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Book Review of *Saving Migrant Birds: Developing Strategies for the Future* John Faaborg

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Saving Migrant Birds: Developing Strategies for the Future. John Faaborg. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xvi+226 pp. Photographs, illustrations, references, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

The purported decline of populations of some of the most conspicuous and prized species of neotropical migrant birds has spawned something of a cottage industry. Beginning in the 1980s, many articles in the popular press, some of them wildly hyperbolic, predicted the imminent demise of much of North America's songbird fauna. One of the positive outcomes of this phenomenon has been a resurgence of research on migratory birds. In *Saving Migratory Birds*, John Faaborg takes a careful look at what we have learned in the two decades since the alarm was sounded and, just as important, what we still need to learn in order to understand what is going on with migratory bird populations.

Faaborg's conclusions, like those of Scott Robinson (*Consequences*, 1997), will not be popular with many whose research and conservation programs have benefitted by exploiting the perceived widespread collapse of migratory bird populations, but I find his arguments rigorous and well defended by the best available data. In the end, he says, "it is my personal feeling that we no longer should be concerned with widespread declines in a large number of Neotropical migrant bird species. The supporting data just

are not there. . . .” Many of the early alarming trends revealed in the Breeding Bird Survey data appear now to have been simply part of longer-term fluctuations or to apply only to some regions of the country. This is not to say that there are no problems (he details many), but, as Faaborg points out again and again in different contexts, we cannot think about neotropical migrants as a unitary group. This seems obvious, but that kind of overgeneralization has plagued thinking in the field. There is often a perceived need to begin to “manage” for a particular group of bird species, but in most cases researchers probably do not know enough to make sound recommendations.

If we are concerned about a declining population and wish to institute conservation measures, we must understand the factors controlling the population and what is limiting its numbers. The book leads us through a clear and acute discussion of population limitation on the wintering grounds (little persuasive evidence for any species so far, but of course tropical deforestation is a disaster for species that make their permanent homes there), factors acting on the breeding grounds (better evidence for population limitation, negative effects of small fragments, edge effects, and so on), and the importance of source-sink dynamics in understanding how migratory bird populations work. The answers to these problems are not easy: we must do the hard work of learning about the detailed biology of each species. Mindless monitoring programs, of which there are far too many, will not provide the answers and may even mislead. It is critical to know not merely how many birds are present, but their reproductive success, year-to-year survival, and physical condition at critical times in the annual cycle. Faaborg makes many fresh and, in some cases, provocative points regarding management guidelines for migrant birds. Large, unbroken habitat that supports source populations is vitally important, but sink populations have value too. In the proper landscape context, forest fragmentation is not always a bad thing, and even some clear-cuts may be valuable to forest birds.

This book is important reading for lay persons interested in birds, for managers, for those interested in bird conservation, for students, and even for professional ornithologists interested in obtaining an authoritative overview of the field, though researchers will be frustrated by the light and uneven citation of sources. The title, too, is slightly misleading: the book deals almost exclusively with songbirds that migrate into the Neotropics. Shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, and other migrants are scarcely mentioned.

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