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Songbirds

A Colorful Chorus

Migratory Bird Management

Mission

To conserve migratory bird populations and their habitats for future generations, through careful monitoring and effective management.



What Is a Songbird?

Anyone who has taken a walk in the woods or in their local park in the spring has heard the melodies of the winged singers collectively known as “songbirds.” Warblers, tanagers, orioles, finches, and hundreds of other species make up this diverse group of birds. Their names often denote their colorful plumage: Indigo Bunting, Yellow Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Purple Martin, and many more. Songbirds are among the smallest of our birds and are also called “perching birds,” meaning they can hold tightly to branches with their toes. For management purposes, songbirds are part of a group called “land birds,” species that rely mainly on terrestrial habitats and some vegetated wetlands.

Songbirds eat a wide variety of foods, including insects, seeds, berries, nectar, and fruit. Their appetite for insects helps farmers and foresters as songbirds annually consume millions of insects that, if unchecked, could damage crops and trees. Some birds eat as many as 300 insects a day during the summer months.

These beneficial species can be found in virtually every habitat in the U.S. Forests, prairies, wetlands, deserts, and many other kinds of habitats are home to songbirds. Millions of people enjoy feeding these fascinating creatures in their back yards and go birding in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s National Wildlife Refuges and other natural areas.

Should We Be Concerned About the Conservation Status of Songbirds?

Yes. While populations of many resident species of songbirds are relatively stable (e.g., American Robin), other resident species are declining. Migrating birds face additional challenges and many of their populations are also in decline. Long-term observations show that the populations of many species of “Nearctic/Neotropical migrants,” migratory birds that breed in North America and winter in Latin America and the Caribbean, are declining. Declines for some species have been precipitous and many birds are much less common today than they were in the recent past. Two primary factors have been suggested to explain declines in migratory songbirds: fragmentation of breeding habitat in the U.S. and Canada and loss of wintering habitat in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.



Purple Martin credit: Alan Brooks

The Breeding Grounds

Our landscape is continuously changing as a result of human activities. In the eastern United States, large blocks of mature forests have been reduced to smaller patches or replaced with younger forests. Studies have shown that birds nesting in the remaining forest fragments are subject to higher rates of predation, competition, and nest parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird (which lays its eggs in the nests of other species). In the west, many migratory songbirds, such as the Endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, depend on riparian habitat, the lush growth of shrubs and trees near rivers and streams. Riparian areas are under continual pressure from water development projects, livestock grazing, and human population growth. Many of our prairie birds have suffered dramatic declines mainly as a result of conversion of native prairie to agricultural land.

The Wintering Grounds

During the fall, many migratory songbirds return to Latin America, where their populations are often compressed into geographic areas that are small relative to those used during the breeding season. For example, Kirtland's and Golden-cheeked warblers winter in an area of just a few thousand square kilometers. Because of their localized distributions, neotropical migrants are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss on the wintering grounds. This problem is acute in the Caribbean Basin, where vital island habitats are particularly threatened.

Migration

In addition to the importance of breeding and wintering habitat, the habitat used during migration is also vital to migratory songbirds. For example, Cape May Point, New Jersey witnesses the passage of

thousands of migratory songbirds each autumn. Similarly, in the spring, waves of songbirds arrive on the shores of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to feed after the long nonstop passage over the Gulf of Mexico. With each passing year, these migrants are finding fewer stopover areas where they can rest and refuel before continuing their journey north.

What Are We Doing for Songbirds?

The Migratory Bird Management Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is engaged in numerous activities to ensure that songbird populations remain healthy.

Songbirds, together with other land birds, comprise the majority of the Service's trust species of birds. The Migratory Bird Management Program periodically prepares status assessments for species of concern, Baird's Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow being recent examples.

We also work with National Wildlife Refuges to improve management for songbirds by standardizing monitoring and by including the latest information on songbird conservation in each Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

A new effort, spearheaded by the Program, will create Memoranda of Understanding with our sister federal agencies, such as the U.S. Forest Service, to better conserve birds on public lands.

The Program also publishes a list of Birds of Conservation Concern every five years. This list highlights species of songbirds as well as many other species most in need of conservation attention by Federal and State agencies and private partners.

The Migratory Bird Management Program is also a leader in Partners In Flight (PIF), an initiative established in 1990 to address the steep declines in songbird and other land bird populations. PIF is a voluntary alliance of federal agencies, state fish and wildlife agencies, non-governmental organizations, numerous universities, and the forest products industry. We have worked with partners to create and implement PIF Bird Conservation Plans, which contain scientific management information on over 400 species of land birds.



Kirtland's Warbler credit: USFWS

The Program has housed a PIF Coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to oversee the integration of PIF Bird Conservation Plans into Service activities and a National PIF Coordinator, who works with all of the partners to further conservation of songbirds and other land birds.

Outreach and education are important components of songbird conservation. We sponsor the publication of *Bird Conservation* (the PIF magazine), Bird Conservation Plans and other materials related to songbird conservation. The Program also provides national coordination of International Migratory Bird Day, the main outreach event for PIF.

Songbirds and other migratory birds are some of nature's most magnificent resources. Their conservation is a critical and challenging endeavor for the Migratory Bird Management Program and all who value nature.

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Southwestern Willow Flycatcher
credit: AZ Game & Fish Department