

Partners in Flight



North American Landbird Conservation Plan

Executive Summary





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Signed and approved by

United States: Partners in Flight Council

Canada: Partners in Flight Canada National Working Group

Mexico: Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad (CONABIO) y Comité Mexicano de la Iniciativa para la Conservación de las Aves en América del Norte (ICAAN-NABCI)



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Front Cover: The Painted Bunting is on Partners in Flight's Continental Watch List because of troubling declines throughout its range and multiple threats, including continued trapping for the caged-bird trade in Mexico and Cuba. Photo © Tom Vezo

Back Cover: The Mountain Bluebird is a Stewardship Species of shrubland habitats in the Intermountain West Biome. The mullein on which this bluebird is perched is one of many invasive plant species threatening the integrity of native bird habitats. Photo © Marie Read

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We also deeply appreciate the contributions of all individuals who reviewed species assessment scores at various geographic scales over the past decade. Without this thorough review and evaluation from hundreds of experts, this Plan simply would not have been possible. We are especially grateful to the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, which has supported the database with substantial staff time over the past decade.



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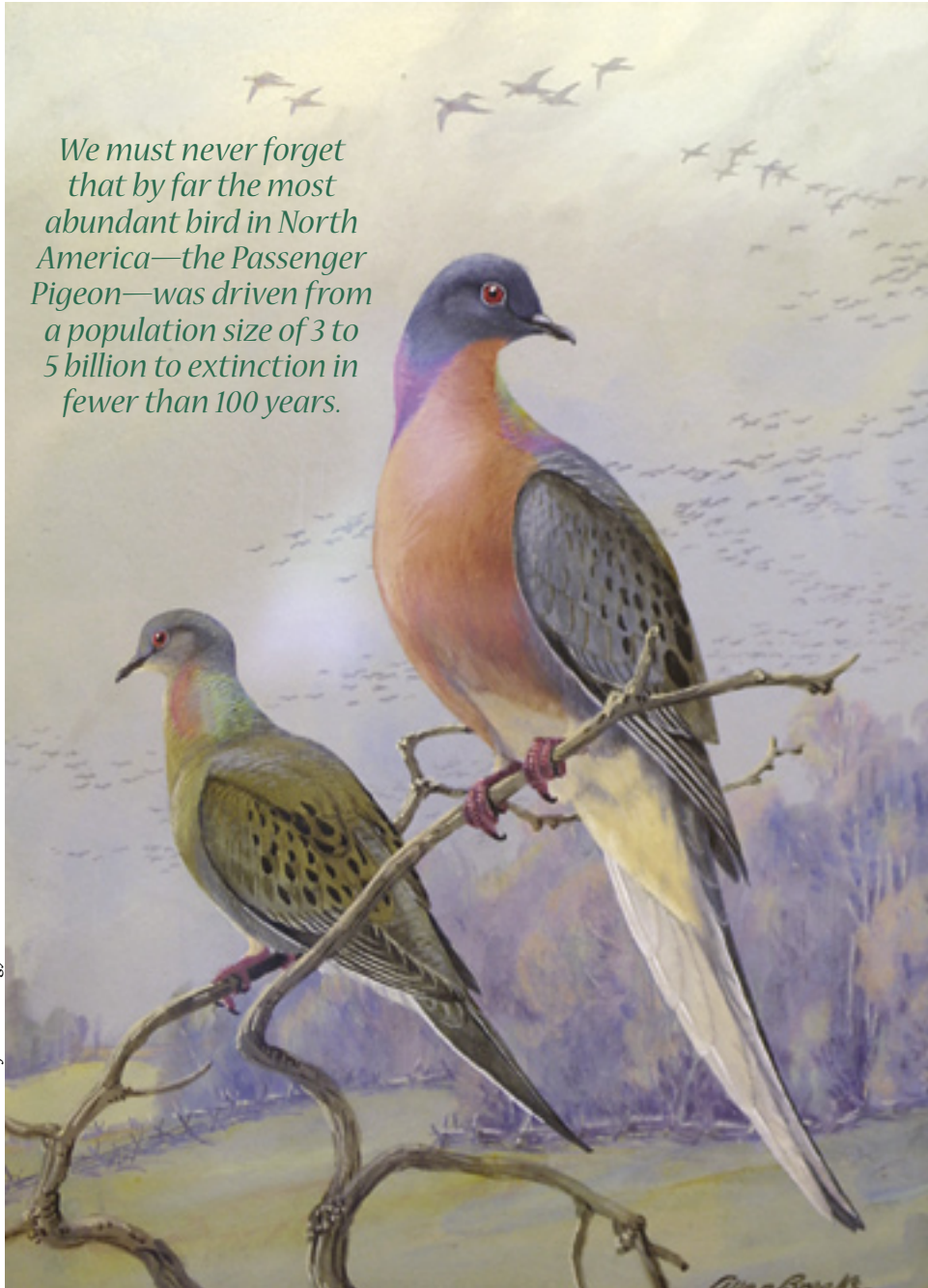
The Prairie Warbler, one of 101 species identified in this Plan on Partners in Flight's continental Watch List, breeds in disturbance-dependent habitats in eastern North America and migrates to the West Indies in winter.

