

# BIRD CONSERVATION

The Magazine of American Bird Conservancy

Fall 2015



# Working Lands Can Work for Birds

**A**s a youngster, I often went to one of the two woodlots on our small farm to unwind and uproot Japanese honeysuckle. I had learned that this vine is an exotic invasive, and I saw how it wound its way up our dogwoods, distorting and strangling them. I was determined to eradicate it from our woods. It seemed like rewarding work at the time. (Embarrassing admission: I still do this around the house where I live now.)

Now, more than 50 years later and with a better idea of the world's complexities, I can smile at my early efforts and ideas. I have slowly learned that older is not always better; fire and cutting can often be good; and "leave it alone" and "keep people out" are no longer useful management maxims—for forests and for most habitats.

What I have concluded is this: If we want to maintain our bird diversity, we must recognize and manage for the variety of habitats birds need. And to succeed, we need the help of a wide range of people and organizations.

In this issue of *Bird Conservation*, we explore the different ways that private landowners are managing their acreage to benefit birds and other wildlife, while maintaining their livelihoods and, in many cases, improving the health of their land. But make no mistake: While people may benefit from this approach, we do it for the birds.

Our feature on dynamic forests, for instance, offers insights into how we can conserve birds that need a spectrum of forest habitats in the eastern United States. We also take a look at ranchers in the U.S. and Mexico who are managing their considerable acreage to benefit



Lark Bunting by Cindy Creighton, Shutterstock

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migratory grassland birds, which require subtly different habitats for breeding in the northern Great Plains and on their wintering grounds in the Chihuahuan Desert.

Then there's the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), which represents one of our newest and most promising partnerships. More than

250 million acres of forests in North America are certified to SFI. Many SFI participants are forest products companies. Although distrusted by some, conservationists would be fools not to want to work with them toward common goals. Frankly speaking, members of this community are often better informed and more supportive of forest and bird needs than some conservationists I work with and value.

Today, humans have so encircled and controlled Nature as to prevent it from doing what it does best: manage itself for health and diversity. Our intervention has sobering consequences. Fires burn into communities, aquifers go dry, and grasslands become desert. Conservationists, landowners, government, and the private sector have a shared obligation to deploy what we know about natural cycles and accomplish what Nature once did on its own. In doing so, we can restore and preserve habitats. It's one of the most important ways we're bringing back the birds.



A stylized, handwritten signature of George H. Fenwick in black ink.

George H. Fenwick  
President, ABC





ABC is the Western Hemisphere's bird conservation specialist—the only organization with a single and steadfast commitment to achieving conservation results for native wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas.

A copy of the current financial statement and registration filed by the organization may be obtained by contacting: ABC, P.O. Box 249, The Plains, VA 20198. 540-253-5780, or by contacting the following state agencies:

Florida: Division of Consumer Services, toll-free number within the state: 800-435-7352.

Maryland: For the cost of copies and postage: Office of the Secretary of State, Statehouse, Annapolis, MD 21401.

New Jersey: Attorney General, State of New Jersey: 201-504-6259.

New York: Office of the Attorney General, Department of Law, Charities Bureau, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

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West Virginia: Secretary of State, State Capitol, Charleston, WV 25305.

Registration does not imply endorsement, approval, or recommendation by any state.

***Bird Conservation* is the magazine of ABC and is published four times yearly for members.**

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## Birds in Working Landscapes

- 9 Birds in Working Landscapes: A Photo Essay
- 13 The Dynamic Forest: Managing Landscapes in the Appalachians
- 20 Sustainable Forests: An Interview with Larry Selzer
- 22 Shade Coffee: A Green Oasis for Wood Thrush
- 24 Grassland Revival: Bringing Back Birds in Northern Mexico



Greater Sage-Grouse by Pat Gaines

## DEPARTMENTS

- 2 Bird's Eye View
- 4 On the Wire
- 30 Final Glimpse



## Major Victory for Eagles in Federal Court Ruling on “Take” Permits

A federal judge in California has decided in favor of ABC in a lawsuit over a federal rule that would have allowed wind energy companies to harm or kill eagles for up to 30 years without prosecution. In August, the court granted ABC's request to set aside the 30-year rule, handing it back to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for further consideration.

Eagles are at risk of colliding with the fast-spinning blades of wind turbines. More than 2,000 Golden Eagles have perished at California's Altamont Wind Energy Project alone. Like most birds in the United States, eagles are protected under federal law. However, companies can apply for “take” permits that

exempt them from prosecution if the birds are harmed.

A previous rule for eagle take permits, in place since 2009, had limited their duration to five years. But in 2012, with wind energy on the rise, FWS proposed the new rule to increase the duration to 30 years.

At the center of the lawsuit was the violation of a key environmental law. The court ruled that FWS and the U.S. Department of the Interior violated the National Environmental Policy Act by expanding the maximum duration for eagle take permits sixfold without first assessing the impact those rules would have on eagles.

Golden Eagle by Alistair Hobbs, Shutterstock



This court ruling reinforced ABC's long-held position on alternative energy development: It's not green if it doesn't consider wildlife. We stand ready to work with FWS to create a new and stronger system—one that can both protect eagles and result in better siting and operation of wind energy projects.

Learn more about Bird-Smart wind: [abcbirds.org/program/wind-energy](http://abcbirds.org/program/wind-energy)

## Russian Ban on Drift Net Fishing Bodes Well for Seabirds



Red-faced Cormorant by Glen Tepke

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently approved a law that will end drift net fishing in an offshore fishing zone in the North Pacific—an important step that will save tens of thousands of seabirds each year, including Red-throated and Yellow-billed Loons, Red-faced Cormorants, Parakeet Auklets, and Crested Auklets.

Conservationists had long pushed for Russia to ban this fishing technique, which uses hanging nets that extend up to 30 miles. Marine mammals, seabirds, and fish often become fatally trapped in the nets.

According to Russian scientists, more than 1.2 million seabirds and 15,000 marine mammals died in the Russian salmon drift net fishery

from 1993 to 1999. More recent estimates suggest an average of 93,000 seabirds each year.

In 1992, the United Nations banned the use of large-scale drift nets to harvest salmon or any other fish species on the high seas. Nonetheless, drift gillnetting continues to be practiced inside the Exclusive Economic Zones of many nations, including the United States. Together, these fisheries cause the accidental deaths of hundreds of thousands of seabirds worldwide. Putin's action in July ended a particularly destructive fishery.

Learn more about ABC's work on fisheries: [abcbirds.org/program/fisheries](http://abcbirds.org/program/fisheries)



## Ecuador's "Children of the Sea" Are Helping to Save a Species

Over the last three years, 50 schoolchildren and 20 adults from the community of Las Tunas, along Ecuador's Pacific Coast, have collected and recycled more than one million plastic bottles as part of the "Children of the Sea" recycling program, which holds weekly beach clean-ups and aims to maintain a "zero waste zone" in the community.

The bottles are re-purposed into artisan crafts, such as handbags, and sold by a local women's group.

Community trash cleanup days have become a regular event around town and the 38-acre Ayampe Reserve, established in 2012 by Fundación Jocotoco with support from ABC. This reserve, along the Ayampe River on the coast, protects



Esmeraldas Woodstar by Francisco Sornoza

the most important known breeding site for the Esmeraldas Woodstar, a highly endangered hummingbird.

This site's coastal forests and mangroves also host migratory Watch List species including Olive-sided Flycatcher, Marbled Godwit, and Lesser Yellowlegs.

