



The All-Bird Bulletin

Bird Conservation News and Information

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From the Editor

Providing private landowners with incentives and assistance to improve the condition of their lands and waters is one of the best strategies to conserve habitat for wildlife populations, which spread out across the landscape without regard to our political delineations. And there are no better mechanisms in place for working with private landowners than the programs established under the conservation title of the Farm Bill, which is now up for reauthorization.

Birds are excellent focal species for private land conservation. The existing network of bird conservation knowledge, plans, and delivery programs provides an effective infrastructure for adaptive management. Birds are loved by the public and have economic and recreational value. Moreover, many bird populations are at risk and in urgent need of conservation due to habitat loss and degradation.

The U.S. NABCI Committee is dedicated to improving the ability of landowners to regularly incorporate bird conservation priorities and objectives into their land use management plans and practices. To do this, the Committee is working closely with state wildlife agencies, the bird habitat joint ventures, non-governmental organizations, such as the National Audubon Society, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the Farm Bill. All of these entities are represented on the Committee and share common goals and objectives for wildlife conservation.

Articles in this special issue of *The All-Bird Bulletin* describe how private land programs around the country are enabling landowners to manage habitat for bird species in need of conservation. Read on and consider how you could work with private landowners in your region to conserve habitat for priority birds and other wildlife. Also, refer to the resource list on page 14, which includes links to recommendations on expanding the wildlife benefits of the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization.

Of Pride and Prairie-Chickens in the Texas Panhandle

*By Debbie Slobe, Communications Leader,
Playa Lakes Joint Venture*

As a wildlife professional, you don't just saunter into a Texas Panhandle town and expect landowners to open their barn doors and listen to how you — an outsider — think they should be managing their properties. These are independent, do-it-yourself folks who are, for the most part, already doing a mighty fine job — thank you very much.

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Lesser prairie-chicken. / Burr Williams



*Advancing integrated bird
conservation in North America*

New York Tailors WHIP to Conserve Birds in Early Successional Habitats

By Christopher Reidy and Shanna Sham, Biologists, New York Natural Resources Conservation Service

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) first introduced the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program or WHIP. The purpose of WHIP is to create, maintain, or restore wildlife habitat on private, tribal, and certain public lands by providing financial incentives to landowners. NRCS staff prioritize applications based on each one's estimated amount of wildlife benefit. Landowners typically enter into ten-year contracts that emphasize improving habitat for state species of concern. The WHIP reaches out to conservation-minded people who may not be farmers, complimenting other programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program.

Since the program's inception, NRCS staff in New York has elected to use WHIP to address the decline of early successional habitats, with an emphasis on grasslands birds. In 2007, the program expanded to include shrubland birds. Staff recognized that Farm Bill programs are vital to these two species suites.

According to BBS data between 1966 and 2003, 64 percent of shrubland species and 85 percent of grassland species, with available trend information, are undergoing significant declines.



Lower Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Plain Bird Conservation Region (BCR 13) provides critical habitat for important grassland species, such as the bobolink, which reaches its highest population density in this region. /Steve Maslowski

Although natural grasslands probably occurred in portions of New York at the time of European settlement, the vast majority of grasslands today are agricultural. But these are disappearing at an alarming rate due to development and farm abandonment. According to the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, the amount of land in hay or pasture in the state has declined by 1.2 million acres since 1980. Shrublands are undergoing a similar downward trend.

Countless studies have demonstrated the importance of agricultural grasslands to birds. According to a survey conducted by the Massachusetts Audubon Society from 1997-2000, New York harbors a significant portion of the Northeast's grassland bird populations. Moreover, few programs are currently focused on restoring or preserving this habitat type.

These facts led New York NRCS to select early successional species as a conservation priority. Here was an opportunity to serve the management needs of landowners who wished to improve conditions for game species on their properties concurrent with management for early successional nongame bird species.

New York NRCS met with representatives from a number of private and public organizations and local experts to select individual priority species and determine the best approach to address their habitat needs. These partners include U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Audubon New York, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, The Ruffed Grouse Society, and State University of New York (SUNY) at Brockport, among others.

The group consulted the 2002 Audubon watch list, New York Breeding Bird Atlas trends, Partners in Flight bird conservation plans, and New York's list of threatened, endangered, and special concern species to select the following priority species for the program: bobolink, Henslow's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, eastern meadowlark, upland sandpiper, northern harrier, short-eared owl, blue-winged warbler, golden-winged warbler, eastern towhee, whip-poor-will, brown thrasher, willow flycatcher, ruffed grouse, and American woodcock.

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The group then set to task on how best to manage for them. Audubon New York conducted an extensive GIS analysis of 2000-2005 New York Breeding Bird Atlas data for the grassland bird species. Atlas blocks were ranked based upon the abundance and diversity of priority grassland species and the proximity of the blocks to each other. The analysis resulted in the generation of eight core grassland areas to focus restoration efforts. Because of the ubiquitous distributions of the priority avian shrubland species, coupled with studies indicating they may not be as critically area sensitive as grassland birds, no core shrubland areas were defined.

Sites are evaluated based upon their potential to meet the general habitat requirements for individual priority species. For grassland birds these include the size and shape of the project area, habitat condition of the site and surrounding landscape, and proximity to core grassland areas. Shrubland evaluation criteria include the size of the project area, successional stage, relative abundance of native shrubs, and presence of invasive species.

