation Initiative with the full participation of Canada and Mexico. Excellent meetings have been held recently in Puebla, Mexico on the North American Initiative and other nations are joining in these efforts. Passage of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act and the appropriation of the full \$8 million will indicate to U.S. planners and to the international community that the U.S. is serious about acting to conserve avian species.

Today, there are approximately 9,040 species of birds on Earth with about 852 found in the U.S. Of these U.S. birds, 90 are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Another 124 additional species are listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as being of management concern, meaning that they may become candidates for listing under the ESA without additional conservation action or that special attention is warranted to prevent declines. Listed as species of concern are the Common Loon, American Bittern, Reddish Egret, Red-shouldered Hawk, Snowy Plover, Black Tern, Short-eared Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Bell's Vireo, and Golden-winged Warbler. Largely due to loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation, introduced species including domestic cats, and contaminants, many bird species are experiencing serious declines. From 1966 to 1993, the Breeding Bird Survey has detected: a 90% decline in Black Skimmers; a 40% decline in Wood Thrushes; a 90% decline in Black-chinned Sparrows; and a 50% decline in Cerulean Warblers and Loggerhead Shrikes. Already listed under the ESA are such avian species as the California Condor, Stellar's Eider, Piping Plover, Whooping Crane, Aleutian Canada Goose, and the Everglade Snail Kite. Gone forever is the Passenger Pigeon, once one of the most numerous birds in North America. Also gone forever is the once relatively plentiful Carolina Parakeet.

Of the 852 species found in the U.S., 778 are migratory nongame birds and roughly 350 are migratory songbirds species. About 250 of these songbirds are neotropical migrants. Many of these neotropical migratory song birds are in serious decline with documentation of an overall 50% decline in the volume of annual flights over the Gulf of Mexico in the last twenty years. Songbirds found in grasslands are experiencing some of the largest and most consistent declines, including the Bobolink and Meadowlarks. Many forest-dwelling species also are in serious decline.

With our nation growing and sprawling and consuming huge chunks of open space, it is imperative that we

assure our citizens that we will not continue to erode our natural heritage and directly contribute to the decline in biodiversity, especially of avian species. With over 50% of America's wetlands gone, with over 95% of our prairie grasslands gone, and with the continued fragmentation and conversion of forest land, wildlife resources, especially birds, are at risk. More localized impacts of great significance to avian species can be found throughout our Nation. The counties around Washington D. C. have lost over 50% of their forest cover in the last 20 years. Iowa has lost 99% of its original marshes. And, according to the Smithsonian Institution, "less than one percent of the native woodlands along rivers in the arid southwest remains and much of that is damaged by grazing cattle or dominated by exotic vegetation. Riparian woodlands in California's Central Valley have lost most of the neotropical migratory bird species that were once abundant there." Habitat loss and fragmentation continue to pose grave threats to many species of migratory birds. Hence, ABC supports continued acquisition of public lands and their prudent management for birds and other wildlife.

Even protected lands in our National Wildlife Refuge system have been degraded by poorly managed economic activities outside their boundaries. For example, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge near Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore has lost over 5,000 acres of essential salt marshes from rising water levels caused in part by wetland drainage and channelization outside of the Refuge primarily for agricultural activities. And, the Kesterton National Wildlife Refuge in California has been contaminated by runoff from farm land to the point that feeding migratory waterfowl risk poisoning and must be chased from the Refuge.

Recent studies and surveys document the huge economic impact of birdwatchers. Over 76 million Americans are birdwatchers, both backyard and non-residential viewers. A recent study found that birders spend over \$8.5 billion yearly in birding activities. This does not include the hunting of migratory birds which generated an additional \$1.3 billion. This same study found that birding and the hunting of birds in the U.S. created 191,000 jobs in 1991. Ecotourism, much of it related to birders, is growing. At Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia, a study was conducted from 1993 to 1994 focusing on birding ecotourism. The study found that 95,970 birders visited Chincoteague during the year spending a total of \$33.2 million, \$9.7 million in the local community. At the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in south Texas, over 99,000 birders visited in one year from all 50 States to view the 388 species of birds found there. The visitors spent \$14.4 million in McAllen, Texas and many bird festivals are promoted in this area of Texas and around the nation by local chambers of congress. Birding is big business.

Often over looked economic benefits from birds are their major contributions to the health and functioning of ecosystems. Scott Robinson has pointed out these benefits in his widely quoted article, *The Case of the Missing Songbird*. Forest birds eating insects result in greater tree growth and a longer period between insect outbreaks, with these services worth as much as \$5,000 per year for each square mile of forest; in addition, birds are valuable as seed dispersers and pollinators of plants.

