



Recovery: A Bird's Eye View

by Rachel F Levin

This piping plover may look like it has many legs, but it has just taking its two chicks under its wing to keep them warm. Photo Credit: © Jim Fenton, 2010

“ A rough-legged hawk comes sailing over the meadow ahead. Now he stops, hovers like a kingfisher, and then drops like a feathered bomb into the marsh. He does not rise again and so I am sure he has caught, and is now eating some worried mouse-engineer who could not wait until night to inspect the damage to his well-ordered world. ”

How many of us have read the words of Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, describing the arrival and departure of birds to his family's farm during spring and fall migrations? How many of us have stood in our driveways on a cool spring morning, listening to the first chirps of swallows, chickadees and cardinals as they welcome springtime and the emergence of life after a long winter?

Birds are among nature's most magnificent living resources. They play a significant ecological, economic and cultural role in our lives. Because of their ubiquitous and conspicuous presence, birds enrich our experience with our natural world and benefit our lives in many ways—through their aesthetic value, as they are appreciated by millions of bird watchers, or their economic and ecological value as pollinators, pest consumers, or seed dispersers.

Millions of people actively appreciate and enjoy birds. Whether on national wildlife refuges or in national parks, at state natural areas or in our own backyards, people “flock” to catch a glimpse of these colorful creatures, straining to hear the mysterious music of birds' calls.

From a practical standpoint, birds also support the economy. Nearly 48 million people observed birds around their homes or on trips in 2006, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and, Wildlife-Associated Recreation. These birding experiences generated more than \$82 billion in total industry output, 671,000 jobs, and \$11 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenue. A growing number of communities around the country host multi-day birding festivals.

The Service is charged by Congress with preserving our nation's bird populations, ensuring that future

generations may continue to enjoy the many benefits that birds bring to our lives. The Migratory Bird Program seeks to conserve migratory bird populations and associated habitats, through careful monitoring and effective population and habitat management. And when threats to birds and their habitats lead bird populations to precariously low levels, the Endangered Species Program works to protect and restore imperiled species through the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

Many of the species you will read about in this edition represent remarkable conservation success stories. The populations of these species were once in steep decline, but are now increasing in numbers and are moving closer towards recovery. A key part of the effort to recover these species has been our partnerships with other agencies, nongovernment organizations and private citizens who come together with a common mission to keep these birds in our lives and on our landscapes.

The whooping crane (*Grus americana*) is a hallmark example of the power of conservation partnerships. Whooping cranes – at 5 feet (1.5 meters) in height, North America’s tallest flying birds – were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s. Today, there are only about 575 birds in existence, some 400 of them in the wild.

Through the extraordinary efforts of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership – a coalition of public and private organizations and individuals – a migrating population of whooping cranes now takes to the skies each year over the eastern United States, allowing people who may never have had the opportunity otherwise to glimpse this rare beauty.

On the other end of the spectrum, and the other side of the country, the story of the tiny Nihoa millerbird

(*Acrocephalus familiaris kingi*) has played out. Last fall, the Millerbird Translocation Project, a partnership of federal and state agencies and conservation organizations, launched an historic effort to create a second population of this secretive bird, found in small numbers only on one volcanic island in the Pacific Ocean.



A whooping crane photographed at the International Crane Foundation located in Barbaboo, Wisconsin.

Photo Credit: Ryan Hagerty/USFWS

The release of 24 Nihoa millerbirds on Laysan Island began a new chapter in the recovery efforts for this critically endangered species. While biologists are still monitoring the translocated birds to see whether they will successfully nest in their new habitat, the project still stands as a groundbreaking effort to save a species from extinction. As with the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, the Nihoa Millerbird Translocation Project would not have been possible without our conservation partners.

The whooping crane and the Nihoa millerbird are but two examples of the many bird species that have come to the brink of extinction, only to be pulled away from the precipice through the efforts of the Service and our partners. Our success in recovering endangered bird populations – and those of so many other imperiled species – depends on collaboration.

The next time you pause to listen to a flock of geese flying overhead or watch a bird at your backyard feeder, remember how much birds mean in all of our lives, and think of the many partners who help us to keep our feathered friends flying high.

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