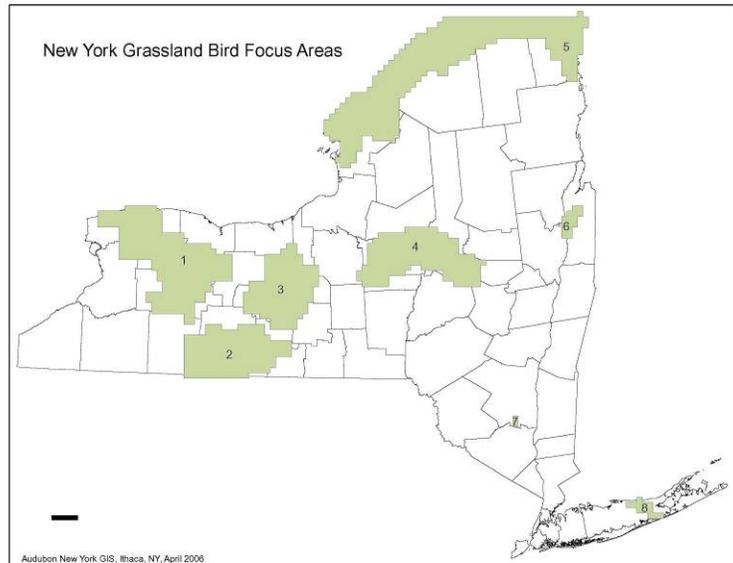
Because of the wide array of site conditions, management practices are selected based upon a combination of habitat needs and landowner objectives. Grasslands practices typically include brush management, prescribed mowing, invasive species management, and seeding of native or introduced grasses and forbs, resulting in improved grassland stands and increased habitat connectivity. Practices for shrubland habitats include shrub planting in fields deemed too small to benefit grassland birds and early successional habitat management, which consists primarily of selective tree felling to create forest openings and encourage regeneration of shrubs and saplings.

To date, New York NRCS has enrolled several thousand acres in the WHIP. In 2007 alone, 128 WHIP applications have been received representing nearly 3,300 acres of land. In-kind assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, including equipment and seed, has helped make the program more financially attractive for landowners. Like many state WHIPs, New York's is frequently unable to meet demand; almost every year, hundreds of thousands of dollars in applications go unfunded.

Studies conducted by SUNY Brockport, funded by the New York Biodiversity Research Institute, indicate that priority species are using lands enrolled in USDA conservation programs, including WHIP. Other wildlife benefiting from WHIP include wild turkey, eastern cottontail, and the federally and state endangered Karner blue butterfly.

NRCS staff has honed their WHIP by working with conservation partners on elements of biological planning, conservation design, and monitoring. In this way, New York has developed a well-tailored WHIP that is an important stimulus for the conservation of the state's early successional bird species of greatest concern.

For more information, contact chris.reidy@ny.usda.gov or Shanna.Shaw@ny.usda.gov.



Focus Areas are found in the following regions: 1 in Western New York; 2 in Southern Tier; 3 in Finger Lakes Region; 4 in Central Leatherstocking Region and Southern Adirondacks; 5 in St. Lawrence River Valley; 6 in Ft. Edward Grasslands IBA; 7 in Shawangunk Grasslands; and 8 in the historic Hempstead Plains on Long Island.

Shorebird Farming in Washington's Skagit River Delta

By Kevin Morse, Skagit Delta Project Manager, The Nature Conservancy

Three farmers in the Skagit River Delta in northwest Washington State are adding a new crop to their fields: shorebirds. By flooding parts of their fields with two or three inches of water for part of each year, the farmers are hoping to create new or improved habitat for shorebirds such as western sandpiper, black-bellied plover, dunlin, dowitcher, and marbled godwit, and at the same time improve the health of the fields for farming.



During migration, the short-billed dowitcher, a shorebird species of high conservation concern, prefers saltwater tidal flats, beaches, and salt marshes. /Marlin Greene

The farmers, David Hedlin, Alan Mesman, and Gail Thulen, are participating in an innovative research project The Nature Conservancy has launched in cooperation with Washington State University, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, and Western Washington Agricultural Association. Called "Farming for Wildlife," the three-year project will study the relationship between three farming practices — mowing, grazing, and flooding — and habitat for migratory shorebirds. The intent of the experiment is to discover how habitat rotation can be compatible with crop rotations in the Skagit Valley.

The Skagit Delta is a vibrant rural community—one of the last strongholds of farming in western Washington and a bread basket both regionally and nationally. The local community is rightfully proud and protective of its family farming heritage, which reaches back for generations. At the same time, the Delta is rich in wildlife. Though altered over the years by human development, diking, and draining, the Delta continues to support tidal marshes and riverine habitats, which host one of the largest and most diverse concentrations of wintering raptors on the continent. And in recent winters, biologists surveying the Delta have counted more than 150,000 dabbling ducks and more than 65,000 shorebirds, underscoring its status as a critical stop along the Pacific Flyway.