The passage, full funding and implementation of H.R. 39 could help prevent further declines in avian species. Habitat loss and fragmentation, while serious in this country, is growing in Latin America and the Caribbean. Population growth, economic development activities, and spreading agriculture are resulting in destruction of forests, wetlands, and critical riparian areas, all essential for birds. For example, the Dickcissel is a common grassland neotropical migratory bird, found in the American mid-west during spring through fall. The Dickcissel population declined mysteriously by 40% from 1966 to 1994. Researchers launched a study and tracked the migrating birds to the *llanos* of Venezuela where they spend the winter months. This wetland area has been partially converted to intensive rice and sorghum agriculture and the Dickcissels had learned to feed upon the crops. Researchers found the cause of the decline rooted in lethal

controls employed by these rice and sorghum farmers in Venezuela. Known as the "rice bird" in Venezuela, the Dickcissel is considered an agricultural pest and some farmers use pesticides to kill hundreds of thousands of birds. Organophosphates such as parathion and azodrin are used to intentionally kill the birds at feeding and drinking areas and by spraying roost sites that may contain three million birds (30% of the entire population). These lethal control methods are continuing, leaving the Dickcissel exposed to potentially catastrophic mortality. Responding to this problem, ABC's Policy Council has stimulated a game plan to resolve this issue under the leadership of Gian Basili of Florida Audubon, the key researcher on the Dickcissel. In June 1998, ABC and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation funded a workshop held at the heart of the bird's wintering ground in the *llanos*. Attending were representatives from Venezuelan government agencies, local universities, conservation groups, farmers' cooperatives and biologists from agricultural extension services. The U.S. delegation included representatives from ABC, National and Florida Audubon, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, and The Nature Conservancy, plus the U.S. Department of Agriculture's top expert on bird damage to rice. The Venezuelans were positively impressed by the strong U.S. showing, which underscored the importance of the issue. The group formed an alliance, and crafted a statement of their mission: to promote, develop and execute actions necessary to implement an integrated management strategy for Dickcissels in rice and sorghum fields of Venezuela. Producers of these crops also signed a letter of intention with Venezuela Audubon. The group determined the need to hire someone to implement on-the-ground actions that would help farmers while also reducing the risk Dickcissels face from catastrophic mortality. There is considerable urgency to obtain funding and launch this program to protect the Dickcissel. Funding is needed for \$20,000 to employ a full time director in the *llanos* but has yet to materialize. H.R. 39 and its funding could be used to provide one-third of the cost of such a position.

ABC also was involved in the protection of another neotropical migratory bird, the Swainson's Hawk. Scientists were puzzled by declines in this Hawks' numbers and used telemetric devices placed on the Hawks to trace their migration and ascertain their wintering locations. It was learned that the Swainson's Hawks migrate from the American West and Canada to winter in the pampas of Argentina. During this study, an estimated 20,000 Swainson's Hawks were killed by pesticides in Argentina in 1995-1996. The land in the pampas region studied had been converted to alfalfa, sunflowers and other crops and the Hawks fed voraciously on grasshoppers inhabiting these fields. Monocrotophos was sprayed to kill the grasshoppers and was killing the Hawks as well. This acutely toxic insecticide had been taken off the U.S. market in 1988. ABC urged Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis) to stop the manufacture and distribution of monocrotophos globally. Ciba-Geigy agreed to a meeting at the Washington, DC headquarters of ABC, and the Governments of Argentina, Canada, and the U.S. sent representatives to try and resolve these mortalities. At this August 1996 meeting, a formal agreement was reached and later signed that included a withdrawal plan for monocrotophos from the pampas and an extensive advertising campaign involving the farmers. The International Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service helped fund the cooperative venture and training sessions were conducted in Argentina for toxicologists and field personnel. ABC's Argentinean partner, the Asociacion Ornitologica del Plata, also was involved in the effort. Subsequent to the agreement, Swainson's Hawk mortality from pesticides was reduced to a few dozen birds. Novartis is now withdrawing monocrotophos globally on a phased basis and ABC has begun a Pesticides and Birds Campaign. Working with leading toxicologists from the U.S. and Canada on a pesticides work group, ABC hopes to reduce the mortality of birds and other wildlife from pesticides in this nation and in Latin America and the Caribbean. A small grant to help promote safer agricultural practices could prevent incidents such as the killing of thousands of Swainson's Hawks.

We are pleased to support H.R. 39 and to work with the Congress in beginning a concerted campaign to

assure that the remaining bird species in the U.S. flourish and that none go the way of the Passenger Pigeon and the Carolina Parakeet. American Bird Conservancy offers our complete support and assistance in developing and implementing such a campaign, including the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act. ABC is uniquely poised and already involved in many efforts to conserve neotropical migratory birds and looks forward to the partnerships that could be initiated under this legislation.

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