Read more about Las Tunas: [abcbirds.org/program/communities/esmeraldas-woodstar](http://abcbirds.org/program/communities/esmeraldas-woodstar)

"Children of the Sea" group collecting plastic bottles for recycling. Photo by Byron Delgado



## Colombia's Tangaras Reserve Continues to Expand

The Tangaras Reserve, first established in 2009 by ABC and Colombian partner Fundación ProAves, has expanded yet again with the recent purchase of 906 acres of key habitat along the western slope of the Andes. This new acquisition has expanded the reserve to 8,901 acres, protecting even more of the area's unique Andean Chocó rainforest.

Approximately 250 bird species have been recorded at the Tangaras Reserve, including the Endangered Gold-ringed Tanager and Chocó Vireo and the Vulnerable Black-

Gold-ringed Tanager by Fundación ProAves



and-gold Tanager and Giant Antpitta. It is also the winter home for migratory birds such as Golden-winged Warbler.

The joint purchase was a collaborative effort of ABC, World Land Trust, ProAves, Weeden Foundation, and Quick Response Biodiversity Fund.

Visit the reserve, which has a comfortable lodge for birders and other visitors: [conservationbirding.org/abouttanagers.html](http://conservationbirding.org/abouttanagers.html)

# Hollow Pipes Pose Deadly Threat to Birds

**A**cross vast swaths of public land from Oregon to New Mexico, miners often use uncapped plastic pipes to mark the boundaries of mining claims. But these millions of open pipes are deadly for small birds. Attracted to the openings as potential nesting cavities, the birds get stuck within the pipes' smooth, narrow walls.

According to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) estimates, in 2014 there were 3.5 million mining claims on BLM lands in 11 contiguous western states and Alaska. Nevada had the most (1.1 million claims), followed by Utah (412,000), Wyoming (314,000, including small numbers from Nebraska), California, (311,000), and Colorado (285,000).

One examination of 854 pipes in Nevada revealed 879 dead birds, along with 113 reptiles and 20 mammals. The Nevada Department of Wildlife has recovered 43 species of birds from the markers, and some pipe-pulling efforts have revealed as many as 30 dead birds in one pipe.

Most of the trapped birds are cavity nesters. The Ash-throated Flycatcher and Mountain Bluebird are the most frequent victims, but also at risk are woodpeckers, sparrows, shrikes, kestrels, and owls.

ABC and more than 100 organizations are urging the Department of the Interior's BLM and the USDA Forest Service to accelerate their efforts to address this longstanding threat to birds.

In a joint letter, the groups pressed the agencies to meet their responsibilities under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Among the groups' recommendations are the

Western Screech-Owl by Teri Virbickis, Shutterstock



development of national policies to remove or modify existing pipes, and federal regulations that would require non-hazardous markers on all future mining claims. The groups also asked the two agencies to stop the use of open pipes for fence posts, gates, and outhouses.

Federal agencies have already taken some steps to mitigate the threat. BLM created a flyer, endorsed by ABC and the National Mining



Mountain Bluebird by Greg Homel

Association, that will be mailed to mine claim holders, alerting them to the problem and urging them to replace or remediate hazardous markers. Meanwhile, Forest Service staff are covering open vent pipes on outhouses that were trapping birds.

Encourage federal officials to implement more protections for birds: [support.abcbirds.org/pipes](http://support.abcbirds.org/pipes)



Monte Cristo range, Utah, showing claim markers. Photo by Christy Klinger



# Help Support Bird Conservation on Working Lands



Golden-winged Warbler habitat (background) and bird (inset) by Isaac Betancourt, ABC

*Western ranchlands. Southwestern deserts. Eastern forests. Many of us have seen them. But did you realize they hold the key to the large-scale conservation of birds?*

ABC is working in partnership with landowners, other conservationists, the private sector, and government agencies, proving that bird conservation and land management can work hand in hand to improve habitats and ecosystems.

**Yet much remains to be done to protect this diversity of birds and habitats. You can help us by making an extra contribution today.**

Your support will help ABC foresters create young forest for the Golden-winged Warbler in

the Appalachians and Great Lakes; support land management work on grasslands in the northern Great Plains for the Long-billed Curlew; expand partnerships with farmers to improve grasslands for the Baird's Sparrow in the Chihuahuan Desert; and strengthen our efforts with private and public stakeholders to protect sagebrush habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse.

Please use the enclosed envelope to make an additional gift, or give online: **[support.abcbirds.org/donate](https://support.abcbirds.org/donate)**

**Together we're bringing back the birds on working lands!**





# Successful Start to a New Laysan Albatross Colony on O'ahu

A three-year project to establish a new Laysan Albatross colony on O'ahu has gotten off to a successful start: Ten Laysan Albatross chicks successfully hatched and fledged from that island this year.

The project began as a way to solve a human-wildlife conflict situation on Kaua'i, where a colony of Laysans nests at the Pacific Missile Range Facility. Each year, the U.S. Navy must remove all albatross eggs and adults from the facility's air safety zone to prevent potential collisions with aircraft.

Adult birds are taken to protected nesting colonies elsewhere on Kaua'i, while most eggs are placed with albatross foster parents whose own eggs were infertile.

However, too few foster birds are usually available, which led to the idea of starting a new colony of Laysan Albatross on O'ahu, where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had acquired a parcel of land to



One of the Laysan Albatross hatched on O'ahu heads out to sea. Photo by Robby Kohley

expand wildlife habitat on the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge.

Laysan Albatross eggs from Kaua'i were first transported to O'ahu in December 2014 and incubated there until January 2015. After hatching, the eggs were placed with foster parents at nearby Ka'ena Point, and at a month old, the chicks were moved to the refuge, where they continued to be fed and monitored as they grew.

By early July, all 10 chicks had fledged and flown out to sea, where they will live on the wing for the next three to five years as they grow to adulthood. The birds should return to their "birthplace" on the refuge to start nesting in five to eight years.

The next phase of this project will include raising and releasing more chicks, plus construction of a predator-proof fence at the refuge to protect the new colony from non-native predators such as feral dogs, cats, mongooses, and rats.

This project draws upon the expertise and generosity of many partners, including ABC, Pacific Rim Conservation, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge System and Pacific Islands Coastal Program, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Learn more or help fund the predator-proof fence:  
[pacificrimconservation.org](http://pacificrimconservation.org)

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## Introducing Our New Website: ABCBIRDS.ORG

We're pleased to announce that ABC has a new digital home! Our recently-launched website is a visually rich experience that's easy to use on all devices, from desktop computers to smartphones. But even more important, it features new content and ways to connect with us. Here are a few highlights:

- **Birds.** Naturally, we devoted a section of the site to celebrating birds, most of them species that benefit from our conservation efforts. We think you'll enjoy the video clips, beautiful photos,

and interesting facts about bird species across the Americas.  
[abcbirds.org/birds](http://abcbirds.org/birds)

- **Get Involved.** If you want to do more to help birds, this part of the site is for you. Learn how to make your home bird-friendly, send letters to decision-makers, easily renew your membership or make a donation, and more.  
[abcbirds.org/get-involved](http://abcbirds.org/get-involved)
- **"Bird Calls" Blog.** All the latest bird conservation news can be found here, from our perspective on the recent federal decision on

Greater Sage-Grouse to inspiring videos about our staff, partners, and priority birds. You'll also find stories about ABC's work on neonicotinoids, a widely used class of chemicals that is highly toxic to birds and other wildlife. These include ABC findings that 90 percent of food samples taken from Congressional cafeterias contain neonics.  
[abcbirds.org/birdcalls](http://abcbirds.org/birdcalls)

We hope you'll visit our site today. It continues to grow and evolve, and we welcome your input!



