



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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AGREEMENT LAUNCHED TO HALT DECLINE OF SOME OF AMERICA'S FAVORITE BIRDS

Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan today announced the beginning of a new international effort to halt the decline of some of the western hemisphere's most beautiful and best-loved birds.

Seven Federal agencies signed an agreement May 14 to promote conservation of "neotropical" migratory birds--those that breed in the U.S. and Canada and winter south of the U.S. Neotropical migrant birds include such well-known species as the northern (Baltimore) oriole, scarlet tanager, ruby-throated hummingbird, rose-breasted grosbeak, wood thrush, bobolink, broad-winged hawk, and many warblers, as well as other species of forest and grassland birds.

"These fascinating birds have inspired music, art, and poetry," said John Turner, director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "They play an essential role in the ecosystem and are admired by more than 80 million Americans who feed and watch birds. Our world would be much poorer without them."

The May 14 agreement was signed by Turner; James Ridenour, director of the National Park Service; and Cy Jamison, director of the Bureau of Land Management; Dale Robertson, chief of the Agriculture Department's U.S. Forest Service; Courtney Riordan, director of the Office of Environmental Processes and Effects Research, Environmental Protection Agency; Peter Bloom, acting assistant administrator for the Agency for International Development's bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean; and

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Jacqueline E. Schafer, assistant secretary of the Navy, Installations and Environment. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation helped launch the conservation program, which will eventually include many states and private conservation groups.

Nearly a quarter of U.S. bird species are neotropical migrants. In some states, more than 70 percent of neotropical bird species experienced population declines from 1980-89, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service's Breeding Bird Survey. In the eastern United States, 44 of 62 neotropical species declined from 1978-87.

"At this rate, the only Baltimore orioles kids see in the next century will be baseball players," said Fish and Wildlife Service director Turner.

"I would like to commend the Secretary and the agencies for taking this important first step in a comprehensive program for migratory songbird conservation," said Charles Collins, executive director of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Neotropical birds are most common in eastern forests, comprising 60 to 80 percent of both the species and the individual birds in these woods. They are also common in western mountain forests, and in deciduous forests in canyons and along streams and rivers. Some species, like the bobolink, nest in grasslands and hayfields.

The species that appear to be declining most seriously are those using forested habitats in both their breeding and wintering areas. In winter, neotropical birds often live in small geographic areas, and so are particularly vulnerable to deforestation and other habitat changes in Latin America and the Caribbean islands.

In the north, the birds are also believed to be affected by what biologists call forest "fragmentation," meaning large blocks of mature forest have been replaced with smaller patches of younger forest.

The bobolink nests in hayfields and makes its way south across the jungles to the pampas of Argentina. Once known as the "rice bird" because it stopped by the millions in Louisiana rice fields (where the unwelcome dinner guests were customarily shot), the bobolink has declined as haying became less common in North America and as a trend toward haying earlier in the season resulted in the destruction of nests and chicks. Now the bobolink is also experiencing problems in its winter home as the pampas give way to rice farming.

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Many neotropical birds make truly remarkable odysseys. The delicate ruby-throated hummingbird and many other species cross the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean, flying several hundred miles over water with no place to stop.

The blackpoll warbler prepares for migration by an eating frenzy that turns it into what one ornithologist calls "a little ball of fat." After migrating from Alaska and Canada to New England, the warbler launches itself across the ocean, beginning a nonstop flight to South America that takes 3 to 4 days. In the spring, they turn around and fly back--a 2,500-mile roundtrip journey by a creature that would fit in the palm of your hand.

Some species migrate in large flocks; others go one by one; and still others travel in families, calling to keep their little groups together. In most species, young birds are independent of their parents by migration time, and must find their way south on their own or with other inexperienced youngsters.

Still, billions of birds make the migrations each year--but whether they can survive when they arrive at their destinations will depend on what people do. Bird experts agree that a coordinated international program is needed to conserve neotropical birds. The program launched with the May 14 agreement will include such steps as improving surveys and monitoring of bird populations; conducting research on the habitat needs and causes of decline for various species; identifying essential habitat areas; and developing habitat conservation and management techniques. Of particular importance are efforts to aid Caribbean and Central and South American countries--many of which are working to develop conservation programs that can succeed in the face of serious human economic and population pressures.

In North America, the government agencies plan on increased efforts to manage and conserve bird habitats in forests, parks, and refuges. Many of the species need large tracts of forestland or benefit from corridors that connect one wooded tract to another.

"We simply are not going to have these birds in the future unless we make a serious effort to conserve their habitats throughout our hemisphere," Turner said.