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*We must never forget
that by far the most
abundant bird in North
America—the Passenger
Pigeon—was driven from
a population size of 3 to
5 billion to extinction in
fewer than 100 years.*

Allan Brooks © Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Partners in Flight Mission

- Helping species at risk •*
- Keeping common birds common •*
- Voluntary partnerships for birds, habitats, and people •*

Executive Summary and Invitation to Action

Digital range map data were provided by NatureServe in collaboration with Robert Ridgely, James Zook, The Nature Conservancy/Migratory Bird Program, Conservation International/Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, World Wildlife Fund-US, and Environment Canada/WILDSPACE. Andrew Couturier, Bird Studies Canada, converted the maps to areas and assigned ranges to degree blocks. PIF recognizes a great debt to Chandler Robbins, who had the foresight to create the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), and to the thousands of BBS volunteers who faithfully collect data year after year. We especially thank John Sauer for providing useful and timely analyses of BBS data that proved invaluable to our efforts. The BBS is one of the primary data sources for PIF species assessment, and it seems that everywhere we turn, we find BBS data to be of great value in both expected and novel ways.

Birds are the most familiar and widely enjoyed wildlife in North America. In 2001 in the U.S. alone, 46 million birders spent \$32 billion to observe, photograph or feed wildlife. Birds also fill critical roles in ecological systems. From predators to prey, and from pollinators to dispersers of seeds, the important functions of birds in our environment cannot be overstated. Equally important, birds have served as inspiration for our music, poetry, philosophy, and other fundamental components of human culture since the beginning of civilization itself. Yet, over the past several decades, populations of some once-common species have declined precipitously, and more species than ever are experiencing range reductions or becoming threatened and endangered. Although many species remain common, we must take proactive action now to preserve the full breadth of benefits that birds provide to human society.

The advent of this new millennium has seen a proliferation of conservation initiatives founded on voluntary partnerships and galvanized into action by documented declines of North American bird populations. Following the lead of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight (PIF) formed in 1990 with the collective commitment to conserve the resident, short-distance, and Neotropical migrant landbirds that occupy every major biome and habitat on the continent. Whereas the mandate to conserve waterfowl populations

was rooted in the economic importance of sport hunting, PIF's mandate is rooted in a broad constituency that represents the fastest growing and economically most important segment of outdoor nature enthusiasts in North America.

Scope and Content of the Plan

This North American Landbird Conservation Plan (hereafter Plan) provides a continental synthesis of priorities and objectives that will guide landbird conservation actions at national and international scales. While our scope for this first version is limited to the 448 native landbirds that breed in the U.S. and Canada, full participation by our Mexican

partners will add another 450 breeding species to the next iteration of the Plan. Together with plans for shore-

*The Partners in Flight Vision:
Populations of native birds
will occur in their natural
numbers, natural habitats, and
natural geographic ranges,
through coordinated efforts
by scientists, government, and
private citizens.*



Roger Eriksson © Cornell Lab of Ornithology

One of 28 landbird species in the U.S. and Canada in need of immediate conservation attention, the rapidly declining Golden-winged Warbler is nearly extirpated from its historic range in the Northeast and Appalachian regions.

birds, waterbirds, waterfowl, and other game birds, this document serves as the blueprint for continental habitat conservation under the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI).

As documented in this Plan, fully 100 land-bird species in Canada and the U.S. warrant inclusion on the PIF Watch List, due to a combination of threats to their habitats, declining populations, small population sizes, or limited distributions. Of these, 28 species require immediate action to protect small remaining populations, and 44 more are in need of management to reverse long-term declines. This Plan also highlights the need for stewardship of the species and landscapes characteristic of each portion of the continent, identifying 158 species (including 66 on the Watch List) that are particularly representative of large avifaunal biomes, and whose needs should be considered in conservation planning. Taken together, the pool of Watch List and Stewardship Species represents the landbirds of greatest continental importance for conservation action. Although the recommended actions may vary from region to region, no area in North America is without a conservation need for birds.

Research and Monitoring Needs

A troubling finding of the Plan is that more than half the Species of Continental Importance warrant improved monitoring. Although population trend is only one of six equal assessment factors, it obviously is a key indicator. Also of concern are the many gaps in our knowledge of the causes of population declines and of the effectiveness of our conservation programs. Addressing these monitoring and research needs will be critical for prioritizing actions and evaluating their success.