# Making Landscapes Work for Birds

*a photo essay*

**W**orking lands are all around us. Farms, forests, ranches—all play important roles in growing food, creating consumer products such as paper, and providing land on which domestic livestock can graze.

*But birds don't distinguish between these lands and everything else. That's why ABC and our partners increasingly collaborate with landowners, companies, and others. The goal: to ensure that working lands also work for birds.*

Bobolink by Paul Reeves Photography, Shutterstock







## Saving Tropical Dry Forests

Cattle producers in the dry forests of Honduras confront increasing summer temperatures, declining rainfall, and soil exhaustion. This leads many to clear additional forest for more pasture.

ABC and Honduran partner ASIDE are developing a program in the Agalta Valley to conserve remaining forests, with incentives for landowners who manage forests for the **Honduran Emerald** (shown) and declining migratory birds.

*Honduran Emerald by Robert Hyman; tropical dry forest by David Wiedenfeld, ABC*



## Growing Coffee for the Birds

In many parts of Central and South America, large areas of forest have given way to industrialized "sun coffee" operations. These same disappearing forests are also the winter home of migratory birds such as the **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** (shown) and Wood Thrush.

Luckily, sun coffee isn't the only approach. Many farmers, including ABC partners, cultivate coffee in the shade of intact tree canopies, a traditional method that preserves bird habitat.

*Photo by Jayne Gulbrand, Shutterstock; shade coffee in Huembo, Peru by Jason Berry, ABC*





## Healthy Pines, Healthy Habitats

The majestic forests of ponderosa pine that once covered large swaths of the western U.S. have been fragmented and degraded.

ABC and partners have promoted forest management techniques, including controlled burns and snag creation, that will help keep this habitat economically viable, while creating valuable habitat for birds such as the **Lewis's Woodpecker** (shown), White-headed Woodpecker, and Flammulated Owl.

*Lewis's Woodpecker by Tom Grey;  
ponderosa pine savannah by Bob Altman,  
ABC*

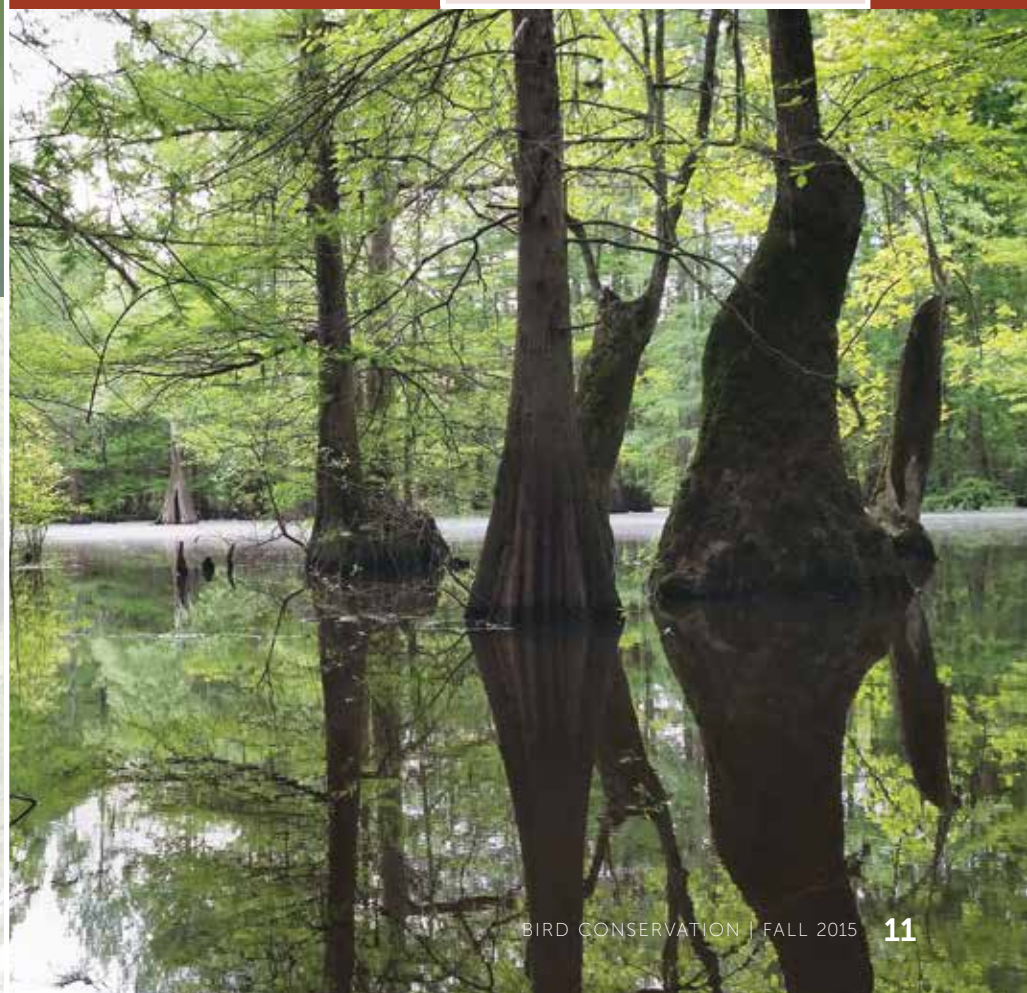


## Growing Rice, Benefiting Birds

The Mississippi Delta has some of the richest soil on Earth. More than two-thirds of the nation's rice is grown here. Today, conservationists have found ways for producers to grow rice and also provide habitat for birds.

Through the collaborative efforts of the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture, more than one million acres have now been restored to provide habitat for birds such as **Prothonotary Warbler** (shown).

*Prothonotary Warbler by Bill Stripling;  
Mississippi Valley forested wetland by  
Dale Yocum*







## Where Rare Sparrows and Cattle Coexist

Coastal prairies that once dominated lowlands of the Pacific Northwest have been largely replaced by agricultural fields. However, landowners' responsible stewardship—through sustainable grazing, removal of invasive trees, and prescribed burns—is helping to conserve and restore habitat.

Among the birds that benefit are the threatened subspecies of the Vesper Sparrow, the **Oregon Vesper Sparrow** (shown).

*Vesper Sparrow by Suzanne Beauchesne;  
Pacific Northwest pasture by Bob Altman, ABC*



## Southern Living

Managed pine forests of the Southeast provide habitat that benefits several bird species. In fact, some practices that increase forest productivity also enhance nesting and foraging opportunities for birds.

Sustainably managed timberlands have some of the highest numbers of nesting **Swallow-tailed Kites** (shown), which prefer thinned forests with healthy wetlands where wildfires and use of prescribed fire are rare.

*Swallow-tailed Kite by David Spates, Shutterstock, pine plantation by Jason Patrick Ross, Shutterstock*



# The Dynamic Forest

*Smart management of Appalachian forests  
holds the key to effective bird conservation*

*By Libby Sander*



Golden-winged Warbler by Glenn Bartley

**T**om Kakabar has spent nearly all of his 51 years in southwestern Pennsylvania. But it wasn't until a decade ago that he realized the forests he'd hiked and hunted in for decades had changed from what he remembered as a boy.

It wasn't a happy revelation. Gray squirrels and chipmunks, once abundant, were gone. So, too, were the red oaks. Instead, the trees had become uniform: mostly striped maple, above a ground choked with hay-scented ferns.

"We've changed the forest," he remembers thinking in 2004. "My goal is to try to get that back."

So Kakabar, a third-generation member and president of the Beaverdale Sportsmen's Association, began to develop a stewardship



Photo by Amy (Grattan) Kakabar, 2015

plan for the club's 325-acre property near Johnstown. With incentives and insight from state and federal agencies, the club gradually began to manage its acreage differently.