David Hedlin is one of three farmers in the Skagit River Delta working with conservation partners to manage habitat for declining migratory shorebirds. /Kirsten Morse

"Scientists have documented the decline of 14 species of migrating shorebirds that rely on near-shore and estuary habitats," said Kevin Morse, the Conservancy's Skagit Delta project manager. The Skagit Delta "is one of the last best places for shorebirds. But they've lost this type of habitat along their migratory routes," Morse said.

The three farmers have each committed about 70 acres of land to the three-year Farming for Wildlife project. They'll employ mowing, grazing, and flooding on different portions of their land, and then scientists will evaluate the effects of each practice on soil and the varieties and abundance of shorebirds.

Project partners will compensate farmers for their time and expenses in the project, up to a total of \$350,000. The project is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, Puget Sound Marine Fund, and private donations.

In addition, with a grant from the Pacific Coast Joint Venture Discretionary Fund, some of the participating farmers, and other agricultural stakeholders in the Skagit Delta, will attend an informational trip to Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge in the Klamath Basin region of Northern California. Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, farmers there have discovered that certain wetland rotations have increased their yields by 25 percent and reduced costs by some \$200 per acre because they no longer needed pesticides to manage soil-borne pests.

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Shorebirds, from Page 4

In addition to improving soil fertility, keeping a field in grass or sheet pond for three years could also enable the farmers to transition to organic status if they were looking for a way to do so, since federal organic standards require farmland to be pesticide-free for three years.

The real payoff will come if The Nature Conservancy learns which practices are successful and can be replicated in other areas of the country. As part of the study, the Conservancy will rigorously monitor use of the habitat by shorebirds at different tide heights, as well as the presence of weeds, invertebrates in the soil, and overall soil condition. Significantly higher numbers of shorebirds feeding in the pilot fields than in neighboring farm fields, measurably improved soil condition, and farmers embracing the treatments will all spell success. The study is expected to be completed in May 2010.

“If 100 years from now,” said farmer Dave Hedlin, “there are healthy viable family farms in this valley and waterbirds and wildlife and salmon in the river, then everyone wins.”

For more information, contact Robin Stanton, Communications Manager, The Nature Conservancy of Washington, rstanton@tnc.org.

Vermont Audubon Helps Private Landowners Improve Forest Breeding Bird Habitat

By *Jim Shallow*, Conservation and Policy Director, Audubon Vermont

From a bird perspective, Vermont is a small state with a big responsibility. The forests of Vermont and neighboring states are home to the highest concentration of breeding bird species in the continental United States. These Neotropical migratory birds have, in some cases, 90 percent of their global population breeding in this region. In fact, the landbird initiative, Partners in Flight, stresses that, from a global perspective, this region – the Atlantic Northern Forest Bird Conservation Region (BCR 14) – ranks among the highest priorities for long-term bird conservation in eastern North America.

However, as documented in Audubon’s recent report, *State of the Birds: Common Birds in Decline*, many of these birds are experiencing long-term declines due to increasing forest fragmentation and a corresponding loss of biodiversity. Audubon Vermont’s Forest Bird Initiative is raising awareness of the importance of the region for birds and working directly with private forest landowners to encourage sustainable forest management to improve breeding habitat and provide landowner income, which may forestall the need to develop and fragment the property.

Thanks to a recent grant from the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Audubon Vermont will now have the capacity to work directly with private forest landowners— who own 80 percent of Vermont’s forests – to promote “bird-friendly” forest management. Matched with a Wildlife Action Opportunity Fund grant from the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, this grant will fund landowner workshops designed to introduce bird-friendly forest management concepts. The workshops will be supplemented by habitat assessments of individual properties to help landowners work with their foresters to develop forest management plans that will improve breeding conditions.



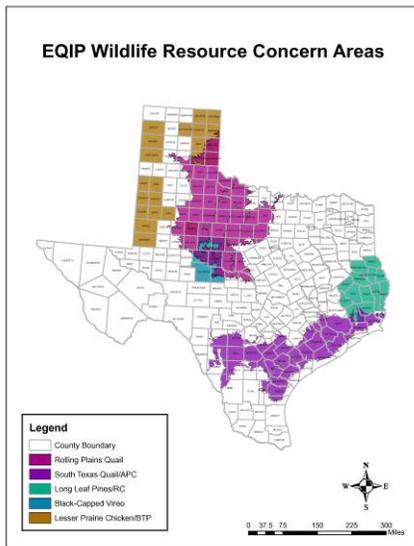
Hermit thrush, the Vermont State Bird, breeds in deciduous, mixed, and coniferous forests and is the only member of its genus to over-winter in North America. /Lee Karney

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EQIP Helps Ranchers Lend a Helping Hand to Texas Birds

By Chuck Kowaleski, Farm Bill Coordinator, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

First authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill, the Environmental Quality Incentive Program or EQIP is USDA's primary cost-share program that assists farmers and ranchers interested in conserving soil, water, wetlands, and wildlife on their properties. With a primary focus on livestock operations, the EQIP in Texas has funded over \$8 million in habitat improvement projects on 370,000 acres in five wildlife resource concern areas (RCA). These projects boost livestock production while simultaneously improving habitat for declining species of grassland, savanna, and forest birds. This feat is accomplished through a combination of technical assistance, cost-share, and incentive payments that make financial sense to conservation-minded land stewards. Let's take a closer look at each of these five areas.