Population Estimates and Objectives

This Plan also presents the first estimates of total population size for all 448 landbird species and population objectives for the 192 Species of Continental Importance. These objectives are based on the extent of declines since the late 1960s and call for the reversal of those declines over the next 30 years. For some species it will be sufficient to maintain current population levels. For 29 Watch List species that have declined by more than 50 percent, however, our objective is to double current populations, possibly involving an increase in habitat for millions of



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Breeding primarily in the Canadian Arctic and wintering in threatened grasslands of the southcentral U.S., the Smith's Longspur is a symbol of the need for international cooperation.

birds, through active management or other appropriate actions.

Most conservation action necessary to meet these ambitious population objectives will take place at regional and local scales, within states, provinces, and territories. Issues and appropriate actions differ substantially from region to region, as detailed in existing regional and state PIF plans and as summarized in Part 2 of this plan. However, local initiatives by themselves, while essential, comprise only part of a balanced and comprehensive strategy.

A Critical Need for Strategic Approaches at the National and International Scales

The following overarching threats are faced by landbirds across all of North America, and potential solutions must be sought at national and international levels:

- Significant direct loss of major bird habitats through intensified modern land-uses. Examples include massive conversion of the boreal forest through industrial forestry, permanent removal of diverse Appalachian hardwood forests via mountaintop-removal-valley-fill mining, as well as loss of western riparian, pinyon-juniper, sagebrush, California chaparral, native prairies, and barrens.

- Fragmentation and degradation of remaining habitats due to intensified agricultural practices, inappropriate grazing, pesticide use, urban and suburban development, fire suppression, and spread of exotic vegetation. Bird-friendly practices and mitigation measures to enhance habitats exist, but these need to be explicitly tied to objectives for priority bird species and combined with economic incentives to be effective at large scales on private lands. On public lands, land use plans must be based on sustaining or restoring long-term biotic integrity of ecosystems.
- Failure to identify and properly protect or manage habitat used during spring migration, fall migration, and winter. Birds are typically both concentrated and stressed during migratory periods and require quality habitats for both food and cover. Yet we know little about the location and condition of these habitats for most species. Habitat loss and other threats continue to increase for migratory species on their wintering grounds. These critical impacts occur beyond our borders and are compounded by lack of knowledge of species' distributions, habitat needs, or effects of land-use trends. Inclusion of Mexico and Caribbean nations in future updates of this plan will focus much greater attention on wintering ground issues for many species.
- A steady, widespread increase in dispersed mortality factors, not directly related to habitat, that accompany the growth of human populations and the advance of technology. Communication towers, wind power development, feral and domestic cats, and lighted buildings in migration corridors cause ever increasing direct mortality across the continent. Although some programs exist to minimize effects from these factors, no overall plan exists to address their cumulative impact on bird populations.

Collectively, these factors contribute to a high proportion of population declines and anticipated future threats among PIF Watch List Species. Addressing these issues at the highest possible administrative levels will be essential for meeting the continental population objectives outlined in this Plan. However, the required conservation and management strategies for several hundred landbird species are far too complex and variable across North America to be treated only at a continental scale. Implementation of on-the-ground bird conservation strategies must take place at state, provincial, territorial, and local levels, guided by regional and continental planning.

Infrastructure for Implementing the Plan

Implementation of PIF objectives for landbirds will be led by existing national councils within each home country, cooperating to form an international PIF council that will address international issues, and advised by an international science group. While this Plan outlines the scientific foundation for landbird conservation at the continental scale, national strategic plans will outline the process for implementation within each country. Partnerships are key to this process, and PIF will work with existing and new Joint Ventures, federal, state, provincial, and territorial agencies, nongovernmental organizations, academia, and individuals to further landbird conservation.

Evaluation and reassessment are necessary components of adaptive implementation and we expect that this Plan will be revised at five-year intervals to incorporate the latest biological information. Mexican partners are rapidly completing assessment and planning for all birds, and full incorporation of conservation needs for this diverse segment of the North American avifauna is anticipated by 2005. We hope that full participation by Caribbean and other Latin American partners will proceed rapidly as well.

A Call for Collective Action by All Stakeholders

This call to action is aimed at several critical audiences, whose collective action is absolutely necessary if the Plan's goals are to be met. We ask funding entities and decision-makers at all levels to allocate resources sufficient to address the major threats faced by high-priority landbirds and their habitats. We ask land managers to incorporate the needs of landbird Species of Continental Importance into existing management plans and on-the-ground conservation activities. We urge ornithologists and conservation biologists to fill in the many gaps in our knowledge of North American landbirds, throughout their annual cycles, and to work toward monitoring all bird species sufficiently well for us to detect significant population changes. Finally, all the agencies, organizations, corporations, and individuals that have joined in the PIF partnership must turn rhetoric into action on the vast lands we control and manage and through the scientific, educational, and management programs we administer. Together, our actions can halt the continuing loss of our wildlife habitats, reverse the declines of our bird species, and ensure a diverse and healthy avifauna across our entire continent far into the future.