## BEFORE

Deer can severely damage the forest understory. In this photo, it is obvious that deer roam freely to the left of the fence. Photo by Isaac Betancourt, ABC

In 2010, the club enrolled in a program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to create 10 acres of habitat for a tiny black-bibbed songbird with a flash of yellow on its head and wing. Kakabar had never seen or heard a Golden-winged Warbler. Yet one acre at a time, he began improvements that have transformed his patch of forest into habitat for the elusive bird.

Foresters and biologists call this the dynamic forest: A sustainable approach to forest management that creates a mosaic of trees of different ages and species, which grow and change over time while preserving healthy habitat for forest birds and other wildlife. The approach is particularly helpful in Appalachia, where imperiled songbirds like the Golden-winged Warbler and the Cerulean Warbler benefit from the diversity of young and mature forest

both birds rely on at different stages of their lives.

As research into the behavior of Golden-winged Warblers and other songbirds becomes ever more sophisticated, biologists and foresters are starting to think more inclusively about how this kind of management might benefit an entire suite of declining birds. The concept holds significant potential in Appalachia, where a dynamic forest could stretch across a huge landscape—from northern Georgia to southern New York—attracting a large and diverse mix of warblers, tanagers, and flycatchers.

Private landowners like Tom Kakabar play a pivotal role in making it happen. Most land in the Appalachian region is privately owned. Much of it is broken down into small parcels—10 acres here, 50 acres there.

## AFTER

The area to the right of the fence is protected from browsing deer, allowing a healthy forest understory to thrive. Photo by Isaac Betancourt, ABC

“What the bird needs is a diversity of age classes and forest structure in close proximity,” Daniel Rider, Forest Stewardship and Utilization Program Manager at the Maryland Forest Service, says of the golden-wing. “How are we going to get that? You need private landowners.”

### A New Look at Golden-wings

For years, biologists studying Golden-winged Warblers had formed a picture of what kind of nesting habitat the bird needed. Concern was running high: The warbler's population had declined by 66 percent in the past 50 years, mostly because of habitat loss on its breeding grounds in the northeastern United States.

Scientists knew the birds nested in young forest and shrubs. Cerulean Warblers, meanwhile, raised their young in mature forests, preferring to be in the tallest trees. But



research had long focused on a narrow window of time—a 30-day nesting season—and relied solely on what biologists could see and hear of the birds.

Then they put transmitters on adult golden-wings and fledglings. The picture changed: Young forest, it turned out, was only part of the equation, says Jeff Larkin, a professor of wildlife ecology and conservation at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, who led the research.

Beyond the nesting period, none of the species studied—golden-wings and ceruleans, along with Wood Thrushes and Worm-eating Warblers—were faithful to a particular age class of trees. Instead, the data suggested that the birds preferred structurally complex forests that offered them many options.

Enter the dynamic forest. Biological research, along with innovative public-private partnerships, Larkin says, are aligning to promote a different way of viewing forests and their role in bird conservation.

“What is very clear is that we don’t need to be thinking species-specific anymore,” Larkin says. If biologists, foresters, and landowners can work together to manage the land in a way that creates a structurally diverse forest, he says, “we’re going to make a lot of progress in bird conservation in the years ahead.”

### Creating a Forest Mosaic

Travel the spine of the Appalachians, and much of the landscape is a thick, unbroken carpet of trees. To the untrained eye, this dense forest appears healthy and robust.

In fact, it is an unsustainable mix of trees that are the same age, and that reflect far less diversity than they could or should.

History tells part of the story. Most of the forests in Appalachia have been cut two, three, even four times. Aggressive timber harvests in the early 20th century, along with a dropoff in management over the past 50 years, means that an abundance of trees are all around the same age. White-tailed deer are now legion, eating seedlings and saplings and preventing the next generation of forest from taking root.

Meanwhile, the forest has become a rather uneventful place. Disturbances, natural and man-made, that spur healthy changes are minimal. Long ago, that was hardly the case: Herds of elk and bison trampled

## FOREST SUCCESSION AND ITS BIRDS

A healthy forest is like a mosaic. Trees and plants of different ages and species create habitat for a variety of birds as the forest grows.



FIELD SPARROW



GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER



PRAIRIE WARBLER



CHIPPING SPARROW



CERULEAN WARBLER



SCARLET TANAGER



WOOD THRUSH

YEAR 1  
Annual  
Plants

YEAR 2  
Perennial  
Plants

YEAR 3-10  
Shrubs

YEAR 20  
Young Pine Forest

YEAR 150  
Mature Oak Forest

through, and from time to time Native Americans cleared and burned the wooded areas.

Foresters can't replicate conditions from centuries ago, says ABC's Todd Fearer, who leads the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture, a regional partnership of more than a dozen organizations. But with intervention, he says, they can create a well-balanced forest.

For individual landowners, however, these changes can be costly. Several federal programs are designed to help them shoulder the costs of amending their land to improve conditions for wildlife, while making their forests more sustainable in the long run.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Working Lands for Wildlife is one such program. It provides financial support to landowners in 10 Appalachian states who

agree to restore habitat for several declining species, including the Golden-winged Warbler. Now in its fourth year, the federal program has provided more than \$4 million to landowners in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey for golden-wing habitat. Of the 8,392 acres of habitat created so far, nearly 7,000 acres are in Pennsylvania.

The program's success has sparked a similar undertaking for the Cerulean Warbler. Like the golden-wing, the bird has suffered steep declines since the 1960s. Seventy-five percent of cerulean distribution on the breeding grounds occurs on private land.

In January, the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program awarded \$8 million to the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture for a similar project to create habitat for the sky-blue birds in Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. ABC will manage the

grant, and the Joint Venture will facilitate the work, collaborating with private landowners to create small gaps in the tree canopy by which ceruleans prefer to nest. In all, they hope to enhance 12,500 acres of forest habitat for Cerulean Warblers and other wildlife.

Both projects reflect a significant shift in how conservationists view the role of forest management. Until recently, Fearer says, the prevailing philosophy held that management should target a few birds that used the same habitat. Many conservationists now embrace the idea that forests can, and should, change over time. Wood Thrush, Worm-eating Warblers, and other birds of the mature forest? They're part of the mosaic, too.

Fearer sums it up this way: "If you're going to manage for an entire suite of species, you have to manage in a dynamic fashion."

Cerulean Warbler by Tessa Nichols





# Improving Habitat for Birds with an Assist from Timber Companies

Companies that grow, harvest, and process wood into paper and paperboard products own millions of acres across Appalachia. Many employ biologists and foresters whose mission is to understand the science behind keeping the forests healthy, productive, and sustainable.

The forest industry is paramount in creating habitat for birds, Jeff Larkin says. “They need to demand that the timber they’re procuring is harvested in a way that promotes sustainable forestry and promotes the diverse landscapes we’re looking for,” he adds.

Some people still believe that leaving the forest alone is best for birds, Larkin says. But eastern forests have historically been so poorly managed from a bird conservation perspective, he says, that the only way to fix things now is to manage them back to a more natural condition.

A sustainable approach to management doesn’t just benefit wildlife, Larkin adds. It also means companies’ forests will remain healthy and productive for years to come.

One such company is Plum Creek, a program participant in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. SFI’s land-owning program participants sustainably manage more than 250 million acres of forest in North America, from the boreal forests of Canada to the southeastern United States, benefiting many species of forest birds. Plum Creek owns more than six million acres across 19 states; 257,000 acres are in West Virginia.

Biodiversity is a key emphasis of the company’s sustainable approach, says Henning Stabins, a wildlife biologist with Plum Creek who also serves on the steering committee of Partners in Flight, a public-private partnership that aims to stop declines of neotropical songbirds.

