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**Jeffrey V. Wells: Birder's Conservation Handbook**

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# Scope and Purpose



In the fall of 2002, as National Bird Conservation Director for the National Audubon Society, I developed a website providing information about the 201 North American bird species of highest conservation concern that made up the Audubon WatchList. While gathering the data for that site, I found myself time and again wanting to reach to my bookshelf for the quick-and-easy book that pulled together the salient facts about a species' status, distribution, and population changes. That book did not yet exist, I knew, from my years as a conservation professional. Creating the Audubon WatchList website highlighted to me the need for such a reference—a book not only to provide the facts about birds of conservation concern but to do so in such a way as to inspire people to action.

I know first hand that cries of alarm too often fall on deaf ears; despite best intentions, people can hear only so much bad news before they become desensitized to it or so overwhelmed that they feel inadequate to do anything to help. I wanted to provide a book that presents the facts but that also offers hope, encouragement, and inspiration for those who want to take action to protect our birds and our environment.

It may come as a surprise to hear that North America is in the midst of a renaissance in bird conservation. The number of initiatives focused on various aspects of bird conservation has blossomed at an unprecedented rate in the last decade to include coalitions focused on conservation of songbirds, shorebirds, and waterbirds, in addition to the more traditional waterfowl and upland game bird conservation groups. All of this activity, and the parallel birth of other types of conservation work across the hemisphere, is exciting and gives me hope that my son and future generations will indeed be able to see for themselves the beauty and ecological significance of what today are some of the most critically endangered species. This is news that I wanted to share, especially since among the good work are countless examples of projects and actions initiated by ordinary people—people who are protecting birds and their habitats based on passion, not profession. Unfortunately, most of these wonderful examples are scattered across a dizzying array of documents and websites and often are placed in the context of some large environmental initiative that

doesn't describe all of the species benefiting from the work.

I hope that by my highlighting these actions, you will be encouraged to get involved, perhaps with one of the projects described in this book or perhaps by starting a new project. Above all, remember that anyone can make a difference for bird conservation. It is my hope that among the readers of this book will be some of the great conservationists of the future, whose work will lower the number of species that need to be included in the next edition.

## **WHAT ARE NORTH AMERICA'S BIRDS OF HIGHEST CONSERVATION CONCERN?**

Sadly, including every species of conservation concern in a handbook intended for a broad audience is not feasible—there are just too many North American birds that fit into that category. To keep the book and what I hope is a strong and urgent conservation message from becoming overwhelming, I limited the number of species to 100—a manageable, memorable number. I hope that doing so has resulted in a book that is easy to use by anyone interested in learning about the major issues causing bird population declines and what's being done to reverse those trends.

Now, why these 100 species? For the last decade I have been engaged with colleagues in research to help develop lists of bird species that should be given highest priority for conservation. There are a number of different ways in which lists can be and have been developed. There's the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Red List, the USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) Birds of Conservation Concern list, the USFWS endangered and threatened species list, the Partners in Flight WatchList, the Audubon Watchlist, the American Bird Conservancy Greenlist, the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan list, and the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan list. Then there are countless state and provincial wildlife agency lists that all spotlight bird species of conservation concern. These are all important lists, each based on factors that are most relevant to the organization's reason for developing the list—which is to say, each list reflects the conservation mission and priorities of

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the entity creating the list. As a result, collectively, more than 500 bird species occur on one or more of these lists!

Although the total number combined is high, my colleagues and I have found in our research that virtually all of the lists agree on the species that are of greatest conservation concern. Many are painfully obvious because their population sizes have reached critical lows—birds like California Condor, Whooping Crane, and Kirtland's Warbler. Some are more obvious to the professional ornithologist but less so to the lay birder—species like Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Bicknell's Thrush, and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, most biologists know, are important to include because they have limited ranges and small populations. There are about 80 species in these more obvious categories. Choosing the remaining 20 to include was more difficult.

While writing this book, I was lobbied by many groups and individuals to include species they considered a priority in their own work. There are several criteria I used to determine the remaining species to include. First, I did not include a species if it had only a small portion of its total global range within the U.S. and Canada and was secure in the remainder of its range, unless there was very clear evidence that the population in North America was distinct enough that it might eventually be elevated to species status. Second, I did not include species for which the information on population declines came from only a portion of the range, was unclear, or was contradictory. A final criterion I used was not to include species with a decline of less than 50% over the last 50 years unless they also had a relatively small population size, had a small total range, or were considered to have significant threats.

In the end, the final 20 are all species of high priority that appear on one or more existing lists and most are showing steep population declines. Weight was given such that these remaining species represented a range of ecosystems, conservation issues, geographic areas, and bird families. While I have limited the number of species included in this book to 100, I have included in Appendix I a table showing which species occur on which of the various major lists. I invite you to delve more deeply into the background of each of these lists and to read some of the academic papers published on the science of conservation priority-setting.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Each species account provides information about the species, including status and distribution, ecology, threats, and conservation action and needs. Each species is illustrated, and there is a map for each species showing its entire range (not ending arbitrarily at the Mexican border, as is typical of field guides). But the bulk of each account is composed of text relating directly to the species' conservation.