The Rolling Plains Quail/Declining Grassland Birds RCA is located in north-central Texas in an historic mixed grass prairie/mesquite savanna. Averaging less than 20 inches of rainfall per year, much of this area has suffered habitat degradation due to lack of rotational grazing and fire compounded by periodic droughts. Participants sign six-year management contracts and receive 50 percent cost-share for brush control, range reseeding, and prescribed burning. They also receive incentive payments for grazing deferment and for following both a Natural Resources Conservation Service rotational grazing plan and a Texas Parks & Wildlife Department approved quail management plan for at least five years. The ranking system favors multi-pasture native rangeland tracts over 1,000 acres. Over \$4 million in contracts on 214,000 acres have been written for this area.



Well-managed prairies in the South Texas Quail Resource Conservation Area provide habitat for the grasshopper sparrow, a Partners in Flight species of continental importance. /Chuck Kowaleski

The South Texas Quail/Attwater's Prairie Chicken RCA is located in the historic tall grass prairie belt along the Texas Gulf Coast. Averaging 40 to 60 inches of rainfall per year, most of this area is now farmland. Brush encroachment is problematic on the remaining grasslands. Participants sign six-year contracts and receive cost-share for brush control, range reseeding, and prescribed burning, as well as incentive payments for necessary grazing deferment and following grazing and wildlife management plans for at least five years. Due to higher precipitation, well-managed prairies in this area have the ability to recover quickly and benefit many declining grassland bird species, such as grasshopper sparrows, Aplomado falcons, and white-tailed hawks. The ranking system favors multi-pasture native rangeland tracts over 1,500 acres. Over \$2.8 million in contracts on 71,000 acres have been written for this area.

The Lesser Prairie-Chicken/Black-tailed Prairie Dog RCA in the Texas Panhandle is located in mixed-grass prairie sites averaging less than 25 inches of rainfall per year. Much of this area has been converted to farmland with surviving prairie sites generally too hilly or sandy to farm. Shortgrass prairie restoration in this area is critical for a number of grassland bird species, such as lesser prairie-chicken, mountain plover, burrowing owl, and ferruginous and Swainson's hawks. Participants sign six-

year management contracts and receive cost-share for brush control, range reseeding, and prescribed burning, as well as incentive payments for grazing deferment and following grazing and prairie-chicken or prairie dog management plans for five years. The ranking system favors native rangeland tracts over 2,500 acres. Over \$1.1 million in contracts on almost 83,000 acres have been written for this area.

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The Longleaf Pine/Red-cockaded Woodpecker RCA is located in southeastern Texas on historic longleaf pine savanna sites averaging 50-60 inches of rainfall per year. Much of this original forest has been cut over as many as four times and replaced by loblolly pine plantations and non-native pasture. Participants receive cost-share for planting and maintaining longleaf pines in a savanna setting through the use of prescribed fire, thinning, and other management tools. The ranking system favors tracts that are over 100 acres, can be safely maintained by fire, are near known populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers or Louisiana pine snakes, and contain native grasses. Over \$300,000 in contracts on almost 1,000 acres has been written for this area.

The Black-capped Vireo (BCV) RCA began this year and is located in the northwestern corner of the central hill country of Texas. This historic oak savanna, in the 25-30 inch annual rainfall belt, has been invaded by juniper. Participants receive cost-share for brush removal and habitat manipulation that favors the shrubby deciduous habitat needed by black-capped vireos. They can also receive \$1000 annual incentive payments for trapping and removing parasitic brown-headed cowbirds. Two contracts worth \$55,000 have been awarded, improving 1,000 acres of habitat.

So how does a livestock program end up spending big bucks to benefit birds? Because it improves the stockman's bottom line as well! According to the 2006-2007 Texas Almanac, hunting leases provided \$431 million in income to Texas ranchers in 2004. Reducing invasive brush, instituting a prescribe burning program, and implementing better grazing management not only benefits declining birds, but livestock and hunting operations as well. This is truly a win-win situation. For more information, contact Chuck Kowaleski at (254) 742-9874 or Chuck.Kowaleski@tx.usda.gov

Birds Focus Private Land Conservation in North Carolina

By Matt Flint, Biologist, North Carolina Natural Resources Conservation Service

Birds provide a great focus for private land conservation. Just ask North Carolina's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff who run the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program or WHIP. By providing management planning assistance and financial incentives, staff are helping private landowners create, enhance, and restore habitats for priority birds identified by North Carolina Partners in Flight and the State Wildlife Action Plan, including several state or federally listed threatened, endangered, or candidate species. Priority birds in the State include Acadian flycatcher, American woodcock, Bachman's sparrow, cerulean warbler, golden-winged warbler, grasshopper sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, loggerhead shrike, painted bunting, red-cockaded woodpecker, and wood thrush, among others.

NRCS staff realize that private land conservation needs to take place at a scale that recognizes the ecological needs of species and accounts for existing conditions and actions being taken across a landscape. Thus, the main objective for WHIP in North Carolina is to engage private landowners and other partners in habitat management at a scale that benefits priority area-sensitive birds and meta-populations of these species.