By collaborating with organizations like ABC and SFI, Plum Creek uses science to find “sweet spots” where bird conservation and commercial forest management goals align.



Golden-winged Warbler  
by Christian Artuso

The approach is threefold. At a regional level, the company considers how its management of working forests fits with the biodiversity goals of surrounding national forests, state lands, and property owned by small private landowners. Then, on Plum Creek lands, the company works to create a shifting mosaic of trees that enhances habitat for wildlife—including birds—and keeps it viable over time.

The last piece is the most specific. Within a particular stand of trees, how can the company harvest—leaving large, mature trees favored by Cerulean Warblers, for instance—in a manner that promotes biodiversity on a smaller scale?

Stabins gives an example. Mindful of a small songbird that favors young forest, he says, foresters often prescribe that harvests leave small snags and even some small trees for perching posts: “For male Golden-winged Warblers to tell everybody that this is their territory,” he says.

In certain areas in the Appalachians, the Golden-winged Warbler and Cerulean Warbler’s needs align well with Plum Creek’s. Biologists collaborate closely with foresters to incorporate science into on-the-ground work to benefit these birds, Stabins says.

It’s a win-win for everyone if foresters determine that the way they want to grow trees matches up with what the birds like. Whenever that’s the case, Stabins says, “we want to make our foresters aware of that.”

—Libby Sander

## A New Landscape

Emily Bellush spends most of her time talking and emailing with landowners in Pennsylvania, working to enroll them in NRCS's golden-wing program. They are intrigued by the project, says Bellush, who is a conservation biologist with Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Research Institute, and curious about the elusive warbler behind it.

The process works something like this. First, a forester meets with a landowner to take a look at the existing conditions and discuss the landowner's goals for his or her property. Ideally, the land would include a large expanse of forest composed of trees of different ages, and with young forest habitat nearby.

If the land looks promising, a conservation planner will coordinate the contractual arrangements between the landowner and NRCS, working closely with the landowner's consulting forester and logger. Following a prescription from the forester, the logger harvests trees to shape the forest into an ideal mix of scattered trees, shrubs, and open, grassy spaces, paying careful attention to the abundance and spacing of trees. Bright paint marks the trees so the logger acts with the precision of a surgeon.

The end result is a landscape deliberately designed to provide nesting habitat and food for Golden-winged Warblers—along with American Woodcock, Ruffed Grouse, and Eastern Whip-poor-will—for many years to come, even as the forest changes and matures.

In Pennsylvania, the average project creates about 50 acres of golden-wing breeding habitat, which Bellush says could support five



How can we create an entire landscape that is going to have long-term benefits to the bird?



TOP: Golden-winged Warbler nest and eggs by Rachel Vallender, BOTTOM: Banded Golden-winged Warbler fledgling by Kyle Aldinger

pairs. From 2012 to 2014, Working Lands for Wildlife completed 68 projects in Pennsylvania and has 71 in progress. Several hundred more acres are underway in Maryland and New Jersey.

The Cerulean Warbler program, which is still in its infancy, could unfold on an even larger scale, says Rider, of the Maryland Forest Service. He says his agency hopes to be strategic in collaborating with landowners: Instead of creating a

patch here and a patch there, why not look at public and private lands and make a block?

Everyone involved in the project is guided by a challenge, Rider says. "How can we create an entire landscape that is going to have long-term benefits to the bird?"

## Building a Home

Larkin and his team want to know whether they're winning the most important battle: recovering the golden-wing population.

Monitoring the thousands of acres adapted for golden-wing habitat will be critical, he says. This was the first year biologists monitored lands enrolled in NRCS programs for golden-wings. In Appalachia, Larkin and his crew visited private lands in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey to seek out migratory songbirds, with a focus on golden-wings, along with American Woodcock.

Researchers detected the birds in 9 percent of the 150 points on private lands across the three states—low numbers, Larkin says, but about what he expected given the challenges the species faces in the region. And it's slow work: Two or three years typically pass before treated areas produce conditions that Golden-winged Warblers find attractive.

"We know that our Appalachian population is the one that's in the real crunch, and it's going to take a long time, and probably some innovative techniques, to recover the species in this area," Larkin says. "I look forward to the day when we have enough numbers in the Appalachians that every time we create habitat, we have a Golden-winged Warbler showing up."





As for Tom Kakabar, all but 40 of his club's 325 acres are now managed according to guidance from state or federal programs. Bit by bit, the land is changing. Blackberries came back after treating the first 10 acres, along with red maple and black cherry trees. Chestnut-sided Warbler arrived after two seasons. This summer he's noticed wild orchids, trillium, and aspen.

On a sparkling Saturday afternoon in May, Kakabar got a phone call from one of Larkin's colleagues. The team was coming to Beaverville that evening to track woodcock. Kakabar rounded up his wife and two daughters, along with a few

members of the club. At dusk, they trekked through briars and bramble that had grown up since the cutting of the trees, and waited in a clearing.

Spiraling up into the clear evening sky, then fluttering back down to earth, the woodcock performed their mating display for a rapt audience. Kakabar can count on one hand the number of times in his lifetime he'd seen the plump brown

birds around the property. On this night, he felt like a proud father.

The golden-wings haven't shown up yet. But Kakabar has faith. I'm building them a nice home, he often thinks to himself. Now they just have to find it.

See a video about one of the stars of the dynamic forest, the American Woodcock: [abcbirds.org/video-american-woodcock](https://abcbirds.org/video-american-woodcock)



*Libby Sander is Senior Writer and Editor at American Bird Conservancy. As a journalist, she covered a variety of beats in Chicago and Washington, D.C., writing news stories and award-winning features for The New York Times, the Washington Post, and The Chronicle of Higher Education. You can follow her on Twitter at @libsander.*

# Sustainable Forests Grow from Vision into Reality

*An Interview with Larry Selzer*

**I**n the early 1990s, a small group of conservationists worked with the forest products industry to develop a certification standard that would help companies manage their forests sustainably. The result was the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

Today, more than 250 million acres of forested land are certified to the SFI standard. The initiative has more than 100 participating companies and has profoundly changed the way millions of acres are managed in North America.

The next step? Using that vast expanse of working forests to increase conservation for birds and other wildlife. Larry Selzer—immediate past chair of the SFI board of directors, president and chief executive officer of The Conservation Fund, and ABC board member—told ABC's Clare Nielsen about SFI's history and how those conservation efforts are taking shape.

**Clare Nielsen: How did the SFI come about?**

**Larry Selzer:** For decades, the forest products industry managed its own forests out of the public eye. Some practices did not fit with best environmental management practices, including large-scale clear-cutting, harvesting of ecologically important old-growth, and harvesting in riparian corridors.

The degree to which these forest management practices were having a negative impact—on wildlife habitat, wetlands, and river corridors—finally burst into public view in the 1980s, when things like aerial and satellite photography for the first time presented images and data to the American people. They were upset by what they saw and wanted the industry to improve its practices.

One way to bring about change was to get the regulatory agencies

involved, and today, we have regulations around endangered species, streamside management zones, and more. However, many believed there was even greater power in having the industry operate transparently within a new forest certification standard that would be uniform across all 50 states.

**CN: So what happened?**

**LS:** By the early 1990s, the industry was under intense pressure from the activist community. The Conservation Fund was the only organization willing to engage with the forest products industry to help bring about change. We were there in 1992 to discuss development of a certification standard that would provide assurances that forests were being managed in a sustainable way.