### *Status and Distribution*

Information on the limits of the species' distribution, including breeding and wintering ranges, is provided to complement a map illustrating the same. Whenever possible, specific protected areas or other locations known or thought to be important to the species are mentioned, along with the number of individuals of the species at the site, based on the most recent surveys, if available. In many cases, where such information was lacking or very limited, locations mentioned are those where the species is known to have been recorded but the overall importance of the site to the species may be uncertain. In some other cases (especially for species on their wintering ranges in the Caribbean and South or Central America), locations mentioned are where the species should occur based on known distribution and habitat, and are described as such in the species account. This section concludes with a summary of the most recent available trend information and population estimates.

### *Ecology*

This section provides a brief summary of habitat use, ecology, and life history information about the species. It is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide a basic overview that sometimes also helps explain why the species may be vulnerable.

### *Threats*

I have described threats considered of greatest significance or potential significance and quantified the significance of threats whenever possible. For example, I provide estimates of the amount of specific habitat already lost and/or predicted to be lost over a particular time period for some species.

Threats that are likely to affect only a small portion of the range or that have a comparatively small impact on a species total population are not discussed.

### **Conservation Action**

This section provides a synthesis of some of the activities that I believe are particularly important or novel and that have benefited the species. Many of the conservation actions I describe are not focused specifically on the bird species that are benefiting from the activity but instead were originally developed to benefit other species, resources, or issues. In many cases, these benefits may be easily and inexpensively broadened and enhanced if the particular needs of priority species are considered early in the process. This allows projects to develop a wider base of public support because there are clearly articulated benefits to multiple resources. My account of conservation initiatives for each species is not meant to be exhaustive but to show important examples and unique models. I encourage readers to learn more by following up on the references and website links to projects mentioned.

### **Conservation Needs**

This section provides a list of specific recommendations for conservation actions and activities that will help increase populations of the species, increase protections for the species, and increase knowledge about the species. These recommendations are synthesized from available resources but ultimately reflect my own interpretations and opinions.

### **References**

To make the species accounts easy to read for those unfamiliar with standard scientific writing, I have departed slightly from tradition in how I present references to the source materials from which the facts are drawn. I place a numbered series in superscript at the end of each section that refers to the numbered citations within this section. Rather than list them alphabetically, the citations appear in the order that the facts are presented within each section. I recognize that scientists reading this will find this system awkward and less precise but I feel that it is worth the

trade-off to make the material more easily read by the broadest audience.

## **RESEARCH, WRITING, REFERENCES, AND REVIEW**

The research, writing, and editing of the book was largely completed over a period of 35 months, from April 2003 until March 2006. I tried hard to ensure that I included the most up-to-date information available in published sources, in reports, and on websites from credible organizations and government agencies. Species accounts were reviewed by a multitude of experts who often had access to recent but unpublished survey data.

When checking information on distribution, ecology, and life history, I always started with *The Birds of North America (BNA)*, the most up-to-date resource for such data. Completed between 1992 and 2002, *BNA* is a monumental, 28-volume series that provides an immensity of facts about 720 North American breeding bird species. Each account was written by one or more experts in some aspect of the species' biology. The *BNA* accounts are excellent, but many, depending on the author's interest and expertise, lack conservation-related information. Species accounts also typically have little relevant information about important threats and conservation activities benefiting the species.

Other sources important to research for this book included BirdLife International's *Threatened Birds of the World*, American Bird Conservancy *Guide to the 500 Most Important Bird Areas in the United States*, *Terrestrial Ecoregions of North America*, *Precious Heritage: The Status of Biodiversity in the United States*, *Áreas de Importancia Para La Conservación de las Aves en México*, Wetland International's *Waterbird Population Estimates*, *Neotropical Birds: Ecology and Conservation*, and *Biogeographical Profiles of Shorebird Migration in Midcontinental North America*. I also made frequent use of Audubon's Important Bird Area (IBA) information from published Important Bird Area books (including those from California, New York, Panama, and Washington) as well as unpublished IBA manuscripts (Florida) and web-accessible IBA databases (most available via Audubon's website at [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)).

Species accounts were reviewed by more than 50 experts from many institutions. A full list of reviewers appears in the acknowledgments. Without

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the expertise of my fellow professionals, the book simply would not be complete. I especially wish to thank the dozens of biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who devoted considerable time in reviewing the species accounts and gave freely of their expertise and their data in order to make the accounts as up-to-date as possible. They have done a great service to users of this book. In

the end, of course, all errors or omissions are mine, and all views expressed herein are mine and do not reflect the position of any agency, institution, or other individual.

I hope that you find this book useful and the conservation examples inspiring and a source of hope for you and your family. Good birding to you!