Take, for example, the North Carolina Sandhills population of the federally listed endangered red-cockaded woodpecker — the second largest population identified in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery plan for the species. Recovery of the North Carolina Sandhills population will significantly contribute to the criteria required to down list or de-list this species.



Endemic to the United States, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker inhabits mature southern pine forests, preferring longleaf pine. /U.S. Marine Corps

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Covering New Ground in Private Land Conservation

By Sally Benjamin, National Biologist, Farm Service Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Private land management offers perhaps the greatest opportunity for increasing the amount and quality of bird habitat in North America. Private land management also presents a significant challenge. Attracting enrollment on the right lands, those that yield the greatest return on taxpayer investments, through voluntary programs, like Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), calls for thinking outside of the box. Doing so, requires the resolve to try new strategies and to then find ways to gather the data necessary to demonstrate, evaluate, and refine the benefits of new approaches. This, in turn, requires collaborative conservation efforts and friends on the ground. Fortunately, in partnership with friends and colleagues in state and federal wildlife agencies and in the nonprofit sector, FSA has found the support necessary to try some 'outside-the-box' ideas.



A Partners in Flight stewardship species of continental importance, the indigo bunting breeds in brushy and weedy areas along edges and in open deciduous woods and old fields. /Dave Menke

The initiatives described below represent a commitment of more than 1.5 million acres under continuous CRP signup, targeted to specific areas of particular wildlife value. They offer great potential for bird conservation. As never before, however, with the price of corn and other agricultural commodities significantly on the rise, it is essential to acknowledge that private land conservation will not occur without the interest and goodwill of private landowners. This takes collaboration among conservation partners in key places, particularly those working on the ground with private landowners, to make good things happen.

Upland Bird Habitat Buffers (CP33) In August 2004, the Administration unveiled FSA's Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds Conservation Practice, otherwise known as CP33. Limited to the historic 35-state range of the northern bobwhite, this targeted initiative is projected to increase northern bobwhite populations by an estimated 750,000 birds annually by providing food and cover for bobwhite quail in cropland areas. The current average costs are \$84 per acre for rental and \$93 per acre for cost-shares. More than half the available CP33 acres have been enrolled in less than three years. Based on this success, the available acres were recently upped from 250,000 to 300,000.

FSA required monitoring programs in the 20 states with the greatest potential for northern bobwhite response to this initiative. State wildlife agencies, nonprofits, and academic researchers from Mississippi State University fielded an army of researchers, coordinated through a \$707,000 2006 Multistate Conservation Grants Program from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, a \$104,153 grant from USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service-Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), and \$136,921 from USDA-FSA-CEAP. The CEAP is a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental benefits of practices used by private landowners in selected USDA conservation programs.

In spring 2006, coordinated monitoring began in Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and South Carolina. Arkansas and Nebraska began monitoring in fall 2006. Florida, Alabama and Louisiana have not been monitored yet because they did not enroll enough CP33 contracts in 2006 to conduct monitoring. Kansas and Oklahoma are conducting monitoring under a different protocol than the coordinated national CP33 monitoring program.

Though it is too early in the monitoring effort to have statistically rigorous results, early indications show a very positive response to the newly established habitat from northern bobwhite and a number of other early successional upland bird species, such as dickcissel, eastern meadowlark, and indigo bunting. To download the report, *Estimating Wildlife Response to the Conservation Reserve Program: Bobwhite and Grassland Birds*, visit http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/quail_study.pdf.

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Latest FSA Initiatives. In fall 2006 and spring 2007, FSA rolled out three more wildlife habitat initiatives: Last October, the Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative (CP37), a practice focusing continuous CRP enrollment in highly productive waterfowl areas of the Prairie Pothole Region and in March 2007, the Longleaf Pine Initiative (CP36) and State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE, CP38). As with CP33, each of these initiatives grew out of input from other federal agencies, state fish and wildlife agencies, and nonprofit conservation leaders.

Continuous Longleaf Initiative (CP36). Historically, longleaf pine was the dominant tree species on an estimated 60 million acres and in the mix of species on another 30 million acres. Natural stands of longleaf pine today occupy less than 2 million acres of the original 90 million-acre range of this species. More than 68 bird species can be found in the longleaf pine ecosystem, many of which are in decline. FSA created a continuous Longleaf Pine practice to re-establish stands at densities that benefit wildlife species and protect water quality. In March 2007, 250,000 acres were made available for continuous enrollment along the coastal plain from east Texas to the piedmonts of Virginia and in the mountains of Alabama and north-west Georgia. By April 2007, FSA had allocated another 20,000 acres to Georgia, the first state to allocate all their initial allotment of CP-36 acres, for a statewide total of 64,750 acres. To download a news release, visit <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases>. To download the 2005 USDA/NRCS report, *Bird Use of Longleaf Pine Restoration*, visit http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/media/pdf/tn_b_33_a.pdf.



North America's only true lark, the horned lark prefers barren ground of open country, such as prairies, fields, shores, and tundra. /Tim Bowman

Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative (CP37). FSA created the Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative in collaboration with Fish and Wildlife Service and state agency wildlife biologists in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Montana, and in response to comments from a number of nonprofit wildlife organizations, including Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever. A continuous CRP practice specifically to benefit nesting waterfowl in the PPR, CP37 targets land expected to produce the greatest waterfowl reproduction, specifically cropland containing high densities of wetlands, with priority to areas with over 25 breeding duck pairs per square mile. Landowners in high duck density areas may enroll up to 10 acres of upland for every one acre of wetland. Biologists estimate that over two million additional ducks per year are hatched as a result of CRP in the Dakotas and Montana alone. Ducks produced in the PPR are harvested across the length and breadth of North America. To download a news release, visit <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases>.