Since then, SFI has become a fully independent organization. The vast

majority of [North American forest products] companies are certified to SFI. Some examples of leadership from the industry include Hancock Timber Resource Group, Georgia-Pacific, Plum Creek, Resource Management Service, and Weyerhaeuser.

Together, the working forests that are certified to the SFI standard now cover more than 250 million acres. From the forest floor to the finished product, the SFI standard provides an assurance that these forests are being managed responsibly, with a third-party audit process ensuring that the certification has been earned.

**CN: What is your vision for SFI?**

**LS:** In the beginning, the goal was to get as many acres certified as possible. SFI has been successful beyond anyone's expectations. Now that we have surpassed 250 million acres,



how can we use that certified land base to make significant contributions to conservation? This is a big, bold vision for the future of SFI and opens up incredible opportunities for partnerships.

**CN: How does ABC fit into this picture?**

**LS:** I've been involved with SFI since its inception, and SFI is the strongest certification available today. But SFI is not a conservation implementation organization; it needs partners on the ground, like ABC, to get conservation done.

I was excited about putting these two world-class organizations together and seeing the partnership blossom. ABC and SFI are in the early stages of something of profound importance. As we work with SFI landowners to help them think differently about how to manage lands for conservation, for birds, we can do amazing things.

**CN: Why ABC?**

**LS:** As the leading practitioner for bird conservation, ABC is in a unique position to help SFI and landowners understand how to do more for birds while not diminishing the economic value of the forested assets they own.

A prime example right now is the Golden-winged Warbler. ABC is working on a pilot project to increase habitat for this species, which is under review for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act, by working with SFI-certified landowners to change the way they are managing their land. As we gather information from this pilot, we will then be able to apply what we've learned to other bird species.

Photo courtesy of The Conservation Fund



"ABC and SFI are in the early stages of something of profound importance.

As we work with SFI landowners to help them think differently about how to manage lands for conservation, for birds, we can do amazing things."

**CN: Can you give us an idea how that will work?**

**LS:** Imagine you have a large acreage and you want to ensure that the Cerulean Warbler, a bird that requires mature forests, benefits from that land. You could set aside a fixed set of acres, say 100,000, and decide not to harvest those trees—but this would be a rather simplistic approach that would diminish the economic value of the land to the landowner.

Alternatively, you could dedicate a certain percentage of acreage to be managed as old-growth all the time, allowing the landowner to ensure there is always land for Cerulean

Warblers. In other words, there would always be 100,000 acres of old-growth available for ceruleans, but where those acres are might shift across an ownership over time.

This requires in-depth science. ABC is in a position to aggregate the best science and translate it for a landowner to help get a different management regime on the ground.

**CN: You're on the board of ABC and you're also the immediate past chairman of the board of SFI. What's the common thread?**

**LS:** Birds! They were one of my first windows into the natural world. My first piece of technology was a pair of old Tasco 10 x 50 binoculars, and seeing birds through those lenses had a profound impact on me. I came to understand that birds are an indicator of how well we are treating the landscape around us. As someone who has dedicated my professional life to conservation, I know this is an indicator that works.

**CN: Was there a particular bird that sparked your interest?**

**LS:** Although I didn't see one until I was in college, my favorite bird has to be the Northern Fulmar. Nothing spectacular, just solid. I think of the Northern Fulmar like an offensive tackle on a football team or the kind of guy you might meet at a neighborhood bar. Friendly, without guile, just getting the job done.

I used to enjoy watching them fly along the waves when I was out at sea; unlike the more graceful shearwaters, they would sometimes catch a wingtip and crash into the face of the wave. But they always popped up, shook it off, and plowed ahead.

My kind of birds.



# SHADE COFFEE:

## A Green Oasis for Wood Thrush

**P**eople across the globe drink about 2 billion cups of coffee each year. As Wood Thrush researcher **Bridget Stutchbury** discovered, the way those beans are grown has huge implications for these and other migratory birds we love.



Coffee by jannoon028, Shutterstock

The Wood Thrush is a modern-day “canary in the coal mine” for the forest birds of eastern North America. The species has declined by more than 50 percent since systematic counts began in the late 1960s, and like the proverbial canary, that downturn bears a warning.

I wrote about the demise of the Wood Thrush in *Silence of the Songbirds*, and since then I have received dozens of comments from readers about the emotional loss they feel when the Wood Thrush disappears

from their neighborhood. Wood Thrushes are rarely seen, but their flute-like song is bold, beautiful, and full of life. For these readers, summer evenings used to bring a refreshing and ringing dusk chorus of “ee-oh-lay” from thrushes in the forests by their houses, but now several years have gone by with none at all. Each spring brings new but diminishing hope.

What can be done to bring these beloved thrushes back? My answer is to drink Bird Friendly coffee—

Wood Thrush wearing a small geolocator tracking device on his back. Photo by Elizabeth Gow







Shade coffee, Ecuador. Photo by Dr. Morley Read, Shutterstock

organic, fair trade, and shade grown—to help give Wood Thrushes a safe place to spend their winters when they are thousands of miles from our back yards.

The importance of Bird Friendly coffee became apparent to me when my graduate students in Pennsylvania first caught a Wood Thrush we had tracked with a geolocator for its entire migration. At the same time that this forest in northern Pennsylvania had been buried under 18 inches of fresh lake-effect snow, “our” Wood Thrush was in Nicaragua and completely at home in a world of strangler figs, howler monkeys, and toucans.

A fortunate bird would find itself wintering on one of Nicaragua’s several hundred Bird Friendly shade coffee farms. These small farms provide high-quality forested habitat for dozens of species of migratory songbirds, as well as tropical birds that there live year round. In the village of San Juan del Río Coco, for instance, a cooperative of more than 400 small coffee producers raise more than 2.5 million pounds of Bird Friendly certified coffee every year. This one co-op accounts for roughly 8,000 acres—a green oasis surrounded by miles of deforested land devoted to pasture, sun coffee, and other crops.

This part of Central America is a hotspot for Wood Thrush, but also for deforestation. Tropical forests in this region are disappearing at one of the highest rates in the world.

## Forest Cover in Nicaragua



Maps of forest loss in Nicaragua show the extreme levels of past and projected deforestation. Maps courtesy of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization *2011 State of the World’s Forests* report, since 1990 Honduras has lost 27 percent of its forest, and Nicaragua 31 percent, to agriculture. It should come as no surprise, then, that Wood Thrushes that depend on those forests are disappearing just as quickly. The scale of our assault on this endearing forest icon is enormous: Over the past half-century, the North American population of Wood Thrushes has dropped by about 12 million birds.

Saving heavily shaded coffee farms throughout this region would protect tens of thousands of acres of habitat for Wood Thrush. But farmers need your help. What is missing is large-scale support and commitment from the millions

of coffee drinkers in America. Too many birders are not aware of the benefits of shade coffee to birds and farmers, or do not realize how easy it is to buy Bird Friendly shade coffee and help the birds they love. By drinking bird-friendly coffee, we can make sure our Wood Thrushes and other forest songbirds serenade future generations for years to come.

Read more about the Wood Thrush tracking study: [abcbirds.org/help-save-wood-thrush-drink-bird-friendly-coffee](http://abcbirds.org/help-save-wood-thrush-drink-bird-friendly-coffee)

Buy Bird Friendly coffee. Until major grocery stores start carrying Bird Friendly coffee, you can order it online from a company like Birds & Beans: [birdsandbeans.com](http://birdsandbeans.com)



Bridget Stutchbury is a professor at York University, Toronto, Ontario. Since the 1980s, she has followed songbirds to their wintering grounds in Latin America and back to their breeding grounds in North America to understand their behavior, ecology, and conservation. She is author of *Silence of the Songbirds* (2007) and *The Private Lives of Birds* (2010).



