

Statement of Julie Wraithmell
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to the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Legislative Hearing on
Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act (H.R. 4389)

October 18, 2023

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of H.R. 4389, the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act.

My name is Julie Wraithmell, and I am the Vice President and Executive Director of Audubon Florida, a state office of the National Audubon Society. Nationwide, Audubon represents nearly 2 million members and works to protect birds and the places they need through its 16 state and regional offices, 32 centers, 23 sanctuaries, more than 450 grassroots chapters, and by working in ten countries across the Americas.

Audubon Florida is Audubon’s largest state program with nearly 100,000 members, around 100 researchers, resource managers, educators, and policy staff working to protect our water, wildlife, habitat, and climate through the lens of birds.

Over the past several weeks, millions of migratory birds have been passing through Florida, Washington, DC, and communities across the United States during their fall migration, when many of the birds who nest in the U.S. and Canada head south for the winter. According to the bird migration tracking tool, BirdCast, more than 415 million birds have migrated across Florida since August – including more than 54 million birds on one night alone.

These birds are undertaking awe-inspiring journeys, traveling from their nesting habitat throughout America and as far north as the Arctic and the vast boreal forest of Canada. Some overwinter in the southern U.S., but more than half of America’s birds will make their way to Latin America and the Caribbean to winter – some traveling thousands of miles and navigating countless hazards. This includes hundreds of beloved species of birds from across the nation, such as orioles, hummingbirds, swallows, ducks, shorebirds, hawks, and many more.

Many of them migrate at night, navigating by the stars, the earth’s magnetic field, and even the low frequency rumble of waves on distant shores and winds crossing distant mountain ranges. Some, like Whimbrels, a large shorebird, may fly for days nonstop overwater. Others, like Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, will lose more than 60% of their bodyweight in their 15-hour nonstop flight across the Gulf of Mexico from Louisiana to the Yucatan.

Some, like the Red Knot, spend their lives in perpetual summer—spending the northern hemisphere’s summer nesting on the tundra and enjoying the southern hemisphere’s summer at the southern tip of South America.

The Blackpoll Warbler will fly up to 12,000 miles each year, from as far as Alaska to Brazil, including nonstop journeys for days at a time, while weighing as much as a AAA battery. Many of these journeys are illustrated through Audubon’s Bird Migration Explorer, which brings together the latest tracking data for more than 450 species of birds, along with conservation challenges they face along the way, and the connections they illuminate between places across the hemisphere.

It’s only normal for us to think of the birds of our everyday lives—the birds of our neighborhoods and communities, states, and regions, as *our* birds, belonging to that place. But in reality, many of them are only on loan to us, and in fact spend their lives in motion, washing like tides back and forth across the hemisphere.

These lives in motion are made possible by habitat anchors, where birds nest in the north and winter in the south, connected by a chain of essential habitats like stepping stones that the birds have depended on for tens of thousands of years. In Florida, we can do everything we can to protect the places “my” birds need in the state. But no matter how successful we are, the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. And if the links to Florida’s south are failing, the birds we bid farewell to in the fall, won’t return to us again in the spring.

The presence of migratory birds in our communities during parts of the year provides a deep sense of joy and wonder for people across the country. Whether it’s the enjoyment of birds in our backyards like Baltimore Orioles gracing our trees and birdfeeders, Purple Martins raising their young in our schoolyards and farms, to the waterfowl such as Blue-Winged Teal dabbling in local wetlands, to the jewel-toned warblers that delight birders in our local parks, National Wildlife Refuges, and beyond.

Last week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies released a new survey, which found that more than 96 million people across the country participated in birdwatching in 2022, including around the home and during travel. That represents more than 1 in 4 people in the country, making it one of the most popular and fastest-growing pastimes in America. 95% of those participants enjoyed birdwatching around the home, and nearly half of them – more than 43 million people – traveled outside the home to observe wild birds. And during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, participation surged as millions of people found solace and comfort in watching birds around their homes and neighborhoods.