State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE). The SAFE initiative is a flexible, results-oriented, and locally led effort to address high-value wildlife habitat restoration by encouraging collaborative conservation projects to benefit high priority wildlife in need of special consideration in specific areas of the country. SAFE empowers the public, producers, state and federal agencies, non-profit conservation organizations, and others to work together to identify geographic areas where new CRP acreage should be enrolled to address the habitat needs of specific endangered, threatened, or high-priority fish and wildlife species. SAFE also invites regional conservation proposals to address wildlife habitat needs that cross portions of several states. SAFE requires a commitment to monitoring and evaluating habitat and wildlife response and to annual reporting.

FSA state offices will accept proposals beginning August 2007. Although SAFE proposals are still in the works, word on the street indicates a number of likely proposals to benefit threatened and

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Rancho El Aribabi, Sonora: Crossroads of Diversity

By Jennie Duberstein, Education and Outreach Coordinator, Sonoran Joint Venture

From coastlines and rivers to desert grasslands to mountaintops clad in spruce and fir, the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico are home to an amazing diversity of wildlife and habitats. The character of the region is one of ending points, meeting places, and overlap among desert, temperate, and tropical species. Throughout the region, one finds a rich mixture of species and habitats that would normally be separated by considerable distances. The Rocky Mountains from the north meet the Sierra Madre Occidental from the south. The Chihuahuan Desert from the east blends with the Sonoran Desert from the west.



Riparian habitat along the Río Cocóspera at Ranch El Aribabi, Sonora, Mexico. / Eduardo Gómez-Límon

In the midst of all of this diversity is Rancho El Aribabi, a private ranch located approximately two hours southeast of Tucson, Arizona, in the upper Río Magdalena watershed of northern Sonora, Mexico. The Río Cocóspera flows through the property and, at Ranch El Aribabi, the river valley narrows and forms a spectacular cottonwood-willow gallery forest, a flood plain of hackberry, sycamore, ash, and mesquite bosque, and a ciénega (spring), one of the rarest riparian habitat types in the Sky Island region. Adjacent desert scrub (i.e., mesquite, palo verde, saguaro, and ocotillo) follows the riparian course of the river. On the east side of the river, the hills gain elevation and vegetation gradually changes to oak woodlands and pine-oak forests.

Unlike the rest of the ephemeral Río Cocóspera, at Rancho El Aribabi, the river has perennial surface water and, together with several springs, forms a headwater. This complex combination of physical structure and biological diversity offers important habitat for nearly 170 species of migratory and resident birds, including scissor-tailed flycatcher, elegant trogon, golden eagle, hermit warbler, Sinaloan wren, streak-backed oriole, Montezuma quail, elf owl, white-faced ibis, and black-capped gnatcatcher.

Rancho El Aribabi is owned by the Robles-Elías family and has been in their possession since 1934. Landowners, Carlos and Martha Robles, currently own and manage 4,000 ha of the property (the remaining 9,000 ha of the ranch are owned by other family members). To date, Rancho El Aribabi has been managed for cattle and hunting white-tailed deer. Carlos Robles is a self-taught naturalist and has always been aware of the importance of his ranch to not just deer and other game species, but birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and plants.



The scissor-tailed flycatcher inhabits open grasslands with occasional trees and shrubs as well as agricultural areas. /Steve Maslowski

The Sonoran Joint Venture was formed in 1999 as an international, all-bird conservation partnership between the United States and Mexico. Joint Venture partners on both sides of the border recognized the importance of working binationally to conserve the unique birds and habitats of the region. In Mexico, 98 percent of land is privately held, including the majority of Protected Areas. This makes working with private landowners, like the Robles-Elías family, a critical piece in the long-term protection of the region's birds and bird habitat.

The Robles contacted the Sonoran Joint Venture in 2004 because they were interested in protecting the area for birds and other wildlife and investigating ways to diversify the income they derive from their property. In 2005 and 2006 the Joint Venture and its partners, funded in part by a grant from the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, worked with the Robles to implement a riparian habitat protection and restoration project at Rancho El Aribabi.

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The project involved fencing an area of approximately 150 ha (~300 acres) that includes three kilometers of riparian habitat on the Río Cocóspera, a ciénega, and adjacent desert scrub habitat. The Joint Venture worked closely with the Robles and other partners to plan the project and the landowners took charge of installing the new fence and cattle guards. The project included the permanent exclusion of cattle from the sensitive restoration area, a series of wildlife surveys to determine local animal and plant populations pre-and post-exclusion of cattle, and the establishment of photo points to document plant responses to the elimination of cattle in the project area.