# Grassland REVIVAL

*In northern Mexico, a new approach to cattle ranching is bringing back grassland birds*

*By Libby Sander*

For millennia, herds of bison roamed the Chihuahuan Desert of northern Mexico to feast on mile after mile of grass. Dozens of bird species coexisted with the large animals, who cropped the grass just to the birds' liking, fertilized the soil with their manure, and aerated the land with many millions of hooves.

By the 19th century, Chihuahua had become a bonanza for ranchers, who made the most of the rich native grasses as prime forage for cattle. But eventually heavy grazing took a toll on the land. Much of the area once covered in grass grew barren and dry.

The birds suffered, too. Roughly 85 percent of grassland birds that breed in the northern Great Plains of the

United States spend their winters in the Chihuahuan Desert. As habitat in both their breeding and wintering grounds disappears, grassland species have become one of the fastest-declining suites of birds native to North America.

Overgrazing by cattle, it is clear, has created problems. But now conservationists see grazing as part of a solution: By strategically

moving cattle from pasture to pasture within a rancher's property, domestic livestock can mimic the positive effects on the land that bison had centuries ago.

Much is at stake. Grasslands now occupy less than 10 percent of the Chihuahuan Desert. As ranchers fall on hard times, many choose to sell their land. Agriculture is expanding into the region, threatening to reduce or eliminate remaining grasslands so critical to the survival of more than 20 species, including the Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Lark Bunting, and Long-billed Curlew.

So far, ABC and Mexican partner organization Pronatura Noreste have improved habitat for these birds on



Sprague's Pipit by Greg Lavaty

**TOP PHOTO:** Restored grasslands on Coyamito Ranch in Chihuahua, Mexico, October 2014. Photo by Lilia Vela



nearly 70,000 acres of working lands in an area called Valles Centrales. Working closely with ranchers to adopt rotational grazing practices, Pronatura has installed electric fences to create separate pastures that allow ranchers to be strategic about where their cattle graze, when, and for how long.

The goal is to encourage landowners to improve the ecological condition of their land in a way that benefits grassland birds. The birds need the help, but so do the ranchers. Drought and poor profits have taken a severe toll on the region's ranching community, says Mauricio De la Maza, Conservation Director of Pronatura Noreste.

But the ranchers taking part in the project are already starting to see results. And birds are returning, De la Maza says. He hopes ranchers will view the birds as indicators that their land is growing healthier: "If

the birds are visiting them, they're doing their stuff right, and will make more profits," he says.

Indeed, the more diverse the wildlife, the better off ranchers will be, says Alejandro Carrillo, who owns Las Damas ranch in the Valles Centrales. If birds and other animals disappear, he says, it suggests the environment has become less resilient.

"If you lose one species, you may think, 'Well, that doesn't matter. I'm not really selling birds.' But I don't think that's the way it works," he says. "Everything relates to everything."

### The Grassland Gang

Every winter, the Sprague's Pipit makes its home in the Chihuahuan Desert. Eating insects and sometimes seeds, the small, brown songbird needs open, treeless grasslands

to survive. But not just any grass will do: Sprague's Pipit likes it short.

A few years ago, scientists with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies conducted research to characterize the habitat needs of priority grassland birds in Chihuahua such as the Sprague's Pipit. The results were compelling. Some of the birds' basic needs—say, the composition of grasses, trees, and shrubs—were very similar to what cattle need, too.

It was a game-changing discovery, De la Maza says. Rotational grazing had been around for decades, but this research suggested that smart grazing could create the right habitat for birds. Equally encouraging was the realization that ranchers would also benefit. Their cattle would have better grass, and more of it, on which to graze.

"What makes sense ecologically also makes sense economically," De la Maza says.

Grasslands team, February 2014. From left to right: Andrew Rothman (ABC), Mauricio De la Maza (Pronatura), Rubén Borunda (partner rancher), Alejandro Carrillo (partner rancher), Lilia Vela (Pronatura), Gerardo Bezanilla (consultant), and Iris Banda (Pronatura).





Still, this new approach would require a tremendous shift in how grazing had been done in Chihuahua for generations.

In the preferred practice across much of the region, De la Maza says, “You throw your cattle in and let them do whatever they want to do.” It’s like inviting children to a birthday party and serving them cake, fish, and vegetables, he says. “You say, ‘OK kids, eat whatever you like.’ They’ll go for the cake.”

The same is true for cattle. In an open range, cattle will naturally head straight for the tastiest grasses. Having consumed those, they quickly move on to the next-best, and so on. Before long, the ground is bare.

It triggers a damaging cycle for cattle, people, and birds. Sparse grasses or the wrong grasses mean cattle don’t get proper nutrition,

Alejandro Carrillo by Mauricio de la Maza



“If you lose one species, you may think, ‘Well, that doesn’t matter. I’m not really selling birds.’ But I don’t think that’s the way it works...Everything relates to everything.”

*Alejandro Carrillo*

requiring ranch operators to spend money on supplemental food and nutrients. The quality of their ranch land plummets along with the fertility of their cows. It becomes hard to survive.

Meanwhile, grasses fail to regenerate under constant pressure. Parched dirt is unable to absorb precious rainfall. Mesquite and other woody

shrubs take root. And the grassland birds arrive each fall to find their land diminished.

### Putting Plans Into Action

A few years ago, Pronatura began reaching out to ranchers in the Valles Centrales. With support from ABC, the organization had identified key areas that were important for the birds, primarily in two regions

## BEFORE

Traditional cattle management techniques and drought had eliminated wintering habitat for migrant grassland birds on the Coyamito Ranch. Photo by Pronatura Noreste, February 2014





—Valles Centrales and Janos— as well as a biological corridor connecting the two. In all, the two regions cover an area that is larger than Yellowstone and Yosemite combined, roughly 3.7 million acres.

The goal: enhance habitat for the dwindling number of grassland birds by engaging landowners in a new way to graze cattle.

Pronatura's Iris Banda works directly with ranchers. She has found that many are willing to hear about new incentives to improve their land and incomes. "By having a few conversations with the landowner, you can figure out if they are truly interested in the project but also committed to change their operations," she says.

Although every case is different, Banda describes a general approach: Pronatura staff meet with a

landowner to explain the program and sign a contract to implement the new grazing practices. Then, they diagnose the condition of the ranch's natural resources and its cattle, proposing practices that will improve cattle production and also benefit migratory birds.

The last step is the hardest, but also the most important: putting the plan into action. Generally this involves creating more pastures; placing a water source in each; tilling soil and removing woody shrubs like mesquite; and controlling erosion.

Ranchers are full of questions, Banda says. When will I see results? Why do my cows still jump the electric fence? If I see plenty of birds all the time, why do you say their populations are decreasing? Aren't all birds the same?

At his Las Damas ranch, Carrillo had already been taking what he calls a holistic approach to grazing when he partnered up with Pronatura two years ago. Now, with the organization's help, he has cordoned off his land into about 100 pastures. Within the next three years, he hopes to have 180, giving him the option to graze his cattle on each pasture for only two days a year if that's what the birds need.

Taking a cue from the area's wildlife, he has also changed the ranch's calving season so that it is in sync with nature. In Chihuahua, deer and other animals give birth in late summer to coincide with the rains. So instead of the haphazard calving schedule of previous years, cows at Las Damas now give birth in August: More rain means taller grasses, greater nourishment for mothers and calves, and less strain on the land.