Birds also provide significant cultural, spiritual, and subsistence values to communities, and a direct connection to nature. They provide numerous ecosystem services, such as pest control by consuming insects that can damage our agricultural production and forests, while feeding on mosquitoes in our communities, as well as supporting pollination of our crops, seed dispersal, and more. Studies have even found that the presence of birds benefits our psychological well-being.

And birds have a major economic impact. The 96 million people that participate in birdwatching results in substantial consumer spending on bird-feeding, birdwatching equipment, and travel, which supports local communities around the nation, and creates more than \$100 billion in economic output annually. Wildlife-watching generally has a substantial and growing economic impact. The most recent FWS and

AFWA survey found that wildlife-watchers spent more than \$250 billion on these activities in 2022, including trip-related expenses, equipment, and more.

Bird migration hotspots like Cape May NJ, Hawk Mountain PA, Grand Isle LA, Bosque del Apache NM, Magee Marsh OH, and Platte River NE demonstrate that protecting their habitat makes dollars and sense because of the wildlife-viewing tourism-economies driven by birds.

In Southwest Florida, Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary attracts more than 100,000 people every year to enjoy birdwatching and wildlife viewing. In many regions across the hemisphere, bird watching supports sustainable ecotourism, which provides economic lifelines to communities while keeping birds and ecosystems healthy.

Tragically, bird populations have been in decline for decades, which means that these valuable benefits to people and communities are also disappearing. A 2019 report found that North America's bird population has declined by 3 billion birds since 1970 – in other words, more than 1 in 4 birds on the continent have vanished in less than a lifetime.

The 2022 State of the Birds report found that birds of nearly all types and in all landscapes, except for waterfowl and wetland-dependent birds, are in decline, including more than half of all bird species. On the one hand, the recovery of our waterfowl populations shows that conservation efforts can work with sufficient resources and partnerships. Yet the report also found that 70 species are now at a tipping point, which have already lost half of their populations since 1970, and their populations will be further halved in the years ahead without action.

Birds are indicators of the health of our environment. So declining bird populations means that the health of our ecosystems and the conditions that support human well-being are also in decline. And we also know that birds are facing ongoing and increasing threats. This includes habitat loss, pollution, preventable mortality, climate change, and more. These threats are putting increasing pressure on bird populations which only increases the need to invest further resources in their conservation.

For example, devastating wildfires in the U.S. and in the boreal forest of Canada are creating tragic impacts for people and communities and damaging habitat for millions of migratory birds, and increasing hazards during migration such as building collisions present serious challenges to birds. This month in Chicago, more than 1,000 migratory birds died at just one building along the lakefront, which puts further stress on their populations.

Migratory birds – especially the hundreds of species that travel long-distances across the hemisphere – have seen some of the greatest population declines, and face some of the most significant challenges going forward. Of the 3 billion birds lost since 1970, 2.5 billion were migratory birds. That includes a loss of more than 2 in 5 Baltimore Orioles and Barn Swallows on the continent. Bird species that migrate to South America have declined overall by more than 40%. While these recent numbers paint a stark and shocking picture, the declines and needs for migratory birds have been known for many years.

That's why Congress passed the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act in 2000. That bipartisan legislation, passed with leadership from the late Congressman Don Young, created a grant program to support bird conservation efforts throughout the Western Hemisphere.

This program provides an essential source of funding and partnerships for migratory bird conservation across the Americas. It enables the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to support efforts across the U.S.,

Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean, by catalyzing partnerships and investing in cost-effective projects that benefits bird habitat, enhances education and awareness, advances necessary research and coordination, and more.

Successful bird conservation in our states and across the nation depends on conservation and partnerships not only in the states, but across the full ranges of migratory birds. Maintaining and recovering bird populations will require working together within the United States, and also in places like Colombia, Panama, Chile, Mexico, Canada, and more.