In addition to improving habitat on the ranch for wildlife, Carlos and Martha Robles were interested in diversifying the income gained from their ranch with an eye toward eventually decreasing or even eliminating the number of cattle on the property. They have hosted white-tailed deer hunters from the United States and were very interested in exploring ways to bring birders and others with an interest in natural history to the ranch. Due to years of hosting hunters, the ranch was already set up to receive guests and the Robles have ample experience as hosts. Installing the fence and excluding cattle from a portion of the riparian area gave the Robles a prime area for birders. The Joint Venture worked with the family to design a trail system. Groups from Arizona, Sonora, and elsewhere have now begun to visit the ranch for overnight and weekend birding and natural history trips. The Joint Venture and other organizations have begun to use the ranch to host meetings and workshops.



Sonoran Joint Venture Coordinator, Robert Mesta (left), with landowner Carlos Robles. /Eduardo Gómez-Limon

The project at Rancho El Aribabi is an outstanding example of how partnerships with private landowners are a critical component to bird conservation efforts in the Sonoran Joint Venture region. For more information, visit <http://www.sonoranjv.org> or contact Jennie Duberstein at Jennie_Duberstein@fws.gov.

Vermont, from Page 5

In addition, Audubon volunteers will work with landowners to help them learn the birds breeding on their lands and record their observations on ebird. Audubon will also deliver a range of community outreach programs in selected areas, including school programs, that will highlight the importance of our forests, emphasizing Vermont's native birds and the dramatic story of migration. All these activities will allow landowners to better understand and value private forestlands as important bird habitat, and motivate them to work with their neighbors, volunteers, and local communities to manage these important natural resources.

Over a two-year period, Audubon will complete the pilot phase in at least three communities and then begin to replicate the program in other communities in Vermont and neighboring states. Partners like the Vermont Coverts, Vermont Woodlands Association, Vermont Family Forests, Vermont Land Trust, Upper Valley Land Trust, and the Orange County Headwaters Project will enhance the project's reach. In addition, the matching Wildlife Action Opportunities funding will allow Audubon to work with the Vermont Natural Resources Council to develop community-planning tools that will promote the retention of forestland. And Vermont's Town Forest Project will work with Audubon to encourage the creation of town forests as havens for Neotropical migratory birds.

By working at the individual and community level, Audubon Vermont's Forest Bird Initiative will help Vermonters understand that their individual and local actions *can* have a positive global impact. For more information go to <http://www.vt.audubon.org>.

Texas, Page 1

Burr Williams, co-founder and director of the [Sibley Nature Center](#) in Midland, Texas, sums the place up nicely, “We are so remote from everyone else. We make our own society. People are real proud of being on the land and I think it means a lot to appeal to the pride of folks. Saying ‘you’ve done a wonderful job already and what can we do to help’ is better than bemoaning wildlife declines.” It’s this independent spirit and pride in the land that Texas conservationists have learned to appeal to in their quest to protect the lesser prairie-chicken.



Redhead pair in Llano Estacado region. /Williams

Recently, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, June Leland Wildlife Foundation, Sibley Nature Center, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Playa Lakes Joint Venture joined forces to help Texas landowners conserve the prairie-chicken habitat on their own terms — before it’s too late.

“The lesser prairie-chicken is found exclusively on private land — especially in the south plains of Texas,” said David Crum of the Foundation. “The only way we can keep it from being listed under the Endangered Species Act is to work together. Landowners are coming around to it and realizing they have to work together to maintain the populations of wildlife.”

Crum and his colleagues are helping landowners do just that by providing a forum for them to come together and offering incentive payments for prairie-chicken conservation work. The effort is being funded through a Texas State Wildlife Grant and the Joint Venture’s State Capacity Grant program.

The incentive program provides landowners in Cochran, Yoakum, Bailey, Lamb, Hockley, Gaines, Andrews, and Deaf Smith Counties — the heart of the lesser prairie-chicken’s southwestern range — a \$20 per acre payment for enrolling in Farm Bill programs to benefit prairie-chickens, such as the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).

EQIP and WHIP generally provide 50-75 percent cost-share for restoration and enhancement of wildlife habitat, which, for some landowners, isn’t enough to make it worth it for them to participate.

“Texas Parks and Wildlife held several landowner meetings a few years ago to find out landowner opinions on state-offered private lands and federal Farm Bill programs and how they were working,” Crum said. “Overwhelmingly, their response was that they could not afford their part of the cost-share. Our incentive program helps them with some of that cost-share.”

The program is proving to be an attractive bonus, and so far about a half a dozen landowners have signed on since its inception in early 2007. In addition to the incentive program, the group is hosting landowner meetings this summer to find out directly from ranchers how they’d like to work together on prairie-chicken conservation. From these meetings, organizers expect landowners will form associations similar to the new Sandhills Area Recreation Association in Lamb and Bailey Counties, which was formed with the help of Texas Parks and Wildlife, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Our goal is to get people together, open up dialogue, and form a working group,” Crum said. “We plan on listening to landowners and let them decide what format an association should be in. We want to let landowners of the South Plains tell us what they’d like to do.” Organizers have already penned a catchy slogan for the group: “Bringing Back the Boom.”