## AFTER

Liliana Vela, Project Coordinator for Pronatura Noreste, stands in pasture that was recently restored on the Coyamito Ranch. Photo by Pronatura Noreste, October 2014





# On the Northern Great Plains, New Hope for a Bold Bird

As ABC's Northern Great Plains Conservation Coordinator, Cheryl Mandich works with private landowners to help them manage their land in a way that will enhance habitat for grassland birds while allowing them to sustain their ranching livelihoods.

Based out of a Natural Resources Conservation Service office in North Dakota, Mandich's work is part of a multinational effort to restore the health of North America's grasslands and prairies for migratory birds, wildlife, and people. The continued decline of birds that require grasslands to survive has resulted in some species, such as the Long-billed Curlew, becoming a focus of conservation by every level of government in the United States and Canada, as well as a major regional conservation effort in Mexico.

On the prairies, the Long-billed Curlew is a beacon in this conservation push. "If we improve habitat for them, we improve habitat for a lot of birds," Mandich says. And there's no mistaking the bold bird with a long, curved bill, she adds. "It's a large bird people can recognize. It's loud. It's very territorial."

ABC has developed guidelines for how landowners can make these important enhancements to their land. These "recommended management actions" call on landowners to halt the conversion of grassland, manage grazing appropriately, use native plant material to restore the grasses, avoid disturbing the land during periods when birds are nesting, and minimize the use of herbicides and pesticides.

Strategic grazing of domestic livestock in Mandich's region—Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas—is part of the solution.

"If you think about bison or buffalo, when they graze they don't stay in one area. They graze and they move on. So you get this mosaic of habitat," Mandich says. "The closest we

can come to that with domestic livestock is rotational grazing. It's mimicking, as much as possible, the bison grazing."

By using livestock to enhance the habitat, ranchers can create shorter grasses by having cattle graze a little bit longer. Moving cattle from pasture to pasture can bring about taller grasses of different heights for birds that need them.

For Mandich, the work is personal. She grew up in a farming community and respects those who make a living off the land. But she got into this work "because wildlife and habitat is very important to me, and I want it to be available for future generations," Mandich says. Now she's trying to conserve both.

—Libby Sander

Meet Cheryl Mandich and hear about her vision for grasslands: [abcbirds.org/video-grassland-birds](http://abcbirds.org/video-grassland-birds)



Long-billed Curlew by  
Dennis Molenaar, Shutterstock



This year, Carrillo noticed Greater Roadrunner and Scaled Quail on his property. It used to be that he'd see one, maybe two quail. Now, there are 50 to 100.

Across the region, the project is revealing how communities can rally and change to help birds, says Andrew Rothman, director of ABC's Migratory Bird Program. "We think of conservation, and we think of the [bird] species," he says. "But conservation is really about people."

In Chihuahua, he adds, "These are people who care about their land because their families have been ranching it for a long time. There's been a restored sense of hope."

De la Maza agrees, describing the project as a rare conservation victory in which both ranchers and birds win. Results have come more quickly and on a greater scale than conservationists anticipated.

But the next challenge will be scaling up the program. Although effective, it is also expensive to run. Government policies will be essential, De la Maza says.

"We need to understand the economic, social, technical, and

business aspects of this," he says, "so we're successful with our vision for the Chihuahuan grasslands."

This means government subsidies for ranchers to purchase electric fences. Limitations on the extraction of water, a valuable resource in the desert. Land-use planning. Protection of land corridors between grasslands.

Carrillo is looking ahead, too. More and more, he says, conservation of grasslands will rely upon the relationships between ranches. He's glad to make the changes. But it's more effective if his neighbors do it, too. "You don't want to be an island of grass in the desert," he says.

This year, Carrillo noticed Greater Roadrunner and Scaled Quail on his property. It used to be that he'd see one, maybe two quail. Now, there are 50 to 100. Reports show that Carrillo's Las Damas now has Baird's Sparrow and Grasshopper Sparrow. Although Pronatura gave him a

booklet to identify these and other grassland species, Carrillo admits the small brown birds are hard to spot. "I can tell you a few by name, but there are so many," he says with a laugh.

"It's not only that we like the birds," Carrillo says of the changes he's made in recent years. "We are interested in creating an environment where they can sustain themselves, and they are part of the whole."

*ABC's work in the Chihuahuan grasslands is made possible by the generous support of Jonathan Franzen and with the support of the Rio Grande Joint Venture.*



# Across the West, Landowners Create a Legacy of Open Land

By Steve Holmer

Montana's Hart Ranch is 3,500 acres of hilly grasslands not far from the Canadian border. It lies squarely in Greater Sage-Grouse country, along the bird's longest-known travel corridor: a 150-mile route between Saskatchewan and the Missouri River.

Thanks to a remarkable public-private partnership, this section of the grouse's habitat will remain intact for generations to come. Nearly 2,500 acres of Hart Ranch are now protected from development under a conservation easement brokered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The arrangement, which still permits the grazing of livestock, is a key component of a 32,249-acre network of easements that protect habitat along the grouse's travel route.

Hart Ranch reflects a monumental effort to conserve sagebrush habitat and the rapidly declining Greater Sage-Grouse. The easements are part of NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI)—a case study in how to reach out and work effectively with private landowners. As a result, western ranchers, with the help of NRCS, state wildlife agencies, and groups such as The Conservation Fund, are central to the effort.

Since 2010, more than 1,100 ranchers have enrolled in SGI programs, conserving more than 4.4 million acres of sage grouse habitat across 11 states. The venture is poised to have an even greater impact: Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently unveiled a plan to invest an additional \$211 million in SGI's conservation efforts through 2018.

This collaborative approach is essential. Sage grouse numbers have dropped so low that, at the time this



Greater Sage-Grouse by USFWS

magazine went to press, the species had been under consideration for an Endangered Species Act listing. To reverse this trend, we need immediate action across a vast area. Yet public and private lands where sage grouse occur are typically intermingled. In Montana, for instance, nearly two-thirds of grouse habitat is on private lands. In other states, private lands provide essential wintering grounds or areas where grouse raise their young.

This overlap can be problematic for the skittish grouse, which avoid noisy or busy areas. Yet the growing alliance, which places working with landowners at its core, offers hope that a tremendously difficult conservation challenge can still be overcome. The SGI's roster reflects an impressive array of partners, including the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, The Nature Conservancy,

the Mule Deer Foundation, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture. These partners and many more are getting the job done.

Most inspiring of all is many ranchers' willingness and desire to leave the land in its wide-open condition for generations to come. By establishing permanent easements like the one at Hart Ranch, they are not only holding back encroaching developments and preventing the conversion of open sagebrush grazing land to cropland. These steps also maintain ranchers' way of life—and are a boon to the charismatic bird that depends on the West's signature stretches of sagebrush to survive.

Read more about the recent grouse announcement and other news on our "Bird Calls" blog: [abcbirds.org/birdcalls](http://abcbirds.org/birdcalls)



Steve Holmer, ABC's Senior Policy Advisor, has over 20 years of experience working to conserve endangered wildlife including the Northern Spotted Owl, Marbled Murrelet, and Greater Sage-Grouse. He also directs the Bird Conservation Alliance, a network of over 200 groups that builds support for bird conservation programs.



# LOOKING for a BRIGHTER FUTURE for BIRDS?

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Birder by soft light, Shutterstock



Let your will be your guide.

You can ensure a better future for birds when you include American Bird Conservancy in your estate plans. A gift through your will, trust, retirement plan, or insurance policy will help protect birds for future generations, and create your own legacy of bird conservation. If you would like more information on how to do so, or if you have already included ABC in your estate, please contact Jack Morrison, ABC Planned Giving Director, at 540-253-5780 or [jmorrison@abcbirds.org](mailto:jmorrison@abcbirds.org).





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Summer Tanager, Ecuador.  
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