This program helps to preserve all the links in the chain of migration that these birds depend upon. In part because of the concentration and importance of wintering migratory birds in certain regions, these projects can be a highly cost-effective investment in conservation and make an outsized impact. Moreover, many of these wintering and migratory stopover sites in Latin America continue to be at risk from habitat loss, including deforestation, and the program supports efforts to target key places for conservation to address these challenges.

Since 2000, the NMBCA program has supported more than 700 projects, across 43 countries, benefitting more than 5 million acres of habitat. Of the \$89 million invested by the U.S., partners have brought more than \$346 million to the table. These projects have advanced conservation across the entire flyways of migratory birds and their full annual cycle.

For example, the Wood Thrush is an iconic bird of our eastern forests, which is famous for its flutelike, ethereal song, and it is the official bird of Washington DC. Sadly, these songs are fading from our forests, as this species has declined by more than 60% since 1970. It has been identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in 29 states, including Florida, Virginia, Arkansas, West Virginia, and more. NMBCA projects have helped to conserve its nesting habitat in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, as well as its wintering habitat in places like Guatemala.

There, funding has helped to empower young women of the Maya highlands to help sustainably manage natural resources and forest habitat in their communities, while securing vital wintering areas for Wood Thrush and other migratory and resident birds. In doing so, this funding also helps our states achieve their bird conservation goals through the State Wildlife Action Plans by helping to advance their recovery and reinforce state investments.

Similarly, the Cerulean Warbler, a stunning blue-and-white songbird beloved by birders, has declined by more than 70% since the 1970s, and has been identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need by 35 states, including Florida. The NMBCA has supported conservation of its nesting habitat, such as the aforementioned West Virginia project, along with efforts in Ohio, Iowa, and Canada, and vital projects in its wintering habitat in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and more. This includes efforts to not only conserve key habitat, but also work with landowners on projects such as bird-friendly coffee production.

Despite the important and effective investments in the NMBCA, there has been more demand for the grants than the program can currently meet. As of 2021, less than one-third of all proposals have been able to receive funding, leaving more than 1,800 projects unable to be supported and implemented.

And to help meet the needs of the birds that are vanishing before our eyes, more resources are urgently needed for bird conservation on the ground, and in the places of greatest need. NMBCA projects help proactively invest in these species, which reduces the need for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Many of the species this program benefits are facing long-term declines, and could be considered for ESA listings without further investments.

Audubon supports H.R. 4389, the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act, because it will address several current needs and opportunities for migratory birds and for the NMBCA program. First, the legislation will reauthorize the program, which is an important and timely step as the five-year authorization ran through Fiscal Year 2023. Second, the legislation will help grow the authorized funding over time, which will help provide additional resources to meet the overwhelming interest in the program.

Third, the legislation will address a significant current barrier to participation in the program and improve its accessibility by amending the matching requirement. The current 3:1 match has been identified as an obstacle for partners to apply for grants, especially for smaller organizations that do not have access to large funding resources. By amending the statutory requirement to a 2:1 match, more partners will be able to come to the table, while bringing it closer in line with similar conservation grant programs. Additionally, this does not limit partners from bringing more funding to the table than would be required under the legislation.

Fourth, the legislation will support greater capacity for managing the program, by increasing the ceiling for administration. Current levels under the 3% ceiling are insufficient to support full-time staff capacity to implement the program, and the legislation will help provide greater support for management by raising it to 4%.

Now is the time to reauthorize and enhance the NMBCA program, and the Migratory Birds of the Americas legislation will take key steps to achieve these important and necessary goals. We are grateful for the leadership of Representatives Salazar, Larsen, Joyce, and Peltola for introducing this bipartisan legislation, and for the bill's cosponsors, as well as to Chairman Bentz and Ranking Member Huffman for holding this hearing on this vital legislation. We look forward to assisting the committee, and we encourage the advancement of this bill to support America's migratory birds, so that our communities will continue to enjoy the economic and quality of life benefits of having these birds among us.

Thank you, and I would look forward to any questions you may have.