This grassroots approach to bird habitat conservation can take extra time and effort, but it is one of the best models for conservation in the Joint Venture, which is more than 90 percent privately owned. Locally led efforts account for more than half of the Joint Venture’s habitat accomplishments since the Capacity

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North Carolina, *from Page 7*

But here's the ever-present challenge: the population is spread across a mosaic of federal, state, and private lands. Moreover, it is fragmented into two distinct sub-populations: Fort Bragg/Southern Pines on the east and Sandhills Game Land/Camp Mackall on the west. The cores of these subpopulations are located on state and federal lands surrounded and separated by private lands not currently managed to provide red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. Many of these private lands, however, are in strategic locations and contain either active red-cockaded woodpecker sites or potential woodpecker habitat. So to create sustainable linkages between these two sub-populations, NRCS is helping private landowners to protect and improve red-cockaded woodpecker habitat on their land.

This type of public-private collaboration is critical to successfully conserve priority birds of the North Carolina Sandhills landscape – the heart of the longleaf pine-wiregrass ecosystem in south-central North Carolina. Between 2004 and 2007, NRCS staff successfully engaged 7,300 acres under 56 contracts with landowners in adjacent Moore and Richmond counties. These WHIP contracts are supporting 15,664 acres of prescribed fire management over the next several years on private land that is frequently adjacent to other similarly managed habitat on military bases, state gamelands, state parks, and private conservation easements.



The North Carolina Sandhills region harbors some of the last remaining stands of longleaf pine forest. /NRCS

The result? A growing network of habitat suitably managed to sustain populations of red-cockaded woodpecker, brown-headed nuthatch, field sparrow, loggerhead shrike, northern bobwhite, prairie warbler, Henslow's sparrow, chuck-will's-widow, red-headed woodpecker, and pine snake.

WHIP incentives are helping people increase native plant diversity and beneficial wildlife habitat in other indigenous ecosystems in North Carolina, including pitch pine, shortleaf pine, table mountain pine, pond pine, oak, mixed hardwood and pine forests, fields, meadows, and prairie remnants. NRCS works with local Soil & Water Conservation Districts to develop strategies that target habitat conservation for priority bird guilds and to encourage adjoining landowners to manage their properties similarly, like informal cooperatives. Though challenging, this approach has landscape-scale effects and benefits many species of concern. The landowners receive wildlife management plans and are reimbursed for part of the cost to implement a host of wildlife management practices, such as establishing native plants from seed or stock, installing bladed firebreaks and refreshing existing line prior to scheduled burns, pre-commercial thinning, mid-story control, and creating snags or canopy gaps. For more information, contact Matt Flint, Matt.Flint@nc.usda.gov.

Prairie-chicken, *Page 12*

Grant program began in 2002. The program awards \$20,000 to each state annually to support the development of sustainable, locally led conservation partnerships, such as this effort in Texas.

“It’s a ranch-by-ranch approach. It’s not something that will be an explosion of change. It’s about building trusted relationships.” And that takes time, says Williams.

But it’s time well spent when the survival of the species lies in the hands of people who already take tremendous pride in their ranching and wildlife heritage.

“The lesser prairie-chicken is such an iconic species of the region — the species is a symbol of this place and what makes the Llano the Llano,” Williams said. “The prairie-chicken should be preserved for no other reason than it is a symbol to the people of the High Plains.”

For more information, contact Debbie Slobe, debbie.slobe@pljv.org, www.pljv.org.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) is a coalition of organizations and initiatives dedicated to advancing integrated bird conservation in North America.

The vision of NABCI is to see populations and habitats of North America's birds protected, restored, and enhanced through coordinated efforts at international, national, regional, state, and local levels, guided by sound science and effective management.

The goal of NABCI is to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships.

The All-Bird Bulletin is a news and information-sharing publication for participants of NABCI.

For subscription or submission inquiries, contact the Editor, Roxanne Bogart, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 802-872-0629 ext. 25 or Roxanne_Bogart@fws.gov. To download back issues, visit <http://www.nabci-us.org/news.html>.

The All-Bird Bulletin publishes news updates and information on infrastructure, planning, science, funding, and other advancements in the field of integrated bird conservation and management. Include author's name, organization, address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address. Pictures are welcome but not necessary.

Additional Resources

Growing Conservation in the Farm Bill: Recommendations of the Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group (AWWG)
<http://www.trcp.org/documents/2007farmbillreport.pdf>

Fish, Wildlife and the Farm Bill – Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
<http://www.fishwildlife.org/farmbill.html>

Use of CRP Fields by Greater Sage-grouse and other Shrubsteppe associated Wildlife in Washington:
ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/nri/ceap/sage_grouse.pdf

*Estimating Response of Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) to the Conservation Reserve Program*
http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/crp_pheasants_final_report.pdf

Integrating Bird Conservation into Range Management, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory Report

Avian Monitoring on Private Lands, Point Reyes Bird Observatory Project

State of the Birds USA 2004, National Audubon Society, <http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/index.html>



Brown-headed nuthatch is a Partners in Flight Watchlist Species that inhabits southern U.S. pine forests and Grand Bahama Island./ Ken Thomas

USDA, from Page 9

endangered bird species, such as sharp-tailed grouse in the Pacific Northwest and lesser prairie-chicken in the Southwest. Other beneficiaries of SAFE proposals include high priority species identified in state wildlife action plans and popular game species, such as ring-neck pheasant, wild turkey, northern bobwhite. To download a news release, visit <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases>.

For more information, contact Sally Benjamin, Sally.Benjamin@wdc.usda.gov.